

Chapter 1

Being a wizard isn't all that it's cracked up to be. Especially when my magic goes sideways more often than not.

My fifteen minutes of wizardry fame faded when the tourist season ended. Before that, crowds flocked to my mystical hometown of Sweetwater to soak in the healing hot springs, hoping for a glimpse of the almost champion of the Winter Games (me), or more likely, Ezra, the world-famous wizard, my great-great-great-grandfather (give or take a few greats). As the dog days of summer lingered, their interest waned, and they returned to the suburbs with T-shirts, charms, and curative salts.

Just after I turned seventeen, my life imploded. My parents died in a freak accident, and I discovered I descended from wizards. My family kept our heritage a secret, waiting to see if I would develop any aptitude for magic. Aunt Shirley called me a late bloomer because I didn't manifest any powers until my senior year. Even after a crash course under the guidance of Mrs. S at Castle Dragon, my powers remained unpredictable.

For the last few years, I've been adrift, bouncing between jobs. It was always the same story: a bossy assistant manager micromanaging my every move, with no room for new ideas. Then it was their way or the highway—I chose *highway*.

Aunt Shirley worried I had a problem with bosses. I gave her my winning smile and replied, "Only the dumb ones."

College wasn't for me, so I started a brush-clearing business. It went well until I accidentally turned the librarian into a goat. (But worse yet—she wasn't the only one.) Let's just say that manifesting late came with a steep learning curve.

My friend and mentor, Ranger Rodrigues, said I had good instincts for magic, but I shouldn't rely on it to solve my problems. *Don't let magic be your crutch*, he'd often say. He wasn't wrong, and adapting his form of discipline helped me compete in the Winter Games, and I've stuck with it ever since.

A flyer advertised a reward for the safe return of a missing Golden Retriever puppy. After backtracking to the last place the dog had been spotted, I hiked a mile through the woods and stumbled upon a cottage where a lady in a straw hat busied herself among her flowerbeds. Imagine my surprise when I recognized my retired fourth-grade teacher. She'd always been a stickler for posture, and I found myself straightening my shoulders.

"Well, if it isn't Noah Farmer." She tipped her head to look up at me and nearly fell over backward into her peonies. I reached out to steady her, and she didn't miss a beat. "My, you've grown. But you were always a tall one. What brings you to my humble garden?"

"I'm looking for a lost puppy."

She put her fingers in her mouth and whistled. A Golden Retriever, a Cocker Spaniel, and a Corgi came bursting out of the trees, barking and chasing each other in circles. She knelt down, opening her arms to a bunch of wet dog kisses. We called the owners of the lost puppy, and they rushed right over.

Then one day, the town librarian asked for help. (Yep, the same one from my goat fiasco. Lucky for me, she didn't hold a grudge.)

Her friend couldn't sell his parents' house because of the odd noises at night and strange lights. I'd dealt with troublesome ghosts before and agreed to investigate. Turned out a real estate investor had his eye on the place and thought he could drive the price down by rattling old bones. He promised to stop if I didn't tell anyone.

Word spread about my knack for finding things, and the librarian suggested I start a P.I. business. So I took an online class, and the day my credentials arrived, I put up a sign in the front yard.

Noah Farmer—Private Investigator

Finder of Lost Things & Paranormal Myth Buster

While I stood back, admiring my handiwork, a sputtering alien-green Honda rolled up the driveway. The car door opened with a sharp metal-on-metal scrape, and the driver angled himself out.

I smiled at my friend. "You still drive that rent-a-wreck?"

"Hey, it's a classic." Saul patted the hood. "Don't mess with the Green Machine."

I gave the new signpost a final whack with my hammer. "Come on in and see what I've done with the place."

After stepping inside, Saul settled his bulk on a stool, resting his forearms on the granite countertop. I offered him coffee, but he waved it off. A college injury ended Saul's football scholarship and his dream of the pros. Now, he worked as a bouncer at the local pub.

He drummed his fingers on the counter and kept his eyes downcast.

"All right, spit it out. What's on your mind?"

“Gloria’s missing, and when I tried to file a report, the police told me to give it twenty-four hours, and that it’s not a crime to leave for the weekend without telling her big brother.”

“That twenty-four-hour thing isn’t a rule. It’s a myth,” I said. “If you have reason to believe she’s in danger, they’re not supposed to wait.”

Saul scoffed. “The new police chief is only interested in keeping the tourists happy. He doesn’t care about us. Told me flat out he wasn’t going to shake a kidney loose and waste his time driving up that mountain road just to find that Gloria hadn’t plugged her phone in.”

“Why do you think something’s wrong?” I asked.

“Because she ghosted our Saturday breakfast. All my calls go straight to voicemail, and that’s not like her. She’s glued to her phone, except when she forgets to charge it, which is also like her.” He pulled a long face. “Truth is, it’s just a gut feeling. She’s been acting strange lately—nothing I can explain. But I know my baby sister, and I’ve got this crazy feeling she’s in trouble.”

“I remember Gloria,” I said. “She used to follow you everywhere. Drove you crazy.”

Saul’s mouth twitched into a brief smile. “Yeah, and she had a crush on you. You probably didn’t even notice.”

“She was just a pigtailed kid with scraped knees, trailing behind us.”

“Well, she ain’t one now.” The smile faded. His voice dropped. “That’s what worries me. Gloria’s always had a mind of her own and a knack for pushing boundaries.”

I leaned against the island, breathing in the steam rising from my mug. Growing up as an only child, I wished I had a brother or sister. If my sister were lost, I’d do whatever it took to find her.

The dark circles under Saul's eyes tugged at my guilty conscience. A few years ago, I accidentally turned Saul into a goat. (Yep, him too.) Maybe he didn't remember or dismissed it as a dream. I don't know. We never spoke of it. But I owed him. Big time.

"Word is you're a P.I. now," Saul said.

Jeez, the paint isn't even dry on my sign. Why am I surprised? Sweetwater's a small town, and paranormals love to gossip.

"Let me guess, Melanie at the diner..."

"You know how she is. Took one look at me with her spidey sense, and the first words out of her mouth were to go see you." He ran his hand through his buzz cut. "Noah, help me find Gloria. I'd go myself, but my car won't make it up that mountain road."

"Yeah, well, my truck's in the shop."

Saul's shoulders dropped. I drained my cup and rinsed it in the sink. "Come on, we'll take the horses. Houdini could use the exercise. You can ride Uncle George's bay."

Quicker than I would've guessed, he sprang to his feet and went outside. I threw on my duster, shouldered my pack, grabbed my wizard's staff, and rushed to catch up. The screen door slammed on my way out, reminding me I'd have to fix the broken spring another day.

We hurried along the path to my uncle's farm. The barn smelled of fresh hay and horses. As soon as I placed a hand on the stall, Houdini, my palomino, nickered a greeting. I threw a saddle over him, cinched it tight, and slid my staff into the scabbard.

After saddling Mesa, I handed the reins to Saul. "This is Mesa. She's gentle and won't give you any trouble, plus she has a huge crush on Houdini. Wherever he goes, she'll go."

As we led the horses out into the yard, sunlight caught Houdini's golden coat, his white mane lifting in the breeze.

With our bedrolls strapped and our canteens full, we rode out into the red rock country. Beyond the local campground, we picked up the hiking trail. We traveled single-file along the narrow path. The only sounds were rustling leaves and the occasional creak of saddle leather.

An hour later, we came to Weaver's Highway, a faded strip of blacktop that serviced a handful of homes. Hooves clip-clopped on cracked pavement until we turned off onto a gravel drive, flanked by ponderosas. The scent of pine lingered as we approached the rustic log cabin, with its green roof nestled in the forest.

The front door hung wide open.

Cinnamon and sugar filled the air, the scent so thick I forgot why I stood in the middle of Gloria's cabin.

Saul slammed the door. "The lock's been acting up."

A blanket folded precisely over the couch, a soft floral chair angled just right in the corner, all arranged like a page from a home decorating magazine. On the mantle, a family photo showed smiling faces. Saul favored his dad, and Gloria shared the same heart-shaped face and dark, round eyes as her mom.

Unlike the living room, the kitchen appeared lived in. Stacks of books lay scattered on the table, and cooling racks piled high with cookies covered the countertop.

Saul snatched a couple. "Help yourself."

I bit into a gingersnap. Flavor exploded on my tongue. "These are incredible." I grabbed a handful and perused a battered sketchbook.

Inside were drawings of flowers and desert plants, rendered in exquisite detail. I studied a loose sketch of an old building. Stenciled across the window was *Gloria's Bakery*, with a woman in a long skirt and bonnet standing out front. She had a crooked smile and expressive eyes that seemed to hold a million secrets.

When I was down to my last cookie, I said, "What does your sister put in these? Seriously, they're almost too good."

"No clue. She's always experimenting with new recipes. Whenever she comes to town, she drops off a few dozen." He filled an extra-large tin container, snapping the lid shut. "Here, take these with you."

Saul picked up the drawing. "It's a thing Gloria does. It's like she pencils herself into history. Sometimes, I think she wished she'd been born a century ago."

I reached for it. "Can I keep it?"

"Sure, whatever you need," he said, his attention locked on a book. He lifted it off the stack. It had a bent spine and dog-eared pages. "The Lost Dutchman's Mine, Gloria's current obsession. Jacob Waltz discovered a treasure, and when he died, he took the secret to the richest gold strike in Arizona history with him. It's all she talks about."

Saul tossed it onto the table. "Let's check the barn."

I rolled up Gloria's sketch and tucked it inside my pack along with the container of cookies. No way would my sweet tooth let me leave them behind. Then, at the last minute, I grabbed another handful of cookies and went outside, careful to pull the door shut.

We crossed over to the barn. Saul leaned against the empty stall. "Brass is gone, so is his tack."

A single set of hoofprints, with a distinctive notch, pocked the dirt floor. “Looks like Brass needs a shoe,” I said.

“The farrier’s coming next week.” He looked toward the edge of the woods, where a trail split the trees. “Maybe she rode to Davidson’s Bluff. She goes there to read all the time.”

Thunder rumbled in the distance as I mounted up. “Okay, let’s go.”

Chapter 2

Pine needles blanketed the trail, soft and silent under the horses’ hooves. Sunlight slipped through the trees, flickering across the forest floor. Squirrels scampered from branch to branch, chirping like nosy neighbors, spreading the news that we were coming.

Ten minutes later, the path spilled onto a carpet of purple lupines and yellow buttercups spread beneath a stand of cottonwoods shedding their fluff.

We dismounted and looped the reins to the saddle horns. Houdini would come if I whistled, and Mesa wouldn’t go far. As we crossed the meadow, grasshoppers shot up ahead.

No warning, no guardrail, no sign, just a gaping hole that the locals called Davidson’s Bluff. We stood at the lip of Sweetwater’s version of the Grand Canyon. Below, Willow River wound through the red and white sandstone cliffs, while steam curled from the hot springs.

“Mom and Dad used to take us here,” Saul said. “I’d climb trees while Gloria read her books. We’d beg to camp overnight, but they worried about us sleepwalking.”

I nodded, not sure what to say.

Did Saul think Gloria was sleepwalking? Nah, I'm probably being too literal again. Sara always said I was emotionally tone-deaf. She's right. Animals, I understand. People not so much. Why am I thinking of Sara? That's over. It was over before it ever began.

I shoved the memory back into the far corners of my mind.

Saul kicked the ground, sending gravel cascading over the edge.

I leaned forward to watch it fall, but my knees went weak and I quickly backstepped, turning away from the canyon.

Trampled grass cut a swath to an ancient cottonwood, where something glinted in the sun. The horses followed as I walked over to investigate. Mesa snorted at the acrid smell of sulfur.

Curious, I opened my third eye, activating my wizard sight. Ectoplasmic slime dripped from the branches. Rivulets of residue pooled at the sprawling roots, clear evidence of recent magic. Not your garden-variety kind—this was spellwork of the highest caliber.

Ugh, and I'm standing in it.

I scraped my boot on a rock, but the goo stuck like bubblegum on a hot sidewalk.

Who does that? Anyone able to summon this much power should know the first rule of enchantment is containment.

“Ranger will want to see this,” I mumbled, knowing that the warden was a stickler about magical safety violations.

Saul lumbered over, and I closed my third eye. He scooped up a paperback lying beside the tree. On the cover, the sun painted the sky in shades of orange. Rugged mountains carved out a chunk of the horizon, and giant saguaros grew in their shadows. Its lettering flashed when he handed it to me.

Warmth spread across my fingers. The pages quivered. I tightened my grip, asserting control. Enchanted artifacts were like horses. If you didn't show them who was boss, they'd never respect you. According to Mrs. S, wizards must exercise discretion in the presence of mundanes. Mischievous enchantments knew this and would act up at any chance they got.

I gave the book an extra squeeze, then read the title aloud. "The Legend of the Superstitions."

I turned it over and skimmed the description. "Listen to this—the spirits of the Superstition Mountains cursed the Lost Dutchman's gold. Beware, don't disturb the ghosts, don't dismiss the curse, and don't dis the Dutchman. Three times repeated, and your luck's defeated."

"Don't *dis* the Dutchman? That's the big, scary curse? Don't *dis* the Dutchman." Saul rolled his eyes. "And Gloria believes this nonsense."

I tucked the paperback into my duster's inside pocket, and a strange pressure built in the air, like the moment before a storm. Gusts tore through the grass, whipping my duster and sparking its sewn-in protective wards. Across the way, a shimmering shaft of light appeared in the meadow. Then, an ominous gray funnel cloud dropped from the sky, spinning toward us. The horses whinnied and ran toward the light.

Saul stumbled backward. "Noah, look out!" The thunderous wind stole the rest of his words.

Crack!

Like a trapdoor, the ground opened, sending me tumbling into an endless void. I screamed until my voice broke. Flailing, I grasped at empty air.

Bile rose in my throat. *Don't throw up! Don't you dare throw up!*

I grappled with my fear, leaning into what Ranger had taught me.

Breathe. Slow and steady. Wizards don't panic. We persevere.

Finally, I spread my arms like a skydiver trying to gain some semblance of control. My momentum slowed, and I found myself weightless and unmoored. Everything around me was murky—not dark, not light, just in-between. A throbbing drummed in my ears the way a passing car sounds with the bass cranked. There were no words, only *boom, boom, boom*.

An invisible current pulled me toward a distant flicker. Soon, the images came into focus, flashing like an old black-and-white movie reel. Some I recognized, others not.

The Twin Towers.

The moon landing.

A mushroom cloud.

Antique cars rolling off an assembly line.

Cowboys on a cattle drive...

Closer and closer, I drifted until I squeezed my eyes shut against the blinding light. The drumming faded, and so did I.

....

Afterward

This novel is a work of fiction. While James Addison Reavis and Jacob Waltz were inspired by real people and actual Arizona locations, such as Vulture City and the Superstition Mountains, the events, dialogue, and magical elements depicted are entirely products of the author's imagination and should not be construed as historical fact.

The story of James Reavis and the Peralta Land Grant is one of the most outrageous frauds in American history. Its dramatic scope and the amount of land and money involved made it a natural fit for fiction. Reavis was convicted of fraud and forgery for fabricating documents and genealogies to support a fictitious Spanish land grant. Royal A. Johnson, the Surveyor General at the time, traveled to Spain, visited the archives, and obtained the proof of forgery.

James Reavis never admitted wrongdoing and claimed he was discredited by the U.S. government. He was released after two years and continued to operate under aliases, involved in other questionable ventures.

Jacob Waltz never filed a claim, and consequently, the Lost Dutchman's Mine remains a mystery. It was said to be the richest mine of its time.

The Peralta Stone tablets are currently on display at an Arizona museum, which some believe is a map to the Lost Dutchman's Mine.

Rumor has it that reports of strange noises, odd lights in the sky, and missing people brought a journalist to the area. After speaking with the locals and investigating the claims, he wrote a story referring to the Thunder Mountains as the Superstition Mountains, and

consequently, the name stuck. It's also worth noting that from some angles, the Three Sisters can appear fewer than three peaks, or as many as four.

The U.S. Army Camel Corps was an experimental program in the 1850s that imported camels from the Middle East to haul supplies across the southwestern deserts. After the Civil War, the camels were auctioned off or released into the wild. Feral camels were occasionally spotted roaming Arizona's deserts for decades afterward, including the legendary *Red Ghost*, a wild camel reportedly carrying a human skeleton strapped to its back with rawhide. The last confirmed Army camel died at the Griffith Park Zoo in Los Angeles in 1934 at the age of 80.

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