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Amy Meredith

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A Dark Touch Novel

THE HUNT

Amy Meredith

RED FOX

With special thanks to Laura Burns and Melinda Metz

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For Carrie Enders, kickass chick

Prologue

'Dude, have you decided to give up showering?' Dave Perry called after practice on Monday. 'As the guy who sits behind you in history, let me say – bad idea.'

Kyle Rakoff laughed, veering away from the Deepdene High gym, where the rest of the football team was headed.

'Jogging home. Showering there,' Kyle shouted back. He turned, trotting backwards so he could continue the conversation. 'Then hitting Big Ola's. Sorry, Dave. I know how much you love sneaking a peek at my naked gloriousness.'

Dave gave an exaggerated fake laugh before disappearing into the gym. Kyle grinned, then turned round and picked up his pace a little. His muscles protested – practice had been killer today – but it also felt kinda good, running across the quad. His whole body was warm and purring like a Lamborghini.

Maybe he'd end up making it to Ola's before Helena did. She had to go in for algebra tutoring this afternoon. She needed it. If she didn't watch out, she'd be pulling a D for the semester. Kyle grinned, indulging in a little fantasy. So Helena would be late. And maybe that new girl – Brynn? Brenda? He was pretty sure it was something starting with B – would be there. Somebody must have clued her in that the ice-cream place on Main Street was where pretty much everyone from school hung out. He could get a little groundwork laid down. Maybe he'd even offer to show B-something around. Nothing wrong with being friendly.

Helena was great and all, but Kyle would not describe himself as monogamous – not that he'd ever done the deed with even one girl. But in theory. And B-something was a complete cutie with her supershort hair and her long, long legs. Or maybe Eve Evergold would be at Ola's. He needed a little more flirt time with her. Sure, she'd turned him down for coffee a few times, but she wouldn't be able to resist him for ever. Someday, someday not too far away, he knew he'd be running his hands through that long, dark hair of hers, seeing her dark blue eyes light up when she saw him.

Kyle decided to cut through the woods. He veered off the sidewalk and onto one of the narrow, twisting paths. His feet made crunching sounds on the fallen leaves that smothered the forest floor. This route would get him to his house probably five minutes sooner. And he could shower fast. Yeah, he should definitely make it to Ola's before Helena.

The branch of a fir tree slapped Kyle's shoulder. The trees were closer together than he remembered, maybe because the last time he'd taken this short cut he'd been about ten, with a lot less muscle and height on him. He should do it more often. The salty ocean air mixed with the earthy smell of the woods in a good way, and it was cool and dim and quiet. Kyle wasn't usually into quiet, but he'd left his iPod in his locker, and the quiet was sort of nice. Maybe he'd scout around a little sometime, see if there was a private place out here that was girl-romantic. Usually he made a bonfire down on the beach, but switching it up was . . .

A rustling sound in the brush off to his left pulled him away from his thoughts. *Probably a fox*, he decided. There were lots of them around. His mom even left bits of chicken out for them sometimes. She liked to sit out on the second-storey deck and look at

them. She called it Fox Watch, and it usually involved cocktails. His dad liked the being-out-on-the-deck part and the cocktail part, but he hated that Kyle's mother fed the foxes. He called them vermin. Kyle's mom called them vermin too – red, pointy-eared, adorable little vermin.

Kyle felt a wave of pinpricks move across his shoulders. It felt like someone was watching him. And not a fox. He slowed down a little, glancing from side to side. He didn't see anything, but he heard the rustling sound again. Louder this time. A fox wouldn't shake the brush hard enough to make that sound. Would it?

Maybe they travel in pairs, he thought. At Fox Watch they definitely came a few at a time, but Kyle wasn't sure how big a part the chicken played in that.

He kept jogging – actually it was getting closer to running – but the feeling of being watched stayed with him. He suddenly remembered why he hadn't taken this route in so long. These woods had creeped him out when he was a kid. The last time he'd been through here, when he was little, he'd let his imagination run away with him completely. He'd been sure that the bogeyman was right on his heels.

And even though he was six years older – and a lot

bigger – it was happening again. He was giving himself the wiggins. *Man up*, he told himself, even though the prickly feeling was getting worse. The sensation wasn't just across his shoulders now. It was all the way down his back.

It was probably just because he'd been working out so hard at practice, really sweating, and now the sweat was drying, giving him chills. The theory worked – except for the fact that Kyle was running. His muscles felt hot, and fresh sweat was running down his face and back. His pits were pumping it out.

A strange sound came from behind him, a mixture of a bark and a howl. Foxes barked. He'd heard them. But he'd never heard a sound like that before. And the weird cry sounded like it came from something bigger than a fox.

'OK, fine, I'm a wuss,' Kyle muttered as he began to run full out, pushing himself as hard as he could.

Bad move. It seemed as if the fox – or whatever it was – could smell his fear, and Kyle's increased speed seemed to have triggered its predatory instincts. It was chasing him now. He could hear its footfalls – yeah, it had to be much bigger than a fox – following him.

It let out another cry, higher and longer, a real howl this time. Kyle's entire body went cold. What the hell

was it? A dog? A *rabid* dog? A wolf? He didn't turn to look. That would only slow him down.

He took a sharp left, ducking around a tree, hoping to lose the . . . whatever was back there. It stayed with him. It was caught up in the hunt now. It let out another howl. Close. So close.

Kyle took another turn. Was he heading deeper into the woods? He wasn't sure – he'd lost track of the direction. And he didn't care. All he wanted was to get away. He could hear the creature breathing now, harsh eager pants.

Something sharp sliced across the back of his ankle, right between his sweats and the top of his sneaker. It took him a few seconds to register that he'd been bitten. Kyle pumped his legs and arms, reaching for every reserve of energy. It wasn't going to be enough.

The creature howled again. It was almost on him. Running wasn't going to work. Kyle whirled around, crouching into an attack position, his heart slamming against his ribs so hard he thought they would shatter.

There was nothing there. He scanned the darkening woods. Nothing. 'Where are you?' he shouted.

A howl answered him from so close that Kyle could feel hot breath on his face.

It was the last sound he'd ever hear.

Chapter One

'Hey, witchy baby.' Jess walked into Eve's room and dropped down on the bed next to her friend. She'd come over straight after her Monday afternoon cheerleading practice.

'Remember, no witch stuff in front of my mom,' Eve reminded her best friend. Eve's mother didn't know Eve had discovered that she – and her mother – were descendants of the Deepdene Witch. Supposedly, at least according to Eve's dad, her mom had gotten teased relentlessly about it back in high school and she was sensitive about the whole thing.

Eve had a hard time believing her mother was or ever had been sensitive about anything. She was a heart surgeon, and she had the God complex that pretty much came with the job. But her father had said it would bother her mother if she knew Eve had discovered the truth about descending from a

witch, although neither her mother nor her father believed that was the real deal. They thought villagers had called Eve's great-great-great-grandmother the Deepdene Witch because she'd been a little odd and had never remarried after her husband died young.

But Eve knew the truth. Her great-great-great gran had had the power to throw fire from her hands, a fire that could be used to battle demons. Unlike her mother, Eve had inherited the same ability.

'No worries. Your mom's all the way downstairs,' Jess answered.

'Good. I told her you, Luke and I were going to be up here studying. I left out the part about how we're going to be studying my fire-shooting woo-woo powers.' She couldn't believe it had only been a few months since those powers had started expressing themselves. She and Jess talked about them so casually.

'Leaving things out is pretty much the only way to handle parents,' Jess said. 'For example, I didn't mention that on Friday-night prowl we took the train to Brookhaven and tried to convince one of the guys at Tattoo Lou's that Jenna was old enough to get inked.'

Eve laughed. 'Yeah, I left that part out too. I said we

went to the movies. Which we did – after. How much fun was it though?'

'How much fun was what?' Luke asked, appearing in the doorway.

'Sorry. What happens on the prowl goes into the safe,' Jess told him.

'And the safe goes to the bottom of the ocean,' Eve added. 'Which, I gotta say, is where your jacket belongs,' she teased, smiling at him.

Luke ran his hand down the sleeve of his corduroy jacket. Yes, corduroy, with brown buttons that were definitely too big. 'What?' he asked.

'So many, many things,' Jess answered.

Yet somehow he still managed to look ultra-cute wearing the thing. The tan colour set off Luke's longish blond hair and those green eyes of his to perfection, even though the jacket looked like it should belong on some fifty-year-old college professor whose eighty-year-old mother still bought his clothes for him. Not Luke's usual style. Not that Luke put any thought into what his style was.

'Unlike you two, I have more important things to think about than clothes,' Luke said.

Eve shook her head. 'Look how he thinks that's something to brag about,' she told Jess. Although,

since her town had been infested with demons a few months ago, Eve had started thinking about fashion a lot less. She, Eve Evergold, high-school freshman, had been the only one with the power to kill Malphas, the soul-stealing master demon.

At least Eve hoped that's what had happened. All she knew for sure was that Mal had disappeared along with his demon minions after she zapped him with every ounce of power she had in her body.

Luke took off the jacket and flung it over the back of Eve's desk chair. Then he opened his backpack and dumped a bunch of candles onto the bed between Eve and Jess. 'I thought these would be good for you to practise on. It seems like the thing you need most is control over your power. If you can figure out how to light a candle without melting it or blasting it apart, that'd be a good start.'

Jess picked up one of the candles and set it on the corner of Eve's desk. 'Try it, Evie.' She and Luke got settled on the bed to watch.

Eve nodded and stood up. For a wild moment she thought about asking if they wanted popcorn to eat during the show. Then she let everything non-essential fade from her mind. She shifted from foot to foot, shook out her hands and fingers, then went still.

She locked her gaze on the little votive candle and concentrated on feeling the power within her. She hadn't used it in a while, hadn't wanted to. She'd wanted to go back to regular life in her regular – celebrity-studded, millionaire-strewn – little town.

But off and on she'd smelled wood-smoke. The smell she associated with the demon Malphas and his minions. It was fall. Wood-smoke wasn't an out-of-the-ordinary scent, but Eve needed to be ready in case the smell wasn't coming from fireplaces or bonfires. That was the whole point of today's 'study' session.

She pulled in a long, slow breath and released it just as slowly. She was fully charged. She could feel the power there, waiting for her, a bright, hot reservoir. Eve narrowed her focus down to the candle's wick. She needed to give it a flick of power, just a quick touch.

Her fingertips began to vibrate as she readied herself. She heard her hair start to crackle with electricity. The sensations jerked her back to that final moment with Malphas, who'd stood in front of her looking like the boy she'd been crushing on, with his chocolate-brown eyes, his crooked smile.

Revulsion cut through Eve and her power burst from her fingers in long bolts of fire-edged lightning.

The candle exploded. A tiny piece of wax struck Eve on the cheek. The velocity made it as hard as a pebble. She rubbed the sore spot with her thumb. 'Maybe we should have borrowed some safety equipment from the bio lab. Some goggles at least.' She looked over at her friends. 'You OK?' They both nodded.

Luke flicked a tiny piece of wax off the knee of his jeans. 'So what happened with the . . .' He opened his hands, making one of those explosion noises that boys seemed to learn before they acquired language.

'I – I thought about Mal,' Eve admitted. 'And I just lost it.'

'My mom just brought some goggles for Ringo – well, sunglass goggles,' Jess said, picking a piece of wax out of one of her short braids. 'They're called Doggles. She read that UV light is as bad for dogs' eyes as it is for humans'. Next time I'll bring them. They're actually kind of cute.' Jess was the best at coming up with a little distracting chatter when it was needed most. Eve definitely needed a moment to recover.

'Would it be OK if I puke in your wastebasket?' Luke asked Eve. 'I'm not sure I can make it to the bathroom.'

'You're going to criticize Ringo the poodle's fashion

choices when you came in wearing that?' Eve nodded towards the jacket on the back of the chair.

'Yes. Yes, I am,' Luke answered. 'Dogs shouldn't have fashion choices. They should have a leash, a collar, a couple of tags. That's it.'

Eve grabbed another candle and set it in position at the edge of her desk. She was doing this. She pictured that reservoir of liquid light inside her. She pictured herself dipping a bottle in and filling it. Her arms began to feel fizzy inside, as if warm champagne were flowing down them, the bubbles gently popping. *That's right. Nice and easy*, she coached herself. She raised her arms, aiming her hands at the candle, keeping her eyes on the wick.

The fizzy feeling intensified, the bubbles popping fast. *Now!* Her fingers turned to sparklers, but the dashes of light didn't come close to reaching the candle, even though it was only about two metres away.

'What were you thinking about that time?' Jess asked.

'Tinky Winky,' Eve answered. She and Jess had had a serious *Teletubbies* obsession for a few months during kindergarten. They'd only answer people when they were addressed by the Tubby names they'd

come up with for themselves. 'Actually I wasn't really thinking about anything except the power. I was visualizing it, trying to keep it in check.'

'Emotion has a big part in the strength of your power,' Luke reminded her. He would know. The very first time her power had started expressing itself, Luke had been teasing her and out came the sparks.

They'd barely known each other. And what Eve *had* known she hadn't really liked. But Luke had stepped up. He'd been by her side – along with Jess – through almost every moment of the demon crisis.

'Shall we taunt you?' Jess sounded a little too eager. 'Or you could just think about Luke's jacket.'

'Are we still on that?' he protested.

'For a few more days at least,' Eve told him, shooting him a wink. She walked over to the desk and straightened the candle's wick. *Because, yeah, that was definitely the problem*: *crooked wick*, she thought as she backed up into her zapping position.

Almost half an hour later she was putting her twelfth candle into position. 'What's the score?' she asked Luke.

'Seven explosions, four meltings, the one where you knocked the candle off the table and four fizzles.'

'Fizzies,' Jess corrected. 'We decided to call them fizzies.'

'They're all going to be fizzies, or whatever we're calling them, pretty soon,' Eve said. 'I'm losing juice.' She could only zap for so long without her power getting too low to even send sparks from her fingers. The bigger the zap, the more power got used up. 'Come on, lucky number twelve,' she called, flexing her fingers a few times.

'I didn't know twelve was lucky,' Luke said to Jess.

'Come on. Twelve, like a dozen. Good things come in dozens,' Eve explained.

'Lords a-leaping,' Jess offered.

'It's drummers drumming,' Luke corrected. 'I'm a minister's kid. I know every hymn and carol there is.'

'Drummers drumming.' Jess smiled. 'I like. Drummers are sexy.'

'I was thinking more like cookies or, yum, donuts, but OK,' Eve said. She gave her fingers one last flex. 'Here goes.'

She felt the fizzing move from her chest across her shoulders. *Harder*, she urged herself as the tickling sensation moved down her arms. In response, the current moved faster, and the bubbles felt as if they were coming to a boil. Bigger and with more of a *ping*

when they popped. *This could be it!* she thought as she let the power surge out of her fingers.

A beautiful bolt of orange-tinged lightning zig-zagged across the room. When the tip touched the wick, the candle lit. The small yellow flame was a beautiful, beautiful sight.

'Woo-hoo!' Jess cried.

'Woo-hoo!' Eve echoed, exhilaration filling her . . . until the candle began to smoulder as the wick sank down into the quickly melting wax.

Eve began to drop her arms But she jerked them back up as a high-pitched shriek cut through the room. Her heart slammed against her ribs. Her power slammed through her body. Too late, she realized that the sound was only the smoke detector. She couldn't stop her power from jumping free with a crackling whoosh. A second later flames were consuming Luke's jacket.

'What's going on?' Eve's mother called from downstairs.

'Smoke detector! Candle!' Eve shouted back. 'We got it.'

Jess started whacking at the jacket with one of Eve's pillows while Luke dumped his Coke over it. Eve grabbed another pillow and waved it under the

smoke detector. The wreck that was her room – burned jacket, plus tortured candles, plus bits of wax everywhere – was not something she wanted to have to explain to her mom.

She waved the pillow harder. The jacket fire was out, but the burned corduroy – yes, corduroy – was still producing a lot of smoke. She dropped the pillow, dashed over to the windows and threw them all open. The alarm was still squealing.

She grabbed her desk chair, swept the jacket off it, then dragged the chair across the room, climbed onto it and ripped the batteries out of the alarm. It finally shut up. 'See, Mom. It was nothing!' she yelled as she stepped back down. 'We'd better clean this place,' she told Jess and Luke. 'My power is getting really low anyway. That last blast took a lot.'

'But for a second you got it,' Jess said. 'You lit the candle perfectly.'

'Yeah, I did.' *After more than a dozen tries*, she silently added. She needed a lot more practice if she was going to be able to control her power. She caught a whiff of smoke. Not from the candles. Wood-smoke. Drifting in through the open windows.

Was something out there? Something evil? Something like Mal?

I have to keep practising. Practising, practising, practising, Eve thought. *I have to be ready . . . for anything.*

'You did this on purpose. Don't even try to deny it,' Luke accused, and Jess began to giggle.

Eve turned and saw him staring at the soggy, smouldering ruins of his jacket. 'I didn't. I swear. In a war there will be casualties.' She moved up next to him and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. *Some nice muscles there*, she couldn't help noticing.

For a few seconds they stared in silence at what remained of the jacket. 'And, Luke, you gotta know,' Eve added, 'it was truly hideous.'