

# DARK CURSE

A CARPATHIAN NOVEL

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PIATKUS

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*For my sister Anita Toste, who shares my love of strange things,  
will stay up with me until all hours of the night writing spells and  
making me laugh at childhood memories, and who I have always  
loved and counted on my entire life: This one is for you.*



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Brian Feehan, who drops everything and brainstorms with me at the drop of a hat. You make my fantasy and action scenes come alive for me when I discuss them with you.

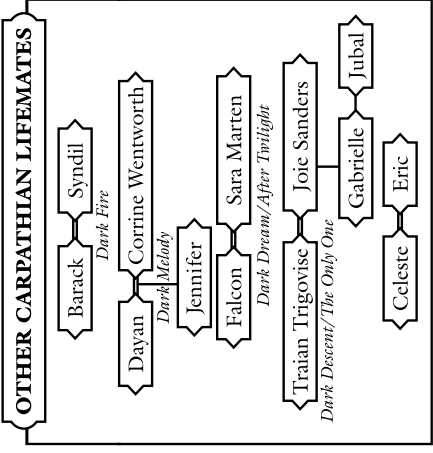
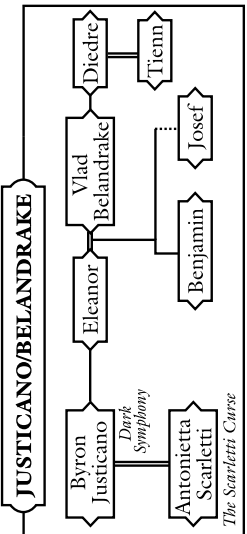
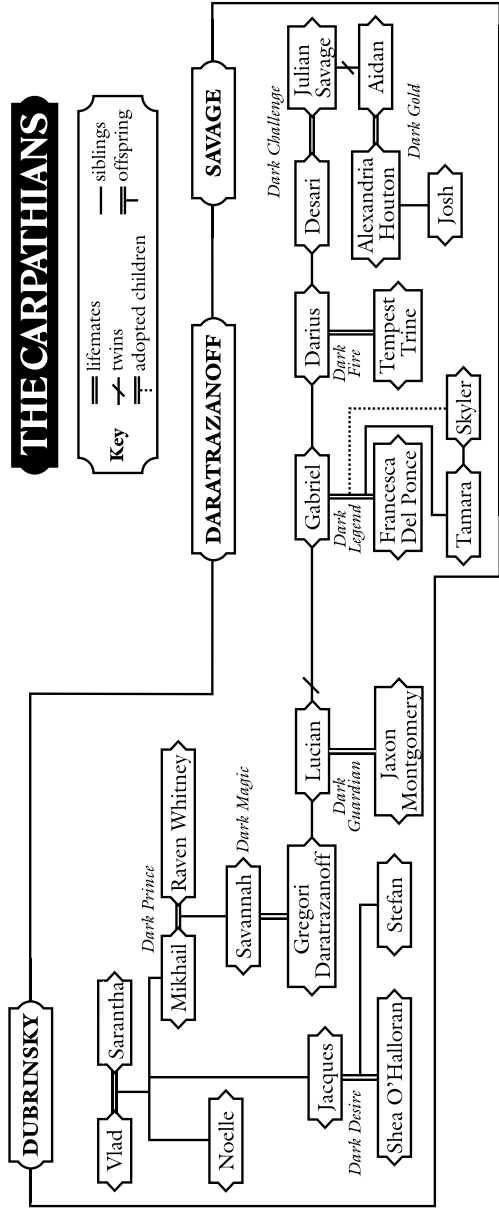
I have to thank Rachel Powell for introducing me to a wonderful woman, Diana SkyEyes, who was generous enough to share her knowledge with me at short notice and put me on the right path to aid my Carpathian women. Diana SkyEyes is an earth priestess with twenty years of practicing Moon Lodge and Wiccan traditions of alternative healing. She is a certified herbalist, musician and writer of healing songs. Any mistakes are my own as well as fictitious license used to enhance my story line. Thank you, Diana, for all your time and energy.

My sister Ruth Powell, who has always stood for children, who is the only one I know that could create an ancient lullaby and make the words universal.

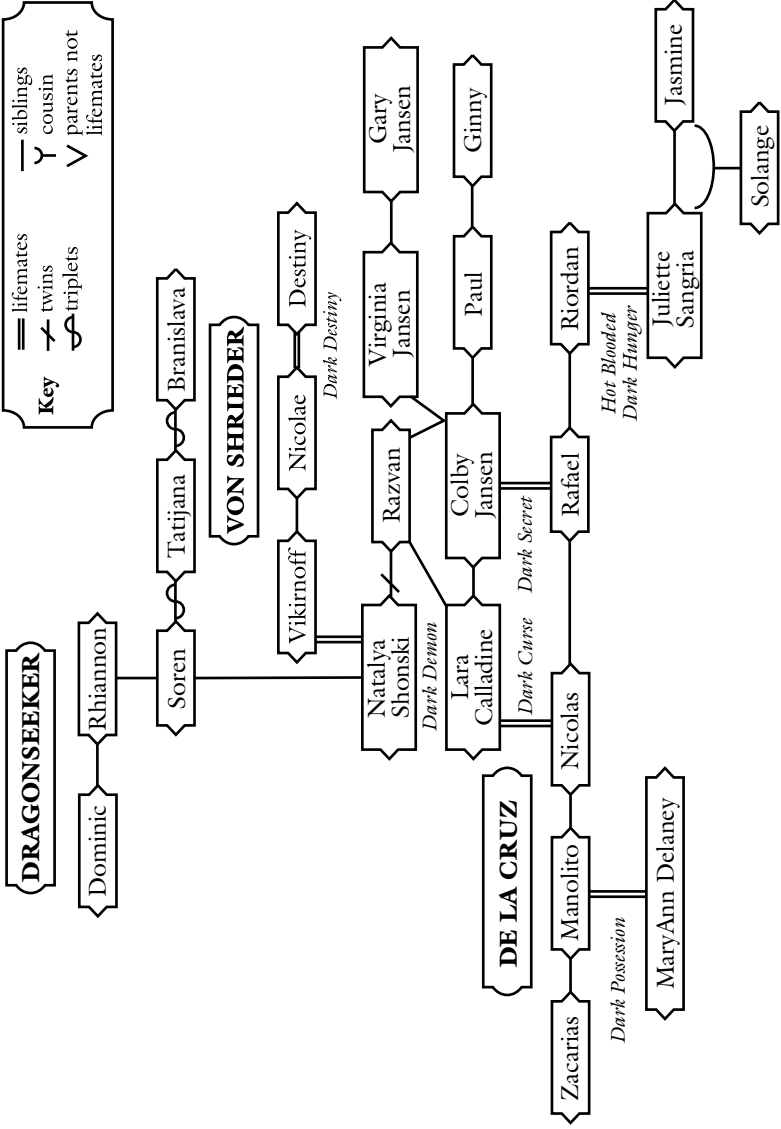
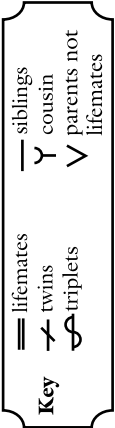
My sister Jeanette and Slavcia, who were willing to discuss birth problems and how best to solve them using alternative medicines.

And, of course, Anita, who made all the work fun and reminded me of our early carefree days of laughter while we worked our own magic! Your talent for so many things always stuns and amazes me.

# THE CARPATHIANS



# THE CARPATHIANS





# DARK CURSE



# Prologue

**T**he cold should have made her shiver, but it was fear, terrible bone-chilling fear that seized Lara, causing such tremors they were impossible to control. She huddled on the floor of the ice cave, studying the walls of her prison. The ice was beautiful, walls thick and blue with amazing formations hanging from the ceiling and rising from the floor like a forest of multicolored crystal. She hunched down, watching the lights flicker across the ice—creating glittering, dazzling displays on the walls. All the while, her heart beat too fast and she choked on rising terror.

A soft whisper in her mind helped to steady her, to keep her centered and calm when she wanted to curl up in a ball and cry. She was eight years old now—today. She looked down at her arms and wrists, covered in bite marks, scars from teeth gnawing through her skin to get at her veins. Her stomach lurched. Today was the last day anyone would tear at her flesh and drink her blood. Today she would escape.

*I am so scared.* Even in her mind, using telepathic communication, her voice trembled.

At once she felt warmth in her mind. The sensation spread through her body, driving away the chill and giving her courage. *You will not be alone. We will aid you to escape. You must be brave, little one.*

*Will you come with me, Aunt Bronnie? Will you both come?* She knew she sounded plaintive and afraid, but she couldn't help it. She'd never been aboveground. The idea of going alone into an unfamiliar world was paralyzing. Without her aunts, she would have no way of protecting herself. They both had taught her, thrusting as many skills and spells into her brain and memories as possible, but she was still a child in a child's body. Thin. Weak. Pale. A mop of copper-colored hair she could never control and little else.

*That may not be possible, Lara, and if we cannot, you must go by yourself. You must get far away from this place and hide your talents and abilities so no one will ever imprison you again. Do you understand? You cannot in any way appear different in the outside world.*

They had told her of the world. Long, lonely nights they had whispered to her of places aboveground, of the sun and sea, of forests of trees, of living animals and birds that flew free. They had filled her mind—and her heart—with images so beautiful they had stolen her breath.

*Why must I hide my gifts in the world outside?* Lara shivered again, running her hands up and down her body in an effort to warm herself. It wasn't the temperature of the ice cave—she could control her body temperature when she remembered to think about it—but the idea of leaving was nearly as terrifying as the idea of staying. Here she at least had the aunts. Outside—she didn't even know what to expect.

*It is always better to blend in, Lara. Xavier is a cruel man—there are others like him. You have great power within you and others will want it. Learn in secret and only use it when you must and for good or to save your life. You cannot let others know.*

*Come with me.*

*If we can, but no matter what, you must leave this place. You see what they do to us—what they will do to you. Your power will call to them and they will take everything from you.*

Lara closed her eyes, the trembling turning into almost violent shuddering. Oh yes, she had seen. Torture. Horrible torture. Horrible black spells drawing forth demons with red glowing eyes and the sickening

stench of evil clinging to them. She would hear screams until the day she died, the screams of others begging for mercy, begging to be killed.

She couldn't let her father or great-grandfather know of the power growing within her. She could never let on that the aunts spoke to her and taught her, filling her mind with everything they knew so that as the power in her grew, she would have the knowledge to accompany it. The two men would try to wrest everything she was from her, control her if they couldn't and, in the end, she would be like the others, torn apart while they still lived, experimented on, eaten alive piece by piece until madness and pain were all that was left.

Today was her birthday and she had to escape. She had to leave the only home she'd ever known and go out into a world she knew only through the memories of her two aunts, who had been imprisoned for so many years they had long ago lost count. Before that could happen, she would be forced to endure her father's and great-grandfather's sharp, wicked teeth one more time.

She covered her eyes and bit back a sob.

*Lara. You are Dragonseeker. You can do this. We are strong. We endure. We do not ever succumb to evil. Do you understand? You must escape.*

Auntie Bronnie always lectured her, but there was love in her voice. Worry. Determination. Auntie Tatijana sounded sad and weak, but the love was there as well, although these days, she rarely wasted energy on talking. Lara knew something was wrong, terribly wrong, and she was frightened of losing the two of them.

"I don't want to be alone," she whispered aloud into the freezing cold of the bluish chamber. She didn't say it in her mind to her aunts, because she didn't want them to know she was nearly paralyzed with fear of leaving. This terrible place of pain and death and cold was her home and here at least she had the aunts, and she knew what to expect. Outside—outside she would be alone in a foreign world.

Lara's body suddenly jerked upright. At the same time she felt the invader spreading through her brain like sludge. A cry escaped. Her instinct was to struggle against the command, but she forced her will to lie

quiet, to pretend to be subdued. It was difficult when everything in her shuddered and withdrew from that spreading stain.

*Do not fight. Do not fight,* Aunt Bron's voice whispered. *Save your strength. Let him think he has control. We will all strike at the same moment. This will be the last time, child. The last time . . .*

Lara choked on the sob welling up. To have someone else inside of her, to feel evil invading her body, pushing at her mind and forcing his will on her caused bile to rise, flooding her throat and mouth with burning acid. She took a step. Another. Like a puppet controlled by strings. She couldn't prevent her instincts to fight. She resisted the invasive presence, trying to throw him out of her mind, a small rebellion that earned immediate retaliation.

Her body jerked again and pain pierced her skull, like ice picks drilling holes through skin and bone. The sensation of spiders crawling on her skin, hundreds of them, swarming, engulfing her, nesting in her hair, biting at her scalp, had her frantically slapping at her body. She opened her mouth wide to scream, but nothing came out. She knew Razvan—her father—had no patience with tears or pleading. It infuriated him to listen to screaming, or to a childish voice. Her earliest memory was of him shaking her, snarling like one of the captured wolves he occasionally brought into his lair to torment.

Whatever her memories, this was her way of life. The aunts had told her a child should be loved and treasured, never used for food, but it was only the memories they shared of their mother's childhood that all of them could really depend on. Not even the aunts had really experienced much more than what Lara's life was like. And memories—especially ancient ones—could be faulty.

*He is forcing me into the chamber.* She tried to force down the rising panic, to keep herself from fighting, from exposing her abilities, but her sense of self-preservation was strong.

*You are coming to us,* her aunt reminded her. *Think only of that. You are leaving this terrible place to go to a new life where they cannot touch you ever again.*

Lara nodded and lessened her fight response. She couldn't lose it altogether or Razvan might suspect something was up. She was smart enough to know he sought to control her through fear. If she wasn't afraid enough, he would find a way to incite her terror so he could keep her under his thumb and biddable.

She counted each step. She already knew the exact number—she had made this journey many, many times before. Thirty-seven steps through the corridor and then her body would jerk to the right, and go through the entrance into the large chamber where Razvan and Xavier always held their ritual ceremonies. The long hall was really a tunnel with a bluish ceiling and thick ice walls. Under her feet the ice was slick and solid, almost crystal clear, always gleaming brightly from the orbs of light in the sconces. The light flickered along the walls, revealing the rainbow of colors, gleaming like jewels embedded in the frozen world.

She loved the beauty, sculptures of orange-red and purplish-blue rising sharply from the floor, bursting into sparkling fountains frozen in place waiting for the light to hit them to come alive. She moved around the familiar shapes using short jerky steps until she was in the middle of the huge chamber. Huge columns rose to the cathedral ceilings, marking every few feet. Ancient weapons lined one wall and straight ahead, encased in ice, were two perfect dragons, one red and one blue.

Lara glanced up, her breath catching in her throat as it always did at the sight of her aunts, imprisoned not only by the ice, but caught in a powerful shape that was not their true form. She couldn't shift yet, but she felt she was getting close. The aunts had embedded the knowledge deep in her mind so that she wouldn't ever forget the process, but she hadn't worked up the courage to actually shift. And the aunts had forbidden her to try where Razvan or Xavier would feel the surge of power.

The red dragon had her great eye pressed against the ice. As Lara watched, the lid slowly closed and then opened again over the round orb. The small acknowledgment gave her the strength to look directly at the man who stood in the center of the room, a frown on his face. Razvan—her father—glared at her, beckoning with a long finger.

The lines in his face had deepened since the last time she'd seen him and that had only been a couple of days earlier. His hair had darkened from the coppery red to deeper brown, now streaked with gray. His eyes were sunken and beneath them were darker circles. The moment his gaze fell on her, he began to breathe harder, the air coming out in great puffs of excitement. In one hand he held a ritual ceremony knife and Lara's heart began to pound.

*He has the knife.*

Teeth tearing at her flesh was bad enough, but the sharp blade slicing, metal against skin and tissue, invading her body and bringing with it the screams of past victims, screams she couldn't drown out for weeks afterward. The pleas for mercy haunted her dreams and clung like ice to her veins so that she felt she was going insane until time finally melted them away.

Lara couldn't help that spurt of adrenaline and the surge of power that came with it, the instinctive retreat, breaking out of the stumbling steps to withdraw. Razvan snarled, his lips drawing back to reveal his stained teeth.

"Get over here!" His face was a mask of hatred. "You are nothing, cheap fodder to feed the genius of my existence. Nothing! A worm crawling on the ground to service greatness."

He pointed to the ice and for a moment she thought to fight his power.

*No! You must do as he says. He cannot know the power within you. He will imprison you as Xavier has done to us. This is your chance, Lara.*

Aunt Bron's voice whispered, cajoled, pleaded and even ordered. All of that would never have been enough to overcome Lara's instincts for survival and her revulsion of the knife and Razvan, but there was stark fear underlying each word her aunt spoke to her. Lara allowed her body to bend, to go to all fours, to crawl across the ice floor, the cold piercing her knees. She allowed the sensation, not regulating her body temperature so the distraction of the cold helped to calm her.

Razvan stood for a moment, hunched over, whispering to himself, his

eyes going from blue to green. Lara winced. Her eyes often changed color depending upon her mood, and it was the one thing that tied her to Razvan, the one trait she had to acknowledge they shared—and that meant the blood of a monster ran in her veins.

He stooped, a strange expression on his face as he glanced around the chamber. One hand dropped to the top of her head, his palm stroking what could have been a caress over her coppery curls. He spoke in a whisper, his voice rusty and hoarse. “Get out. Get out before you are consumed.”

Lara blinked up at him, puzzled by the strange ritual he always invoked before he caught her by her thin shoulders and yanked her to her feet. His eyes glowed a ruby red, shining with madness as he turned her wrist up and slashed the blade across it.

She cried out, tried to suppress the shock of panic and pain as the knife cut through flesh to bone, freeing the screams of multiple victims, the shadows of life still clinging to the weapon that had tortured and killed them. Razvan pressed her wrist to his mouth and began to suck greedily, his teeth biting and scraping as if at a bone. He made hideous slurping noises, the sound mingling with the cries of the dead.

Tears burned behind her lids, blurred her vision and choked in her throat. The aunts were right, she had to escape. It mattered little what was waiting in the outside world, she couldn’t survive this torment day after day.

*Stay strong. He is nearly sated.*

She clung to that, knowing that the aunts always were aware when Razvan was about to stop feeding. She felt weak and dizzy, her knees sagging. And then everything in her went still. The hair on the back of her neck rose. Goose bumps rose on her arms and a shiver of apprehension slid down her spine. *He* was coming. If Razvan was a monster, her great-grandfather was the living epitome of evil. She could feel his presence long before he ever entered the chamber.

Razvan shuddered visibly as he lifted his head and shoved Lara behind him. Lara swept her tongue across the wound, the healing agents in her saliva sealing her skin.

The scent of decayed flesh heralded Xavier's arrival. He entered, his emaciated body bent over, one hand wrapped around a walking stick as he shuffled into the chamber. The walking stick was a weapon of amazing power and could be—and often was—wielded to administer pain. The long robes covering the thin body rustled with every step, swishing across the ice floor, picking up crystals so that the hem collected shards and splinters of glistening white. The long white beard was nearly to the old man's waist. His image was blurry as he moved, but if she looked hard enough she could see the rotting flesh beneath the glamour.

Lara felt the surge of power and knew it emanated from the walking stick rather than from her great-grandfather. Razvan cowered from the old man as he approached. She knew Xavier was the oldest mage, the master of both white and black magic. His teachings had been the foundation of not only the race of mages, but of the Carpathian people as well. Her aunts had educated her in the terrible family history of kidnap, rape, murder and war. All because of this one man and his search for immortality.

Xavier stretched a thin arm toward her, his fingers like bones, the nails long and curled. He beckoned.

Razvan shoved Lara away. "You will not touch her. You have your own supply."

*Come close, Lara, now, while they bicker over you. Come close to the wall and aid us in breaking free.*

"I can no longer use them as you well know. They have become far too powerful to control. I need the book. We must find the book." Xavier stumbled closer to Lara, his clawlike fingers reaching for her. "Once I have the book, they will not be able to defy me."

Razvan swept Lara farther behind him. "This one is mine and you will not touch her."

"Do not presume to give me orders." The voice bellowed in the vast chambers. Xavier stood to his full height, Razvan shrinking before him. "I grow old, but I still have my abilities and you do not."

Lara inched closer to the wall, all the while gathering the energy in the room.

“You cannot even control your own children. As sick as they are they still defy you! You forced me to bring you my own offspring, but you cannot have this one. You kill them with your greed.”

“You will give her to me.” Xavier swung his stick up, the tip pointing at his grandson.

Lara seized the moment, pulling every scrap of energy from the stick she could and directing it toward the ice wall. At the same time, the aunts connected their power with hers. The massive wall bubbled outward toward the chamber. Great shards fell off as the ice spiderwebbed, and then fragmented.

“Stop them!” Xavier leapt away from the splintering ice as he yelled the warning.

A bright red dragon burst through the ice, claws stretched toward Razvan as the blue dragon bent its wing to Lara.

*Now! Now! Climb on fast,* Aunt Tatijana called to her.

Lara didn't hesitate. She jumped agilely onto the wing, scrambled up the sloping membrane and swung her leg over the dragon's back. Immediately the dragon reared back on its legs, great wings flapping violently, creating a windstorm, blowing both men backward. Xavier lost his grip on the walking stick. Lara concentrated on it, funneling the wind straight at the thick wooden staff. It rolled to the far side of the ice chamber. The blue dragon took to the air.

*There is not much time. Go, Tatijana, flee while you can,* Bronnie pleaded with her sister while she flung her body between Razvan, Xavier and Lara.

Lara could see both dragons were weak. Already their skin color was fading. The effort to keep the two mages at bay was already taking its toll on them. Sitting on Tatijana, she realized they were starved, had been starved for years. Xavier only allowed them the barest sustenance in order to keep them from being able to utilize their power. Of the two, Tatijana was the weakest. Bronnie tried to give her sister time to reach the surface and escape.

Lara looked down to see Razvan creeping toward the red dragon.

Bronnie flapped her wings to keep Xavier on the floor and away from the all-powerful staff.

*Look out.* Lara tried to warn her aunt, but the warning was a heartbeat too late.

Razvan plunged the ceremonial knife into the chest of the red dragon. Tatijana screamed. The red dragon sank to the floor.

*Get off. Run. I will hold them as long as I can.* Tatijana extended her wing to allow Lara to crawl off onto a ledge far above the chamber.

*Go with her, Tatijana,* Bronnie entreated.

*Come with me,* Lara begged.

Tatijana shook her head. *I will not leave my sister. Go, little one. Run and forget this place. Do not look back. Be free and find happiness.*

Lara clutched the ice wall. She still had to find her way out of the maze of tunnels to the surface. She looked below one last time at the only home she'd ever known. Xavier regained his feet and held up his hand. The staff hesitated and then flew across the room to him.

"Be still or you will die," he commanded. "You fool," he hissed at Razvan.

The red dragon continued to fight, spilling blood across the ice floor in bright red streaks.

Xavier pointed the staff at the blue dragon. "Be still or I will kill your sister."

Bronnie ceased all movement and lay panting on the ice. The blue dragon settled next to her sister, nuzzling her with her long neck and tongue in an effort to save her.

Lara held back a sob by pressing her hand tightly against her mouth.

*Go before her sacrifice is in vain,* Tatijana ordered.

Lara ran.