

THE  
GOOD,  
THE  
BAD,  
AND THE  
UNDEAD

KIM  
HARRISON

*To the man who knows caffeine comes first, chocolate comes second, romance comes third—and when they ought to be reversed.*

One

I hitched the canvas strap holding the watering canister higher up on my shoulder and stretched to get the nozzle into the hanging plant. Sunlight streamed in, warm through my blue institutional jumpsuit. Past the narrow plate-glass windows was a small courtyard surrounded by VIP offices. Squinting from the sun, I squeezed the handle of the watering hose, and the barest hint of water hissed through.

There was a burst of clattering computer keys, and I moved to the next plant down. Phone conversation filtered in from the office past the reception desk, accompanied by a belly laugh that sounded like the bark of a dog. Weres. The higher up in the pack they were, the more human looking they managed, but you could always tell when they laughed.

I glanced down the row of hanging plants before the windows to the freestanding fish

tank behind the receptionist's desk. Yup. Cream-colored fins. Black spot on right side. This was the one. Mr. Ray raised koi, showing them in Cincinnati's annual fish show. Last year's winner was always displayed in his outer office, but now there were two fish, and the Howlers' mascot was missing. Mr. Ray was a Den boy, a rival of Cincinnati's all-Inderland baseball team. It didn't take much to put two and two together and get stolen fish.

"So," the cheerful woman behind the desk said as she stood to drop a ream of paper into the printer's hopper. "Mark is on vacation? He didn't tell me."

I nodded, not looking at the secretary dressed in her snappy cream-colored business suit as I dragged my watering equipment down another three feet. Mark was taking a short vacation in the stairwell of the building he had been servicing before this one. Knocked out with a short-term sleepy-time potion. "Yes, ma'am," I added, raising my voice and adding a slight lisp. "He told me what plants to water, though." I curled my red manicured nails under my palms before she spotted them. They didn't go with the working plant-girl image. I should have thought of that earlier. "All the ones on this floor, and then the arboretum on the roof."

The woman smiled to show me her slightly larger teeth. She was a Were, and fairly high up in the office pack by her amount of polish. And Mr. Ray wouldn't have a dog for a secretary when he could pay a high enough salary for a bitch. A faint scent of musk came from her, not unpleasant. "Did Mark tell you about the service elevator at the back of the building?" she said helpfully. "It's easier than lugging that cart up all those stairs."

"No, ma'am," I said, pulling the ugly cap with the plant-man logo on it tighter to my head. "I think he's making everything just hard enough that I don't try to take his territory." Pulse quickening, I pushed Mark's cart with its pruning shears, fertilizer pellets, and watering system farther down the line. I had known of the elevator, along with the placement of the six emergency exits, the pulls for the fire alarm, and where they kept the doughnuts.

“Men,” she said, rolling her eyes as she sat before her screen again. “Don’t they realize that if we wanted to rule the world, we could?”

I gave her a noncommittal nod and squirted a tiny amount of water into the next plant. I kinda thought we already did.

A tight hum rose over the whirl of the printer and the faint office chatter. It was Jenks, my partner, and he was clearly in a bad mood as he flew out of the boss’s back office and to me. His dragonfly wings were bright red in agitation, and pixy dust sifted from him to make temporary sunbeams. “I’m done with the plants in there,” he said loudly as he landed on the rim of the hanging pot in front of me. He put his hands on his hips to look like a middle-age Peter Pan grown up to be a trashman in his little blue jumpsuit. His wife had even sewn him a matching cap. “All they need is water. Can I help you out here with anything, or can I go back and sleep in the truck?” he added acerbically.

I took the watering canister off me, setting it down to unscrew the top. “I could use a fertilizer pellet,” I prompted, wondering what his problem was.

Grumbling, he flew to the cart and started rummaging. Green twist ties, stakes, and used pH test strips flew everywhere. “Got one,” he said, coming up with a white pellet as large as his head. He dropped it in the canister and it fizzed. It wasn’t a fertilizer pellet but an oxygenator and slime-coat promoter. What’s the point of stealing a fish if it dies in transport?

“Oh my God, Rachel,” Jenks whispered as he landed on my shoulder “It’s polyester. I’m wearing polyester!”

My tension eased as I realized where his bad mood came from. “It’ll be okay.”

“I’m breaking out!” he said, scratching vigorously under his collar. “I can’t wear

polyester. Pixies are allergic to polyester. Look. See?” He tilted his head so his blond hair shifted from his neck, but he was too close to focus on. “Welts. And it stinks. I can smell the oil. I’m wearing dead dinosaur. I can’t wear a dead animal. It’s barbaric, Rache,” he pleaded.

“Jenks?” I screwed the cap lightly back onto the canister and hung it over my shoulder, pushing Jenks from me in the process. “I’m wearing the same thing. Suck it up.”

“But it stinks!”

I eyed him hovering before me. “Prune something,” I said through gritted teeth.

He flipped me off with both hands, hovering backward as he went. Whatever. Patting my back pocket of the vile blue jumpsuit, I found my snippers. While Miss Office Professional typed a letter, I snapped open a step stool and began to clip leaves off the hanging plant beside her desk. Jenks started to help, and after a few moments I breathed, “Are we set in there?”

He nodded, his eyes on the open door to Mr. Ray’s office. “The next time he checks his mail, the entire Internet security system is gonna trip. It will take five minutes to fix if she knows what she’s doing, four hours if she doesn’t.”

“I only need five minutes,” I said, starting to sweat in the sun coming in the window. It smelled like a garden in there, a garden with a wet dog panting on the cool tile.

My pulse increased, and I moved down another plant. I was behind the desk, and the woman stiffened. I had invaded her territory, but she had to put up with it. I was the water girl. Hoping she attributed my rising tension to being so close to her, I kept working. My one hand rested on the lid of the watering canister. One twist and it would be off.

“Vanessa!” came an irate shout from the back office.

“Here we go,” Jenks said, flying up to the ceiling and the security cameras.

I turned to see an irate man, clearly a Were by his slight size and build, hanging halfway out of the back office. “It did it again,” he said, his face red and his thick hands gripping the archway. “I hate these things. What was wrong with paper? I like paper.”

A professional smile wreathed the secretary’s face. “Mr. Ray, you yelled at it again, didn’t you? I told you, computers are like women. If you shout at them or ask them to do too many things at once, they shut down and you won’t even get a sniff.”

He growled an answer and disappeared into his office, unaware or ignoring that she had just threatened him. My pulse leapt, and I moved the stool right beside the tank.

Vanessa sighed. “God save him,” she muttered as she got up. “That man could break his balls with his tongue.” Giving me an exasperated look, she went into the back office, her heels thumping. “Don’t touch anything,” she said loudly. “I’m coming.”

I took a quick breath. “Cameras?” I breathed.

Jenks dropped down to me. “Ten minute loop. You’re clear.”

He flew to the main door, perching himself on the molding above the lintel, to hang over and watch the exterior hallway. His wings blurred to nothing and he gave me a tiny thumbs-up.

My skin tightened in anticipation. I took off the fish tank lid, then pulled the green fishnet from an inner pocket of the jumpsuit. Standing atop the step stool, I pushed my sleeve to my elbow and plunged the net into the water. Immediately both fish darted to the back.

“Rachel!” Jenks hissed, suddenly at my ear. “She’s good. She’s halfway there.”

“Just watch the door, Jenks,” I said, lip between my teeth. *How long could it take to catch a fish?* I pushed a rock over to get to the fish hiding behind it. They darted to the front.

The phone started ringing, a soft hum. “Jenks, will you get that?” I said calmly as I angled the net, trapping them in the corner. “Got you now ...”

Jenks zipped back from the door, landing feet first on the glowing button. “Mr. Ray’s office. Hold please,” he said in a high falsetto.

“Crap,” I swore as the fish wiggled, slipping past the green net. “Come on, I’m just trying to get you home, you slimy finned thing,” I coaxed through gritted teeth. “Almost ... almost ...” It was between the net and the glass. If it would just hold still ...

“Hey!” a heavy voice said from the hall.

Adrenaline jerked my head up. A small man with a trim beard and a folder of papers was standing in the hallway leading to the other offices. “What are you doing?” he asked belligerently.

I glanced at the tank with my arm in it. My net was empty. The fish had slipped past it. “Um, I dropped my scissors?” I said.

From Mr. Ray’s office on my other side came a thump of heels and Vanessa’s gasp. “Mr. Ray!”

*Damn. So much for the easy way.* “Plan B, Jenks,” I said, grunting as I grabbed the top of the tank and pulled.

In the other room, Vanessa screamed as the tank tipped and twenty-five gallons of icky

fish water cascaded over her desk. Mr. Ray appeared beside her. I lurched off the stool, soaked from the waist down. No one moved, shocked, and I scanned the floor. “Gotcha!” I cried, scrabbling for the right fish.

“She’s after the fish!” the small man shouted as more people came in from the hallway. “Get her!”

“Go!” Jenks shrilled. “I’ll keep them off you.”

Panting, I followed the fish in a hunched, scrabbling walk, trying to grab it without hurting it. It wiggled and squirmed, and my breath exploded from me as I finally got my fingers around it. I looked up as I dropped it into the canister and screwed the lid on tight.

Jenks was a firefly from hell as he darted from Were to Were, brandishing pencils and throwing them at sensitive parts. A four-inch pixy was holding three Weres at bay. I wasn’t surprised. Mr. Ray was content to watch until he realized I had one of his fish. “What the hell are you doing with my fish?” he demanded, his face red with anger.

“Leaving,” I said. He came at me, his thick hands reaching. I obligingly took one of them, jerking him forward and into my foot. He staggered back, clutching his stomach.

“Quit playing with those dogs!” I cried at Jenks, looking for a way out. “We have to go.”

Picking up Vanessa’s monitor, I threw it at the plate-glass window. I’d wanted to do that with Ivy’s for a long time. It shattered in a satisfying crash, the screen looking odd on the grass. Weres poured into the room, angry and giving off musk. Snatching the canister, I dove through the window. “After her!” someone shouted.

My shoulders hit manicured grass and I rolled to my feet.

“Up!” Jenks said by my ear. “Over there.”

He darted across the small enclosed courtyard. I followed, looping the heavy canister to hang across my back. Hands free, I climbed the trellis. Thorns pierced my skin, ignored.

My breath came in a quick pant as I reached the top. The snapping of branches said they were following. Hauling myself over the lip of the flat-topped, tar-and-pebble roof, I took off running. The wind was hot up here, and the skyline of Cincinnati spread out before me.

“Jump!” Jenks shouted as I reached the edge.

I trusted Jenks. Arms flailing and feet still going, I ran right off the roof.

Adrenaline surged as my stomach dropped. It was a parking lot! He sent me off the roof to land in a parking lot!

“I don’t have wings, Jenks!” I screamed. Teeth gritted, I flexed my knees.

Pain exploded as I hit the pavement. I fell forward, scraping my palms. The canister of fish clanged and fell off as the strap broke. I rolled to absorb the impact.

The metal canister spun away, and still gasping from the hurt, I staggered after it, fingers brushing it as it rolled under a car. Swearing, I dropped flat on the pavement, stretching for it.

“There she is!” came a shout.

There was a ping from the car above me, then another. The pavement beside my arm suddenly had a hole in it, and sharp tingles of shrapnel peppered me. They were shooting at me?

Grunting, I wiggled under the car and pulled the canister out. Hunched over the fish, I backed up. “Hey!” I shouted, tossing the hair from my eyes. “What the hell are you doing? It’s just a fish! And it isn’t even yours!”

The trio of Weres on the roof stared at me. One hefted a weapon to his eye.

I turned and started running. This was not worth five hundred dollars anymore. Five thousand, maybe. *Next time*, I vowed as I pounded after Jenks, *I’d find out the particulars before I charge my standard fee.*

“This way!” Jenks shrilled. Bits of pavement were ricocheting up to hit me, echoing the pings. The lot wasn’t gated, and as my muscles trembled from adrenaline, I ran across the street and into the pedestrian traffic. Heart pounding, I slowed to look behind me to see them silhouetted against the skyline. They hadn’t jumped. They didn’t need to. I had left blood all over that trellis. Still, I didn’t think they would track me. It wasn’t their fish; it was the Howlers’. And Cincinnati’s all Inderland baseball team was going to pay my rent.

My lungs heaved as I tried to match the pace of the people around me. The sun was hot, and I was sweating inside my polyester sack. Jenks was probably checking my back, so I dropped into an alley to change. Setting the fish down, I let my head thump back into the cool wall of the building. I’d done it. Rent was made for yet another month.

Reaching up, I yanked the disguise amulet from around my neck. Immediately I felt better, as the illusion of a dark-completed, brown-haired, big-nosed woman vanished, revealing my frizzy, shoulder-length red hair and pale skin. I glanced at my scraped palms, rubbing them together gingerly. I could have brought a pain amulet, but I had wanted as few charms as possible on me in case I was caught and my “intent to steal” turned into “intent to steal and do bodily harm.” One I could dodge, the other I’d have to answer to. I was a runner; I knew the law.

While people passed at the head of the alley, I stripped off the damp coveralls and stuffed it into the Dumpster. It was a vast improvement, and I bent to unroll the hem of my leather pants down over my black boots. Straightening, I eyed the new scrape mark in my pants, twisting to see all the damage. Ivy's leather conditioner would help, but pavement and leather didn't mesh well. Better the pants scraped than me, though, which was why I wore them.

The September air felt good in the shade as I tucked in my black halter top and picked up the canister. Feeling more myself, I stepped into the sun, dropping my cap on a passing kid's head. He looked at it, then smiled, giving me a shy wave as his mother bent to ask him where he had gotten it. At peace with the world, I walked down the sidewalk, boot heels clunking as I fluffed my hair and headed for Fountain Square and my ride. I had left my shades there this morning, and if I was lucky, they'd still be there. God help me, but I liked being independent.

It had been nearly three months since I had snapped under the crap assignments my old boss at Inderland Security had been giving me. Feeling used and grossly unappreciated, I had broken the unwritten rule and quit the I.S. to start my own agency. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, and surviving the subsequent death threat when I couldn't pay the bribe to break my contract had been an eye opener. I wouldn't have made it if not for Ivy and Jenks.

Oddly enough, now that I was finally starting to make a name for myself, it was getting harder, not easier. True, I was putting my degree to work, stirring spells I used to buy and some I had never been able to afford. But money was a real problem. It wasn't that I couldn't get the jobs; it was that the money didn't seem to stay in the cookie jar atop the fridge very long.

What I made from proving a Werefox had been slipped some bane by a rival den had gone to renewing my witch license; the I.S. used to pay for that. I recovered a stolen familiar for a warlock and spent it on the monthly rider on my health insurance. I hadn't