



WHITE
WITCH,
BLACK
CURSE

KIM

HARRISON

New York Times Bestselling Author of *The Outlaw Demon Wails*

White Witch, Black Curse

Kim Harrison

 HarperCollins e-books

*To the guy who finishes my sentences and gets my jokes.
Even the lame ones.*

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The bloody handprint was gone, wiped from Kisten's window but not from my memory, and it ticked me off that someone had cleaned it, as if they were trying to steal what little recollection I retained about the night he'd died. The anger was misplaced fear if I was honest with myself. But I wasn't. Most days it was better that way.

Stifling a shiver from the December chill that had taken the abandoned cruiser, now in dry dock rather than floating on the river, I stood in the tiny kitchen and stared at the milky plastic as if willing the smeared mark back into existence. In the near distance came the overindulgent, powerful huff of a diesel train crossing the Ohio River. The scrape of Ford's shoes on the metallic boarding ladder was harsh, and worry pinched my brow.

The Federal Inderland Bureau had officially closed the investigation into Kisten's murder—Inderland Security hadn't even opened one—but the FIB wouldn't let me into their impound yard without an official presence. That meant intelligent, awkward Ford, since Edden thought I needed more psychiatric evaluation and I wouldn't come in anymore. Not since I fell asleep on the couch and everyone in the FIB's Cincinnati office had heard me snoring. I didn't need evaluation. What I needed was something—anything—to rebuild my memory. If it was a bloody handprint, then so be it.

"Rachel? Wait for me," the FIB's psychiatrist called, shifting my worry to annoyance. *Like I can't handle this? I'm a big girl.* Besides, there wasn't anything left to see; the FIB had cleaned everything up. Ford had obviously been out here earlier—given the ladder and the unlocked door—making sure everything was sufficiently *tidy* before our appointment.

The clatter of dress shoes on teak pushed me forward, and I untangled my arms from themselves and reached for the tiny galley table for balance as I headed to the living room. The floor was still, which felt weird. Beyond the short curtains framing the now-clean window were the dirty gray and brilliant blue tarps of boats at dry dock, the ground a good six feet below us.

"Will you hold up?" Ford asked again, the light eclipsing as he entered. "I can't help if you're a room away."

"I'm waiting," I grumbled, coming to a halt and tugging my shoulder bag up. Though he'd tried to hide it, Ford had some difficulty getting his butt up the ladder. I thought the idea of a psychiatrist afraid of heights was hilarious, until the amulet he wore around his neck turned a bright pink when I mentioned it and Ford went red with embarrassment. He was a good man with his own demons to circle. He didn't deserve my razzing.

Ford's breathing slowed in the chill silence. Wan but determined, he gripped the table, his face whiter than usual, which made his short black hair stand out and his brown eyes soulful. Listening in on my feelings was draining, and I appreciated his wading through my emotional crap to help me piece together what had happened.

I gave him a thin smile, and Ford undid the top few buttons of his coat to reveal a professional cotton shirt and the amulet he wore while working. The metallic ley line charm was a visual display of

the emotions he was picking up. He felt the emotions whether he was wearing the charm or not, but those around him had at least the illusion of privacy when he took it off. Ivy, my roommate and business partner, thought it stupid to try to break witch magic with human psychology in order to recover my memory, but I was desperate. Her efforts to find out who had killed Kisten were getting nowhere.

Ford's relief at being surrounded by walls was almost palpable, and seeing him release his death grip on the table, I headed for the narrow door to the living room and the rest of the boat. The faint scent of vampire and pasta brushed against me—imagination stoked by a memory. It had been five months.

My jaw clenched, and I kept my eyes on the floor, not wanting to see the broken door frame. There were smudges of dirt on the low-mat carpet that hadn't been there before, marks left by careless people who didn't know Kisten, had never known his smile, the way he laughed, or the way his eyes crinkled up when he surprised me. Technically an Inderland death without human involvement was out of the FIB's jurisdiction, but since the I.S. didn't care that my boyfriend had been turned into a blood gift, the FIB had made an effort just for me.

Murder was never taken off the books, but the investigation had been officially shelved. This was the first chance I'd had to come out here to try to rekindle my memory. Someone had nicked the inside of my lip trying to bind me to them. Someone had murdered my boyfriend twice. Someone was going to be in a world of hurt when I found out who they were.

Stomach fluttering, I looked past Ford to the window where the bloody handprint had been, left like a signpost to mock my pain without giving any prints to follow. *Coward.*

The amulet around Ford's neck flashed to an angry black. His eyes met mine as his eyebrows rose, and I forced my emotions to slow. I couldn't remember crap. Jenks, my backup and other business partner, had dosed me into forgetting so I wouldn't go after Kisten's murderer. I couldn't blame him. The pixy was only four inches tall, and it had been his only option to keep me from killing myself on a suicide run. I was a witch with an unclaimed vampire bite, and that couldn't stand up to an undead vampire no matter how you sliced it.

"You sure you're up to this?" Ford asked, and I forced my hand down from my upper arm. Again. It throbbed with a pain long since gone as a memory tried to surface. Fear stirred in me. The recollection of being on the other side of the door and trying to break it down was an old one. It was nearly the only memory I had of that night.

"I want to know," I said, but my voice sounded wobbly even to me. I had kicked the freaking door open. I had used my foot because my arm had hurt too much to move. I'd been crying at the time and my hair had been in my eyes and mouth. I had kicked the door down.

A memory sifted from what I knew, and my pulse hammered as something was added, the recollection of me falling backward, hitting a wall. *My head hit a wall.* Breath held, I looked across the living room, staring at the featureless paneling. Right there. *I remember.*

Ford came unusually close. "You don't have to do it this way."

Pity was in his eyes. I didn't like it there, directed at me, and his amulet turned silver as I gathered my will and passed through the door frame. "I do," I said boldly. "Even if I don't remember anything, the FIB guys might have missed something."

The FIB was fantastic at gathering information, even better than the I.S. It had to be since the human-run institution had to rely on finding evidence, not sweeping the room for emotions or using witch charms to discover who committed the crime and why. Everyone was capable of missing something, though, and that was one of the reasons I was out here. The other was to remember. Now that I was, I was scared. *My head hit the wall...just over there.*

Ford came in behind me, watching as I scanned the low-ceilinged living room that stretched from one side of the boat to the other. It looked normal here, apart from the unmoving Cincy skyline visible through the narrow windows. My hand went to my middle as my stomach cramped. I had to do this, no matter what I remembered.

"I meant," Ford said as he put his hands in his pockets, "I've other ways to trigger memories."

"Meditation?" I said, embarrassed for having fallen asleep in his office. Feeling the beginnings of a stress headache, I strode past the couch where Kisten and I had eaten dinner, past the TV that got lousy reception, not that we ever really watched it, and past the wet bar. Inches from the undamaged wall, my jaw began to ache. Slowly I put a hand to the paneling where my head had hit, curling my fingers under when they started to tremble. *My head had hit the wall. Who shoved me? Kisten? His killer?* But the memory was fragmented. There was no more.

Turning away, I shoved my hand in my pocket to hide the slight shaking. My breath slipped from me in an almost-visible cloud, and I tugged my coat closer. The train was long gone. Nothing moved past the curtains but a flapping blue tarp. Instinct told me Kisten hadn't died in this room. I had to go deeper.

Ford said nothing as I walked into the dark, narrow hallway, blind until my eyes adjusted. My pulse quickened as I passed the tiny bathroom where I'd tried on the sharp caps Kisten had given me for my birthday, and I slowed, listening to my body and realizing I was rubbing my fingertips together as they silently burned.

My skin tingled, and I halted, staring at my fingers, recognizing the memory of feeling carpet under my fingers, hot from friction. I held my breath as a new thought surfaced, born from the long-gone sensation. *Terror, helplessness. I had been dragged down this hall.*

A flash of remembered panic rose, and I squelched it, forcing my breath out in a slow exhalation. The lines I'd made in the carpet had been erased by the FIB vacuuming for evidence, erased from my memory by a spell. Only my body had remembered, and now me.

Ford stood silently behind me. He knew something was trickling through my brain. Ahead was the door to the bedroom, and my fear thickened. That was where it had happened. That was where Kisten had lain, his body torn and savaged, slumped against the bed, his eyes silvered and truly dead. *What if I remember it all? Right here in front of Ford and break down?*

"Rachel."

I jumped, startled, and Ford winced. “We can do this another way,” he coaxed. “The meditation didn’t work, but hypnosis might. It’s less stressful.”

Shaking my head, I moved forward and reached for the handle of Kisten’s room. My fingers were pale and cold, looking like mine but not. Hypnosis was a false calm that would put off the panic until the middle of the night when I’d be alone. “I’m fine,” I said, then pushed the door open. Taking a slow breath, I went in.

The large room was cold, the wide windows that let in the light doing little to keep out the chill. Arm clutched against me, I looked to where Kisten had been propped up against the bed. *Kisten*. There was nothing. My heart ached as I missed him. Behind me, Ford started to breathe with an odd regularity, working to keep my emotions from overwhelming him.

Someone had cleaned the carpet where Kisten had died for the second and final time. Not that there had been much blood. The fingerprint powder was gone, but the only prints they had found were from me, Ivy, and Kisten—scattered like signposts. There’d been none from his murderer. Not even on Kisten’s body. The I.S. had probably cleaned his corpse between when I’d left to kick some vampire ass and my bewildered return with the FIB after I’d forgotten everything.

The I.S. didn’t want the murder solved, a courtesy to whoever Kisten’s last blood had been given as a thank-you. Inderland tradition came before society’s laws, apparently. The same people I’d actually once worked for were covering it up, and that pissed me off.

My thoughts vacillated between rage and a debilitating heartache. Ford panted, and I tried to relax, for him if nothing else. Blinking back the threatened tears, I stared at the ceiling, breathing in the cold, quiet air and counting backward from ten, running through the useless exercise Ford had given me to find a light state of meditation.

At least Kisten had been spared the sordidness of being drained for someone’s pleasure. He had died twice in quick succession, both times probably trying to save me from the vampire he’d been given to. His necropsy had been no help at all. Whatever had killed him the first time had been repaired by the vampire virus before he died again. And if what I’d told Jenks before losing my memory was true, he’d died his second death by biting his attacker, mixing their undead blood to kill them both. Unfortunately, Kisten hadn’t been dead for long. It might only have left his much older attacker simply wounded. I just didn’t know.

I mentally reached zero, and calmer, I moved toward the dresser. There was a shirt box on it, and I almost bent double in heartache when I recognized it.

“Oh God,” I whispered. My hand went out, turning to a fist before my fingers slowly uncurled and I touched it. It was the lace teddy Kisten had given me for my birthday. I’d forgotten it was here.

“I’m sorry,” Ford rasped, and my gaze blurring from tears, I saw him slumped in the threshold.

My eyes squinted shut to make the tears leak out, and I held my breath. My head pounded, and I took a gasping breath only to hold it again, struggling for control. Damn it, he had loved me, and I had loved him. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t right. And it was probably my fault.

A soft sound from the threshold told me Ford was struggling, and I forced myself to breathe. I had to get control of myself. I was hurting Ford. He was feeling everything I was, and I owed him a lot. Ford was the reason I hadn't been hauled in for questioning by the FIB despite my working for them occasionally. He was human, but his curse of being able to feel another's emotions was better than a polygraph or truth charm. He knew I'd loved Kisten and was terrified of what had happened here. "You okay?" I asked when his breathing evened out.

"Fine. Yourself?" he said in a wispy voice.

"Peachy keen," I said, gripping the top of the dresser. "I'm sorry. I didn't know it was going to be this bad."

"I knew what I was in for when I agreed to bring you out here," he said, wiping a tear from his eye that I no longer would cry for myself. "I can take anything you dish out, Rachel."

I turned away, guilty. Ford stayed where he was, the distance helping him cope with the overload. He never touched anyone except by accident. It had to be a crappy way to live. But as I rocked away from the dresser, there was a soft pull as my fingertips left the underside of the dresser top. *Sticky*. Sniffing my fingertips, I found the faint bite of propellant.

Sticky web. Someone had used sticky web and smeared it off on the underside of the dresser top. Me? Kisten's murderer? Sticky web worked only on fairies and pixies. It was little more than an irritant to anyone else, like a spiderweb. Jenks had begged off coming out here on the excuse of it being too cold, which it was, but maybe he knew more than he was saying.

My heartache eased from the distraction, and kneeling, I dug in my bag for a penlight and shined it on the underside of the lip of the dresser. I'd be willing to bet no one had dusted it. Ford came close and I snapped the light off and stood. I didn't want FIB justice. I wanted my own. Ivy and I would come out later and do our own recon. Test the ceiling for evidence of hydrocarbons, too. Shake Jenks down to find out just how long he'd been with me that night.

Ford's disapproval was almost palpable, and I knew if I looked, his amulet would be a bright red from picking up my anger. I didn't care. I was angry, and that was better than falling apart. With a new feeling of purpose, I faced the rest of the room. Ford had seen the smeared mess. The FIB would reopen the case if they found one good print—other than the one I'd just made, that is. This might be the last time I was allowed in here.

Leaning back against the dresser, I closed my eyes and crossed my arms, trying to remember. Nothing. I needed more. "Where's the stuff?" I asked, both dreading and eager to realize what else lay hidden in my mind, ready to surface.

There was the sound of sliding plastic, and Ford reluctantly handed me a packet of evidence bags and a stack of photos. "Rachel, we should leave if there's a viable print."

"The FIB has had five months," I said, nervous as I took them. "It's my turn. And don't give me any crap about disturbing evidence. The entire department has been through here. If there's a print, it's probably one of theirs."

He sighed as I turned to the dresser and arranged the plastic bags, print side down. I took up the photos first, my gaze rising to the reflection of the room behind me.

I moved the picture of the smeared, bloody handprint on the kitchen window to the back of the stack, and tidied the pile with several businesslike taps. I got nothing from the handprint apart from the feeling that it wasn't mine or Kisten's.

The picture of Kisten was absent, thank God, and I crossed the room with a photo of a dent in the wall. Ford was silent as I touched the paneling, and I decided by the lack of phantom pain that I hadn't made it. There'd been a fight here other than mine. Over me, probably.

I slid the photo behind the stack. Under it was a close-up of a shoe imprint taken under the bank of windows. My head started to throb, and with that as a warning, I knew something was here, lurking in my thoughts. Jaw tight, I forced myself to the window, kneeling to run a hand over the smooth carpet, trying to spark a memory even as I feared it. The print was of a man's dress shoe. Not Kisten's. It was too mundane for that. Kisten had kept only the latest fashions in his closet. *Had the shoe been black or brown?* I thought, willing something to surface.

Nothing. Frustrated, I closed my eyes. In my thoughts, the scent of vampire incense mixed with an unfamiliar aftershave. A quiver rose through me, and not caring what Ford thought, I put my face on the carpet to breathe in the smell of fibers. *Something...anything...Please....*

Panic fluttered at the edge of my thoughts, and I forced myself to breathe more deeply, not caring that my butt was in the air as primitive switches in my brain fired and scents were given names. *Musky shadows that never saw the sun. The cloying scent of decayed water. Earth. Silk. Candle-scented dust.* They added up to the undead. If I'd been a vampire, I might have been able to find Kisten's killer by scent alone, but I was a witch.

Tense, I breathed again, searching my thoughts and finding nothing. Slowly the feeling of panic subsided and my headache retreated. I exhaled in relief. I'd been mistaken. There was nothing here. I was just carpet, and my mind had been inventing smells as it tried to fulfill my need for answers. "Nothing," I murmured into the carpet, inhaling deeply one last time before I sat up.

A pulse of terror washed through me as I breathed in the scent of vampire. Shocked, I awkwardly scrambled to my feet, staring down at the carpet as if having been betrayed. *Damn it.*

In a cold sweat, I turned away and tugged my coat straight. *Ivy. I'll ask her to come out and smell the carpet,* I thought, then almost laughed. Catching it back in a harsh gurgle, I pretended to cough, fingers cold as I shifted to the next photo.

Oh, even better, I thought sarcastically. Scratch marks on the paneling. My breath came fast and my gaze shot straight to the wall by the tiny closet as my fingertips started to throb. Almost panting, I stared, refusing to go look and confirm that my finger span matched the marks, afraid I might remember something even as I wanted to. I didn't recall making the marks on the wall, but it was obvious my body did.

I'd seen fear before. I'd seen fear bright and shiny when death comes at you in an instant and you can only react. I knew the nauseating mix of fear and hope when death comes slow and you frantically

try to find a way to escape it. I'd grown up with old fear, the kind that stalks you from a distance, death lurking on the horizon, so inevitable and inescapable that it loses its power. But this outright panic with no visible reason was new, and I trembled as I tried to find a way to deal with it. *Maybe I can ignore it. That works for Ivy.*

Clearing my throat, I tried for an air of nonchalance as I set the remaining pictures on the dresser and spread them out, but I wasn't fooling anyone.

Smears of blood—not splattered, but smeared. Kisten's, according to the FIB guys. A picture of a split drawer that had been slid back out of sight. Another useless bloody handprint on the deck where Kisten's killer had vaulted over the side. None of them hit me like the scratches on the carpet, and I struggled with wanting to know, but was afraid to remember.

Slowly my pulse eased and my shoulders lost their stiffness. I set the pictures down, bypassing the bags of dust and lint the FIB had vacuumed up, seeing my strands of red curls among the carpet fuzz and sock fluff. I watched myself in the mirror as my fingers touched the hair band in a clear evidence bag. It was one of mine, and it had held my braid together that night. A dull throb in my scalp lifted through my awareness, and Ford shifted uneasily.

Shit, the band meant something.

“Talk to me,” Ford said, and I pressed my thumb into the rubber cord through the plastic, trying to keep the fear from gaining control again. Evidence pointed at me to be Kisten's killer, hence the not-quite-hidden mistrust I now felt at the FIB, but I hadn't done it. I'd been here, but I hadn't done it. At least Ford believed me. Someone had left the stinking bloody handprints.

“This is mine,” I said softly so my voice wouldn't quaver. “I think...someone undid my hair.” Feeling unreal, I turned the bag over to see that it had been found in the bedroom, and a surge of panic rose from out of nowhere. My heart hammered, but I forced my breathing to steady. Memory trickled back, pieces, and nothing of use. *Fingers in my hair. My face against a wall. Kisten's killer taking my hair out of its braid.* No wonder I hadn't let Jenks's kids touch my hair much the last five months or why I'd freaked when Marshal had tucked my hair behind my ear.

Queasy, I dropped the bag, dizzy when the edges of my sight dimmed. If I passed out, Ford would call someone, and that would be that. I wanted to know. I had to.

The last piece of evidence was damning, and turning to rest my backside against the dresser, I shook a small, unbroken blue pellet to the corner of its bag. It was filled with a now-defunct sleepy-time charm. It was the only thing in my arsenal that would drop a dead vampire.

A faint prickling of the hair on the back of my neck grew as a new thought lifted through me and a whisper of memory clenched my heart. My breath came out in a pained rush, and my head bowed. *I was crying, swearing. Pointing my splat gun, I pulled the trigger. And laughing, he caught the spell.*

“He caught it,” I whispered, closing my eyes so they wouldn't fill. “I tried to shoot him, and he caught it without breaking it.” My wrist pulsed in pain and another memory surfaced. *Thin fingers gripped my wrist. My hand went numb. A thump when my gun hit the floor.*

“He hurt my hand until I dropped my splat gun,” I said. “I think I ran then.”

Afraid, I looked at Ford, seeing his amulet purple with shock. My little red splat gun had never been missing, was never recorded as having been here. All my potions were accounted for. Someone had clearly put the gun back where it belonged. I didn't even remember making the sleepy-time charms, but this was clearly one of mine. Where the other six were was a good question.

In a surge of anger, I kicked the dresser with the ball of my foot. The shock went all the way up my leg, and the furniture thumped into the wall. It was stupid, but it felt good.

“Uh, Rachel?” Ford said, and I kicked it again, grunting.

“I'm fine!” I shouted, sniffing back the tears. “I'm freaking fine!” But my lip was throbbing where someone had bitten me; my body was trying to get my mind to remember, but I simply wouldn't let it. Had it been Kisten who had bitten me? His attacker? I hadn't been bound, thank God. Ivy said so, and she would know.

“Yeah, you look fine,” Ford said dryly, and I pulled my coat closed and tugged my shoulder bag up. He was smiling at my lost temper, and it made me even madder.

“Stop laughing at me,” I said, and he smiled wider, taking off his amulet and tucking it away as we were finished. “And I'm not done with those,” I added as he gathered the pictures.

“Yes, you are,” he said, and I frowned at his unusual confidence. “You're angry. That's better than confused or grieving. I hate using clichés, but we can move forward now.”

“Psychobabble bull,” I scoffed, grabbing the evidence bags before he could take them, too, but he was right. I did feel better. I had remembered something. Maybe human science was as strong as witch magic. Maybe.

Ford took the bags from me. “Talk to me,” he said, standing in front of me like a rock.

My good mood vanished, replaced by the urge to flee. Grabbing the shirt box from the dresser, I pushed past him. I had to get out. I had to put some distance between me and the scratch marks on the walls. I couldn't wear the teddy Kisten had given me, but I couldn't leave it here either. Ford could gripe all he wanted about removing evidence from the crime scene. Evidence of what? That Kisten had loved me?

“Rachel,” Ford said as he followed, his steps silent on the carpet in the hall. “What do you recall? All I get is emotion. I can't go back and tell Edden you remembered nothing.”

“Sure you can,” I said, my pace fast and my blinders on as we crossed the living room.

“No, I can't,” he said, catching up with me at the broken door frame. “I'm a lousy liar.”

I shivered as I crossed the threshold, but the cold brightness of late afternoon beckoned, and I lurched for the door. “Lying is easy,” I said bitterly. “Just make something up and pretend it's real. I do it all the time.”

“Rachel.”

Ford reached out and drew me to a surprised stop in the cockpit. He was wearing winter gloves and had only touched my coat, but it proved how upset he was. The sun glinted on his black hair and his eyes were squinting from the glare. The cold wind shifted his bangs, and I searched his expression wanting to find a reason to tell him what I remembered, to let go of the them-versus-us attitude between human and Inderlander and just let him help me. Behind him Cincinnati spread in all her mixed-up, comfortable messiness, the roads too tight and the hills too steep, and I could sense the security that so many lives entangled together engendered.

My eyes fell to my feet and the crushed remains of a leaf the wind had dropped here. Ford’s shoulders eased as he felt my resolve weaken. “I remembered bits and pieces,” I said, and his feet shifted against the polished wood. “Kisten’s killer took my hair out of my braid before I kicked the door off the frame. I’m the one who made the scratches by the closet, but I only remember making them, not who I was trying to...get away from.” My hand fisted, and I shoved it in a pocket, leaving the shirt box tucked under an arm.

“The splat ball is mine. I remember shooting it,” I said, throat tight as I flicked my eyes to his and saw his sympathy. “I was aiming at the other vampire, not Kisten. He has...big hands.” A new pulse of fear zinged through me and I nearly lost it when I remembered the soft feel of thick fingers on my jawline.

“I want you to come in tomorrow,” Ford said, his brow pinched in worry. “Now that you have something to work with, I think hypnosis might bring it all together.”

Bring it all together? Does he have any idea what in hell he is asking? The blood drained from my face, and I pulled out of his reach. “No.” If Ford put me under, I had no idea what might come out.

Fleeing, I dipped under the railing and swung my weight out and onto the ladder. Marshal waited in his big-ass SUV below, and I wanted to be in it with the heater going to try to drive away the chill Ford’s words had started. I hesitated, wondering if I should drop the shirt box or keep it tucked under an arm.

“Rachel, wait.”

There was the rattle of the lock being replaced, and leaving the box under my arm, I started down, watching the side of the boat as I descended. I toyed with the idea of taking the ladder away to leave him stranded, but he would probably put it in his report. Besides, he did have his cell phone.

Finally I reached the ground. Head down, I placed my boots carefully in the slush, aiming for Marshal’s car, parked behind Ford’s in the maze of impounded boats. Marshal had offered to bring me out after I’d complained during a hockey game that my little red car would get stuck in the ruts and ice out here, and since my car wasn’t made for the snow, I’d said yes.

Guilt tugged at me for avoiding Ford’s help. I wanted to find out who’d killed Kisten and tried to make me their shadow, but there were other things I wanted to keep to myself, like why I’d survived common but lethal blood disease that was also responsible for my being able to kindle demon magic, or what my dad had done in his spare time, or why my mother had nearly gone off her rocker to keep

me from knowing my birth father wasn't the man who'd raised me.

Marshal's eyes showed his concern when I got in his SUV and slammed the door. Two months ago, the man had shown up on my doorstep, back in Cincinnati after the Mackinaw Weres had burned his garage down. Fortunately he'd saved both the house and the boat that had been his livelihood—now sold to pay for getting his master's at Cincy's university. We'd met last spring when I was up north rescuing Jenks's eldest son and Nick, my old boyfriend.

Despite my better judgment, we'd been out more than a few times, realizing we had enough in common to probably make a good go of it—if it weren't for my habit of getting everyone close to me killed. Not to mention that he was coming off a psycho girlfriend and wasn't looking for anything serious. The problem was, we both liked to relax doing athletic stuff, ranging from running at the zoo to ice-skating at Fountain Square. We'd kept it friendly but platonic for two months now, shocking the hell out of my roommates. The lack of stress from not wondering will-we, won't-we was a blessing. Curbing my natural tendencies and instead keeping our relationship casual had been easy. I couldn't bear it if he got hurt. Kisten had cured me of foolish dreams. Dreams could kill people. At least, mine could. And did.

"You okay?" Marshal asked, his low voice with his up-north accent heavy with worry.

"Peachy," I muttered as I tossed the box with the teddy onto the backseat and wiped a cold finger against the underside of my eye. When I didn't say anything more, he sighed, rolling his window down to talk to Ford. The FIB officer was making his way to us. I had half a mind to accuse Ford of asking Marshal to drive me here and back, knowing I'd probably need a shoulder to cry on, and though he wasn't my boyfriend, Marshal was a hundred percent better than taking my raw turmoil back to Ivy.

Ford looked up as he angled to my door, not Marshal's, and the tall man behind the wheel silently pressed a button to roll my window down. I tried to roll it back up, but he locked the controls and I gave him a dirty look.

"Rachel," Ford said as soon as he closed the distance between us. "You won't be out of control for even an instant. That's how it works."

Damn it, he had guessed why I was afraid, and embarrassed that he was bringing this up in front of Marshal, I frowned. "We don't have to do it at my office if you're uncomfortable," he added, squinting from the bright December sun. "No one needs to know."

I didn't care if the FIB knew I was seeing their psychiatrist. Hell, if anyone needed counseling, it was me. But still... "I'm not crazy," I muttered as I angled the blowing vents to me and my hair flew up from under my hat.

Ford put a hand on the open window in a show of support. "You're probably the sanest person I know. You only look crazy because you've got a lot of weird stuff to deal with. If you want, while you're relaxed, I can give you a way to keep your mouth shut about anything you want under just about any circumstance. Completely confidential, between you and your subconscious." Surprised, I stared at him, and he finished, "I don't even have to know what you're keeping to yourself."

"I'm not afraid of you," I said, but my knees felt funny. *What has he figured out about me that h*

Shifting his feet in the slush, Ford shrugged. “Yes, you are. I think it’s cute.” He glanced at Marshal and smiled. “Big bad runner who can take down black witches and vampires afraid of little helpless me.”

“I am not afraid of you. And you’re not helpless!” I exclaimed as Marshal chuckled.

“Then you’ll do it,” Ford said confidently, and I made a noise of frustration.

“Yeah, whatever,” I muttered, then fiddled with the vent again. I wanted to get out of here before he really figured out what was going on in my head—and then told me.

“I have to tell Edden about the sticky silk,” Ford said, “but I’ll wait until tomorrow.”

My eyes flicked to the ladder, still propped against the boat’s side. “Thanks,” I said, and he nodded, responding to the heavy emotion of gratitude I knew I must be throwing off. My roommate would have time to come out with the Jr. Detective Kit she probably had stashed in her label-strewn closet and take whatever prints she wanted. Not to mention sniffing the carpet.

Ford smiled at a private thought. “Since you won’t come in, how about me coming over tonight about...six? Somewhere after my dinner and before your lunch?”

I stared at him for his brazenness. “I’m busy. How about next month?”

He ducked his head as if embarrassed, but he was still smiling when he met my gaze. “I want to talk to you before I talk to Edden. Tomorrow. Three o’clock.”

“I’m picking my brother up at the airport at three,” I said quickly. “I’ll be with him and my mother the rest of the day. Sorry.”

“I’ll see you at six,” he said firmly. “By then, you’ll be home trying to get away from your brother and your mom, ready for some relaxation. I can teach you a trick for that, too.”

“God! I hate it when you do that!” I said, messing with my seat belt so he would take the hint and go away. I was more embarrassed than angry that he’d caught me trying to evade him. “Hey!” I leaned out the window as he turned to go. “Don’t tell anyone I had my face on the floor, okay?”

From beside me, Marshal made a wondering sound, and I turned to him. “You either.”

“No problem,” he said, thunking the SUV into gear and moving forward a few feet. My window went up, and I loosened my scarf as the vehicle warmed. Ford slowly managed the slushy ruts back to his car, pulling his phone from his pocket as he went. Remembering my own phone, on vibrate, I dug my cell out of my bag. Scrolling through the menu to put it on ring, I wondered how I was going to tell Ivy what I remembered without both of us flaking out.

With a small noise of concern, Marshal put his SUV back into park, and my head came up. Ford was standing beside his open door with his phone stuck to his ear. A bad feeling began to trickle through me when he started back to us. It grew worse when Marshal put his window down and Ford

stopped beside it. The psychiatrist's eyes carried a heavy worry.

"That was Edden," Ford said as he closed his phone and returned it to his belt case. "Glenn's been hurt."

"Glenn!" I leaned over the center console toward him, getting a good whiff of the scent of redwood coming off Marshal. The FIB detective was Edden's son and one of my favorite people. And now he was hurt. *Because of me?* "Is he okay?"

Marshal stiffened, and I leaned back. Ford was shaking his head and looking at the nearby river. "He was off duty investigating something he probably shouldn't have. They found him unconscious. I'm going to the hospital to see how much damage he's suffered to his head."

His head. Ford meant his brain. Someone had beat him up. "I'm coming, too," I said, reaching for my seat belt.

"I can drive you out," Marshal offered, but I was winding my scarf back up and grabbing my bag.

"No, but thanks, Marshal," I said, my pulse fast as I gave his shoulder a quick touch. "Ford's going out there. I'll, ah, call you later, okay?"

Marshal's brown eyes were worried, and his black hair, tight to his skull, hardly shifted as he nodded. It had been growing in for only a few months, but at least he had eyebrows now. "Okay," he echoed, not giving me any grief for ditching him. "Take care of yourself."

I exhaled, glancing once at Ford, waiting impatiently for me, then back to Marshal. "Thanks," I said softly, and gave him an impulsive kiss on the cheek. "You're a great guy."

I got out, and, pace fast, followed Ford to his car, my thoughts and stomach churning at what we might find at the hospital. Someone had hurt Glenn. Sure, he was a FIB officer and ran the risk of injury all the time, but I had a feeling this involved me. It had to. I was an albatross.

Just ask Kisten.

"We'll take the next elevator," the tidy woman said with an overly bright smile as she pulled her confused friend back into the hall and the silver doors slid shut before Ford and me.

Wondering, I glanced at the huge lift. The thing was big enough for a gurney. Ford and I were the only two people in here. But then the woman's harsh whisper of "Black witch" came in just before the doors met, telling me all I needed to know.

"The Turn take it," I muttered, tugging my bag back up on my shoulder.

Beside me, Ford edged away, not enjoying my angry emotions as I fumed. I wasn't a black witch. Okay, so my aura was covered with demon smut. And yeah, I'd been filmed last year being dragged down the street on my ass by a demon. It probably didn't help that the entire universe knew I'd summoned one into an I.S. courtroom to testify against Piscary, Cincinnati's top vampire and my roommate's former master. But I was a white witch. *Wasn't I?*

Depressed, I stared at the dull silver panels of the hospital elevator. Ford was a dark blur beside me, his head bowed as I stewed. I wasn't a demon to be pulled back to the ever-after when the sun rose, but my children would be—thanks to the illegal genetic tinkering of the now-dead Senior Kalamack. He had unknowingly broken the checks and balances that elves magicked into the demon's genome thousands of years ago, effectively allowing only magically stunted demon children to survive. The elves named the new species witches, telling us lies and convincing us to fight demons in their war. When we found out the truth, we abandoned the elves and demons both, migrating out of the ever-after and doing our best to forget our origins. Which we did admirably, to the point where I was the only witch to know the truth.

Ceri had filled in the gaps of Mr. Haston's sixth-grade history class, having been a demon's familiar before I rescued her. She'd read up on it between twisting curses and planning orgies.

No one knew the truth but me and my partners. And Al, the demon I had a standing teaching date with every Saturday. And Newt, the ever-after's most powerful demon. There was Al's parole officer Dali. Mustn't forget Trent and whoever he'd told, but that was likely going to be no one, seeing that his dad's breaking of the genetic roadblock had been a stupid thing to do. No wonder they'd killed all the geneticists at the Turn. Too bad they'd missed Trent's dad.

Ford jiggled on his feet, then, looking embarrassed, he pulled a black metal flask from a coat pocket, twisted off the top, tilted his head to the ceiling, and took a swig.

Watching his Adam's apple move, I gave him a questioning look.

"It's medicinal," he said, a charming shade of red as he fumbled recapping it.

"Well, we *are* in a hospital," I said dryly, then snatched it. Ford protested as I took a sniff, then touched it to my lips. My eyes widened. "Vodka?"

Looking even more embarrassed, the slight man took it from my unresisting fingers, capped it, and tucked it away. ~~The elevator chimed and the panels slid apart. Before us was a hallway like any other in the building, with its low-mat carpet, white walls, and banister.~~

My worry for Glenn came rushing back, and I lurched forward. Ford and I bumped as we got out, and I felt a wash of chagrin. I knew he didn't like to touch anyone. "Can I steady myself on your elbow?" he asked, and I glanced at the pocket he had dropped the flask into.

"Lightweight," I said, reaching out for him, careful to touch him only through his coat.

"I'm not drunk," he said sourly, linking his arm in mine in a motion that held absolutely no romance, but rather, desperation. "The emotions are sharp in here. The alcohol helps. I'm in overload and I'd rather feel your emotions than everyone else's."

"Oh." Feeling honored, I strode forward with him and past the two orderlies pushing a hamper. My good mood soured when one of them whispered, "Should we call security?"

Ford's grip tightened when I spun to give them my opinion, and the two skittered away like I was the boogeyman. "They're just afraid," Ford said, his fingers tightening on me.

We continued down the hall, and I wondered if they could kick me out. The beginnings of a headache pulsed. "I'm a white witch, damn it," I said to no one, and the guy in a lab coat coming toward us gave us a cursory glance.

Ford was looking pale, and I tried to calm myself before they admitted him. I should step up my efforts to find a muffler for him—other than alcohol, that is.

"Thanks," he whispered as he picked up on my concern, then, voice stronger, he added, "Rachel, you summon demons. You're good at it. Get over it, then find a way to make it work for you. It's not going to go away."

I huffed, ready to tell him he had no right to sound so high and mighty, but turning a liability into an asset was exactly what he had done with his "gift." I gave his arm a squeeze, then started when I saw Ivy, my roommate, bending over the nurses' desk, not caring that a male orderly had just walked into a wall watching her. Her black jeans were low and tight, but she had the body of a model and could get away with it. The matching cotton pullover was cut high to give a glimpse of her lower back as she craned to see what was on the computer. In deference to the cold, her long leather coat was draped over the counter. Ivy was a living vampire, and she looked it: svelte, dark, and broody. It made it hard to live with her, but I was no picnic either, and we knew each other's quirks.

"Ivy!" I called, and her head turned, her short, enviably straight hair with the gold tips swinging as she came up. "How did you find out about Glenn?"

Ford's shoulders slumped, all his tension slipping from him as he held my arm. He looked happy. But he would, seeing that he was picking up my emotions and I was happy to see Ivy. Perhaps I might invest in a little talk time about Ivy when Ford and I got together again. I could use his insight into our uneasy relationship.

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