A CURSE SO DARK AND LONELY

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BLOOMSBURY
NEW YORK LONDON OXFORD NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY YA
Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018

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First published in the United States of America in January 2019
by Bloomsbury YA

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Kemmerer, Brigid, author.
Title: A curse so dark and lonely / by Brigid Kemmerer.
Description: New York : Bloomsbury, 2019.
Summary: Eighteen for the three hundred twenty-seventh time, Prince Rhen despairs of breaking the curse that turns him into a beast at the end of each season—until feisty Harper enters his life.
Identifiers: LCCN 2018010847 (print) | LCCN 2018017988 (e-book)
ISBN 978-1-68119-508-7 (hardcover) • ISBN 978-1-68119-509-4 (e-book)
Subjects: | CYAC: Blessing and cursing—Fiction. | Magic—Fiction. | Cerebral palsy—Fiction. | People with disabilities—Fiction. | Fairy tales.
Classification: LCC PZ8.K374 Cur 2019 (print) | LCC PZ8.K374 (e-book) | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2018010847

Book design by Jeanette Levy
Typeset by Westchester Publishing Services
Printed and bound in the U.S.A. by Berryville Graphics Inc., Berryville, Virginia
2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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CHAPTER ONE

RHEN

There is blood under my fingernails. I wonder how many of my people I've killed this time.

I thrust my hands into the barrel beside the stables. The ice-cold water bites at my skin, but the blood clings. I shouldn't bother, because it will all be gone in an hour anyway, but I hate this. The blood. The not knowing.

Hooves ring against the cobblestones somewhere behind me, followed by the jingle of a horse's bridle.

I don't need to look. My guard commander always follows at a safe distance until the transition is complete.

Guard commander. As if Grey has men left to command.

As if he didn't earn the title by default.

I swipe the water from my hands and turn. Grey stands a few yards back, holding the reins of Ironheart, the fastest horse in the stables. The animal is blowing hard, its chest and flanks damp with sweat despite the early-morning chill.

For as long as we've been trapped here, Grey's appearance is somehow a continual surprise. He looks as young as the day he earned a position in the elite Royal Guard, his dark hair slightly unkempt, his face unlined. His uniform still fits him well, every buckle and strap perfectly arranged, every weapon shining in the near darkness.

He once carried a gleam of eagerness in his eye, a spark for adventure. For challenge.

That gleam has long since gone dark, the only aspect of his appearance that is never remade by the curse.

I wonder if my unchanged appearance startles him, too.

"How many?" I say.

"None. All of your people are safe this time."

This time. I should be relieved. I am not. My people will be at risk again soon enough. "And the girl?"

"Gone. As always."

I look back at the blood staining my hands, and a familiar tightness wraps around my rib cage. I turn back to the barrel and bury my hands in the water. It's so cold it nearly steals my breath.

"I'm covered in blood, Commander." A lick of anger curls through my chest. "I killed *something*."

As if sensing danger, his horse stomps and dances at the end of the reins. Grey puts out a hand to calm the animal.

Once there would have been a stablehand rushing to take his horse, especially upon hearing my tone. Once there was a castle full of courtiers and historians and advisers who would have turned over a coin for a bit of gossip about Prince Rhen, heir to the throne of Emberfall.

Once there was a royal family that would have frowned on my antics.

Now there is me, and there is Grey.

"I left a trail of human blood on the path out of the forest," he says, unaffected by my anger. He's used to this. "The horse led a good chase, until you fell on a herd of deer in the southernmost part of your lands. We stayed well away from the villages."

That explains the condition of the animal. We traveled far tonight.

"I'll take the horse," I say. "The sun will be up soon."

Grey hands over the reins. This final hour is always the hardest. Full of regret for my failure once again. As always, I just want to get this over with.

"Any special requests, my lord?"

In the beginning, I was frivolous enough to say yes. I'd specify blondes or brunettes. Big breasts, or long legs, or tiny waists. I'd wine them and woo them and when they did not love me, another was easily found. The first time, the curse had seemed like a game.

Find me one you *like*, *Grey*, I'd said, laughing, as if finding women for his prince was a privilege.

Then I changed, and the monster tore through the castle, leaving a bloodbath.

When the season began again, I had no family left. No servants. Only six guardsmen, two of whom were badly injured.

By the third season, I had one.

Grey is still waiting for a response. I meet his eyes. "No, Commander. Anyone is fine." I sigh and begin leading the horse toward the stables, but then stop and turn. "Whose blood made the trail?"

Grey raises an arm and draws his sleeve back. A long knife wound still bleeds down into his hand, a slow trickle of crimson.

I'd order him to bind it, but the wound will be gone in an hour, when the sun is fully up.

So will the blood on my hands and the sweat on the horse's flanks. The cobblestones will be warm with early-fall sunlight, and my breath will no longer fog in the morning air.

The girl will be gone, and the season will begin again.

I'll be newly eighteen.

For the three hundred twenty-seventh time.

CHAPTER TWO

HARPER

Washington, DC, is so cold it should be illegal.

I pull up the hood of my sweatshirt, but the material is practically threadbare, and it doesn't do much good. I hate being out here playing lookout, but my brother has the worse end of this job, so I try not to complain.

Somewhere down the street, a man shouts and a car horn blares. I bite back a shiver and suck more tightly into the shadows. I found an old tire iron near the curb earlier, and I twist my fingers against the rusted metal, but whoever it was seems far away.

A glance at the timer on Jake's phone tells me he has another thirteen minutes. Thirteen minutes, and he'll be done, and we can go buy a cup of coffee.

We don't really have money to spend, but Jake always needs time to unwind, and he says coffee helps. It ratchets me up so I can't sleep, which means I don't crash until four in the morning and then I miss school. I've missed enough days of my senior year

that it probably doesn't matter anymore. I sure don't have any friends who'll miss me.

So Jake and I will sit in a corner booth of the all-night diner, and his hands will tremble on the mug for a few minutes. Then he'll tell me what he had to do. It's never good.

I had to threaten to break his arm. I twisted it up behind his back. I think I almost dislocated it. His kids were there. It was awful.

I had to punch him. Told him I was going to hit him until a tooth came loose. He found the money real quick.

This guy was a musician. I threatened to smash a finger.

I don't want to hear the ways he shakes them down for cash. My brother is tall and built like a linebacker, but he's always been gentle and soft-spoken and kind. When Mom first got sick, when Dad got involved with Lawrence and his men, Jake would look out for me. He'd let me sleep in his room or sneak me out of the house for ice cream. That was when Dad was around, when Dad was the one getting threatened by Lawrence's "bill collectors," the men who'd come to our door to reclaim the money Dad had borrowed.

Now Dad's gone. And Jake's playing "bill collector" just to keep them off our backs.

Guilt twists my insides. If it were just me, I wouldn't let him do it.

But it's not just me. It's Mom, too.

Jake thinks he could do more for Lawrence. Buy us more time. But that would mean actually *doing* the things he's only threatening to do. It would mean truly hurting people.

It would break him. I can already see how even this is changing him. Sometimes I wish he'd drink his coffee in silence.

I told him that once, and he got mad. "You think it's hard to

listen? I have to *do it.*" His voice was tight and hard and almost broke. "You're lucky, Harper. You're lucky you just have to *hear* about it."

Yeah. I feel super lucky.

But then I felt selfish, because he's right. I'm not quick, and I'm not strong. Playing lookout is the only way he'll let me help. So now, when he needs to talk about these near-atrocities, I keep my mouth shut. I can't fight, but I can listen.

I glance at the phone. Twelve minutes. If his time runs out, it means the job went bad, and I'm supposed to run. To get Mom out. To hide.

We've gotten down to three minutes before. Two minutes. But he always appears, breathing hard and sometimes speckled with blood.

I'm not worried yet.

Rust flakes under my fingertips as I twist the ice-cold tire iron in my hand. Sunrise isn't far off, but I'll probably be too frozen by then to even notice.

A light feminine laugh carries in the air nearby, and I peek from the doorway. Two people stand alone by the corner, just at the edge of the circle of light cast by the streetlamp. The girl's hair shines like a shampoo commercial, swinging as she staggers a little. The bars all closed at three a.m., but she clearly didn't stop. Her micro-mini and open denim jacket make my sweatshirt feel like a parka.

The man is more suitably dressed, in dark clothes, with a long coat. I'm trying to decide if this is a cop busting a hooker or a john picking up a date, when the guy turns his head. I duck back into the doorway.

Her laughter rings through the street again. Either he's hilarious or this girl is hammered.

The laugh cuts short with a gasp. Like someone yanked a plug.

I hold my breath. The silence is sudden and absolute.

I can't risk looking.

I can't risk *not* looking.

Jake would be so pissed. I have one job here. I imagine him yelling. *Don't get involved, Harper! You're already vulnerable!*

He's right, but cerebral palsy doesn't mean my curiosity is broken. I peek out around the edge of the doorway.

The blonde has collapsed in the man's arms like a marionette, her head flopped to the side. His arm is hooked under her knees, and he keeps glancing up and down the street.

Jake will lose his mind if I call the cops. It's not like what *he's* doing is legal. If the police come around, Jake is at risk. I'm at risk. Mom's at risk.

I keep staring at that waving blond hair, at the limp arm dragging the ground. He could be a trafficker. She could be dead—or close. I can't do *nothing.*

I slip out of my sneakers so my stupid left foot won't make a dragging noise against the pavement. I can move quickly when I want to, but quiet is tough to master. I rush forward and raise the bar.

He turns at the last second, which probably saves his life. The bar comes down across his shoulders instead of his head. He grunts and stumbles forward. The girl goes sprawling onto the pavement.

I raise the bar to hit him again, but the man retaliates faster than I'm ready for. He blocks my swing and drives an elbow into my chest, hooking my ankle with his own. I'm falling before I realize it. My body slams into the concrete.

He's suddenly right there, almost on top of me. I start swinging. I can't reach his head, but I catch him across the hip. Then his ribs.

He seizes my wrist, then smacks my arm down to the pavement. I squeal and twist away from him, but it feels like he's kneeling on my right thigh. His free arm pins my chest. It hurts. A lot.

"Release the weapon." He's got an accent, but I can't place it. And now that his face is on top of mine, I realize he's young, not much older than Jake.

I clench my fingers even tighter around the bar. My breath makes huge panicked clouds between us. I beat at him with my free hand, but I might as well be striking a statue. He tightens his hold on my wrist, until I genuinely think the bones are rubbing together.

A whimper escapes my throat, but I grit my teeth and hold on.

"Release it," he says again, his tone thickening with anger.

"Jake!" I scream, hoping enough time has passed that he might be heading back. The pavement stabs daggers of ice into my back. Every muscle hurts, but I keep fighting. "Jake! Someone help me!"

I try to claw at his eyes, but the man's grip tightens in response. His gaze meets mine and there's no hesitation there. My wrist is going to break.

A siren kicks up somewhere nearby, but it'll be too late. I try to claw at his face again, but I catch his neck instead. Blood blossoms under my nails, and his eyes turn murderous. The sky lightens fractionally behind him, turning pink with streaks of orange.

His free hand lifts and I don't know if he's going to hit me or strangle me or break my neck. It doesn't matter. This is it. My last sight will be a glorious sunrise.

I'm wrong. His hand never strikes.

Instead, the sky disappears altogether.

CHAPTER THREE

RHEN

Sunlight gilds the fixtures in my sitting room, throwing shadows along the hand-sewn tapestries and the velvet chairs my parents once occupied. Sometimes, if I sit here long enough, I can imagine their presence. I can hear my father's brusque voice, full of admonishment and lectures. My mother's quiet disapproval.

I can remember my own arrogance.

I want to walk out of the castle and fling myself off a cliff.

That doesn't work. I've tried. More than once.

I always wake here, in this room, waiting in the sunlight. The fire always burns low, just as it is now, the flames crackling in a familiar pattern. The stone floor appears freshly swept, wine and goblets sitting ready on a side table. Grey's weapons hang on the opposite chair, waiting for his return.

Everything is always the same.

Except for the dead. They never come back.

The fire pops, a bit of kindling sliding to the base of the fireplace. Right on schedule. Grey will reappear soon.

I sigh. Practiced words wait on my tongue, though sometimes it takes the girls a while to awaken from the sleeping ether Grey gives them. They're always frightened at first, but I've learned how to ease their fears, to charm and coax them into trusting me.

Only to destroy that trust when autumn slides into winter. When they see me change.

The air flickers, and I straighten. As much as I hate the curse, the never-ending repetition of my life here, the girls are the one spot of change. Despite myself, I'm curious to see what motionless beauty will hang in Grey's arms today.

But when Grey appears, he's pinning a girl to the floor.

She's not a motionless beauty. She's scrawny and shoeless and digging her nails into the side of his neck.

Grey swears and knocks her hand away. Blood appears in lines across his throat.

I rise from the chair, nearly losing a moment to the sheer novelty of it all. "Commander! Release her."

He flings himself back and finds his feet. The girl scrambles away from him, clutching a rusted weapon of some sort. Her movement is labored and clumsy.

"What is this?" She gets a hand on the wall and staggers to her feet. "What did you do?"

Grey grabs his sword from the chair, pulling it free from the scabbard with a fierceness I haven't seen in . . . in *ages*. "Have no worries, my lord. This may be the shortest season yet."

The girl raises the rusted bar as if that will provide any kind of defense against a trained swordsman. Dark curls spill out of the hood of her clothing, and her face is tired, drawn, and dusty. I wonder if Grey injured her, the way she keeps her weight off her left leg.

"Try it." She glances between him and me. "I know a good spot I haven't hit with this yet."

"I will." Grey lifts his weapon and steps forward. "I know a good spot I haven't hit with *this* yet."

"Enough." I've never seen Grey go after one of the girls, but when he shows no intention of stopping, I sharpen my tone. "That is an *order*, Commander."

He stops, but his sword remains in his hand and he doesn't take his eyes off the girl. "Do not think," he tells her, his voice fierce, "that this means I will allow you to attack me again."

"Don't worry," she snaps. "I'm sure I'll get another chance."

"She attacked you?" My eyebrows rise. "Grey. She is half your size."

"She makes up for it in temperament. She most assuredly was not my first choice."

"Where am I?" The girl's eyes keep flicking from me to him to the sword in his hand—and then to the doorway behind us. Her knuckles are white where they grip the bar. "What did you do?"

I glance at Grey and lower my voice. "Put up your sword. You're frightening her."

The Royal Guard is trained to obey without hesitation and Grey is no exception. He slides his weapon into its sheath, but strings the sword belt around his waist.

I cannot remember the last time he was fully armed on the first day of the season. Probably not since there were men to command and threats to deflect.

But removing the weapon has drained some of the tension from the room. I put out a hand and keep my voice gentle, the way I speak to skittish horses in the stables. "You are safe here. May I have your weapon?"

Her eyes slide to Grey, to where his hand remains on the hilt of his sword. "No way."

"You fear Grey? Easily solved." I look at him. "Commander. You are ordered to not harm this girl."

He takes a step back and folds his arms.

The girl watches this exchange and then she draws a long breath and takes a tentative step forward, the bar held in front of her.

At least she can be tamed as easily as the others. I extend my hand and give her an encouraging look.

She takes another step—but then her expression shifts, her eyes darken, and she swings.

Hard steel slams into my waist, just below my rib cage. Silver hell, it *hurts.* I double over and barely have time to react before she's swinging for my head.

Luckily, my training is nearly as thorough as Grey's. I duck and catch the bar before she makes contact.

Now I understand why Grey grabbed his sword.

Her eyes flare, burning with defiance. I jerk her forward, ready to wrestle the bar out of her grasp.

Instead, she lets go, forcing me to fall back. She stumbles toward the door, limping into the hallway, her breathing ragged.

I let her go. The iron bar drops to the carpet and I press a hand to my side.

Grey hasn't moved. He's standing there, arms folded. "Do you still wish for me to leave her unharmed?"

There was a time when he wouldn't have dared to question me.

There was a time when I might have cared.

I sigh, then wince as my lungs expand into the already-forming bruise on my side. What began as a novelty now simply hurts. If she fights to run so fiercely now, there is little hope for later.

The shadows have shifted a bit, tracing their familiar path. I've watched it hundreds of times.

When this season ends in failure, I'll watch it again.

"She is injured," says Grey. "She cannot get far."

He is right. I am wasting time.

As if I don't have *time* in spades.

"Go," I say. "Bring her back."