

Chapter One

Daniela Gomez, Georgetown, District of Columbia, Present

It was two days after the attack on the gallery and her friend, Kara, stood before her and dropped a bombshell confession. Up until the exhibition, she believed she was just a painter with a dream of sharing her art with the world. But that deception came crashing down when Charlotte attacked, and Kara was forced to wield magic in plain view of the public. Until that night, Daniela believed she herself was ordinary. But when the window shattered, the inexplicable happened, and she emerged unscathed.

Now, on this morning she and Terry demanded answers—and Kara told them everything. She told them of her magical background, her expired friendship with Charlotte, how she had sworn vengeance on her. Kara told them how after she lost her brother, Anthony, she tried to deny magic but it was all in vain. She finished her confession with a vision of the mystical energy pulsing within both of them. Now the questions multiplied by ten.

“I’m not the only one between us with magic, Dani. You have it, too,” Kara said.

“I know.”

Her friend blinked. “What? How?”

“The night of the attack, I threw up a barrier to shield myself from the falling glass. I didn’t know I was capable of that before now. I need answers.”

She took a deep breath and explained everything. “What I just showed you was my center of power. It’s where all of my magical energy resides. The thin streams of light branching out from it are called conduits. They circulate energy through my body so I can cast.”

“So, I am like you?”

“Not quite.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“The magic inside of you is not a true center of power, Dani. It’s a finite storehouse of energy that was implanted by someone else. You weren’t born with the gift.”

“Do you know who gave me this power?”

Kara shook her head and her short blond hair brushed her cheeks. “I’m not sure, but I think it comes from someone closely related to you. A parent or a sibling maybe.”

“That’s not possible. No one in my family can cast.”

“Dani, I think it’s time for you to consider the possibility that... you were adopted.”

“How long have you known that I had magic?”

Kara hesitated before she answered. “Since I first met you.”

“Tell me why you kept the truth from me.”

“I never said anything because I recognized the spell that was used to implant that magic. It’s a spell designed to transfer a spark of someone else’s power into a non-magical person. Up until now, it’s been dormant. It only activated when your safety was threatened.”

“Like when the glass fell on me.”

“Yes, Dani. It’s a last resort self-defense mechanism. Whoever cast the spell was trying to protect you.”

“But who or what are they protecting me from?”

“I honestly don’t know.”

Daniela sighed.

“I know this is a lot to take in, Dani. I’m sorry you’re finding out this way.”

“I need to step out for a few minutes.” She grabbed her jacket and walked briskly out of the studio. Her curly, black ponytail swished behind her head while her heels clicked across the

floor. Daniela headed down the corridor and cut through the cafeteria. She pushed open a door and found herself on an empty balcony.

The sky was a bright blue, and a gentle wind touched her slender arms. Daniela slipped on her jacket and inhaled the fresh air. She grappled with the fact that both of them possessed magic, but only Kara knew it. She knew it and said nothing. How dare she conceal such a thing from her! She had a magical education, and just the other night clashed with another mystic. What else did she not know about her?

Daniela thought about the night of the gallery attack, how the barrier appeared around her at the moment she needed it. She remembered closing her eyes, and waiting for the glass to cut her ... only it never did. Daniela knew for a fact that no one in the Gomez family could cast. The only question that remained was: where did this power come from?

Daniela pulled out her phone and called her mother, Marta.

The phone only rang once before she answered. "Hello?"

"Hi, mom."

"Dani, you sound upset. What's wrong?"

"Kara just told me that she is a mystic. After two years of friendship, this is the first time I'm finding out!"

"I'm sorry, mija. But I'm sure she had her reasons for not telling you before."

Daniela explained the reasons Kara had given her.

"See! She is working through her own trauma."

"I know. I just feel so betrayed right now. I've told her everything about myself and now I feel like I know nothing about her."

“I understand where you’re coming from. But she has been such a good friend to you aside from this one fault, hasn’t she? She trained you in photography and consoled you when that silly boy broke your heart. She even helped you find an apartment!”

“You are right. But it still hurts.”

“Mija, in this life people will fail you in small ways and in big ways. It is unavoidable. The best thing to do is just forgive and move on.”

“I know.”

“Is that all that was bothering you?”

“No,” Daniela answered.

“What else is the matter?”

Daniela told her mother everything Kara revealed about the spark of magic in her. “I know nobody in our family can cast. So, I need to know, was I adopted?”

Her mother paused for a long time before she replied. “Of course not, Dani. You are my daughter.”

“Thanks, mom. I have to get back to work now.”

They said their goodbyes and hung up.

She did not speak to Kara much for the rest of the day. She ate her lunch alone and left at the end of her shift without a word.

Later that evening, she arrived at her apartment as her phone chimed. She closed the door and looked at the screen.

It lit up with a text from Kara.

Dani, I'm so sorry for deceiving you. Can we talk things over?

Daniela locked the screen and slipped her phone back into her pocket. After she kicked off her shoes and left her purse on the table, she thought about the conversation she had with her mother. Something about it didn't feel right. Why did it take her so long to answer when she asked if she was adopted or not? She sat on the couch and texted her mom.

Can I come over for dinner tonight?

The answer was almost instant. *Of course, sweetie!*

A quick glance at the clock told her she would be serving dinner in an hour. She rose from the couch and washed her face in the bathroom. Daniela fussed with her hair and touched up her make up. When she was satisfied with her appearance, she retrieved her purse from the living room and left for her mother's house.

When she arrived in her parents' neighborhood, she stepped out of her car and closed the door. Children shrieked playfully while she crossed the parking lot. Daniela approached the narrow townhouse and rang the doorbell. There was a stirring within right before the door swung open.

A woman whose head barely reached Daniela's shoulders greeted her with a smile. Wrinkles stretched from the corners of her eyes, and slivers of gray streaked her short brown hair. An apron was tied around Marta's wide girth, and she stood with her thick arms raised for a hug.

"Dani, it's good to see you."

She stepped into her tight embrace.

"Dinner is almost ready."

Daniela entered the house and the warm aroma of roasted chicken filled her nostrils. The smell of the spices triggered a flood of memories from her childhood. Visions of every birthday, every Christmas, every family gathering danced in her mind. Was it all a lie?

Her mother vanished into the kitchen and the clanging of pots and pans echoed into the living room. Daniela waited until her mother's back was turned, then crept upstairs. She walked through a short hallway, past her childhood bedroom and into her father's office. Daniela rifled through drawers and filing cabinets in search of any documents concerning herself. So far, all she found were tax returns for the family and invoices for her father's business. She looked through a series of manila folders and found nothing. Daniela leaned back in the chair and sighed.

Then something caught her eye.

A tiny light shone beneath the desk.

She scooted the chair back and looked closer. The light was next to a keypad that was mounted on a vault. Could this be where they were keeping her documents? Her heart raced while she tried to guess the password. If there was a magical spell that could unlock a vault, she didn't know it. She would just have to do it the old-fashioned way. *I guess I'll try their address first.* Nothing. Next, she tried the numeric digits of her father's license plate. Nothing. She typed her mother's birthday, then her father's, and still the vault remained locked. Lastly, she typed her own birthday, 0695. There was a click and she pulled it open.

Inside the vault was a thin stack of papers. She pulled out the first document, which was a birth certificate, her own! According to the document, she was born at Capernaum Hospital on June 23rd, 1995.

But her birth parents were listed as John and Jane Doe.

Daniela gasped.

Her mother lied!

She felt as though she had been impaled by something. For all these years she thought Andre and Marta Gomez were her natural parents, but this birth certificate had just smashed her perception of everything. All her memories were a lie, a counterfeit! But if they were not her true parents, then who was? Tears filled Daniela's eyes and she pulled the next document from the vault. It was her adoption papers. According to the document, Daniela was surrendered to a nurse by the name of Elisha Clarkson. The day was her date of birth and the time was 10:45 p.m. The identity of the one who turned her over was simply marked as "N/A."

Her mother had some explaining to do.

Daniela snatched the documents from the floor and shoved the chair aside. She marched down the stairs and burst into the kitchen.

Marta whirled around at the stove and gasped at her entrance.

She held up the documents. "Do you want to tell me about these?"

Her mother's eyes widened. "Dani, how did you find those papers?"

"I found them in dad's office! I trusted you all my life and now I discover you've been hiding this!"

She slammed the documents on the table and planted her knuckles on her hips.

"Mija, I'm so sorry I lied. I just never wanted you to feel different from the rest of us."

Daniela shook her head. "I can't believe you! I ran to you for comfort because my own best friend was keeping a secret, and now I discover you've been doing exactly the same thing! Why is everyone deceiving me?"

Marta's eyes glistened. "Dani, I only wanted to protect you."

She tried to hug Daniela, but she swatted her arms away.

The woman recoiled.

“No! I can’t even look at you right now!”

Daniela stuffed the documents into her bag and stormed out of the kitchen.

“Dani, wait! Let me explain!” the woman called after her.

But she ignored Marta’s pleas. She ripped the door open and stalked back to her car.

She sat behind the wheel and sobbed for long minutes. Her body shuddered with the force of her weeping. She wanted to break something. Anything! Only the fear of injury stopped her from acting on the impulse. When her tears subsided, she wiped her face and started the car.

Later, at her apartment, she felt consumed by a hollow feeling on the inside. Her mouth was drawn in a frown, her eyes moist and red. Daniela dropped her bag on the floor and slumped into a chair. She buried her face in her hands. Why did everyone feel an urge to hide things from her? After a few moments of quiet sobbing, she pulled the documents out of her bag. She had to uncover the truth of her origin.

According to her adoption papers, she was surrendered as an infant to a nurse by the name of Elisha Clarkson. But it did not say who surrendered her. She had to get in contact with that nurse. She pulled out her phone and called the hospital. After a few ringtones, a receptionist answered.

“Capernaum Hospital. This is Gabrielle, how may I direct your call?”

“Hi. My name is Daniela Gomez. I am trying to get in touch with a nurse by the name of Elisha Clarkson.”

“Hold, please.”

After a few minutes of soft music, Gabrielle returned.

“I’m sorry, that nurse no longer works here. She transferred several years ago.”

“Where did she go?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know.”

She had hit a wall. Daniela sighed inwardly. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

They hung up.

Daniela opened her laptop and logged on to the internet. She navigated to a professional networking site and typed the name Elisha Clarkson in the search bar. Several profiles appeared in the list. She looked through the work histories of each one and discarded the Elishas who never worked at Capernaum Hospital. Daniela worked her way through five entries before she found the nurse designated on her birth certificate. After a brief look at her work history, Daniela learned that Elisha was now working at a private practice in Maryland. She clicked the message button and a dialogue box appeared on the screen. Her email was short:

Good Evening Miss Clarkson,

My name is Daniela Gomez and I have some very important questions to ask you. You are designated as the receiving nurse on my birth certificate. I need to know who surrendered me and the identity of my biological parents. Please get back to me as soon as you can. Thank you.

When Daniela concluded her work, she closed her laptop and rose to get a glass of water. While she poured from a pitcher, her phone chimed once more.

She frowned. *Is that Kara again?* With her glass in hand, she walked back to the table and picked up her phone.

The screen showed a text from Terry.

I’m going out for a drink tonight. Wanna join me?

Daniela set her glass on the table and replied instantly. *I could use a drink myself.*

Cool.

He then followed up with the street address of the bar.

The sun sank low on a darkened horizon as the streets of Adams Morgan came alive. Outdoor patios were jam-packed with patrons as they talked jovially among themselves. The crowded tables were filled with food and drinks while the wait staff zipped around the dining area. The sun cast harsh shadows on the gaudy buildings as the street lamps winked on.

The air was filled with conversation when Daniela stepped through the door. She caught snippets of what the patrons said as she walked by.

“Did you hear about the attack on the gallery?” one woman said.

“How could I not? It’s everywhere!” another customer replied.

“I heard one of the artists was involved in the battle.”

“Yeah, yeah. Kara Hartman, the painter, right?”

Still another customer said, “The videos of that night are insane. Magical flames and lightning bolts and glowing swords!”

Of course, how could she not be famous now?

Terry leaned away from the bar and waved at her from the far end of the room.

She spotted him right away and took a stool next to her friend.

“How are you? I saw you eating lunch alone today,” Terry said before he sipped at his beer.

“Yeah. Honestly, I’m pretty upset she hid the mystical side of herself from us. She texted me earlier, but I ignored it.”

“I haven’t spoken to her either.”

A moment later, the bartender noticed Daniela and asked what she wanted. The youngish blonde woman was dressed in a black tank top and her bare shoulders were covered in tattoos. Her long golden hair was pulled back in a ponytail and a tiny piercing sparkled at her nose.

“A glass of bourbon, por favor.”

She smiled. “Comin’ right up.”

Terry’s eyes widened and he leaned away from her. “Goin’ for the strong stuff tonight! Who are you?”

Daniela gave him a weak smile. “I have something else to tell you.”

“What is it?”

The bartender slid the glass of whiskey to Daniela and she thanked her.

She looked down at the amber fluid in her glass and spoke in a low voice. “The night of the attack, I discovered something about myself I didn’t know before. When the bat broke through the window and the glass fell on me, I threw my hands up to shield myself. When I opened my eyes, I saw a glowing barrier around me as the glass bounced off.”

His eyebrows rose. “Are you trying to tell me you have magic, too?”

Daniela nodded. “After you left the studio this morning, Kara gave me a vision. She touched me and I saw her magic as bright as the sun. I could feel the energy washing over me. Then I looked down and I saw a tiny spark of magic in myself.”

“Did you always know?”

Daniela shook her head. She swallowed a mouthful of whiskey and squinted her eyes as the sweet liquid burned its way down her throat. “No one in my family can cast magic, Terry. But it doesn’t make sense. Genetics is a huge factor in determining whether someone is gifted with magic or not. I’m not a Gomez, Terry.”

“Do you know who your real family is?” Terry said before he took another sip of his beer.

“No. I tried to find out, but my birth certificate only lists my parents as John and Jane Doe. I found my documents in a vault under my dad’s desk. My parents hid them from me my whole life! I was never allowed to play in my dad’s office as a child. Now I know why.”

“What did you do after that?”

“I confronted my mom about it, and we had a huge fight. She apologized for hiding the truth from me, but I was so angry I stormed out.”

Daniela took another gulp of whiskey.

“Awwww. I’m sorry to hear that. I’m sure she had her reasons, though.”

“I just feel like everyone is hiding something from me lately. I hate it!”

“Well, you ain’t gotta worry about that from me. I’m an open book!”

She giggled and wiped a tear from her eye. Then she tilted the glass at her lips once more.

“Did you find out anything else?”

“Yeah. I got the name of the nurse who received me. I called the hospital to find out who handed me over but the nurse doesn’t work there anymore. I sent her a message right before I left.” She tossed her head back and downed more whiskey. “I have no idea who I am anymore. My parents are not my parents. My cousins are not my cousins. All my memories feel like a lie.”

“I know who you are. You’re my friend, Dani. And that will never change.”

Daniela smiled. “Thank you, Terry.”

As the evening wore on, the two of them passed the time with talk of trivial things. They discussed events they wanted to attend, movies they wanted to see together, and places they wanted to visit.

The loud chatter of the bar filled her ears while the patrons around them laughed and cheered boisterously.

Various games played on the screens over the bar along with video footage of the gallery attack.

Daniela barely glanced at the screens while she and Terry conversed. They smiled and made each other laugh with references from their favorite movies. Through the din of the cheering patrons, she heard her phone chime. She slipped it out of her pocket and saw another text from Kara.

Dani, are you still upset with me? Can we talk?

She put away her phone without replying.

“Save my seat, Terry. I’m going to the bathroom,” Daniela said with slurred speech.

“Sure thing.”

She rose from her stool and immediately wobbled. She clutched at the bar to stop herself from falling.

“Maybe you should sit down for a bit,” Terry said with a chuckle.

“I’m good.”

Then she teetered her way to the restroom.

Daniela carefully weaved around the clusters of patrons who stood and talked with drinks in hand. The floor seemed to tilt beneath her feet as she stumbled through the crowd. She bumped into several people and apologized while on her way to the restroom. But when Daniela reached the other side of the room, she only found the emergency exit. That wasn’t right. Where was the bathroom? She looked around and everything seemed to spin as she turned her head. Daniela turned to her left, and saw the restroom sign just a few meters away. There it was! She walked with an unsteady gait towards the sign.

Daniela could barely see in the dimly lit bar. Walls of people pressed in on her from all sides. She could barely take a step without bumping into another person.

Another customer squeezed by her, and she turned sideways to let him pass.

Then she staggered backward and fell into a waitress carrying a pitcher of beer. The pitcher tumbled off the tray and spilled all over a woman seated at a table. A deluge of beer and ice spilled all over her, drenching her completely.

The woman's eyes and mouth were wide open as she fixed her glare on Daniela.

The waitress attempted to placate her, but the woman ignored her.

"You bitch! This was my favorite top!"

"I'm so, so sorry. I didn't mean to do that."

She sprang to her feet and slapped Daniela in the face.

Her cheek stung as her head whipped around on her shoulders.

Like a tiger, she pounced on her and began pounding Daniela with her fists.

She shielded herself from the blows as she tried desperately to apologize for what she had done.

Several customers attempted to pry her away but to no avail.

Terry heard the commotion and turned to see what was going on. He saw the woman beating Daniela and left his stool. He tried to push his way through the crowd, but it was too dense.

"Please stop! I didn't mean to spill beer on you, I swear!"

She raked her nails across Daniela's face and left three red lines on her cheek.

"I said stop!"

She thrust her hand forward and blasted the woman with a shockwave.

The woman was hurled backward through the air and careened into several other patrons who toppled like bowling pins.

Daniela gasped as she looked upon the customers moaning and struggling to their feet.

Silence filled the room as the patrons gawked at what she had done. Then came the whispers.

Daniela could feel their eyes on her while several people helped the woman to her feet. “I— I’m sorry,” she stammered.

Terry came to her side.

“Come on, Dani. We should go.”

He wrapped an arm around her and led her out of the bar.

Night had fallen in earnest when Terry escorted Daniela to her car. He walked with a protective arm across her shoulders while she stumbled at his side.

“Give me the keys, Dani. I’m takin’ you home.”

Daniela dug the keys out of her purse and placed them in his hand.

He opened the door to her car, and she dropped into the passenger seat.

She buckled her seat belt as Terry walked around the hood and got behind the wheel.

He pulled away from the curb and merged with traffic.

Daniela leaned back in the seat and gazed absently at the street lamps as they flew across her vision.

The radio played quietly in the cabin.

“I didn’t mean to hurt her. I feel awful.”

“I know, I know,” Terry replied. He turned through an intersection and made a lane change.

Daniela looked down at her hands and remembered how it felt when the magic flowed through her arm and exploded from her palm. It was like waves of liquid fire washing over her.

Before today, she had no idea she was capable of such a thing. Where had this power come from? Why was she not aware of it until now?

“Do you think there is a secret that Kara is trying to protect me from?”

“It was probably something like that. I mean, I kinda see where she was coming from when she mentioned Charlotte and her brother. If I lost my brother like that, I wouldn’t want to broadcast it either. But if she had told you about your magic sooner, maybe she could have taught you to control it better. Maybe that bar fight back there wouldn’t have happened.”

“Maybe,” Daniela answered.

When they arrived at her apartment, Terry opened the door and clicked on the lights.

Daniela clung to his arm as he led her across the living room. She wobbled and swayed beside him while the floor see-sawed.

He led her into the bedroom where she tumbled onto the mattress. Kneeling by the bedside, he slipped off her shoes.

“You’re always so good to me, Terry. I don’t deserve a friend like you,” Daniela said as the room spun in her vision.

“Of course, you do.”

Her eyelids drooped, and her breathing slowed.

Then Terry pulled the covers up to her shoulders.

She began to mumble something but fell asleep before she could finish the thought.

He left the lamp on and went to the living room where he lay down on the couch.

The next morning was painful. Daniela awoke to an agonizing, throbbing headache. It was as if someone was pounding her skull with a hammer. She sat up slowly and moaned. Slivers of

golden light stabbed through the blinds, and she realized with a gasp she had to go to work. She began to undress and stumble towards the shower when her phone chimed.

Daniela pulled it out of her pocket, and saw another text from Kara. *Dani, please talk to me. Are you coming in today?*

Yes, boss, she replied out of habit.

Later that morning, Daniela sat at her desk and cradled her head in her hands. Her laptop was open but idle. For once, the studio was not filled with the sound of her furious clicking. She just sat still and moaned quietly to herself.

When Kara realized why the studio was so silent, she looked up from her canvas and saw Daniela with her head resting against her palms.

“Are you okay?”

Daniela sat up and resumed her work. “I’m fine,” she replied without looking at her.

Kara sat on her stool with a brush poised in front of her canvas. A glob of paint clung to its bristles while she held her palette in the other hand. She watched as Daniela worked, her face devoid of its usual cheer. She suspected she had more than a little to do with that. After she put down her palette, she approached Daniela’s desk.

“I can take away the pain.”

“I have seen enough of your magic,” she replied as she continued to type.

“Please, let me heal you. I know I can’t make up for what I did, but maybe this can be a start.”

Daniela dropped her hands into her lap and sighed. The pounding in her head was relentless, and the pills she took this morning were of little use.

“Fine,” she replied. She turned toward Kara who began to cast immediately.

She muttered an incantation while her palms came together and twisted. Then she turned both hands sideways and pulled them apart until only her fingers touched.

Waves of warmth washed over Daniela, and the pain in her head ceased. She felt as though she had just woken up from a full night of sleep. Colors appeared more vibrant in her eyes, and the subtle scent of Kara's perfume was more acute. She could even feel minuscule gradients of temperature in the air. Daniela gasped audibly as the spell ended. For a moment, she just sat there and breathed, her eyes wide as she absorbed all the magnified sensations.

Kara gave her a wan smile. "You're welcome."

She turned and went back to her painting.

While Daniela worked that day, she kept gazing at the paintings all around her and looking out the window. It was as though she had been living her life in a black and white movie when suddenly, she was thrust into full color. She could smell the faint aroma of someone's breakfast down the hall, and feel vibrations in the ground from passing cars. She almost forgot that she was still upset with Kara.

Kara Hartman, Georgetown, District of Columbia, Present

During her lunch break, she sat alone in the quiet studio. She ate her grilled chicken sandwich while she scrolled half-heartedly through her social media feed. *How long will Dani be upset with me?* Kara sighed and decided to play some music to cheer herself up. In a few seconds, an old Billy Joel tune played in her ears. She sipped her tea and waved at a photographer as he walked by her studio.

Kara crumpled up the wrapper and tossed it into the waste bin. She drained the last of her tea and rose from her chair to resume her work. As she donned her apron, Selene entered the studio.

Her eyebrows rose and she smiled. "Hi! I wasn't expecting you."

“Just thought I would swing by and see my special lady.”

Kara hugged her.

“How’s your day going?”

“I’m keeping busy. Ever since news broke that I’m not just a painter, my commissions have gone through the roof!”

“I can see that,” Selene said as she cast an appraising look about the studio. “And how are Terry and Daniela handling your big confession?”

Kara sat at her stool and dropped her eyes to the floor. “They’re ... not really talking to me right now.”

“I’m sure they’ll come around eventually. Just give it time. You’ve been a good friend to them for a while now.”

Kara gave her a small smile while she mixed colors on her palette. “Thanks, babe.”

“Did Dani say anything after you revealed her magic?”

“Actually, she did. She’s starting to ask questions about her biological family.”

“Maybe you could help her look into it.”

“Maybe. I’ll see what she thinks,” Kara said as she detailed minuscule highlights on her canvas.

“Oh! And one more thing before I forget.”

Kara looked up as she reached into her pocket and pulled out a pair of tickets. Her eyes went wide as she snatched them out of Selene’s hand. “Elton John tickets! You didn’t have to!”

“I wanted to,” she said with a smile.

She leaned forward and kissed her.

“I gotta go now. I’ll see you later.”

“See you.”