

LOVE HAS NEVER BEEN
SO DEADLY.



REBEL WITCH

THE CRIMSON MOTH: BOOK TWO

KRISTEN
CICCARELLI

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



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WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK



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FOR THE BRAVE ONES

WHO LIGHT THE WAY

PART ONE

In the beginning, there was darkness. Until the Seven Sisters laughed and a world burst into being. The sisters walked its waves and carved its shorelines. They breathed life into all things and bound the world together with love, goodness, and beauty.

But they couldn't stay forever. Before moving on, they chose a select few to watch over the world in their absence. To help these guardians love and protect their creation, the Seven Sisters gave them a gift.

The gift of magic.

And then, like a flame extinguished, they vanished.

—CREATION MYTH FROM THE CULT OF THE ANCIENTS

ONE

GIDEON

GIDEON TUGGED AT THE jacket of his stolen uniform. The forest green fabric was stiff, as if it hadn't been broken in.

The poor guard he'd taken it from was currently unconscious and tied up in a supply closet on the third floor of Larkmont Palace. Four other guards hadn't been so lucky. Their bodies were floating in the frigid waters of the fjord.

He'd had no choice.

Gideon was deep in enemy territory. If discovered, he'd be better off dead.

His thoughts were a dark contrast to the bright ballroom he stood in. Musical instruments hummed as they warmed up, preparing for the private recital that was about to start. Chandeliers winked overhead as servants wove between the glittering guests in Prince Soren's ballroom, offering one last round of refreshments before the music started.

As Gideon stood along the wall, watching the room like the other guards, his gaze fixed on his mark: the beautiful girl in the golden dress.

Rune Winters.

Prince Soren stood beside her, his palm pressed to the small of Rune's back. The Umbrian prince wore a tailored suit, his family's silver crest stitched into the cape slung stylishly over one shoulder, and his hungry gaze roamed down the dress Rune wore, inviting his rich friends to do the same.

Gideon's blood burned as he watched them.

It was a beautiful gown—he couldn't deny it. Made by some fancy designer, it likely cost a small fortune. But it wasn't *Rune*. Gold didn't suit her, and the cut was severe. The plunging V neckline ended a few inches above her belly button in front and at the base of her spine in back, sending a powerful message:

Look at her. She's mine.

The prince wanted his guests to admire the beautiful witch on his arm. To Soren, Rune was an exotic creature. A living artifact he was determined to add to his collection.

If Harrow's intel was correct, one week ago, the prince had asked her to marry him. And Rune had accepted, on one condition: if Soren wanted her for a wife, he had to give Cressida an army.

It's why Gideon volunteered for this job.

With an army, Cressida would wage war against the New Republic. If she won, she would reinstate the Reign of Witches and more people would die.

Gideon couldn't let that happen. So long as Rune was the lynchpin in this unholy alliance between Cressida and Soren, he couldn't let her live.

Gideon had kill orders and he was going to see them through. Right here. Tonight.

He'd waited all evening for his chance. Standing against the wall of the ballroom, sweating in this stolen uniform, he watched Rune flirting with her betrothed. Watched Soren flirt back: touching her with hungry hands, devouring her with haughty eyes.

It was driving him to the brink.

Alex was barely in the ground, and Rune was already engaged to another man. A prince, no less.

Is that what she wanted all along—a prince?

He was a fool to think he'd ever had a chance.

Gideon fingered the gun holstered at his hip. He was ready. More than ready. All he needed was the right moment ...

"Do you miss your home?"

Gideon scanned the circle of party guests surrounding Rune and Soren until his gaze landed on the speaker: a young woman with wheat-gold hair braided into a crown.

Rune laughed. "Can you miss a place where everyone wants you dead?"

Gideon watched her press her champagne glass to her red lips, then tip the last swallow into her mouth.

It was her third drink tonight.

Not that Gideon was counting.

"What was it like before the revolution?"

"We witches once lived as you do," Rune said, motioning to the grand hall they stood in, where chandeliers twinkled and marble columns propped up the painted ceiling. "Our lives were full of music, beauty, art..."

Yes, thought Gideon. *And your luxuries came at the expense of our misery.*

The buzz and hum of fiddles grew louder. Gideon glanced across the room, where guests began to fill chairs facing the musicians.

"That way of life was stolen from us the night Gideon Sharpe led a group of revolutionaries into the palace."

At the sound of his name on her lips, his attention shot back to her.

"He murdered two queens in their beds while his comrades cut the rest of us down in the streets. He would have let them murder me, too, if Cressida hadn't saved me."

Gideon bristled. *You're leaving out a lot of the story, sweetheart.*

"It must be heartbreaking," said the prince as his knuckles grazed the bumps of Rune's spine in a slow path downward. "To be so far away, knowing the horrible things taking place there ... I'm glad you're free of it."

Soren's arms slid around her waist, in what might have been an effort to comfort her, but felt more like a reminder: Rune was *his*.

Gideon rolled his shoulders, forcing himself to relax.

"Witches are still being slaughtered for nothing more than the crime of being what they are," said Rune, studying her empty glass from within Soren's arms. "I'll never be free until every last one of my sisters is free, too."

The hum of instruments fell silent and an announcement sounded: the recital was starting.

One by one, the circle of guests dispersed, moving toward the musicians.

Twining his fingers through Rune's, Soren tugged her toward their seats. They'd barely walked two steps when the first song started, and Rune's footsteps faltered.

Gideon watched her jerk to a stop.

"Everything all right?" asked the prince, turning back to her.

As the music rose, Gideon glanced to the musicians. The song was familiar. But why he recognized it, he didn't know.

"I-I need to powder my nose." Rune seemed to be struggling to compose herself. "I'll be right back..."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Soren. "The concert has begun." He lowered his voice. "This recital is for *you*, Rune. To celebrate our engagement. You need to be here."

His fingers white-knuckled around hers.

Gideon's eyes narrowed. His body tightened like a coiled spring as he watched Soren drag her onward. Closer to the music. The very thing she was trying to get away from.

"I need..." Rune tried to tug her hand out of his. When Soren appeared to grip harder, refusing to release her, Gideon stepped out of position along the wall. The guards stationed ten paces down glanced his way, reminding Gideon that he was surrounded by enemies. He couldn't draw attention to himself.

Also: Rune didn't need to be rescued. This was made clear as she stepped directly in front of Soren, blocking his path to the chairs.

"I promise not to miss much." Pushing herself onto her toes, she slid her pale arms around the prince's neck and grazed his cheek with her lips, lingering there. When Soren's free hand settled on her hip, admiring its curve, she added: "Later tonight, when the recital is over and the guests are gone, I have something special planned for you."

Gideon's heart dropped at those words. As he watched Soren slide his hand up and run his fingers along Rune's jaw, his entire body turned to stone.

"Something special?" the prince murmured, leaning down to press his mouth to Rune's.

Slipping her hand into his brown hair, Rune kissed Soren back, giving him a taste of what was to come. Soren pulled her in closer, and Gideon knew this wasn't the first time. There had been other kisses. Probably more than kisses.

The realization awoke something in him. Something tremulous and aching. It knotted around his rib cage, threatening to drag him to the bottom of the sea.

Enough.

He reached for his pistol.

But before he could finish this, Rune slipped out of Soren's grasp.

"I think you'll like my surprise." Her cheeks were rosy as she walked backward. "See if you can guess what it is while I'm gone."

Rune winked. The prince's eyes darkened with lust.

Gideon was going to be sick.

Rune spun on her heel and strode away, leaving Soren and Gideon to stare after her, the dress putting her on full display.

She rushed past guests making their way toward their chairs and guards stationed along the walls. As she hurried to the door, she nearly ran straight into the servant coming through them, halting just before they collided. The young woman balanced a shaking tray of glasses in one hand and held a bottle of whiskey in the other.

Gideon watched Rune exchange a few words with the servant, take the bottle from her, and disappear into the hall.

There it is.

The moment he'd been waiting for.

TWO

RUNE

DON'T CRY DON'T CRY don't cry.

Tears burned in Rune's eyes as she fled down the hall, past the stoic guards in their dark green uniforms. She was glad the rims of their hats shielded their faces, preventing her from seeing what they must think of her.

She couldn't let the tears spill. Not here. Not with them all watching.

But no matter how fast she ran, she couldn't outrun the song still playing in the ballroom, each note an arrow through her heart.

Alex's song.

The wistful tune had transported Rune back to Wintersea, to standing in her library's doorway, watching her best friend hunched over the keys of her grand piano, his hands casting a spell over the room.

Alexander Sharpe.

This song—the one chasing her away—was the last he'd ever written.

Rune touched his ring, still on her finger, as a wave of grief swelled inside her. She scrambled for something to protect herself against the terrible wave, that horrible *missing*, and came up empty-handed.

It was why she'd needed out of that ballroom. Before she broke down sobbing in the middle of a party to celebrate her upcoming marriage to a prince.

We would have been married by now.

She would have preferred Alex over Soren. Alex was her best friend. Other than her grandmother, he was the only person in the world who'd ever truly loved her. She might not have been *in love* with him, but given enough time, perhaps she could have been.

But Alex wasn't the only thing she missed.

If Rune was being honest, she missed her home.

Home.

The word seared her.

Back in the ballroom, Soren's friend had asked if she missed the New Republic, and Rune had laughed the question off.

But the truth?

The truth was Rune missed the sight of Nan's gardens, sparkling with dew. She missed riding Lady through the wildest parts of Wintersea. She missed the smell of the sea and the woods and the fields. She missed the winds and storms.

She liked Umbria and its capital, Caelis. She liked the architecture and the art, the culture and fashions and food, the absence of anti-witch sentiment. She liked it for a visit or a holiday. But it wasn't where she belonged.

Rune hadn't realized she'd feel this way when she agreed to marry Alex and leave the New Republic. She didn't know that in leaving the island behind, she was leaving her heart with it.

Could you miss the place where everyone wanted you dead?

Rune squeezed the whiskey bottle's neck. *Apparently yes.*

If there weren't a dozen guards watching her flee, Rune would have guzzled whiskey straight from the bottle. The three glasses of champagne had numbed her a little, warming her insides and blurring the edges of her vision. It was how she got through most evenings now: in a fog of intoxication.

But if she were going to get through *this* evening, she'd need more than three glasses of alcohol. She'd need an entire bathtub full.

As Alex's song built, growing louder, as its melancholic sound sank into her bones, Rune hiked up her dress and ran, glancing back over her shoulder to make sure Soren wasn't following.

Soren. Her fiancé.

Rune shivered, her skin still numb in all the places he'd touched her.

Later tonight, when the recital is over and the guests are gone, I have something special planned for you.

A cold sweat broke out over her skin.

Why did I say that?

Rune had nothing planned. She'd simply needed to flee.

The thought of going to him later, *alone*, made her gut twist. She would rather walk into the sea, her pockets full of heavy stones.

Make him want you.

It was the directive Cressida had given Rune when they first came to Umbria: to make herself irresistible to Soren Nord, an Umbrian prince.

It was what Rune was good at, after all.

Enticing men.

Soren possessed a fleet of warships. As a former admiral in the navy, he was well traveled and had a penchant for collecting beautiful, exotic things. Best of all, though: he was sympathetic to witches and rumored to be on the hunt for a wife.

So after the opera one night, while Cressida watched from the wings, Rune waited for the prince to exit his box and planted herself directly in his path. He'd walked straight into her, spilling wine down the front of her very expensive dress.

The prince was horrified at his clumsiness. And Rune was so gracious and forgiving. To make it up to her, he invited her to the ballet the next night. And the theater two nights after that. Suddenly, they were spending every day together. Going on strolls or carriage rides. Dining alone.

He was smitten, and Rune stoked his affection, playing her part perfectly, until she had what Cressida wanted: a proposal.

But to Soren's surprise, Rune turned him down.

I can't marry you, she told him, reciting her lines. *Not until every last witch is safe.*

More specifically: she *wouldn't* marry him—not unless he gave Cressida an army to wage war on the New Republic.

Rune had no desire to marry Soren, nor was she interested in doing the witch queen's bidding. The very idea of working for Cressida filled Rune with dizzying self-loathing.

But Cressida had saved her life, along with Seraphine's. Cressida didn't want her dead, unlike Gideon and everyone else in the New Republic. Most importantly: Cressida wanted to save the witches they'd left behind. Girls who were being exterminated at this very moment.

Every week, the names of dead witches made their way to Rune's ears. The Blood Guard had captured Aurelia Kantor, a powerful sibyl—a witch who could see into the past, present, and future. And now they were using her to give them the locations of every witch in hiding. It allowed them to hunt down and execute witches with merciless precision. Sometimes as many as three or four a week.

Ancients knew what they were doing to Aurelia to get that information.

Once, the Crimson Moth would have rescued her. But the Moth was here in Larkmont Palace, all the way across the Barrow Strait, half-drunk on champagne.

Look at yourself, Rune thought. *Partying with princes while your sisters are murdered.*

She'd abandoned those girls. And if Gideon Sharpe wasn't stopped, there would be no witches left in the New Republic.

If Rune were still on the island, she would have already broken Aurelia out of custody and smuggled her to the Continent, protecting other witches in the process. But the only way in was by sea, and every port of entry teemed with witch hunters and their witch-hunting hounds—dogs trained to scent magic. They were even stationed aboard ships traveling to and from the island.

Only one ship—the *Arcadia*—refused to allow the Blood Guard and their beasts to board their vessels. But that just meant the witch hunters traveled undercover. And once the boat entered New Republic waters, it was boarded by hounds who sniffed out every witch before they could set foot on the island.

Even *if* Rune got the sibyl out somehow, the Blood Guard would never stop hunting her kind. The New Republic's spies were searching the continent for Cressida Roseblood and her growing court, and if they had a sibyl in their hands, it was only a matter of time before they found where they were hiding.

They will never stop hunting us.

The only way to keep witches safe was to destroy the Blood Guard and tear down the New Republic.

And the only way to do *that* was to put Cressida back on her throne.

Rune wanted Cressida on a throne like she wanted a hole in her chest. The girl was vile. A cold-blooded murderess. But when compared to the alternative—a society that wanted to tie girls like Rune up by the ankles, slit their throats, and watch the blood drain from their bodies—Cressida Roseblood was the lesser of two evils.

Because under the rule of a witch queen, at least witches would be *safe*.

With Soren's backing, Cressida would ensure no witch was ever hunted again.

Cressida was in the capital, looking for more alliances to forge, but she was due back any day now. The moment she returned, she and Soren would sign the contract his lawyers had drafted, sealing their alliance.

And Rune would be required to marry him.

The powder room came into view. Rune fixed her gaze on the door. Once safely inside, she would let herself fall apart. Just for a minute. And when that minute was up ...

Rune thrust the door open and stepped inside, letting it swing shut behind her.

Candles lit the dark room, flickering in wall sconces and in candleholders lining the sink's ledge. As she strode to the sink, Rune uncorked the whiskey and took a long sip straight from the bottle. It burned her tongue and throat.

I thought I left all of this behind.

Rune had assumed it would be easy. After all, she was used to playing roles. Playing the part of "smitten fiancée" should have been a piece of cake.

But ever since Alex's death, the flirting and scheming and deceiving was taking a toll. Hence: her near breakdown in front of Soren's friends, and the bottle of whiskey gripped in her fist.

After fleeing the New Republic, Rune had foolishly thought she might finally get to be herself. No longer a silly, shallow socialite but a witch in plain sight. The *real* Rune Winters.

But who is that? she thought. *Who is the real Rune Winters?*

She shoved the question down.

It doesn't matter. Cressida needed an army, and Soren had one. It was up to Rune to secure that army. What mattered was who she *needed* to be: a girl who would put an end to the Blood Guard and finally ensure the safety of all witches.

You can do this. Remember what's at stake.

At the sink, she took another long sip of whiskey, shivering at the taste, and glanced into the mirror. Tears streaked her face. Her reddened eyes stared back at her, splotches of pink mottling her nose and cheeks.

Her gaze moved downward. The golden dress Soren had given her was not at all her taste. Gold was for accents only; it drew too much attention otherwise. And the cut was, well ... razor-sharp. It put her entire body on display.

She hated it.

It made her think of another dress. One that suited her like no other ever would. Because the giver knew what her soul required, not just her body.

Rune fought off that thought before its claws burrowed in.

She would *not* think of Gideon Sharpe. She was *done* thinking about him.

Except, apparently, she wasn't.

Like Alex, Gideon had also proposed to Rune. Not marriage, exactly, but a partnership. A future together.

She fisted her hands.

Gideon never really loved you. He loved the girl he thought you were. So it doesn't matter what he proposed.

Gideon could never love a witch.

She wasn't sure what was more upsetting: that Alex had loved her, or that Gideon didn't.

Rune had been so certain the Blood Guard captain would hunt her down—as he'd sworn to do. But two months had passed, and he hadn't come.

Maybe he decided I'm not worth his revenge.

Maybe he's moved on.

Rune clenched her fists.

Who cared what the reason was? He was gone. Out of her life.

Tears burned in her eyes, sharper than the whiskey. Rune took another swig, hoping it would numb her enough to go back to the ballroom. Surely Alex's song was over by now.

But her feet refused to turn around and walk her back.

Rune glanced at the ring on her finger and lowered the bottle.

He's gone. He's never coming back. You've had two months to grieve. It's time to move on.

Alex would understand why she had to do this. Why she needed to marry Soren. He wouldn't like it, but he would understand. He would forgive her.

It was the thought of Alex—kind, good, safe Alex—*forgiving* her that did Rune in.

Instead of rallying, the opposite happened. Something tried to claw its way out of her. She grabbed hold of the sink's ceramic sides, desperately needing to hold it back.

But she couldn't.

The grief erupted.

Rune gripped the sink and broke into silent, quaking sobs as the sadness wrapped around her like chains, pulling her down with its weight. She was so

overwhelmed by it, she almost didn't hear the door open behind her.

Though her vision was blurred with tears, she saw forest green flash across the mirror.

Great. Soren has sent one of his guards to fetch me.

Could she not have five minutes alone?

Was this to be the rest of her life?

Palming the tears from her eyes, she reached for the smile she used as a weapon. The one that masked the emptiness inside. She was about to use it on this unsuspecting guard, when another glance into the mirror stopped her. Rune would know that cruel mouth anywhere.

Gideon pushed back his hat and aimed his gun straight at her.

As their gazes met, Rune's heart pounded like a hurricane.

I thought you'd forgotten me.