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A Fistful of Charms

Kim Harrison

Chapter 1

The solid thud of David's car door shutting echoed off the stone face of the eight-story building we had parked beside. Leaning atop of the roof of the gray sports car, I shaded my eyes and squinted up its aged and architecturally beautiful columns and fluted sills. The uppermost floor was golden in the setting sun, but here at street level, we were in a chill shadow. Cincinnati had a handful of such landmark buildings, most abandoned as this one appeared to be.

"Are you sure this is the place?" I questioned, then dragged the flat of my arms off the roof of his car. The river was close; I could smell the oil and gas mix of boats. The top floor probably had a view. Though the streets were clean, the area was clearly depressed. But with a little attention—and a lot of money—this could be one of the city's newest residential hot spots.

David set his worn leather briefcase down and reached into the inner pocket of his suit coat. Pulling out a sheaf of papers, he flipped to the back, then glanced to the distant corner and the street sign. "Yes," he said, his soft voice carrying tension, but not worry.

Tugging my little red leather jacket down, I hiked my bag higher on my shoulder and headed to his side of the car, heels clunking. I'd like to say I was wearing my butt-kicking boots in deference to this being a run, but the reality was I just liked them. They went well with the blue jeans and black T-shirt I had on, and with the matching cap, I looked and felt sassy.

David frowned at the noise—or my choice of attire, maybe—steeling his features to a bland acceptance when he saw me quietly laughing at him. He was in his respectable work clothes, somehow pulling off the mix of the three-piece suit and his shoulder-length, wavy black hair held back in a subdued clip. I'd seen him a couple of times in running tights showing off his excellently maintained, mid-thirty's physique—yum—and a full-length duster and cowboy hat—Van Helsing eat your heart out—but his somewhat small stature lost none of its presence when he dressed like the insurance claim adjuster he was. David was kind of complex for a Were.

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I hesitated when I came even with him, and together we eyed the building. Three streets over I could hear the shush of traffic, but here nothing moved. "It's really quiet," I said, holding my elbows against the chill of the mid May evening.

Brown eyes pinched, David ran a hand over his clean-shaven cheeks. "It's the right address, Rachel," he said, peering at the top floor. "I can call to check if you want."

"No, this is cool." I smiled with my lips closed, hefting my shoulder bag and feeling the extra weight of my splat gun. This was David's run, not mine, and about as benign as you could get—adjusting the claim of an earth witch whose wall had cracked. I wouldn't need the sleepy-time charms I loaded my modified paint ball gun with, but I had just grabbed my bag and went when David had asked me to come with him. It had still been packed from my last run—storming the back room of an illegal spammer. God, plugging him had been satisfying.

David pushed into motion, gallantly gesturing for me to go first. He was older than I by about ten years, but it was hard to tell unless you looked at his eyes. "She's probably living in one of those new flats they're making above old warehouses," he said, heading for the ornate stoop.

I snickered, and David looked at me. "What?" he said, dark eyebrows rising.

I entered the building before him, shoving the door so he could follow tight on my heels. "I was thinking if you lived in one, it would still be a warehouse. Were house? Get it?"

A sigh shifted him, and I frowned. Jenks, my old backup, would have laughed. Guilt hit me, and my pace faltered. Jenks was currently AWOL, hiding out in some Were's basement, but with spring here, I could step up my efforts to apologize and get him to return.

The front lobby was spacious, full of graying marble and little else. My heels sounded loud in the tall-ceilinged space, and creeped out, I started walking to minimize my noise. A pair of black-edged elevators made an obvious showing, and we headed for them. David pushed the up button, and rocked back.

I eyed him, the corners of my lips quirking. Though he was trying to hide it, he was starting to get excited about his run. Being a field insurance adjustor wasn't the desk job one might think it was. Most of his company's clients were Inderlanders—witches, Weres, and the occasional vamp—and as such, getting the truth as to why a client's car was totaled was harder than it sounded. Was it from the teenage son backing it into the garage wall, or did the witch down the street finally get tired of him beeping every time he left the drive? One was covered, the other wasn't, and sometimes it took, ah, creative interviewing techniques to get the truth.

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David noticed I was smiling at him, and the rims of his ears went red under his dark complexion. "I appreciate you coming with me," he said, shifting forward as the elevator dinged and the doors opened. "I owe you dinner, okay?"

"No problem." I joined him in the murky, mirrored lift, and I watched my reflection in the amber light as the doors closed. I had needed to move an interview for a possible client, but David had helped me in the past, and that was far more important.

The trim Were winced. "The last time I adjusted the claim of an earth witch, I later found out she had scammed the company. My ignorance cost them hundreds of thousands. I appreciate you giving me your opinion as to if she caused the damage with a misuse of magic."

I tucked a loosely curling lock of red hair that had escaped my French braid behind an ear, then adjusted my leather cap. The lift was old and slow. "Like I said. No problem."

David watched the numbers counting up. "I think my boss is trying to get me fired," he said softly. "This is the third claim this week to hit my desk that I'm not familiar with." His grip on his briefcase shifted. "He's waiting for me to make a mistake. Pushing for it."

I leaned against the back mirror and smiled weakly at him. "Sorry. I know how that feels." I had quit my old job at Inderland Security, the I.S. almost a year ago to go independent. Though it had been rough—and still was, occasionally—it was the best decision I'd ever made.

"Still," he persisted, the not-unpleasant scent of musk growing as he turned to me in the confined space, "This isn't your job. I owe you."

"David, let it go," I said, exasperated. "I'm happy to come out here and make sure some witch isn't scamming you. It's no big deal. I do this stuff every day. In the dark. Usually alone. And if I'm lucky, it involves running, and screaming, and my foot in somebody's gut."

The Were smiled to show his flat, blocky teeth. "You like your job, don't you."

I smiled right back. "You bet I do."

The floor lurched, and the doors opened. David waited for me to get out first, and I looked out onto the huge, building-sized room on the top floor. The setting sun streamed in the ceiling-to-floor windows to shine on the scattered building materials. Past the windows, the Ohio River made a gray sheen. When finished, this would be a most excellent apartment. My nose tickled at the scent of two-by-fours and sanded plaster, and I sneezed.

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David's eyes went everywhere. "Hello? Mrs. Bryant?" he said, his deep voice echoing. "I'm David. David Hue from Were Insurance. I brought an assistant with me." He gave my tight jeans, T-shirt, and red leather jacket a disparaging look. "Mrs. Bryant?"

I followed him farther in, my nose wrinkling. "I think the crack in her wall might be from removing some of those supporting members," I said softly. "Like I said. No problem."

"Mrs. Bryant?" David called again.

My thoughts went to the empty street and how far we were from the casual observer. Behind me, the elevator doors slid shut and the lift descended. A small scuff from the far end of the room sent a stab of adrenaline through me, and I spun.

David, too, was on edge, and together we laughed at ourselves when a slight figure rose from the couch set adjacent to a modern kitchen, the cupboards still wrapped in plastic.

"Mrs. Bryant?" David questioned. "I'm David Hue."

"As prompt as your last yearly review claim," a masculine voice said, the soft resonances sifting thorough the darkening air. "And very thoughtful to bring a witch with you to check your customer's claim with. Tell me, do you take that off your end of the year taxes, or do you claim it as a business expense?"

David's eyes were wide. "It's a business expense, sir."

I looked from David to the man standing at the end of the long room. "Ah, David? I take it that's not Mrs. Bryant."

His grip on his briefcase shifting, David shook his head. "I think it's the president of the company."

"Oh." I thought about that. Then thought about that some more. I was getting a bad feeling about this. "David?" I questioned, and he put a hand on my shoulder and leaned in.

"I think you should leave," he said, the worry in his brown eyes running right to my core.

My thoughts returned to what he had said in the elevator about his boss gunning for him, and my pulse quickened. "David, if you're in trouble, I'm not leaving," I said, boots thumping as he hustled me to the lift.

The small man's face was grim. "I can handle this."

I tried to twist from his grip. "Then I'll stay and help you to the car when it's over."

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He glanced at me. "I don't think so, Rachel. But thanks."

The elevator opened. Still protesting, I was ill prepared when David jerked me back. My head came up, and my face went cold. Crap. The lift was full of Weres in various levels of elegance ranging from Armani suits and sophisticated skirt and top combos to jeans and blouses. Even worse, they all had the collected, confident pride of alphas. And they were smiling.

Shit. David had a big problem.

"Please tell me it's your birthday," I said, "and this is a surprise party."

A young Were in a bright red dress was the last to step from the elevator. Tossing her thick length of black hair, she gave me a once-over. Though sure of herself, I could tell by her stance that she wasn't an alpha. This was getting weird. Alphas never got together. They just didn't. Especially without their packs behind them.

"It's not his birthday," the woman said cattily. "But I imagine he's surprised."

David's grip on my arm twitched. "Hello, Karen," he said caustically.

My skin crawled as the Weres ringed us, and I felt my muscles tighten. I thought of the splat gun in my bag, then felt for a ley line, but didn't tap it. David couldn't pay me to leave, now. This looked like a lynching.

"Hi, David," the woman in red said, satisfaction clear in her stance behind the alphas. "You can't imagine how overjoyed I was to find you had started a pack."

His steps quick and confident, David's boss settled in between us and the elevator. The tension in the room ratcheted up a notch, and Karen slinked to stand behind him.

I hadn't known David long, but I'd never seen this mix of anger, pride, and annoyance on him before. There was no fear. David was a loner, and as such, the personal power of an alpha held little sway over him. But there were eight of them, and one of them was his boss.

"This doesn't involve her, sir," David said with a respectful anger. "Let her leave."

David's boss lifted an eyebrow. "Actually, this has nothing to do with you."

My breath caught. Okay, maybe I was the one with the problem. .

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