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JIM BUTCHER

**STORM
FRONT**

A NOVEL OF THE DRESDEN FILES



A ROC BOOK

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For Debbie Chester, who taught me everything I really needed to know about writing. And for my father, who taught me everything I really needed to know about living. I miss you, Dad.

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And thank you, Shannon, for too many things to list. You're my angel. One day, I will learn to turn my socks right side out before throwing them on the bedroom floor.

Chapter

One

I heard the mailman approach my office door, half an hour earlier than usual. He didn't sound right. His footsteps fell more heavily, jauntily, and he whistled. A new guy. He whistled his way to my office door, then fell silent for a moment. Then he laughed.

Then he knocked.

I winced. My mail comes through the mail slot unless it's registered. I get a really limited selection of registered mail, and it's never good news. I got up out of my office chair and opened the door.

The new mailman, who looked like a basketball with arms and legs and a sunburned, balding head, was chuckling at the sign on the door glass. He glanced at me and hooked a thumb toward the sign. "You're kidding, right?"

I read the sign (people change it occasionally), and shook my head. "No, I'm serious. Can I have my mail, please?"

"So, uh. Like parties, shows, stuff like that?" He looked past me, as though he expected to see a white tiger, or possibly some skimpily clad assistants prancing around my one-room office.

I sighed, not in the mood to get mocked again, and reached for the mail he held in his hand. "No, not like that. I don't do parties."

He held on to it, his head tilted curiously. “So what? Some kinda fortune-teller? Cards and crystal balls and things?”

“No,” I told him. “I’m not a psychic.” I tugged at the mail.

He held on to it. “What are you, then?”

“What’s the sign on the door say?”

“It says ‘Harry Dresden. Wizard.’ ”

“That’s me,” I confirmed.

“An actual wizard?” he asked, grinning, as though I should let him in on the joke. “Spells and potions? Demons and incantations? Subtle and quick to anger?”

“Not so subtle.” I jerked the mail out of his hand and looked pointedly at his clipboard. “Can I sign for my mail please?”

The new mailman’s grin vanished, replaced with a scowl. He passed over the clipboard to let me sign for the mail (another late notice from my landlord), and said, “You’re a nut. That’s what you are.” He took his clipboard back, and said, “You have a nice day, sir.”

I watched him go.

“Typical,” I muttered, and shut the door.

My name is Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden. Conjure by it at your own risk. I’m a wizard. I work out of an office in midtown Chicago. As far as I know, I’m the only openly practicing professional wizard in the country. You can find me in the yellow pages, under “Wizards.” Believe it or not, I’m the only one there. My ad looks like this:

HARRY DRESDEN—WIZARD

LOST ITEMS FOUND. PARANORMAL INVESTIGATIONS.

CONSULTING. ADVICE. REASONABLE RATES.

NO LOVE POTIONS, ENDLESS PURSES, PARTIES,

OR OTHER ENTERTAINMENT.

You'd be surprised how many people call just to ask me if I'm serious. But then, if you'd seen the things I'd seen, if you knew half of what I knew, you'd wonder how anyone could *not* think I was serious.

The end of the twentieth century and the dawn of the new millennium had seen something of a renaissance in the public awareness of the paranormal. Psychics, haunts, vampires—you name it. People still didn't take them seriously, but all the things Science had promised us hadn't come to pass. Disease was still a problem. Starvation was still a problem. Violence and crime and war were still problems. In spite of the advance of technology, things just hadn't changed the way everyone had hoped and thought they would.

Science, the largest religion of the twentieth century, had become somewhat tarnished by images of exploding space shuttles, crack babies, and a generation of complacent Americans who had allowed the television to raise their children. People were looking for something—I think they just didn't know what. And even though they were once again starting to open their eyes to the world of magic and the arcane that had been with them all the while, they still thought I must be some kind of joke.

Anyway, it had been a slow month. A slow pair of months, actually. My rent from February didn't get paid until the tenth of March, and it was looking like it might be even longer until I got caught up for this month.

My only job had been the previous week, when I'd gone down to Branson, Missouri, to investigate a country singer's possibly haunted house. It hadn't been. My client hadn't been happy with that answer, and had been even less happy when I suggested he lay off of any intoxicating substances and try to get some exercise and sleep, and see if that didn't help things

more than an exorcism. I'd gotten travel expenses plus an hour's pay, and gone away feeling I had done the honest, righteous, and impractical thing. I heard later that he'd hired a shyster psychic to come in and perform a ceremony with a lot of incense and black lights. Some people.

I finished up my paperback and tossed it into the DONE box. There was a pile of read and discarded paperbacks in a cardboard box on one side of my desk, the spines bent and the pages mangled. I'm terribly hard on books. I was eyeing the pile of unread books, considering which to start next, given that I had no real work to do, when my phone rang.

I stared at it in a somewhat surly fashion. We wizards are terrific at brooding. After the third ring, when I thought I wouldn't sound a little too eager, I picked up the receiver and said, "Dresden."

"Oh. Is this, um, Harry Dresden? The, ah, wizard?" Her tone was apologetic, as though she were terribly afraid she would be insulting me.

No, I thought. It's Harry Dresden the, ah, lizard. Harry the wizard is one door down.

It is the prerogative of wizards to be grumpy. It is not, however, the prerogative of freelance consultants who are late on their rent, so instead of saying something smart, I told the woman on the phone, "Yes, ma'am. How can I help you today?"

"I, um," she said. "I'm not sure. I've lost something, and I think maybe you could help me."

"Finding lost articles is a specialty," I said. "What would I be looking for?"

There was a nervous pause. "My husband," she said. She had a voice that was a little hoarse, like that of a cheerleader who'd been working a long tournament, but had enough weight of years in it to place her as an adult.

My eyebrows went up. "Ma'am, I'm not really a missing-persons specialist. Have you contacted the police or a private investigator?"

"No," she said, quickly. "No, they can't. That is, I haven't. Oh dear, this is all so complicated. Not something someone can talk about on the phone. I'm sorry to have taken up your time, Mr. Dresden."

"Hold on now," I said quickly. "I'm sorry, you didn't tell me your name."

There was that nervous pause again, as though she were checking a sheet of written notes before answering. "Call me Monica."

People who know diddly about wizards don't like to give us their names. They're convinced that if they give a wizard their name from their own lips it could be used against them. To be fair, they're right.

I had to be as polite and harmless as I could. She was about to hang up out of pure indecision, and I needed the job. I could probably turn hubby up, if I worked at it.

"Okay, Monica," I told her, trying to sound as melodious and friendly as I could. "If you feel your situation is of a sensitive nature, maybe you could come by my office and talk about it. If it turns out that I can help you best, I will, and if not, then I can direct you to someone I think can help you better." I gritted my teeth and pretended I was smiling. "No charge."

It must have been the no charge that did it. She agreed to come right out to the office, and told me that she would be there in an hour. That put her estimated arrival at about two-thirty. Plenty of time to go out and get some lunch, then get back to the office to meet her.

The phone rang again almost the instant I put it down,

making me jump. I peered at it. I don't trust electronics. Anything manufactured after the forties is suspect—and doesn't seem to have much liking for me. You name it: cars, radios, telephones, TVs, VCRs—none of them seem to behave well for me. I don't even like to use automatic pencils.

I answered the phone with the same false cheer I had summoned up for Monica Husband-Missing. "This is Dresden, may I help you?"

"Harry, I need you at the Madison in the next ten minutes. Can you be there?" The voice on the other end of the line was also a woman's, cool, brisk, businesslike.

"Why, Lieutenant Murphy," I gushed, overflowing with saccharine, "it's good to hear from you, too. It's been so long. Oh, they're fine, fine. And your family?"

"Save it, Harry. I've got a couple of bodies here, and I need you to take a look around."

I sobered immediately. Karrin Murphy was the director of Special Investigations out of downtown Chicago, a *de facto* appointee of the Police Commissioner to investigate any crimes dubbed *unusual*. Vampire attacks, troll maraudings, and faery abductions of children didn't fit in very neatly on a police report—but at the same time, people got attacked, infants got stolen, property was damaged or destroyed. And someone had to look into it.

In Chicago, or pretty much anywhere in Chicagoland, that person was Karrin Murphy. I was her library of the supernatural on legs, and a paid consultant for the police department. But two bodies? Two deaths by means unknown? I hadn't handled anything like that for her before.

"Where are you?" I asked her.

"Madison Hotel on Tenth, seventh floor."

"That's only a fifteen-minute walk from my office," I said.

“So you can be here in fifteen minutes. Good.”

“Um,” I said. I looked at the clock. Monica No-Last-Name would be here in a little more than forty-five minutes. “I’ve sort of got an appointment.”

“Dresden, I’ve sort of got a pair of corpses with no leads and no suspects, and a killer walking around loose. Your appointment can wait.”

My temper flared. It does that occasionally. “It can’t, actually,” I said. “But I’ll tell you what. I’ll stroll on over and take a look around, and be back here in time for it.”

“Have you had lunch yet?” she asked.

“What?”

She repeated the question.

“No,” I said.

“Don’t.” There was a pause, and when she spoke again, there was a sort of greenish tone to her words. “It’s bad.”

“How bad are we talking here, Murph?”

Her voice softened, and that scared me more than any images of gore or violent death could have. Murphy was the original tough girl, and she prided herself on never showing weakness. “It’s bad, Harry. Please don’t take too long. Special Crimes is itching to get their fingers on this one, and I know you don’t like people to touch the scene before you can look around.”

“I’m on the way,” I told her, already standing and pulling on my jacket.

“Seventh floor,” she reminded me. “See you there.”

“Okay.”

I turned off the lights to my office, went out the door, and locked up behind me, frowning. I wasn’t sure how long it was going to take to investigate Murphy’s scene, and I didn’t want to miss out on speaking with Monica Ask-Me-No-Questions.

So I opened the door again, got out a piece of paper and a thumbtack, and wrote:

Out briefly. Back for appointment at 2:30. Dresden

That done, I started down the stairs. I rarely use the elevator, even though I'm on the fifth floor. Like I said, I don't trust machines. They're always breaking down on me just when I need them.

Besides which. If I were someone in this town using magic to kill people two at a time, and I didn't want to get caught, I'd make sure that I removed the only practicing wizard the police department kept on retainer. I liked my odds on the stairwell a lot better than I did in the cramped confines of the elevator.

Paranoid? Probably. But just because you're paranoid doesn't mean that there isn't an invisible demon about to eat your face.

Chapter

Two

Karrin Murphy was waiting for me outside the Madison. Karrin and I are a study in contrasts. Where I am tall and lean, she's short and stocky. Where I have dark hair and dark eyes, she's got Shirley Temple blond locks and baby blues. Where my features are all lean and angular, with a hawkish nose and a sharp chin, hers are round and smooth, with the kind of cute nose you'd expect on a cheerleader.

It was cool and windy, like it usually is in March, and she wore a long coat that covered her pantsuit. Murphy never wore dresses, though I suspected she'd have muscular, well-shaped legs, like a gymnast. She was built for function, and had a pair of trophies in her office from aikido tournaments to prove it. Her hair was cut at shoulder length and whipped out wildly in the spring wind. She wasn't wearing earrings, and her makeup was of sufficient quality and quantity that it was tough to tell she had on any at all. She looked more like a favorite aunt or a cheerful mother than a hard-bitten homicide detective.

"Don't you have any other jackets, Dresden?" she asked, as I came within hailing distance. There were several police cars parked illegally in front of the building. She glanced at my eyes for a half second and then away, quickly. I had to give her credit. It was more than most people did. It wasn't really dangerous unless you did it for several seconds, but I was used to

anyone who knew I was a wizard making it a point not to glance at my face.

I looked down at my black canvas duster, with its heavy mantling and waterproof lining and sleeves actually long enough for my arms. “What’s wrong with this one?”

“It belongs on the set of *El Dorado*.”

“And?”

She snorted, an indelicate sound from so small a woman, and spun on her heel to walk toward the hotel’s front doors.

I caught up and walked a little ahead of her.

She sped her pace. So did I. We raced one another toward the front door, with increasing speed, through the puddles left over from last night’s rain.

My legs were longer; I got there first. I opened the door for her and gallantly gestured for her to go in. It was an old contest of ours. Maybe my values are outdated, but I come from an old school of thought. I think that men ought to treat women like something other than just shorter, weaker men with breasts. Try and convict me if I’m a bad person for thinking so. I enjoy treating a woman like a lady, opening doors for her, paying for shared meals, giving flowers—all that sort of thing.

It irritates the hell out of Murphy, who had to fight and claw and play dirty with the hairiest men in Chicago to get as far as she has. She glared up at me while I stood there holding open the door, but there was a reassurance about the glare, a relaxation. She took an odd sort of comfort in our ritual, annoying as she usually found it.

How bad was it up on the seventh floor, anyway?

We rode the elevator in a sudden silence. We knew one another well enough, by this time, that the silences were not uncomfortable. I had a good sense of Murphy, an instinctual

grasp for her moods and patterns of thought—something I develop whenever I'm around someone for any length of time. Whether it's a natural talent or a supernatural one I don't know.

My instincts told me that Murphy was tense, stretched as tight as piano wire. She kept it off her face, but there was something about the set of her shoulders and neck, the stiffness of her back, that made me aware of it.

Or maybe I was just projecting it onto her. The confines of the elevator made me a bit nervous. I licked my lips and looked around the interior of the car. My shadow and Murphy's fell on the floor, and almost looked as though they were sprawled there. There was something about it that bothered me, a nagging little instinct that I blew off as a case of nerves. Steady, Harry.

She let out a harsh breath just as the elevator slowed, then sucked in another one before the doors could open, as though she were planning on holding it for as long as we were on the floor and breathing only when she got back in the elevator again.

Blood smells a certain way, a kind of sticky, almost metallic odor, and the air was full of it when the elevator doors opened. My stomach quailed a little bit, but I swallowed manfully and followed Murphy out of the elevator and down the hall past a couple of uniform cops, who recognized me and waved me past without asking to see the little laminated card the city had given me. Granted, even in a big-city department like Chicago P.D., they didn't exactly call in a horde of consultants (I went down in the paperwork as a psychic consultant, I think), but still. Unprofessional of the boys in blue.

Murphy preceded me into the room. The smell of blood grew thicker, but there wasn't anything gruesome behind door

number one. The outer room of the suite looked like some kind of a sitting room done in rich tones of red and gold, like a set from an old movie in the thirties—expensive-looking, but somehow faux, nonetheless. Dark, rich leather covered the chairs, and my feet sank into the thick, rust-colored shag of the carpet. The velvet velour curtains had been drawn, and though the lights were all on, the place still seemed a little too dark, a little too sensual in its textures and colors. It wasn't the kind of room where you sit and read a book. Voices came from a doorway to my right.

"Wait here a minute," Murphy told me. Then she went through the door to the right of the entryway and into what I supposed was the bedroom of the suite.

I wandered around the sitting room with my eyes mostly closed, noting things. Leather couch. Two leather chairs. Stereo and television in a black glossy entertainment center. Champagne bottle warming in a stand holding a brimming tub of what had been ice the night before, with two empty glasses set beside it. There was a red rose petal on the floor, clashing with the carpeting (but then, in that room, what didn't?).

A bit to one side, under the skirt of one of the leather recliners, was a little piece of satiny cloth. I bent at the waist and lifted the skirt with one hand, careful not to touch anything. A pair of black satin panties, a tiny triangle with lace coming off the points, lay there, one strap snapped as though the thong had simply been torn off. Kinky.

The stereo system was state of the art, though not an expensive brand. I took a pencil from my pocket and pushed the PLAY button with the eraser. Gentle, sensual music filled the room, a low bass, a driving drumbeat, wordless vocals, the heavy breathing of a woman as background.

The music continued for a few seconds more, and then it began to skip over a section about two seconds long, repeating it over and over again.

I grimaced. Like I said, I have this effect on machinery. It has something to do with being a wizard, with working with magical forces. The more delicate and modern the machine is, the more likely it is that something will go wrong if I get close enough to it. I can kill a copier at fifty paces.

"The love suite," came a man's voice, drawing the word *love* out into *luuuuuuuuv*. "What do you think, Mister Man?"

"Hello, Detective Carmichael," I said, without turning around. Carmichael's rather light, nasal voice had a distinctive quality. He was Murphy's partner and the resident skeptic, convinced that I was nothing more than a charlatan, scamming the city out of its hard-earned money. "Were you saving the panties to take home yourself, or did you just overlook them?" I turned and looked at him. He was short and overweight and balding, with beady, bloodshot eyes and a weak chin. His jacket was rumpled, and there were food stains on his tie, all of which served to conceal a razor intellect. He was a sharp cop, and absolutely ruthless at tracking down killers.

He walked over to the chair and looked down. "Not bad, Sherlock," he said. "But that's just foreplay. Wait'll you see the main attraction. I'll have a bucket waiting for you." He turned and killed the malfunctioning CD player with a jab from the eraser end of his own pencil.

I widened my eyes at him, to let him know how terrified I was, then walked past him and into the bedroom. And regretted it. I looked, noted details mechanically, and quietly shut the door on the part of my head that had started screaming the second I entered the room.

They must have died sometime the night before, as rigor

mortis had already set in. They were on the bed; she was astride him, body leaned back, back bowed like a dancer's, the curves of her breasts making a lovely outline. He stretched beneath her, a lean and powerfully built man, arms reaching out and grasping at the satin sheets, gathering them in his fists. Had it been an erotic photograph, it would have made a striking tableau.

Except that the lovers' rib cages on the upper left side of their torsos had expanded outward, through their skin, the ribs jabbing out like ragged, snapped knives. Arterial blood had sprayed out of their bodies, all the way to the mirror on the ceiling, along with pulped, gelatinous masses of flesh that had to be what remained of their hearts. Standing over them, I could see into the upper cavity of the bodies. I noted the now greyish lining around the motionless left lungs and the edges of the ribs, which apparently were forced outward and snapped by some force within.

It definitely cut down on the erotic potential.

The bed was in the middle of the room, giving it a subtle emphasis. The bedroom followed the decor of the sitting room—a lot of red, a lot of plush fabrics, a little over the top unless viewed in candlelight. There were indeed candles in holders on the wall, now burned down to the nubs and extinguished.

I stepped closer to the bed and walked around it. The carpet squelched as I did. The little screaming part of my brain, safely locked up behind doors of self-control and strict training, continued gibbering. I tried to ignore it. Really I did. But if I didn't get out of that room in a hurry, I was going to start crying like a little girl.

So I took in the details fast. The woman was in her twenties, in fabulous condition. At least I thought she had been. It

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