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OUR  
MISTAKEN  
IDENTITY

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## CHAPTER



“**Y**ou understand that because of *that*,” Momma told me from her desk, pointing at the window that exposed the school’s gym just outside her door, “you can never use magic in here even if it seems like we’re alone, right?”

I sighed in frustration, leaning against the whiteboard and looking up at the fluorescent lights overhead. This had been the everyday lecture for the past *week*. I didn’t need any more reminders that my school used to train the secret agents who hunted down people like me.

I crossed my arms against the air conditioning. “Yes, Mother, I’m not eight anymore.”

She scoffed, folding her hands on the desk. “You sure still

like to show off like you did back then. You don't remember how you wanted to show people the books on the coffee table rising into the air, the front door unlocking on its own, or your hot chocolate turning frozen?"

I deadpanned. That was almost eight years ago! I'd been *well* aware of the consequences of someone finding me out for the better half of my (apparently short) life.

"Look." Momma softly sighed. "As long as you don't use magic, you're safe here since the school only specializes in self-defense now. That's what matters. We can't ever be too careful."

A plea weighed down her honey-colored eyes. Right then, I almost wished I'd inherited them instead of the Atera's signature blue. Sometimes it feels like Momma's chestnut hair is all I got from her; she isn't like me, but she still acts like she knows what it's like to be a magician.

"I'm sorry I kept you hidden for this long," she said next, "but you know there was no room for risk, and you couldn't afford not to practice. Sure, you missed out on your first year of high school, but at least you get to explore your second with your best friends."

"My friends who can never know the truth."

"Emma..." Momma's eyes asked for sympathy again.

I kicked at an invisible pebble on the tile floor. "Fine, sorry... I know none of it's your fault. And you can trust me here."

Her waves perfectly framed her narrow face as she nodded. "Remember that I placed you here for a reason. You should know how to defend yourself in *all* forms."

"I know: no magic unless necessary."

"Exactly." She stood from her desk and strolled over to me. "Okay, I need to get ready for a meeting starting soon. I'll see you

tomorrow for the *first day of school*.” With an excited grin, she cupped my face and kissed my forehead. “I love you, honey.”

“Love you, too.”

I left her classroom and made my way back to the Grand Foyer, passing and waving at other girls settling in. I recognized some of them from orientation last week, and the rest, I’d depend on tomorrow to reintroduce me.

Either way, I was facing two hundred other girls to keep who I really was from. Some year this would be.

Every step up the Main Staircase was a surreal reminder of whose stairs, whose carpet, I was walking on—of why Momma and I were here in the first place. Even though the Callistro Academy was dedicated to just self-defense now, President Caldwell swears that the whole country is out for the “evil” blood of magic. America’s greatest Hunters have been killing us off by the dozen since he was elected—four terms ago. (He’s the first president since FDR to manage that, and if I think about it for too long, I’ll get mad enough to start ripping out these pages.) And yet, somehow, my people are still out there. Probably because they’re doing something as crazy as I am to survive. Every single one isn’t dead. It’s impossible to completely eradicate magic, it has to be.

*Dad, I couldn’t help but think, arriving at the top floor with my legs burning. I’ll meet you someday. Hopefully.*

Frankly, it was a miracle that Callistro still hadn’t reopened its Hunter classes, considering it was the first Hunter school ever established. With that history, naturally, despite being an ex-Master herself, my mother thought that enrolling her *sorceress* daughter here was the wisest course of action. I get it, she wanted to make sure that, in case anyone did find out about me and ended up

attacking me in a dark alley, I could defend myself past the basics. After all, Callistro was for providing young ladies advanced self-defense—and, scarily enough, the higher-level education Hunters usually got anyway during training.

Far down the left hallway of the top floor, I found and opened the door to my dorm. Sarah and Breanne were mischievously swift as they unpacked their clothes, taking turns between the drawers and walk-in closet on the right side of the room. A white dresser stood next to me, and a white desk stood in the corner, now decorated with Breanne's excessive notebooks, textbooks, and stationary materials. A large purple circle rug now lay in the middle of the room, in front of Sarah's bed that was sandwiched between mine and Breanne's.

I couldn't help but smile to myself a bit. *At least we get to explore our first year here together.*

Breanne threw a pair of denim shorts at me before I could open my mouth. "Those are yours," she said in front of her bed, tossing her straight blond hair out of her face. "You left them at my house last week. Come on, hurry!"

"For... what?" I asked, tossing the shorts onto my bed.

Sarah walked out of the closet as if at my words, her bright-green eyes, enhanced by a perfect eyeshadow job, hopelessly ecstatic. "The school is thinking about reopening the Hunter's Room!"

Just like that, my cover had one less brick to stand on.

Only authorized staff are legally allowed to use the gadgets and weapons on display down in the Hunter's Room. It was closed when magic was legalized in 1900, but even after the law was repealed fifty years later, it had remained closed since. As long as

the Hunter's Room was closed, our disguise as a prestigious school specializing in self-defense was actually the truth.

"That means they're gonna continue the Hunter classes!" Sarah exclaimed, hands jubilantly expressing her words. (Her trip to the Bahamas earlier that summer had definitely added a nice glow to her copper skin.) "We could graduate as Hunters and then become *Masters* together, can you imagine that?"

*Nope*—considering I'd probably be dead if that ever became the case.

Breanne spared her a skeptical brow on her fair face, subtly decorated with sparse freckles. "Even *if* they do, it's not going to open for a long while. Sarah wants to get a sneak peek before security comes back from a staff meeting happening right now."

"Come on," Sarah urged before I could speak, tossing her hair over her shoulder. "Are you done yet?"

Breanne lugged a half-empty cardboard box onto her bed. "Okay, fine, I'll finish later."

There was cause for concern for more than the obvious reasons. The last time Breanne Shaw had broken the rules was in seventh grade, when Sarah had convinced her to hack into their school's roster to see where the new foreign exchange student was from so they could learn his native tongue to "get a head start". My *life* would have to be on the line before that girl risks her permanent record, so where was the willingness to venture into forbidden territory coming from—and how was I supposed to stop it?

Instead of the stairs, we ducked into the elevator right by them. It's only meant for students and staff with physical disabilities, but it's also the only way to get to the Hunter's Room. According to Breanne, we had about fifteen minutes to be in and

out without getting caught by either other rebellious Callistro Girls or staff able to suspend us.

The silver doors closed behind us as we stepped inside. Nerves burned in my stomach like acidic starvation as Breanne leaned toward the round buttons on the wall. “There’s a button for the basement,” she said, “but that’s just for maintenance supplies and the boiler room... Maybe this keypad unlocks the one for the Hunter’s Room.”

Under the small array, said keypad was installed on a metal panel—like a door.

“That feels too easy.” Sarah tossed her black hair over her shoulder and then crossed her arms, leaning against the crimson wallpaper of the elevator. “You can’t have a whole room dedicated to government purposes and *not* keep its entrance hidden from the common public.”

*Good point.*

Based on the yellow keys and worn-out numbers, the keypad was at least a couple of decades old. Breanne stepped aside as I walked to it and kneeled, citing my options in my head.

My brows knit together. *No way. Seriously?*

“1”, “5”, “8”, and “9” had the least amount of black paint remaining. September 5, 1827 was too easy to guess, but only because most don’t care to memorize Callistro’s birthday—and it’s only easy for me because, go figure, Callistro’s birthday is the same as mine.

*It’s like Caralyn Callistro built this place knowing I’d be here two centuries later and just wanted to taunt me.*

I entered the date, ending with the first two digits of the year the school was established. A green light flashed under the zero,



and my friends gasped in excitement behind me. I opened the panel, revealing a red button with the white initials “HR”.

“Emma!” Sarah exclaimed. “How did you do that?”

I scoffed. “I kid you not, it’s literally the school’s birthday.”

“They really should change that,” Breanne remarked dully in the corner of my vision.

My chuckle died down to a quiet, shaky breath. Was I really about to do this? Going into the enemy’s lair had to be betrayal of some kind! Everything I could find down there, the reminder of what its gadgets had already done to too many to count, to people like me—

“Press it!” Sarah chirped. “Let’s go!”

I obeyed, half of me seeming to rip itself from the other and shouting betrayal and warnings. Curiosity has always been a silent killer.

The elevator lightly jerked down, paranoia dropping into my stomach with it. What if one of the devices was built to sense magic and suddenly went off on its own once I walked through the doors? What if we tripped some kind of silent alarm? What kind of security was in place?

Okay. *Those* two questions, I could ask.

“Security is temporarily deactivated since the staff is coming and going so often,” Breanne effortlessly answered, picking at the light hair on her pale arms. That relaxed me somewhat: she was nervous, too. Her blue-hazel eyes shifted to Sarah. “There’s *no* way I’d do this otherwise, I can’t even believe I let you talk me into it to begin with. This is a pipe dream, you know!”

“Exactly,” Sarah said, holding up a perfectly manicured finger. “All the more reason to check it out while we can. The other stuff

is cool, but the main thing I'm after is the Hall of Generations in the back. The family trees of the greatest Hunters who've ever lived are hung down a hall on the left, and on the right—"

"The most powerful magicians!" Breanne finished with an astonished breath, round eyes wide. "I forgot about that! Isn't the Atera family tree there, too?"

*And there it is.*

To be completely honest, I can't stand using "magician" for the people of magic (seeing as we're not a Vegas act or an entertainer for kids' parties), but the Atera name is one I *wish* I could hear more often. Momma changed her surname to "Marie", in honor of one of the Atera family middle names, shortly after she married to protect us. I'm not Emmalynn Atera to my best friends, but it's still my name; every time they say it, it's like dangling a chocolate bar that'll call the government if I grab it.

"They *should* be there," Sarah said, "considering they're the most powerful family of sorcerers. That's literally the whole reason the school's thinking about—"

The metal doors slid open, introducing us to the most opulent room any of us (well, Breanne and I) had had the privilege of laying our eyes on. Fleur-de-lises stamped the crimson wallpaper plastered on the twenty-foot-high walls encasing us, golden baseboards and crown molding accenting them. A dark-oak floor supported us, a crimson rug covering most of it. Dark shelves lined the walls, surrounding a total of eight classroom doors. Display pillars made of white polished quartz stood throughout the middle of the room like regal chess pieces. In the back, a towering archway beckoned us to the Hall of Generations.

My friends and I walked in silent awe, our minds separating

us and pulling us to the most interesting toys our eyes caught.

“Okay, remember, we have to be quick,” Breanne said next to what looked like a black hand-sized speaker. I could bet my magic that it did a lot more than play music. She faced Sarah at the pillar behind her. “What were you saying about the Ateras?”

“Whoa,” I said before I knew the word was in my mouth. Curiosity was stronger than gossip down here, pulling me to the display pillar ahead of Breanne. What looked like a small, open laptop installed on a flat printer-like base sat on the quartz. My fingers were careful not to touch the wooden plaque mounted on the front of the pillar. “An—‘electromagnetic cardiograph’. What’s that?”

“A magician has a stronger reaction to electromagnetic waves than a mortal does on the molecular level,” Breanne replied effortlessly. “The readings probably flew off the charts when these were tested on a person with magic. I’ve heard that some have tried to control what they read to try to avoid getting caught.”

Sarah’s pear-green eyes jumped from display to display. “I wish the plaques said what these things actually do.”

I turned to the pillar on my other side, where a polygraph-like device sat on top, and slightly bent down to the plaque.

“CEREBRAL POLYGRAPH”.

I actually knew about this one because of the time Momma used it on a caught magician. It’s a lot more accurate in detecting lies because it also measures brain activity, which a lie naturally stimulates more of. If a magician is caught and debriefed under one of these, it’s practically a death sentence.

I suppressed the shiver wrapping around my spine. *I hope I never see you again.*

“Come on, let’s get to the Hall!” Sarah urged, meandering to the other side of the room. “I wanna tell you about the Atera rumor I heard recently...”

I immediately straightened. “The what?”

She smiled slyly, turned her back to us, and skipped to the Hall of Generations. Breanne and I weaved our way through the pillars and followed after.

The Callistro crest of a sword through a rose proudly boasted itself above the entry arch. Passing through, I stuck my gaze to the small chandeliers hanging down the hall like ducks in a row. Their yellow glow lent a familiar aura, like I was enjoying an evening back home with Momma. Simple archways stood on both sides, leading to the halls that the family trees were mounted on. I glanced at the top of them: golden plaques nailed to dark-oak boards dated the time period. We were standing at the beginning of time, as close to it as records could recall.

Sarah sighed wistfully, peeking into each entrance on both sides before taking another step. “All these people have made history. Imagine getting our families’ names up here because we’re that good at hunting.”

The standards to get a name up in the Hall of Generations are higher than Breanne’s IQ. It may have families from multiple millennia recorded, but not many individuals are actually listed. We ended up walking past dozens of world-changing eras, from the Roman Empire period to the Cold War, until reaching Post-modernity.

Breanne ran into the Hunter’s side of the Hall with no more than a gasp. Sarah and I caught her scrutinizing one of the most recent family trees mounted on the wall.

“Before we get to the Ateras,” she said in her most speculative voice, “I’ve been really curious about the Bleus lately. They made a name for themselves recently because they’ve caught more people with magic than almost any other Hunter in the past two decades. And they’re really loyal to the president, which means they’re still out there looking for the last few magicians alive.”

*“Few”. I really hope you’re wrong about that.*

Momma always says to never judge someone for what they are, but what they do. Until you meet someone, you have no true first impression. Until you know someone, you have no true judgment. But I was pretty sure that hating anyone who’d *chosen* to stay in the Hunter career for so long was fair game, wasn’t it?

“William Bleu,” Breanne added, pointing at the last name on the tree, “isn’t even an on-field Hunter. He works behind the scenes for almost every mission. But then...”—her excitement swelled as she skipped far back down the hall from where we’d come, almost at the beginning—“he married Alexa Delphine!”

“I remember that!” Sarah lit up, her posture bouncing to perfection. “It’s insane, the Delphines are literally the masters of their profession.”

“Yep.” Breanne’s thin lips stretched so wide with mischief that it even touched the faded freckles on her cheeks. “They’ve captured more magicians than anyone in the past *six* decades, and they’ve been hunting for centuries. It just makes me curious—I mean, you have to wonder, would Alexa and William ever have kids? Do they already? What do those kids’ lives look like?”

I was more or less perfectly all right with not knowing—and, if said kids already existed, avoiding them at all costs.

Sarah smirked, tossing her hair behind her shoulder. “Their

stories make mine even more interesting.”

She hurried back out to the main hall and entered the start of the magician side—starting with the Atera family tree, the first one listed.

My true awe surrendered behind Sarah as she stepped up to it, my eyes soaking up my history. Momma had never been able to say much about my father’s side of the family. She could only tell me about the people she’d actually known and everyone she remembered from my dad’s and aunt’s stories. Seeing my family in front of me for the first time, Momma’s words became reality: grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, and cousins were stitched together on this one large sheet of aging paper. A sense of pride that had been forced to hide all my life finally poked its head out. This was my family. And most of them were already gone.

Well, we still have Grandpa Atera, even though Nevada is a five-hour flight from North Carolina. That only leaves Aunt Becca, which I wouldn’t complain about; she was the only person I knew on a deeper level than friendship who understood what I felt and how I felt it. Actually, she was the only other magician I knew. Plus, at least she’d moved into my childhood home while Momma and I were here, so she was close by instead of an hour away in Charlotte.

“The line ended at Tristan and Rebecca Melicent-Marie Atera,” Sarah began, pointing loosely at their names as if the paper would disintegrate if she did so too firmly. “Still ‘missing’.”

“What a name,” Breanne said, cocking her thin brows. “How did they end up with something so elegant?”

“I don’t know, but the only thing anyone *knows* about Tristan is that he was chased out of the country almost twenty years ago,”

Sarah replied. “He actually managed to leave without getting caught! Like, how?”

I thought back to the story I’d heard from Momma my entire childhood: how my dad had to kiss his wife goodbye and reluctantly begin his escape, left to the mercy of the hope that he’d see her again someday. A month later, Momma found out she was pregnant and had no way to contact her husband. She spent the next eight months shaping and creating a life she and her baby could survive.

Of course... that meant my father didn’t even know that he had a daughter. And that was if he was even alive.

“Okay, but,” I began, hoping my gossip could match their eagerness as I took Sarah’s attention, “what about the *rumor*?”

Sarah laughed, crossing her arms. “I can’t believe you haven’t heard it yet! *They’re* the whole reason the school’s thinking about opening the Hunter’s Room last minute. The government suspects that the Ateras are still alive, and apparently they’re also—”

No sooner than she spoke did the elevator doors slide open on the other side of the Hunter’s Room. We froze, the mechanical whir echoing straight down the Hall and into my very being.

## CHAPTER



**B**reanne's pale hands flew to her mouth in terror, blue-hazel eyes wide. "The staff is back!" Sarah pulled us to the empty wall adjacent to the Atera family tree. We tightly pressed our backs against it. Hiding would only buy us a few seconds at maximum, but at least they were a few seconds.

"We've barely been here for five minutes!" Sarah whispered-screamed. "How are we supposed to sneak past them?"

The stranger's footsteps were muted on the rug in the Hunter's Room, but they'd be loud and clear once they reached the wooden floor of the Hall's foyer. The question was, how much time did we have before they reached us?

"It—it's okay," Breanne stammered, viciously picking at the



hair on her arms. “If we come clean, they should let us off with a warning. It’s the day before school starts, teenagers do stupid things all the time—”

“We practically broke into a top-secret room we’re not even supposed to know how to get to,” Sarah snapped. “You seriously think they’re gonna ‘let us off with a warning’?”

“Calm down,” I whispered, “before they *actually* catch us!”

I wasn’t even kidding myself. Sarah was anything but exaggerating, and my heart beat like it was trying to break the cage protecting it. Rationality was telling me that the school would have no reason to test me with a gadget that would expose my magic, but Momma’s wrath was nothing to be grateful for as an alternative if I was suspended.

A classroom door clicked shut far down the Hunter’s Room. My shoulders dropped in relief against the wall.

“They’re searching the classrooms first,” I whispered. “It sounds like just one person. We can sneak past them and get to the elevator.”

“We have to check if it’s clear to run,” Sarah said.

I scoffed. “Be my guest, since *you* wanted to come down here.”

Breanne perked up, eyes still wide. “I second that.”

Sarah pressed her mauve lips together before begrudgingly stepping toward the first archway. It only took her a second to peer around the edge and then turn back to us. “I don’t see anyone.”

I couldn’t really blame her for the superficial check, but anger was bubbling in my throat: with every second, Breanne’s suggestion of turning ourselves in inched closer and closer to becoming our only option—our only option that involved free will. But at least then I’d be caught with my friends. Maybe that would earn

us a lighter punishment and stop a chain reaction of events leading to them and the school finding out—

“What are you doing here?” a woman snapped, appearing behind Sarah and startling us.

Relief poured into my chest, and I sank against the wall. “You scared us!”

“Probably because you shouldn’t be down here,” Momma hissed, jabbing her index finger down the main hall. “Get upstairs. Now.”

I glimpsed at Breanne next to me: only when I met her still wide-eyed stare did she detach from the wall, Sarah already scamp-ering ahead of us.

“You’re not, um...” Breanne began hesitantly as we passed Momma, “part of security, too, are you?”

“No,” Momma stated, amber eyes hardening with her narrow jaw. “And I hope you realize how much trouble you would’ve been in if I were.”

She followed us like a police officer as we reentered the Hunter’s Room. There are a number of reasons that I love my mother, but her ability to make my friends just as afraid of her as I am is in the top five.

Neither girl beside me said a word as we walked the side of the room to avoid the display pillars in the middle. All we managed were glances between each other, stifling laughter from embarrassment and adrenaline. Momma was right about one thing: I didn’t want to explore my first year of real school with anyone else but these two.

It was only after I turned eight that Momma was convinced that I treated our secret with the same respect she did. Then she

finally let me meet the girls I'd always spy on from our living room window as they biked, drew with chalk on the sidewalk, or played some form of soccer in the street. We set up our first playdate at the white gazebo in Capperson Park, what's now "our spot". That was also where we swore that from that day forward, we'd have "an everlasting bond of best friendship".

Sarah gasped next to me, gawking at the corner of the high ceiling. "You guys!"

Breanne and I followed her gaze: security cameras. Mounted in all four corners of the room.

I mentally facepalmed. *Thank God I didn't use magic down here.*

Sarah leaned forward to better look at Breanne on my other side. "When can you erase it?"

Breanne went rigid, a furrow scrunching her thin brows. "You want me to *hack* the feed and erase the footage? I'm not doing that!"

"I'm concerned that you know *how* to do that," Momma remarked behind us. I'm not sure why—she knew that the girl had already taught herself HTML *and* JavaScript before most kids learned the basics of algebra.

Well, good news for my mother: I knew how to tamper with footage, too.

I met our eyes, which was enough confirmation: she had the same idea.

"I mean," Breanne stammered, staring shyly at the crimson rug, "I don't do it *often*, but—"

"Don't worry about it. Just get back upstairs." Momma nudged them both, nodding at me with her permission as they passed. I looked up at the camera above us.

“*Obliviscor hodie*,” I whispered, repeating the process three times before rushing to the elevator.

Breanne may know how to hack and erase, but I can give someone permanent amnesia with nothing but my mind. I’m just not *allowed* to unless my life literally depends on it (or Momma’s feeling rebellious and wants to defy the one-coupon-per-customer rule). Most of the time, though, magic is just easier.

The steel doors closed in front of us, and I turned to Momma. “Can you do anything about the cameras?”

“Don’t worry about it,” she said again, gently emphasizing each word. “Nobody watches the footage unless security is given a reason to, like if someone commits a crime. You’re fine.”

If nobody ever watched it, why had she told me to erase it?!

“But,” she added, “you’re still not allowed down there until further notice. And if you accidentally commit a crime next time, I’m not bailing you out. So promise me that there won’t be a next time.”

The three of us nodded.

*No next time. But if the school reopens that place...*

I discreetly bit the inside of my lip. “Is the school gonna reopen the Hunter’s Room?”

“They’re considering it,”—Momma nodded once—“but nothing’s definite and won’t be for a long time. The only thing the three of you need to worry about is the year already ahead of you.”

“I’m hoping they do,” Sarah said as the doors opened, revealing the Grand Foyer. We followed her out and onto the crimson rug. “I was saying before, the government suspects Tristan and Rebecca Atera are still alive—and *in* the country. That’s why Callistro wants to reopen the Room.”

“What?” Breanne and I exclaimed in unison, the shock in her tone overriding the panic in mine. “Where did you hear that from?” I asked.

“Opal Dubois,” Sarah replied, like it was obvious. “Her mom’s the chief editor of *Magic Magazine*.”

I suppressed an eye roll. *Magic* exclusively touches on the mortal-versus-magic war, known for getting the most accurate and closest leads on any scandal the writers can find. Whatever Opal Dubois was telling people, it was most likely about to be printed in the latest issue. But based on *Magic*’s (admittedly) almost flawless reputation for accuracy... could that rumor actually be true?

*But Aunt Becca’s staying at our old house. She never had to leave the country. Dad, though...* It was a miracle he’d even left to begin with. Canada and Mexico were just as dangerous, planes were impossible to sneak onto unless someone was willing to risk their life, and stowing away on a ship was hard enough for mortals to accomplish, let alone magicians.

“So they *are* alive,” I said flatly, barring hope from my tone.

Sarah shrugged. “That’s where the latest intel’s coming from, but it’s just another rumor.”

“Latest”—how recent was that?

One glance at Momma and her slightly arched brow all but screamed her message: stop asking questions. Intense curiosity would do me no favors in maintaining our cover.

I looked out at the Grand Foyer. A few Callistro Girls were enjoying the last day of free dress as they roamed, some walking into the Dining Hall on the left side and others carrying packed boxes up the Main Staircase. My eyes landed on the tall, wide double doors of the manor’s entrance. Tonight was our last night of

freedom before we'd need to start signing out with the headmaster to go off campus.

*I doubt Mr. Dawson would make exceptions for me just because I'm his goddaughter.*

In other words, it'd be my last opportunity for a long while to be alone and wrap my head around things...

I turned back to Momma. "I'm gonna head into town."

She tilted her head, twisting the golden wedding band on her finger. "Okay. But make sure you'll have enough time to finish unpacking. They want everyone in bed by 9 tonight."

"Oh, we'll take care of that for you," Sarah said, offering me a runway-worthy smile and understanding my tacit request to be alone. "It'll be our 'welcome to your first real school' gift."

"Thanks," I chimed, touching Breanne's shoulder in a good-bye as I walked past her.

After verifying with the headmaster, students would then need to verify with the security guards at the entrance of the black metal gates that encircle the manor. Our ID cards opened them. Just for today, my card was all I needed.

I pulled out my phone as the gate shut with a metal clang, and started my trek into the Callistro Forest:

**E:** How did you know where we were?? What about your meeting?

Momma probably has some sort of built-in GPS that sets off an alarm any time I'm remotely near anywhere I shouldn't be. Or she chipped me. She definitely chipped me. That would explain a lot of things...

**M:** I went to drop off one of your boxes I accidentally took to my room. Nobody was in your dorm, and with Sarah in your group, there's only one other place you'd all be the night before school starts. So did we have the same idea back there?

**E:** Yeah, the cameras shouldn't have anything from today. But if nobody watches the footage, why delete it?

**M:** Because I'd rather have security thinking the cameras glitched and didn't record anything from today instead of knowing you three broke in somewhere. So please, don't go back.

Just barely got to the meeting in time, have to go. Be safe.

*No wonder she's scared I'm gonna accidentally blow it...* Even I was scared that I'd accidentally blow it, especially because I didn't have nearly that level of caution or wisdom yet.

Then again, she was the fully trained Hunter—but with the school year I had ahead of me, my biggest fear was that I'd never have the chance to get to where I needed to be before those four walls turned on me nonetheless. Just like they almost had today.

## CHAPTER

# THREE



**S**trolling out of the forest and onto the sidewalk along Main Street, I was just in time to catch Capperson's late-summer sunset. A gentle, cool wind breezed by, relieving the warm air as I passed under the streetlights. I reminded myself to savor every second of my last few moments of alone time; not only were they now rare, but they were also the one thing left that gave me complete freedom. There was no pretending to side with the enemy's belief, no standard of how to react around those who spoke against me. And if I chose to think about what made me different and about my hope of my father coming back, I could. These moments were my only real getaways now.

The lampposts' comforting yellow glow infused the early evening's air. All around the square, couples enjoyed an evening



walk while singles shopped and made phone calls. I took one last glimpse at my old reality, soaking up the details of the town square I'd grown up in.

Reaching the center, I paused on the sidewalk. *Why isn't the fountain on tonight?*

Okay, this was probably going to be the only fun I'd have in a while. And the timing made this all the more perfect—there was a technician somewhere that turned the fountain on, or it was set to a schedule, right? This would look completely natural. Nobody would know.

Mindful of the magic that would flash in my eyes, I bent my head down. "*Interfluo.*"

Water flowed to life from the spouts in slow motion, trickling down the top two stone tiers. Just as I'd thought, nobody spared more than a glance before minding their own business again.

I smiled: I'd successfully snagged an opportunity for magic. From the moment Momma and I moved to Callistro, I knew that that would never be guaranteed again. I didn't know how, but she knew a lot about magic despite being mortal. We still had to figure out a whole new schedule for our mentoring sessions.

A wooden bench sat against each side of the fountain. I walked to the other side and sat down on the bench facing the strip of stores, turning my back to Main Street. Shivering in the cool breeze, I exhaled the last remaining tension of what had happened in the Hunter's Room. I knew it had been real, but I hated that it *felt* real. Too close to the reality that magicians actually suffer every day at the hands of those devices I'd just marveled at with my best friends. And we'd been caught. By my mother, but caught nonetheless—

*This isn't helping.* My eyes closed, and I forced my mind to shake away magic altogether. Maybe I *didn't* have my moments of freedom anymore; maybe I was going to have to trap my thoughts in the habit of normalcy. Practice makes permanent, and if I practiced mortality, I'd more permanently execute it...

I shivered again, goosebumps prickling my bare arms and legs. An icy bite lingered in the breeze now, slithering around my limbs like the truth: I was in a different arena now whether I thought I liked it or not, and magic was forbidden. No more until—

*Is that... cologne?*

Something black flash in my peripheral, warmth encasing my arms. I sprang up and turned around. A jacket just as quickly invaded my previous spot on the bench. My eyes snapped up.

*Oh no.*

Brown eyes—the first thing I noticed were the boy's round brown eyes that radiated more warmth than his jacket. He stood behind the bench with his lips slightly parted and light-brown hands frozen in the air. Mahogany hair went down to his ears and swept upward at the tips. He stared back at me for just a second before his lips broke into a grin.

"I'm sorry," he quickly said, "I swear, I was gonna introduce myself before you stood up, you just looked cold so I figured—"

"Oh, it's okay." I smiled back, subconsciously flinging my hair out from behind my ear to cover it. "I forgot my jacket at home, but—um, I appreciate the thought."

"Well, I'm glad *that's* your initial reaction."

I bit my lip to subdue the laugh. To be honest, I had no idea whether to feel creeped out or flattered that a boy *this* cute had been concerned about if I was warm enough and tried to sneak

his jacket onto me. Something was off, but... well, what harm could a smile like that do?

“Nice eyes.”

I froze, words stuck in my throat like a fly to honey. It wasn't the first time someone had complimented the icy Atera blue of my eyes—but he was a handsome stranger complimenting *my* eyes.

“Thanks,” I said, barely stopping myself from mentioning the Atera part. “You, too.”

I mentally facepalmed. *I did not just say that.*

But he chuckled, held out his hand, and said, “I'm Jak.”

The foolproof method to keep a stranger trapped in conversation. The worst part? Part of me was glad.

And despite everything Momma's ever told me about strangers, I accepted his handshake and locked myself in. “Em-malynn—Emma, sorry. Um, people usually call me ‘Emma’.”

Jak walked around the bench to stand in front of me, fully exposing his height: four inches taller than me? Five? “I promise, I really was planning on actually sitting down, if that makes you feel less—creeped out. Um...” He paused, as if saying the words out loud had held up a large mirror in front of him. “Okay, clearly I don't get out much.”

My teeth lost their grip on my lip as I grinned, my laugh set free. How had he done that?

“Neither do I, believe it or not,” I told him, scratching a non-itchy spot on my forehead. “I get that.”

“In that case, I also usually grab coffee to warm up, if you're still cold.”

*What a suave way of asking someone out.*

Wait. A guy was actually *asking me out!* For the first time ever!

In full honesty, I didn't know the response to that. I'd only trusted so many strangers growing up, but I'd always had Momma's help to gauge the boundaries of the relationship. That was just how it had always worked out, but I was going to be sixteen in a week. I definitely wouldn't have her help forever...

*I'll let him decide how much he wants to do this.*

"I would, but I didn't bring my purse," I said.

Jak shrugged. "My treat."

Okay. This was definitely a date.

"Really?" I hugged myself against the breeze, shifting my weight to one foot. "That's really nice of you... You're pretty bold for a stranger."

"And you're still cold." He nodded to my stance with a soft smile. Then, he turned around, grabbed his jacket from the bench, and held it out to me. "Plus, how do you know we're not friends just because we hadn't met till now?"

He was good. He was all the more dangerous because he was so good.

I ran through each of Momma's rules regarding strangers in my head: 1.) Never tell them a thing about either of your parents. 2.) Never reveal which part of town you live in. 3.) Never take anything from them, especially if they offer it to you for free. 4.) Always assume your conversation will last for thirty seconds, because then it will. 5.) If they ask for your number, give them the number to the pizza place two blocks away from home. 6.) If they try to follow you, go to the bathroom and make them forget about you (or, if a bathroom isn't nearby, scream).

But a teenage boy? This was a new game with different rules.

"Funny you say that," I said, my resolve softening under the

anxiety. “I don’t think I’ve seen you before, are you from here?”

“No,” Jak answered submissively. “I’m from Topa.”

My head jerked back. “Isn’t that an hour away? What’re you doing here?”

He seemed to think about his answer for a second, glancing off to the side. “Interest, I guess. Getting something out of my system before school starts.”

I did understand *that*; I was doing the same thing.

“I did *not* have the best start to this conversation to begin with,” he said next, holding up a hand, “so believe me, if you’re not comfortable, I will gladly see myself somewhere else—”

“No, it’s—” I caught myself saying, my own realization cutting me off. Apparently I *didn’t* want him to leave, and I didn’t need Sarah’s help to know what that meant.

I glimpsed the red cement underneath us, unable to look Jak in the eye when I asked, “Do you have to be back soon?”

“No. You?”

I pressed my lips together to bar the giddy, idiotic grin. He actually wanted to spend the evening out with me. That thought alone made me want to burst out laughing, and every time I opened my mouth was a gamble.

*Don’t tell him about your family or where you live, and it’s all good. And you can just erase his memory if you do let something slip!*

“Nope.” I smiled, nodding. “Coffee sounds good.”

The closest Joe’s House was the one inside the Publisher’s Ink bookstore around the corner. Jak and I didn’t speak for most of the way there as we walked on the sidewalk beside the main road, eventually turning left into the central shopping center.

Maybe he hadn’t expected me to actually accept—because *now*

he was struggling to fill in the all-too awkward silence.

“Topa, right?” I asked as we passed the store a couple of doors down from Publisher’s Ink. “Where do you go to school?”

“Redway. We don’t start for another two weeks.”

No way. There was only one reason I’d heard of Redway Academy: it was an all-boys boarding school with the same original purpose and cover story as Callistro.

But Jak couldn’t know that I knew his cover—then he’d know mine.

“I was actually homeschooled for all of elementary school,” Jak added, “and then I went to a different private school until last year. You?”

From the sounds of it, he *already* knew me; how had he managed to recite half of my childhood without knowing a thing about me?

“That’s crazy,” I said, “I haven’t met anyone else who was homeschooled. I was until this year. But I don’t meet new people that often in general, I usually stay home or hang out with my friends.”

“What about your dad?”

I nearly stopped in my tracks as we walked into Publisher’s Ink, hunting for a safe answer. To this day, neither Sarah nor Breanne has ever asked me about my father because Momma told a cover story to their parents, who probably told the girls to never bring the subject up. Jak was officially the first to do so.

“I, um...” I said slowly, “I never got to meet my dad.”

Jak paused like I’d set him off course. Regret seemed to settle in him, pulling his eyes down to the dark-blue carpet below us. “Oh. I’m—I’m sorry.”

I paid him a weak smile, following his gaze.

Silence lingered between us again all the way until we reached the back of the store and strolled up to the counter at Joe's House to order. Then, Jak slid over to the neighboring pick-up counter, took a magazine, and followed me to a table next to a window.

It wasn't until we sat down that he opened the magazine, and I leaned in for a look at the cover: a slightly blurred photo of a man with brown hair and icy-blue eyes took up the page. His strikingly familiar, rugged face looked off to the side, the motion blur indicating his fast pace. The table hid the headline printed at the bottom, but the top shamelessly boasted the publisher: *Magic*.

"Interesting?" I asked, masking my skepticism.

"Very," Jak replied casually. His eyes moved up to meet mine, and he lowered his voice. "You know about the Ateras, right?"

*Seriously? Again?*

The pieces connected in my mind, and I realized why the man on the cover looked so familiar, why that familiarity had been blurred; I hadn't seen a photo of him in a long time, and the few that I *had* seen were crystal clear. And he was always smiling.

"Yeah," I said.

"So the world believes that, despite Tristan Atera marrying all those years ago, he and Rebecca were the last of their line. No more Ateras, no more magic. America's finally safe."

Anxiety crept up on me, igniting my skin with a heat that combatted the cold glass of the window. Not even the warm coffee aroma could comfort me as I forced my jaw to remain loose and said, "Yeah... and?"

"Apparently that's not true. He didn't just get married." Jak closed the magazine, dropped it onto the table, and pushed it in

my direction. “Less than a year later, Tristan and his wife had a baby.”



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The rest of *Our Mistaken Identity* and the *Emmalynn Atera* Series is available now on Amazon and [barnesandnoble.com](http://barnesandnoble.com)!