

# One

I stood in the shadows of a deserted shop front across from The Blood and Brew Pub, trying not to be obvious as I tugged my black leather pants back up where they belonged. *This is pathetic*, I thought, eyeing the rain-emptied street. I was way too good for this.

Apprehending unlicensed and black-art witches was my usual line of work, as it takes a witch to catch a witch. But the streets were quieter than usual this week. Everyone who could make it was at the West Coast for our yearly convention, leaving me with this gem of a run. A simple snag and drag. It was just the luck of the Turn that had put me here in the dark and rain.

“Who am I kidding?” I whispered, pulling the strap of my bag farther up my shoulder. I hadn’t been sent to tag a witch in a month: unlicensed, white, dark, or otherwise. Bringing the mayor’s son in for Wereing outside of a full moon probably hadn’t been the best idea.

A sleek car turned the corner, looking black in the buzz of the mercury street lamp. This was its third time around the block. A grimace tightened my face as it approached, slowing. “Damn it,” I whispered. “I need a darker door front.”

“He thinks you’re a hooker, Rachel,” my backup snickered into my ear. “I told you the red halter was slutty.”

“Anyone ever tell you that you smell like a drunk bat, Jenks?” I muttered, my lips barely moving. Backup was unsettlingly close tonight, having perched himself on my earring. Big dangling thing—the earring, not the pixy. I’d found Jenks to be a pretentious snot with a bad attitude and a temper to match. But he knew what side of the garden his nectar came from. And apparently pixies were the best they’d let me take out since the frog incident. I would have sworn fairies were too big to fit into a frog’s mouth.

I eased forward to the curb as the car squished to a wet-asphalt halt. There was the whine of an automatic window as the tinted glass dropped. I leaned down, smiling my prettiest as I flashed my work ID. Mr. One Eyebrow’s leer vanished and his face went ashen. The car lurched into motion with a tiny squeak of tires. “Day-tripper,” I said in disdain. *No*, I thought in a flash of chastisement. He was a norm, a human. Even if they were accurate, the terms day-tripper, domestic, squish, off-the-rack, and my personal favorite, snack, were politically frowned upon. But if he was picking strays up off the sidewalk in the Hollows, one might call him dead.

The car never slowed as it went through a red light, and I turned at the catcalls from the hookers I had displaced about sunset. They weren’t happy, standing brazenly on the corner across from me. I gave them a little wave, and the tallest flipped me off before spinning to show me her tiny, spell-enhanced rear. The hooker and her distinctly husky-looking “friend” talked loudly as they tried to hide the cigarette they were passing between each other. It didn’t smell like your usual tobacco. *Not my problem, tonight*, I thought, moving back into my shadow.

I leaned against the cold stone of the building, my gaze lingering on the red taillights of the car as it

braked. Brow furrowed, I glanced at myself. I was tall for a woman—about five-eight—but not nearly as leggy as the hooker in the next puddle of light over. I wasn't wearing as much makeup as she was, either. Narrow hips and a chest that was almost flat didn't exactly make me streetwalker material. Before I found the leprechaun outlets, I had shopped in the "your first bra" aisle. It's hard finding something without hearts and unicorns on it there.

My ancestors had immigrated to the good old U.S. of A. in the 1800s. Somehow through the generations, the women all managed to retain the distinct red hair and green eyes of our Irish homeland. My freckles, though, are hidden under a spell my dad bought me for my thirteenth birthday. He had the tiny amulet put into a pinky ring. I never leave home without it.

A sigh slipped from me as I tugged my bag back up onto my shoulder. The leather pants, red ankle boots, and the spaghetti strap halter weren't too far from what I usually wore on casual Fridays to tick off my boss, but put them on a street corner at night... "Crap," I muttered to Jenks. "I look like a hooker."

His only response was a snort. I forced myself not to react as I turned back to the bar. It was too rainy for the early crowd, and apart from my backup and the "ladies" down the way, the street was empty. I'd been standing out here nearly an hour with no sign of my mark. I might as well go in and wait. Besides, if I were inside, I might look like a solicitee rather than a solicitor.

Taking a resolute breath, I pulled a few strands of my shoulder-length curls from my topknot, took a moment to arrange it artfully to fall about my face, and finally spit out my gum. The click of my boots made a snappy counterpoint to the jangling of the handcuffs pinned to my hip as I strode across the wet street and into the bar. The steel rings looked like a tawdry prop, but they were real and very well-used. I winced. No wonder Mr. One Eyebrow had stopped. Used for *work*, thank you, and not the kind you're thinking of.

Still, I'd been sent to the Hollows in the rain to collar a leprechaun for tax evasion. How much lower, I wondered, could I sink? It must have been from tagging that Seeing Eye dog last week. How was I supposed to know it wasn't a werewolf? It matched the description I'd been given.

As I stood in the narrow foyer shaking off the damp, I ran my gaze over the typical Irish bar crap: long-stemmed pipes stuck to the walls, green-beer signs, black vinyl seats, and a tiny stage where a wannabe-star was setting up his dulcimers and bagpipes amid a tower of amps. There was a whiff of contraband Brimstone. My predatory instincts stirred. It smelled three days old, not strong enough to track. If I could nail the supplier, I'd be off my boss's hit list. He might even give me something worth my talents.

"Hey," grunted a low voice. "You Toby's replacement?"

Brimstone dismissed, I batted my eyes and turned, coming eye-to-chest with a bright green T-shirt. My eyes traveled up a huge bear of a man. Bouncer material. The name on the shirt said CLIFF. It fit. "Who?" I purred, blotting the rain from what I generously call my cleavage with the hem of his shirt. He was completely unaffected; it was depressing.

"Tobby. State-assigned hooker? She ever gonna show up again?"

From my earring came a tiny singsong voice. "I told you so."

My smile grew forced. "I don't know," I said through my teeth. "I'm not a hooker."

He grunted again, eyeing my outfit. I pawed through my bag and handed him my work ID. Anyone watching would assume he was carding me. With readily available age-disguising spells, it was mandatory—as was the spell-check amulet he had around his neck. It glowed a faint red in response to my pinky ring. He wouldn't do a full check on me for that, which was why all the charms in my bag were currently uninvoked. Not that I'd need them tonight.

“Inderland Security,” I said as he took the card. “I'm on a run to find someone, not harass your regular clientele. That's why the—uh—disguise.”

“Rachel Morgan,” he read aloud, his thick fingers almost enveloping the laminated card. “Inderland Security runner. You're an I.S. runner?” He looked from my card to me and back, his fat lips splitting in a grin. “What happened to your hair? Run into a blowtorch?”

My lips pressed together. The picture was three years old. It hadn't been a blowtorch, it had been a practical joke, an informal initiation into my full runner status. Real funny.

The pixy darted from my earring, setting it swinging with his momentum. “I'd watch your mouth,” he said, tilting his head as he looked at my ID. “The last lunker who laughed at her picture spent the night in the emergency room with a drink umbrella jammed up his nose.”

I warmed. “You know about that?” I said, snatching my card and shoving it away.

“Everybody in appropriations knows about that.” The pixy laughed merrily. “And trying to tag that Were with an itch spell and losing him in the john.”

“You try bringing in a Were that close to a full moon without getting bit,” I said defensively. “It's not as easy as it sounds. I had to use a potion. Those things are expensive.”

“And then Nairing an entire bus of people?” His dragonfly wings turned red as he laughed and his circulation increased. Dressed in black silk with a red bandanna, he looked like a miniature Peter Pan posing as an inner city gang member. Four inches of blond bothersome annoyance and quick temper.

“That wasn't my fault,” I said. “The driver hit a bump.” I frowned. Someone had switched my spells, too. I had been trying to tangle his feet, and ended up removing the hair from the driver and everyone in the first three rows. At least I had gotten my mark, though I wasted an entire paycheck on cabs the next three weeks, until the bus would pick me up again.

“And the frog?” Jenks darted away and back as the bouncer flicked a finger at him. “I'm the only one who'd go out with you tonight. I'm getting hazard pay.” The pixy rose several inches, in what had to be pride.

Cliff seemed unimpressed. I was appalled. “Look,” I said. “All I want is to sit over there and have a drink, nice and quietlike.” I nodded to the stage where the postadolescent was tangling the lines from his amps. “When does that start?”

The bouncer shrugged. “He's new. Looks like about an hour.” There was a crash followed by cheers as an amp fell off the stage. “Maybe two.”

“Thanks.” Ignoring Jenks's chiming laughter, I wove my way through the empty tables to a bank of darker booths. I chose the one under a moose head, sinking three inches more than I should have in the flaccid cushion. Soon as I found the little perp, I was out of there. This was insulting. I had been with the I.S. for three years—seven if you counted my four years of clinicals—and here I was, doing intern work.

It was the interns that did the nitty-gritty day-to-day policing of Cincinnati and its largest suburb across the river, affectionately known as the Hollows. We picked up the supernatural stuff that the human-run FIB—short for the Federal Inderland Bureau—couldn't handle. Minor spell disturbances and rescuing familiars out of trees were in the realm of an I.S. intern. But I was a full runner, damn it. I was better than this. *I had done* better than this.

It had been I who single-handedly tracked down and apprehended the circle of dark witches who were circumventing the Cincinnati Zoo's security spells to steal the monkeys, selling them to an underground biolab. But did I get any recognition for that? No.

It had been I who realized that the loon digging up bodies in one of the churchyards was linked to the spate of deaths in the organ replacement wing in one of the human-run hospitals. Everyone assumed he was gathering materials to make illegal spells, not charming the organs into temporary health, then selling them on the black market.

And the ATM thefts that plagued the city last Christmas? It had taken me six simultaneous charms to look like a man, but I nailed the witch. She had been using a love charm/forget spell combo to rob naive humans. That had been an especially satisfying tag. I'd chased her for three streets, and there had been no time for spell casting when she turned to hit me with what could have been a lethal charm, so I was completely justified in knocking her out cold with a roundhouse kick. Even better, the FIB had been after her for three months, and tagging her took me two days. I made them look like fools, but did I get a "Good job, Rachel?" Did I even get a ride back to the I.S. tower with my swollen foot? No.

And lately I was getting even less: sorority kids using charms to steal cable, familiar theft, prank spells, and I couldn't forget my favorite—chasing trolls out from under bridges and culverts before they ate all the mortar. A sigh shifted me as I glanced over the bar. Pathetic.

Jenks dodged my apathetic attempts to swat him as he resettled himself on my earring. That they had to pay him triple to go out with me did not bode well.

A green-clad waitress bounced over, frighteningly perky for this early. "Hi!" she said, showing teeth and dimples. "My name is Dottie. I'll be your server tonight." All smiles, she set three drinks before me: a Bloody Mary, an old-fashioned, and a Shirley Temple. How sweet.

"Thanks, hon," I said with a jaded sigh. "Who they from?"

She rolled her eyes toward the bar, trying to portray bored sophistication but coming off like a high schooler at the big dance. Peering around her thin, apron-tied waist, I glanced over the three stiff, lust in their eyes, horses in their pockets. It was an old tradition. Accepting a drink meant I accepted the invitation behind it. One more thing for Ms. Rachel to take care of. They looked like norms, but one never knew.

Sensing no more conversation forthcoming, Dottie skipped away to do barmaid things. "Check them out, Jenks," I whispered, and the pixy flitted away, his wings pale pink in his excitement. No one saw him go. Pixy surveillance at its finest.

The pub was quiet, but as there were two tenders behind the bar, an old man and a young woman, I guessed it would pick up soon. The Blood and Brew was a known hot spot where norms went to mix with Inderlanders before driving back across the river with their doors locked and the windows up tight, titillated and thinking they were hot stuff. And though a lone human sticks out among

Inderlanders like a zit on a prom queen's face, an Inderlander can easily blend into humanity. It's a survival trait honed since before Pasteur. That's why the pixy. Fairies and pixies can literally sniff an Inderlander out quicker than I can say "Spit."

I halfheartedly scanned the nearly empty bar, my sour mood evaporating into a smile when I found a familiar face from the office. Ivy.

Ivy was a vamp, the star of the I.S. runner lineup. We had met several years ago during my last year of internship, paired up for a year of semi-independent runs. She had just hired on as a full runner, having taken six years of university credit instead of opting for the two years of college and four years of internship that I had. I think assigning us to each other had been someone's idea of a joke.

Working with a vampire—living or not—had scared the peas out of me until I found out she wasn't a practicing vamp and had sworn off blood. We were as unlike as two people could be, but her strengths were my weakness. I wish I could say her weaknesses were my strengths, but Ivy didn't have any weaknesses—other than the tendency to plan the joy out of everything.

We hadn't worked together for years, and despite my grudgingly given promotion, Ivy still outranked me. She knew all the right things to say to all the right people at all the right times. It helped that she belonged to the Tamwood family, a name as old as Cincinnati itself. She was its last living member, in possession of a soul and as alive as me, having been infected with the vamp virus through her then still-living mother. The virus had molded Ivy even as she grew in her mother's womb, giving Ivy a little of both worlds, the living and the dead.

At my nod, she sauntered over. The men at the bar jostled elbows, all three turning to watch her in appreciation. She flicked them a dismissing glance, and I swear I heard one sigh. "How's it going, Ivy?" I said as she eased onto the bench opposite me.

Vinyl seat squeaking, she reclined in the booth with her back against the wall, the heels of her tall boots on the long bench, and her knees showing over the edge of the table. She stood half a head over me, but where I just looked tall, she pulled off a svelte elegance. Her slightly Oriental cast gave her an enigmatic look, upholding my belief that most models had to be vamps. She dressed like a model, too: modest leather skirt and silk blouse, top-of-the-line, all-vamp construction; black, of course. Her hair was a smooth dark wave, accenting her pale skin and oval-shaped face. No matter what she did with her hair, it made her look exotic. I could spend hours with mine and it always came out red and frizzy. Mr. One Eyebrow wouldn't have stopped for her; she was too classy.

"Hey, Rachel," Ivy said. "Whatcha doing down in the Hollows?" Her voice was melodious and low, flowing with all the subtleties of gray silk. "I thought you'd be catching some skin cancer on the coast this week," she added. "Is Denon still ticked about the dog?"

I shrugged sheepishly. "Nah." Actually, the boss nearly blew a vein. I had been a step away from being promoted to office broom pusher.

"It was an honest mistake." Ivy let her head fall back in a languorous motion to expose the long length of her neck. There wasn't a scar on it. "Anyone could have made it."

*Anyone but you*, I thought sourly. "Yeah?" I said aloud, pushing the Bloody Mary toward her. "Well, let me know if you spot my take." I jingled the charms on my cuffs, touching the clover carved from olive wood.

Her thin fingers curved around the glass as if they were caressing it. Those same fingers could break my wrist if she put some effort into it. She'd have to wait until she was dead before she had enough strength to snap it without a thought, but she was still stronger than me. Half the red drink disappeared down her throat. "Since when is the I.S. interested in leprechauns?" she asked, eyeing the rest of the charms.

"Since the boss's last rainy day."

She shrugged, pulling her crucifix out from behind her shirt to run the metal loop through her teeth provocatively. Her canines were sharp, like a cat's, but no bigger than mine. She'd get the extended versions after she died. I forced my eyes from them, watching the metal cross instead. It was as long as my hand and made of a beautifully tooled silver. She had begun wearing it lately to irritate her mother. They weren't on the best of terms.

I fingered the tiny cross on my cuffs, thinking it must be difficult having your mother be undead. I had met only a handful of dead vampires. The really old ones kept to themselves, and the new ones tended to get staked unless they learned to keep to themselves.

Dead vamps were utterly without conscience, ruthless instinct incarnate. The only reason they followed society's rules was because it was a game to them. And dead vampires knew about rules. Their continued existence depended upon rules which, if challenged, meant death or pain, the biggest rule of course being no sun. They needed blood daily to keep sane. Anyone's would do, and taking it from the living was the only joy they found. And they were powerful, having incredible strength and endurance, and the ability to heal with an unearthly quickness. It was hard to destroy them except for the traditional beheading and staking through the heart.

In exchange for their soul, they had the chance for immortality. It came with a loss of conscience. The oldest vampires claimed that was the best part: the ability to fulfill every carnal need without guilt when someone died to give you pleasure and keep you sane one more day.

Ivy possessed both the vamp virus and a soul, caught in the middle ground until she died and became a true undead. Though not as powerful or dangerous as a dead vamp, the ability to walk under the sun and worship without pain made her envied by her dead brethren.

The metal rings of Ivy's necklace clicked rhythmically against her pearly whites, and I ignored her sensuality with a practiced restraint. I liked her better when the sun was up and she had more control over her mien of sexual predator.

My pixy returned to land on the fake flowers in their vase full of cigarette butts. "Good God," Ivy said, dropping her cross. "A pixy? Denon must be pissed."

Jenks's wings froze for an instant before returning to a blur of motion. "Go Turn yourself, Tamwood!" he said shrilly. "You think fairies are the only ones who have a nose?"

I winced as Jenks landed heavily upon my earring. "Nothing but the best for Ms. Rachel," I said dryly. Ivy laughed, and the hair on the back of my neck prickled. I missed the prestige of working with Ivy, but she still set me on edge. "I can come back if you think I'll mess up your take," I added.

"No," she said. "You're stat. I've got a pair of needles cornered in the bathroom. I caught them soliciting out-of-season game." Drink in hand, she slid to the end of the bench and stood with a sensual stretch, an almost unheard moan slipping from her. "They look too cheap to have a shift

spell,” she said when she finished. “But I’ve got my big owl outside just in case. If they try to bat their way out a broken window, they’re bird chow. I’m just waiting them out.” She took a sip, her brown eyes watching me over the rim of her glass. “If you make your tag early enough, maybe we can share a cab uptown?”

The soft hint of danger in her voice made me nod non-committally as she left. Fingers nervously playing with a drooping curl of my red hair, I decided I’d see what she looked like before getting in a cab with her this late at night. Ivy might not need blood to survive, but it was obvious she still craved it, her public vow to abstain aside.

Condolences were made at the bar as only two drinks remained at my elbow. Jenks was still fussing in a high-pitched tantrum. “Relax, Jenks,” I said, trying to keep him from ripping my earring out. “I like having a pixy backup. Fairies don’t do squat unless their union clears it.”

“You’ve noticed?” he all but snarled, tickling my ear with the wind from his fitfully moving wings. “Just because of some maggoty-jack, pre-Turn poem written by a drunk lard-butt, they think they’re better than us. Publicity, Rachel. That’s all it is. Good old-fashioned greasy palms. Did you know fairies get paid more than pixies for the same work?”

“Jenks?” I interrupted, fluffing my hair from my shoulder. “What’s going on at the bar?”

“And that picture!” he continued, my earring quivering. “You’ve seen it? The one of that human brat crashing the frat party? Those fairies were so drunk, they didn’t even know they were dancing with a human. And they’re still getting the royalties.”

“Hose yourself off, Jenks,” I said tightly. “What’s up at the bar?”

There was a tiny huff, and my earring twisted. “Contestant number one is a personal athletic trainer,” he grumbled. “Contestant number two fixes air conditioners, and contestant number three is a newspaper reporter. Day-trippers. All of them.”

“What about the guy on stage?” I whispered, making sure I didn’t look that way. “The I.S. gave me only a sketch description, since our take is probably under a disguise spell.”

“*Our* take?” Jenks said. The wind from his wings ceased, and his voice lost its anger.

I fastened on that. Maybe all he needed was to be included. “Why not check him out?” I asked instead of demanding. “He doesn’t seem to know which end of his bagpipes to blow into.”

Jenks made a short bark of laughter and buzzed off in a better mood. Fraternization between runner and backup was discouraged, but what the heck. Jenks felt better, and perhaps my ear would still be in one piece when the sun came up.

The bar jocks jostled elbows as I ran an index finger around the rim of the old-fashioned to make it sing while I waited. I was bored, and a little flirtation was good for the soul.

A group came in, their loud chatter telling me the rain had picked up. They clustered at the far end of the bar, all talking at once, their arms stretching for their drinks as they demanded attention. I looked them over, a faint tightening of my gut telling me that at least one in their party was a dead vamp. It was hard to tell whom under the goth paraphernalia.

My guess was the quiet young man in the back. He was the most normal looking in the tattooed, body-pierced group, wearing jeans and a button shirt instead of rain-spotted leather. He must have been doing well to have such a bevy of humans with him, their necks scarred and their bodies thin and

anemic. But they seemed happy enough, content in their close-knit, almost familylike group. They were being especially nice to a pretty blonde, supporting her and working together to coax her to eat some peanuts. She looked tired as she smiled. Must have been his breakfast.

As if pulled by my thoughts, the attractive man turned. He shifted his sunglasses down, and my face went slack as he met my eyes over them. I took a breath, seeing from across the room the rain on his eyelashes. A sudden need to brush them free filled me. I could almost feel the dampness of the rain on my fingers, how soft it would feel. His lips moved as he whispered, and it seemed I could hear but not understand his words swirling behind me to push me forward.

Heart pounding, I gave him a knowing look and shook my head. A faint, charming smile tugged the corners of his mouth, and he looked away.

My held breath slipped from me as I forced my eyes away. Yeah. He was a dead vamp. A living vamp couldn't have bespelled me even that little bit. If he had been really trying, I wouldn't have had a chance. But that's what the laws were for, right? Dead vamps were only supposed to take willing initiates, and only after release papers were signed, but who was to say if the papers were signed before or after? Witches, Weres, and other Inderlanders were immune to turning vampire. Small comfort if the vamp lost control and you died from having your throat torn out. 'Course, there were laws against that, too.

Still uneasy, I looked up to find the musician making a beeline for me, his eyes alight with a fevered itch. Stupid pixy. He had gotten himself caught.

"Come to hear me play, beautiful?" the kid said as he stopped at my table, clearly struggling to make his voice low.

"My name is Sue, not Beautiful," I lied, staring past him toward Ivy. She was laughing at me. Swell. This was going to look just fantastic in our office newsletter.

"You sent your fairy friend to *check—me—out*," he said, half singing the words.

"He's a pixy not a fairy," I said. The guy was either a stupid norm or a smart Inderlander pretending to be a stupid norm. I was betting on the former.

He opened his fist and Jenks flew a wobbly trail to my earring. One of his wings was bent, and pixy dust sifted from him to make brief sunbeams on the table and my shoulder. My eyes closed in a strength-gathering blink. I was going to get blamed for this. I knew it.

Jenks's irate snarling filled my ear, and I frowned in thought. I didn't think any of his suggestions were anatomically possible—but at least I knew the kid was a norm.

"Come and see my big pipe in the van," the kid said. "Bet you could make it sing-g-g-g."

I looked up at him, the dead vamp's proposition making me jittery. "Go away."

"I'm gonna make it big, Suzy-Q," he boasted, taking my hostile stare as an invitation to sit. "I'm going to the coast, soon as I get enough money. Got a friend in the music biz. He knows this guy who knows this guy who cleans Janice Joplin's pool."

"Go away," I repeated, but he only leaned back and screwed his face up, singing "Sue-sue-sussudio" in a high falsetto, pounding on the table in a broken rhythm.

This was embarrassing. Surely I would be forgiven for nacking him? But no, I was a good little



soldier in the fight for crimes against norms, even if no one but I thought so. Smiling, I leaned forward until my cleavage showed. That always gets their attention, even if there isn't much of it. Reaching across the table, I grabbed the short hairs on his chest and twisted. That gets their attention, too, and it's far more satisfying.

The yelp as his singing cut off was like icing, it was so sweet. "Leave," I whispered. I pushed the old-fashioned into his hand and curled his slack fingers around it. "And get rid of this for me." His eyes grew wider as I gave a little tug. My fingers reluctantly loosened, and he beat a tactful retreat, sloshing half the drink as he went.

There was a cheer from the bar. I looked to see the old bartender grinning. He touched the side of his nose, and I inclined my head. "Dumb kid," I muttered. He had no business being in the Hollows. Someone ought to sling his butt back across the river before he got hurt.

One glass remained before me, and bets were probably being made as to whether I would drink or not. "You all right, Jenks?" I asked, already guessing the answer.

"The sawed-off lunker nearly pulps me, and you ask if I'm *all right*?" he snarled. His tiny voice was hilarious, and my eyebrows rose. "Nearly cracked my ribs. Slime stink all over me. *Great God almighty*, I reek of it. And look what he did to *my clothes*. Do you know how hard it is to get stink out of silk! My wife is gonna make me sleep in the flower boxes if I come home smelling like this. You can shove the triple pay, Rache. You aren't worth it!"

Jenks never noticed when I quit listening. He hadn't said a thing about his wing, so I knew he'd be okay. I slumped into the back of the booth and stewed, dead in the water with Jenks leaking dust as he was. I was royally Turned. If I came in empty-handed, I'd get nothing but full moon disturbances and bad charm complaints until next spring. It wasn't my fault.

With Jenks unable to fly unnoticed, I knew I might as well go home. If I bought him some Maitake mushrooms, he might not tell the guy in appropriations how his wing got bent. *What the heck*, I thought. *Why not make a party of it?* Sort of a last fling before the boss nailed my broom to a tree, so to speak. I could stop at the mall for some bubble bath and a new disc of slow jazz. My career was taking a nosedive, but there was no reason I couldn't enjoy the ride.

With a perverse glow of anticipation, I took my bag and the Shirley Temple, rising to make my way to the bar. Not my style to leave things hanging. Contestant number three stood with a grin and a shake of his leg to adjust himself. God, help me. Men can be so disgusting. I was tired, ticked-off, and grossly unappreciated. Knowing he would take anything I said as playing hard to get and follow me out, I tipped the ginger pop down his front and kept walking.

I smirked at his cry of outrage, then frowned at his heavy hand on my shoulder. Turning into a crouch, I sent my leg in a stiff half spin to trip him onto the floor. He hit the wood planking with a loud thump. The bar went silent after a momentary gasp. I was sitting on him, straddling his chest, before he even realized he had gone down.

My bloodred manicure stood out sharply as I gripped his neck, flicking the bristles under his chin. His eyes were wide. Cliff stood at the door with his arms crossed, content to watch.

"Damn, Rache," Jenks said, swinging wildly from my earring. "Who taught you that?"

"My dad," I answered, then leaned until I was in his face. "So sorry," I breathed in a thick Hollows

accent. “You want to play, cookie?” His eyes went frightened as he realized I was an Inderlander and not a bit of fluff out looking for a wild night of pretend. He was a cookie, all right. A little treat to be enjoyed and forgotten. I wouldn’t hurt him, but he didn’t know that.

“Sweet mother of Tinker Bell!” Jenks exclaimed, jerking my attention from the sniveling human. “Smell that? Clover.”

My fingers loosened, and the man scabbled out from under me. He awkwardly gained his feet, dragging his two cohorts to the shadows with a whispered muttering of face-saving insults. “One of the bartenders?” I breathed as I rose.

“It’s the woman,” he said, sending a wash of excitement through me.

My eyes rose, taking her in. She filled out her tight, high-contrast uniform of black and green admirably, giving the impression of bored competence as she moved confidently behind the counter. “You flaking out, Jenks?” I murmured as I tried to surreptitiously pull my leather pants out from where they had ridden up. “It can’t be her.”

“Right!” he snapped. “Like *you* could tell. *Ignore* the pixy. I could be home right now in front of my TV. But no-o-o-o-o. I’m stuck spending the night with some beanpole of backward feminine intuition who thinks she can do my job better than me. I’m cold, hungry, and my wing is bent nearly in two. If that main vein snaps, I’ll have to regrow the entire wing. Do you have any idea how long that takes?”

I glanced over the bar, relieved to see that everyone had returned to their conversations. Ivy was gone and had probably missed the entire thing. Just as well. “Shut up, Jenks,” I muttered. “Pretend you’re a decoration.”

I sidled to the old man. He grinned a gap-toothed smile as I leaned forward. Wrinkles creased his leathery face in appreciation as his eyes rove everywhere but my face. “Gimme something,” I breathed. “Something sweet. Something that will make me feel good. Something rich and creamy and oh-so-bad for me.”

“I’ll be needing to see yer ID, lassie,” the old man said in a thick Irish accent. “Ye dunna look old enough to be out from under yer mum’s shadow.”

His accent was faked, but my smile at his compliment wasn’t. “Why, sure thing, hon.” I dug in my bag for my driver’s license, willing to play the game, since we both obviously enjoyed it. “Oops!” I giggled as the card slipped to fall behind the counter. “Silly little me!”

With the help of the bar stool, I leaned halfway across the counter to get a good peek behind it. Having my rear in the air not only distracted the menfolk admirably but afforded me an excellent look. Yes, it was degrading if you thought about it too long, but it worked. I looked up to find the old man grinning, thinking I was checking him out, but it was the woman I was interested in now. She was standing on a box.

She was nearly the right height, in the right place, and Jenks had marked her. She looked younger than I would have expected, but if you’re a hundred fifty years old, you’re bound to pick up a few beauty secrets. Jenks snorted in my ear, sounding like a smug mosquito. “Told you.”

I settled back on the stool, and the bartender handed me my license along with a dead man’s float and a spoon: a dollop of ice cream in a short glass of Bailey’s. Yum. Tucking the card away, I gave

him a saucy wink. I left the glass where it was, turning as if scoping out the patrons that had just come in. My pulse increased and my fingertips tingled. Time to go to work.

A quick look around to make sure no one was watching, and I tipped my glass. I gasped as it spilled, and my distress wasn't entirely faked as I lurched to catch it, trying to save at least the ice cream.

The kick of adrenaline shook me as the woman bartender met my apologetic smile with her patronizing one. The jolt was worth more to me than the check I found shoved into my desk every week. But I knew the feeling would wane as fast as it had come. My talents were being wasted. I didn't even need a spell for this one.

*If this was all the I.S. would give me, I thought, maybe I should blow off the steady pay and go out on my own.* Not many left the I.S., but there was precedence. Leon Bairn was a living legend before he went independent—then promptly got wasted by a misaligned spell. Rumor had it the I.S. had been the one to put the price on his head for breaking his thirty-year contract. But that was over a decade ago. Runners went missing all the time, taken out by prey more clever or luckier than them. Blaming it on the I.S.'s own assassin corps was just spiteful. No one left the I.S. because the money was good and the hours were easy, that's all.

*Yeah, I thought, ignoring the whisper of warning that took me.* Leon Bairn's death was exaggerated. Nothing was ever proven. And the only reason I still had a job was because they couldn't legally fire me. Maybe I should go out on my own. It couldn't be any worse than what I was doing now. They would be glad to see me leave. *Sure, I thought, smiling.* Rachel Morgan, private runner for hire. All rights earnestly upheld. All wrongs sincerely avenged.

I knew my smile was misty as the woman obligingly swiped her towel between my elbows to mop up the spill. My breath came in a quick sound. Left hand dropping, I snatched the cloth, tangling her in it. My right swung back, then forward with my cuffs, clicking them about her wrists. In an instant it was done. She blinked, shocked. Damn, I'm good.

The woman's eyes widened as she realized what had happened. "Blazes and condemnation!" she cried, sounding elegant with her Irish accent. Hers wasn't faked. "What the 'ell do you think you're doin'?"

The jolt flared to ash, and a sigh slipped from me as I eyed the lone scoop of ice cream that was left of my drink. "Inderland Security," I said, slapping my I.S. identification down. The rush was gone already. "You stand accused of fabricating a rainbow for the purpose of misrepresenting the income generated from said rainbow, failure to file the appropriate requisition forms for said rainbow, failure to notify Rainbow Authority of said rainbow's end—"

"It's a lie!" the woman shouted, contorting in the cuffs. Her eyes darted wildly about the bar as all attention focused on her. "All a lie! I found that pot legally."

"You retain the right to keep your mouth shut," I adlibbed, digging out a spoonful of ice cream. It was cold in my mouth, and the hint of alcohol was a poor replacement for the waning warmth of adrenaline. "If you forego your right to keep your mouth shut, I will shut it for you."

The bartender slammed the flat of his hand on the counter. "Cliff!" he bellowed, his Irish accent gone. "Put the Help Wanted sign in the window. Then get back here and help me."

“Yeah, boss,” came Cliff’s distant, I-couldn’t-care-less shout.

Setting my spoon aside, I reached across the bar and yanked the leprechaun over the counter and onto the floor before she got much smaller. She was shrinking as the charms on my cuffs slowly overpowered her weaker size spell. “You have a right to a lawyer,” I said, tucking my ID away. “If you can’t afford one, you’re toast.”

“You canna catch me!” the leprechaun threatened, struggling as the crowd’s shouts became enthusiastic. “Rings of steel alone canna hold me. I’ve escaped from kings, and sultans, and nasty little children with nets!”

I tried to finger-curl my rain-damp hair as she fought and wrestled, slowly coming to grips that she was caught. The cuffs shrank with her, keeping her confined. “I’ll be out of this—in—just a moment,” she panted, slowing enough to look at her wrists. “Aw, for the love of St. Pete.” She slumped, sending her eyes over the yellow moon, green clover, pink heart, and orange star that decorated my cuffs. “May the devil’s own dog hump your leg. Who squealed about the charms?” Then she looked closer. “You caught me with four? *Four*? I didn’t think the old ones still worked.”

“Call me old-fashioned,” I said to my glass, “but when something works, I stick with it.”

Ivy walked past, her two black-cloaked vamps before her, elegant in their dark misery. One had a bruise developing under his eye; the other was limping. Ivy wasn’t gentle with vamps preying on the underage. Remembering the pull from the dead vamp at the end of the bar, I understood why. A sixteen-year-old couldn’t fight that. Wouldn’t *want* to fight that.

“Hey, Rachel,” Ivy said brightly, looking almost human now that she wasn’t actively working. “I’m heading uptown. Want to split the fare?”

My thoughts went back to the I.S. as I weighed the risk of being a starving entrepreneur to a lifetime of running for shoplifters and illegal-charm sellers. It wasn’t as if the I.S. would put a price on my head. No, Denon would be thrilled to tear up my contract. I couldn’t afford an office in Cincinnati, but maybe in the Hollows. Ivy spent a lot of time down here. She’d know where I could find something cheap. “Yeah,” I said, noting her eyes were a nice, steady brown. “I want to ask you something.”

She nodded and pushed her two takes forward. The crowd pressed back, the sea of black clothing seeming to soak up the light. The dead vamp at the outskirts gave me a respectful nod, as if to say “Good tag,” and with a pulse of emotion giving me a false high, I nodded back.

“Way to go, Rachel,” Jenks chimed up, and I smiled. It had been a long time since I’d heard that.

“Thanks,” I said, catching sight of him on my earring in the bar’s mirror. Pushing my glass aside, I reached for my bag, my smile widening when the bartender gestured it was on the house. Feeling warm from more than the alcohol, I slipped from my stool and pulled the leprechaun stumbling to her feet. Thoughts of a door with my name painted on it in gold letters swirled through me. It was freedom.

“No! Wait!” the leprechaun shouted as I grabbed my bag and hauled her butt to the door. “Wishes! Three wishes. Right? You let me go, and you get three wishes.”

I pushed her into the warm rain ahead of me. Ivy had a cab already, her catch stashed in the trunk so there would be more room for the rest of us. Accepting wishes from a felon was a sure way to find yourself on the wrong end of a broomstick, but only if you got caught.

“Wishes?” I said, helping the leprechaun into the backseat. “Let’s talk.”