

wicked

Witch & Curse

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SIMON PULSE

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Part One: Lammas

The Harvesting



LAMMAS

“And the ground refused to give up its natural fruits, but instead yielded unholy and unnatural creatures. The dead walked along with those who had never lived.”

—Simon the Prophet, 8th century

ONE

BARLEY MOON



Fare ye well, Lord of Light
Thou wilt rule on Yuletide Night
Blackfires burn and scythe the Rows
So crieth House of Deveraux

From out thy Vessel, Lady Faire
Cahors Witches take to Aire
Blood drink of Foe and Blood of Friend
Renew the Earthe with Blood again

Mile 76 from Lee's Ferry, the Colorado River, August 1 (Lammas)

Oh, great. A storm. On top of everything else.

Ignoring for the moment the thick, hot words her parents were exchanging at the bow of the inflatable raft, Holly raised her gaze to the shard of sky between the canyon walls. Nickel and copper sunlight sheered her vision, making her eyes hurt. Clouds like decomposing gray fists rumbled, and the canyon wrens fluttered from their hiding places, cooing warnings to one another.

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Behind her, the extremely buff boatman who did these rides every summer for his USC tuition money grunted and sighed. Her parents had pushed the guy beyond his “Hello, my name is Ryan and I’ll be your river guide” manners, and she didn’t blame him. Her mother and father were wearing everybody out—him, her, and Tina, her best friend, who had had the bad luck to be invited on this nightmare vacation. Of course, Tina got invited to everything. Being an only child had its advantages, and both Tina and Holly were onlies.

Tina’s mom had dropped out at the last minute, claiming a problem with her schedule at Marin County General, but Holly wondered if the petite, dark-haired woman had known something was up. That would make sense; Barbara Davis-Chin was Holly’s mom’s best friend, and even grown-up best friends told their girlfriends everything.

Hey, I know the score, Holly thought. *I’ve seen Sex and the City.*

Five days ago, when Holly had gotten home from her horse stable job, it had been obvious something had been going on behind the closed doors of their classically San Franciscan Queen Anne Victorian row house. Her parents’ shouts, cut short by the sound of Holly’s key in the front lock, had practically echoed off

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the white plaster walls. She'd heard the rhythmic sound of a push broom as one of them swept up a mess. Above Holly's head as she stood in the foyer, taking off her jacket, the floorboards of her parents' bedroom creaked with tension.

"Hey, hi, you guys, I'm home," she'd called, but no one had answered. Then after a moment or two, her father had come downstairs, his smile reaching nowhere near his eyes as he said, "Hi, punky. Good day at the stables?"

No one had talked about what had happened. Her parents, Elise and Daniel Cathers, had joined in a conspiracy of polite silence, chilly to each other that night while packing for the trip, with the emotional frost dipping below freezing on the flight to Las Vegas. Thankfully, she'd sat with Tina in another row of the plane, and she and her best friend had had their own room in their suite at the Bellagio.

Her parents had gone out to see Cirque du Soleil, leaving Holly and Tina in their own room to talk about the upcoming senior year and their plans for college—USC for Tina, UC Santa Barbara for Holly. Then the two adults had come back, very late—and drunk, Holly hoped, because she didn't want to think that they would ever speak that way to each other when they were sober. They had flung mean words at each

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other like knives, words designed and honed to hurt. Holly knew it was wishful thinking that her father was not saying *bitch*, but *witch*, even though it had sounded like that through the closed doors of the suite's second bedroom. That was what Tina had heard too.

In the morning Ryan had met the four of them in the Bellagio foyer and driven them to the raft trip launch site. Mom and Dad had barely been civil to each other during the daylong safety training class.

Ryan got the raft into the water and told them where to sit. Then, as if the swirling waters of the Colorado had driven their tempers, the arguing had begun again, and during the day of white-water rafting it had grown steadily worse.

Now Holly and Tina hunched over their oars, paddling according to Ryan's directions and pointedly trying to pretend nothing weird was going on. They wore bright orange life vests and orange helmets, Tina's hanging low over her black hair, which she had dyed aquamarine in honor of the trip. Holly, her own dark hair a mass of damp, crazed ringlets, was crammed beside Tina in the center of the raft, which resembled a kind of pudgy dinghy. Cold water sluiced at them from every direction as the raft roller-coasted between slick black boulders and tree trunks. As chilly as the environment was, it was tropical com-

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pared to her parents' attitude toward each other.

"Dude, what is *wrong* with them?" Tina asked in Holly's ear. "They're going to kill each other. Or us."

"When we get home, adopt me," Holly said miserably.

"We're almost old enough to get married." Tina wagged her eyebrows suggestively. "C'mon, baby, you know you want me." She blew Holly a kiss.

Smiling faintly, Holly sighed and shook her head. "Your mom would love that."

"My mom is a bigger knee-jerk liberal than your whole family put together," Tina retorted. "She'd love to plan our commitment ceremony, *darling*."

Holly grinned and Tina grinned back. The smiles quickly faded, however, as the sound of angry voices rose once again over the rapids' roar.

"—*not* going back early," Holly's father hissed.

"You never told me." That was her mom. "You should have told me . . ."

Ay, Chihuahua, Holly thought. Tension eddied between them, and a fresh wave of anxiety washed through her. Something was basically, fundamentally wrong, and if she got really honest with herself, she knew it had been wrong for over a year.

Ever since I had that nightmare . . .

Her dad broke eye contact first and her mother

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quit the field, two territorial animals both dissatisfied with the outcome of their face-off. They were both good-looking people even though they were in their forties. Dad was tall and lanky, with thick, unruly black hair and very dark brown eyes. Her mom was the odd one out, her hair so blond, it looked fake, her eyes a soft blue that reminded Holly of bridesmaid dresses. Everyone always thought they looked so good together, like TV parents. Few besides Holly knew that their conversations were more like dialogue from a horror movie.

“Okay, hang on,” Ryan interrupted her thoughts—and for a split second, the arguing. “We’re gonna start the Hance Rapids. Remember, stay left.” He looked up at the lowering sky and muttered, “Damn.”

Holly cocked her head up at him. His face was dark and durable, much too leathery for someone who was only twenty-one. *By the time he’s thirty, she thought, he’s going to look like a statue made of beef jerky.*

“Gonna be a storm, huh,” she said, raising her voice to be heard over the rapids and the creaking of the raft’s rubber skin.

He glanced at her. “Yeah. We’ll stop early tonight.” He glanced at her parents. “Tempers are getting kinda short.”

“They’re not usually—” she began, then shut her

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mouth, nodded, and got back to paddling.

White water tumbled ahead like a kettle put on to boil, and she and Tina sat up a little straighter, getting ready for the big, exciting zoom downward. Going down rapids was officially the fun part, the reason they were there. But Holly had had enough. She wanted to go home.

The river currents rushed, threading together and then separating, curling around rocks and boulders and making eddies like potholes in a street. They skidded and slid along, the by-now familiar blend of joy and fear tightening Holly's chest and tickling her spine. "Yee-ha!" she yelled, and Tina took up the cry. They broke into laughter, bellowing "Yee-ha!" over and over in voices loud enough to echo off the canyon walls. Canyon wrens joined in and thunder rumbled overhead, and Holly felt a flash of anger that her parents were too busy being pissed off at each other to share in the fun.

The raft picked up more speed, then more; Holly's stomach lurched and Tina shrieked with fearful delight.

Then the sky rumbled once, twice, and cracked open. Rain fell immediately, huge bucketfuls of it, completely drenching them. It rushed down so hard, it slapped Holly's shoulders painfully. She flailed for her

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yellow raincoat wrapped around her waist, and the boat pitched and bowed as everyone lost track, startled by the downpour.

Ryan yelled, "To your oars!"

Holly's parents snapped to, guiding the boat the way Ryan had taught them. Rain came down like waterfalls; the river waters sluiced to either side of a giant boulder, and Holly remembered rather than heard Ryan's admonition to stay left of it. *Everything around here, stay left.*

The huge granite outcropping towered above them. Its face was jagged and sharp, not rounded with erosion as one would have expected.

"Wow," Tina yelled, taking a moment to gesture at it.

The rain fell even harder, pummeling them, and Holly worked frantically to pull her hood back up over her head as a bracing wind whipped it off. The torrents blinded her. She couldn't see anything.

"Jesus Christ, *duck!*" Ryan screamed.

Holly ducked, peering through the rain.

There was a millisecond where everyone froze, shocked brains registering what was happening. Then they all scrambled as if responding to an air raid in a World War II movie, grabbing their paddles and fighting the river's determination to slam them en masse

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against the huge piece of granite.

“No!” Tina cried as her oar was almost torn from her hands by the force of a wave. She started screaming as the raft dove down at a 45-degree angle. Foaming angry water rushed over the five passengers up to their waists. Tina screamed again and batted futilely at the water as Holly shouted, “What do we do now? What are we supposed to do?”

“Keep calm!” Ryan bellowed. “Left, left, *left!*”

Holly’s oar felt entirely too fragile and slight to make any difference in the trajectory the water was flinging them into; at the same time it was too heavy and unwieldy for her to manipulate.

Then her mother shouted something and Daniel Cathers cried, “No!”

The river was a maelstrom now; everything was gray and cold and unforgiving and treacherous; gray stone and gray water, as the raft was propelled toward the boulder with the force of a catapult.

Holly held on to the paddle. It was useless now, but still she held it, hands frozen around it in terror. Someone, she had no idea who, was shouting her name.

Then Ryan’s voice rang out. “Jump! *Now!*”

His command broke her stupefaction. As she tried to unbuckle her safety straps and jump, the river

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crested over the raft, completely engulfing it. Cold, unforgiving water surrounded her, cresting above her shoulders, her head; she waited for it to recede, but it just kept barreling over her. She panicked, unable to breathe, and began pushing frantically at the restraints. She couldn't remember how to undo them.

I'm going to drown. I'm going to die.

The steel waters thickened, becoming waves of blackness. She couldn't see anything, couldn't feel anything, except the terrible cold. The raft could be tumbling end over end for all she knew. Her mind seized on the image of the huge face of rock; hitting it at this speed would be like falling out of a window and splatting on the street.

Her lungs were too full; after some passage of time she could not measure, they threatened to burst; she understood that she needed to exhale and draw in more oxygen. She fumbled at the belt but she still had no clue how to get free. As her chest throbbed she batted at the water, at her lap and shoulders where the straps were, trying so hard to keep it together, so hard.

I'm gonna die. I'm gonna die.

The ability to reason vanished. She stopped thinking altogether, and instinct took over as she flapped weakly at the restraints, not recalling why she was doing it. She forgot that she had been in a raft with the

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three people she loved most in the world. She forgot that she was a teenager named Holly and that she had hair and eyes and hands and feet.

She was nothing but gray inside and out. The world was a flat fog color and so were her images, thoughts, and emotions. Numb and empty, she drifted in a bottomless well of nothingness, flat-lining, ceasing. She couldn't say it was a pleasant place to be. She couldn't say it was anything.

Though she didn't really know it, she finally exhaled. Eagerly she sucked in brackish river water. It filled her lungs, and her eyes rolled back in her head as her death throes began.

Struggling, wriggling like a hooked fish, her body tried to cough, to expel the suffocating fluid. It was no use; she was as good as dead. Her eyes fluttered shut.

And then, through her lids, she saw the most exquisite shade of blue. It was the color of neon tetras, though she couldn't articulate that. It shimmered like some underwater grace note at the end of a movie; she neither reached toward it nor shrank from it, because her brain didn't register it. It didn't register anything. Oxygen-starved, it was very nearly dead.

The glow glittered, then coalesced. It became a figure, and had any part of Holly's brain still been taking in and processing data, it would have reported the

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sight of a woman in a long-sleeved dress of gray wool and gold trimming, astonishingly beautiful, with curls of black hair mushrooming in the water. Her compassionate gaze was chestnut and ebony as she reached toward Holly.

Run. Flee, escape, don't stop to pack your belongings. Alors, she will perish if you do not go now. Maintenant, a c'est moment la; vite, je vous en prie. . . .

Nightmare, Holly thought fuzzily. Last year. Nightmare. . . .

The figure raised forth her right hand; a leather glove was wrapped around her hand, and on it perched a large gray bird. She hefted the bird through the water, and it moved its wings through the rush torrent, toward Holly.

"We aren't witches!" her father shouted in her memory.

And her mother: "I know what I saw! I know what I saw in Holly's room!"

Go, take her from here; they will find her and kill her . . . je vous en prie . . . je vous en prie, Daniel de Cahors. . . .

"*Je vous en prie,*" the man in the deer's head whispered heartbreakingly.

It was Barley Moon, the time of harvest, and the forest was warm and giving, like a woman. The man

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was staked to a copse of chestnut trees, his chest streaked with his own blood.

The Circle was drawn, the tallow candles set for lighting.

“I am so sorry for him, Maman,” Isabeau whispered to her mother. The lady of the manor was dressed in raven silks, silver threads chasing scarlet throughout, as were the others in the Circle—there were thirteen this night, including her newly widowed mother’s new husband, who was her mother’s dead husband’s brother, named Robert, and the sacrifice, the quaking man in the dead deer’s head, who knew that he would soon die.

The Circle’s beautiful familiar, the hawk Pandion, jingled her bells as she observed from her perch, which had been fashioned from bones of the de Cahorses’ bitterest enemy . . . the Deveraux. She was eager for the kill; she would snatch the man’s soul as it escaped his body, and daintily nibble at its edges until others caught hold of it for their own purposes.

“It is a better death,” Catherine de Cahors insisted, smiling down on her child. She petted Isabeau’s hair with one hand. In the other hand she held the bloody dagger. It was she who had carved the sigils into the man’s chest. Her husband, Robert, had felt compelled to restrain her, reminding her that torture was not a

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part of tonight's rite. It was to be a good, clean execution. "His wagging tongue would have sent him to the stake eventually. He would have burned, a horrible way to die. This way . . ."

They were interrupted by a figure wearing the silver and black livery of Cahors; he raced to the edge of the Circle and dropped to his knees directly before the masked and cloaked Robert. *Robert's height must have given him away*, Isabeau thought.

"The Deveraux . . . the fire," the servant gasped. "They have managed it."

Pandion threw back her head and shrieked in lamentation. The entire Circle looked at one another in shock from behind their animal masks. Several of them sank to their knees in despair.

Isabeau was chilled, within and without. The Deveraux had been searching for the secret of the Black Fire for centuries. Now that they had it . . . what would become of the Cahors? Of anyone who stood in the way of the Deveraux?

Isabeau's mother covered her heart with her arms and cried, "*Alors*, Notre Dame! Protect us this night, our Lady Goddess!"

"This is a dark night," said one of the others. "A night rife with evil. The lowest, when it was to have

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been a joyous Lammas, this man's ripe death adding to the Harvest bounty. . . ."

"We are undone," a cloaked woman keened. "We are doomed."

"Damn you for your cowardice," Robert murmured in a low, dangerous voice. "We are not."

He tore off his mask, grabbed the dagger from his wife, and walked calmly to the sacrifice. Without a moment's hesitation he yanked the man's head back by the hair and cut his throat. Blood spurted, covering those nearby while others darted forward to receive the blessing. Pandion swooped down from her perch, soaring into the gushing heat, the bells on her ankles clattering with eagerness.

Isabeau's mother urged her toward the man's body. "Take the blessing," she told her daughter. "There is wild work ahead, and you must be prepared to do your part."

Isabeau stumbled forward, shutting her eyes, glancing away. Her mother took her chin and firmly turned her face toward the stream of steaming, crimson liquid.

"*Non, non,*" she protested as the blood ran into her mouth. She felt defiled, disgusted.

The gushing blood seemed to fill her vision. . . .

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Holly woke up. As far as she could tell, she lay on the riverbank. The sound of rushing water filled her pounding head; she was shaking violently from head to toe and her teeth were chattering. She tried to move, but couldn't tell if she succeeded. She was completely numb.

“Mmm . . . ,” she managed, struggling to call for her mother.

All she heard, all she knew, was the rushing of the river. And then . . . the flapping of a bird's wings. They sounded enormous, and in her confusion she thought it was diving for her, ready to swoop her up like a tiny, waterlogged mouse.

Her lids flickered up at the sky; a bird did hover against the moon, a startling silhouette.

Then she lost consciousness again. Her coldness faded, replaced by soothing warmth. . . .

The blood is so warm, she thought, drifting. See how it steams in the night air. . . .

Again, the sound of rushing water. Again the deathly chill.

The screech of a bird of prey . . .

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Then once more Holly saw the hot, steaming blood—and something new: a vile, acrid odor that reeked of charnel houses and dungeon terrors. Something very evil, very wrong, very *hungry* crept toward her, unfurling slowly, like fingers of mist seeking her out, sneaking over branch and rock to find her wrist, encircle it, enclose it.

Someone—or something—whispered low and deep and seductively, *“I claim thee, Isabeau Cahors, by night and Barley Moon. Thou art mine.”*

And from the darkness above the circle a massive falcon dove straight for Pandion, its talons and beak flashing and savage. . . .

“No!” Holly cried into the darkness.

A bird’s wings flapped, then were still.

She was shivering with cold; and she was alive.

A brilliant yellow light struck her full force in the face. Holly whimpered as the light moved, bobbing up and down, then lowered as the figure holding it squatted and peered at her.

It was a heavysset woman dressed like a forest ranger. She said, “It’s okay, honey, we’re here now.” Over her shoulder, she yelled, “Found a survivor!”

A ragged cheer rose up, and Holly burst into frightened, desperate tears.

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Seattle, Washington, Lammas

Kari Hardwicke had wrapped herself in a simple, cream-colored robe of lightweight gauze that was totally see-through and that clung everywhere. In her slashed blond hair she had entwined a few wildflowers, and she had bronzed her cheeks and shoulders. Her feet were bare and she had dabbed patchouli oil in all the strategic places.

Spellcasters loved patchouli oil.

Now she curled herself around Jer Deveraux as he brooded silently before her fireplace. He had burst through her door with the storm, fierce and enraged, but he wouldn't tell her what was wrong. He had accepted the glass of cab she offered him and drawn up her leather chair before her fireplace. He sipped, and he fell silent, his dark eyes practically igniting the logs in the fireplace.

Hell hath no fury like Jeraud Deveraux when he's in a temper.

That made her want him all the more. There was something about Jer she couldn't explain. It wasn't simply his air of command, as if he could make one do his slightest bidding merely by raising one eyebrow. Nor was it his sharp wit, or his drive; the pull he had on almost everyone who knew him; the way he fascinated people, both men and women, who would fall to

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discussing him once he had left a room.

It was all that combined with his astonishing looks. His brown-black eyes were set deep into his face beneath dark brown eyebrows. His features were sharply defined, his cheekbones high above hollows shaded by the soft light in the room. Unlike his father and his brother, he was clean shaven; his jaw was sharp and angular, and his lips looked soft. He worked out, and it showed in his broad shoulders, covered for the moment by a black sweater. Like his family members, he wore black nearly all the time, adding to his allure of danger and sensuality.

But it's even more that that, Kari thought now. He's . . . how does the old song go?

A magic man.

Heavy rain rattled the dormer window of her funky student apartment; the storm matched his mood, but she was determined to shake him out of it. It was Lammastide, the witches' harvest night, and she knew he would leave in a while to go perform some kind of ritual with Eli, his brother, and Michael, his father. They were "observant," as he liked to phrase it . . . and she wanted him to take her with him tonight. She wanted to know what they did in secret. Their rites, their spells . . . all of it.

The Deveraux men are warlocks, she thought.

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But use that word in front of Jer, and he would deny it.

In the early days of their relationship—a year ago, now, how it had flown!—he had been eager to bring her into the fold. Back then, she was his teaching assistant, and he, a newbie undergrad; after the first time they'd gone to bed together, he had told her he would share his “mysteries” with her. He had hinted about an ancient family Book of Spells.

She was thrilled. She was getting her PhD in folklore, a path she had chosen so that she could investigate magic and shamanism with the full resources of the university behind her. The University of Washington at Seattle treated Native American belief systems with the utmost respect; thus, her field of endeavor was encouraged, and never challenged.

But it wasn't simply Northwestern magic that interested her. She was fascinated by European magic . . . especially black magic. And though, like being a bona fide warlock he denied that his family practiced the Dark Art, she was fairly certain they spent more time in the shadows than they did in the diffuse light of Wicca. Yet she maintained the fiction that he practiced one of the Wicca traditions; it was what he had told her.

“I've dressed like the Barley Maid,” she said now,

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moving between him and the fireplace and stretching out her arms to him. He looked startled and—she hated to admit it—irritated by her interruption of his reverie.

Jer, you loved me once, she thought anxiously. You were thrilled that a glamorous “older woman” graduate student wanted you, a mere freshman. What did I do wrong?

I want you to come back to me. Not just treading water with me, but back into the deluge, the flood that was all that passion you poured into me. We made such waves . . . we drowned in such amazing ecstasy. . . .

“I’ve read that if we make love tonight, whatever spells we cast will be extra powerful.” She smiled lustily.

“That’s true,” he said, giving her that much. His smile was gentle, tinged with both sadness and great wisdom. “And you’ve cast quite a spell on me, Kari. You’re beautiful.”

She let herself believe he was sincere, and he rose from his chair, scooped her up in his arms, and carried her into her bedroom.