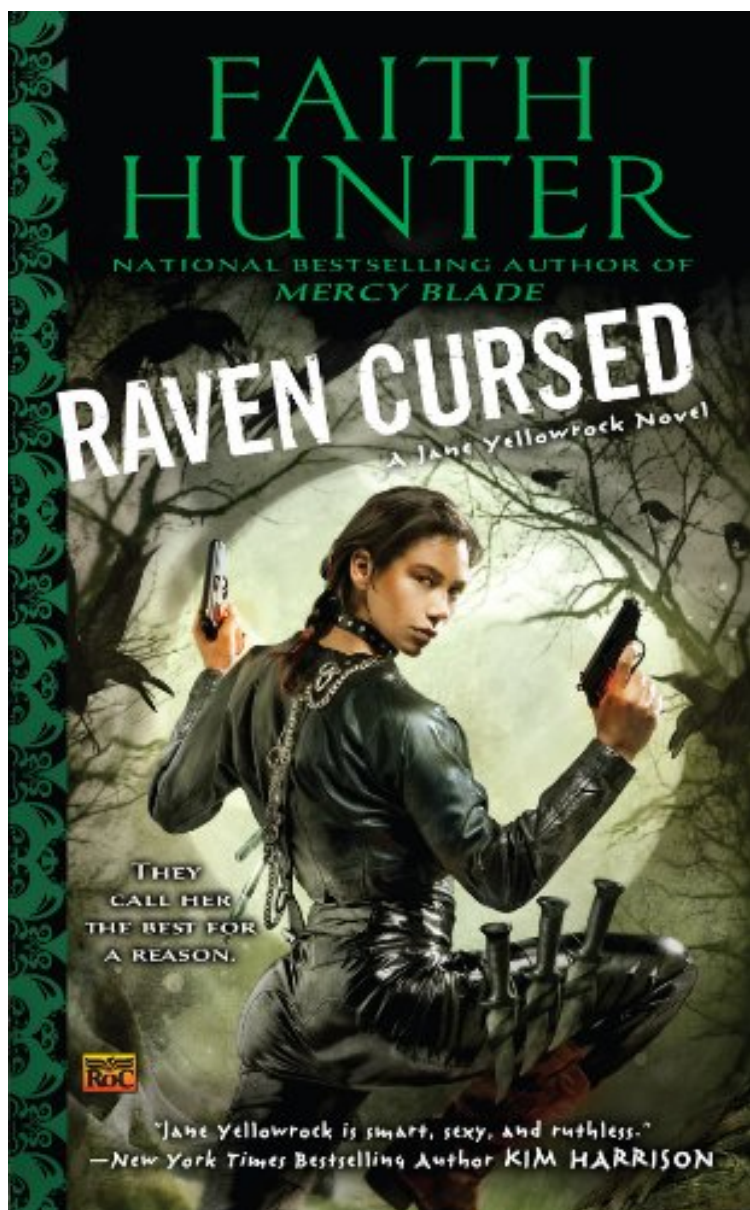


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# Raven Cursed



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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurJane Yellowrock is a shape-shifting skinwalker and vampire hunter for hire. But lately instead of just slaying vampires, she's been working for them.The vampires of Asheville, North Carolina, want to establish their own clan, but since they owe loyalty to Leo Pellissier, the Master of the City of New Orleans--and Jane's boss--they must work out the terms with him. To come up with an equitable solution, Leo sends an envoy with the best bodyguard money can buy: Jane Yellowrock.But when a group of local campers is attacked by something supernatural, Jane goes from escort to investigator. It's up to her to keep peace in the region, and unless she wants to face up to very angry vampire Master, Jane will have to work

overtime to find the killer. It's a good thing she's worth every penny

Chapter One

Lots of Things That Go Boom and Kill Bad Guys

I rode into Asheville, North Carolina, for all the wrong reasons, from the wrong direction, on a borrowed bike, with no weapons, ready to work for the vamps again. It was stupid all around, but it was the gig I signed up for, and I was all about satisfying the client, keeping him safe, eliminating the danger, and finishing the job. Or staking the vamp, depending on the job description. Finish the Job had become my second mantra, right behind Have Stakes Will Travel. I was not at all happy that I'd taken this gig, once again working for the Blood Master of the City of New Orleans, Leo Pellissier, though this time was different. Of course, that's what I always think that there's a new and better reason to keep up a business relationship with the chief fanghead. Money counts of course, and the MOC pays extremely well, but I've begun to think it's also because I'm a masochist and curious as in curiosity killed the cat. At the thought, my Beast chuffed with amusement. Not dead. Am good hunter. Smell cooked meat and running deer and mountains. Free flowing water. We are home. Yeah, we are. And that thought put a smile on my face, despite my misgivings. I'm Jane Yellowrock. I'm licensed and experienced in the security business but I made my street cred as a rogue vamp hunter. I am, according to most, the best in the business. I am also a Cherokee skinwalker living with the soul of a mountain lion inside me, the one I call Beast. I may well be the last of my kind, since I killed the only other skinwalker I ever met when he went nuts and started killing and eating people. My occupation has a definite ick factor. The job at hand was to set up and provide security for the vamp parley taking place in Asheville, and it wasn't likely that the location was accident or coincidence. Lincoln Shaddock, the most powerful fanghead in the Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina and Tennessee, had been applying to Leo for sixty years for the right to become a master of the city. Leo was a lot more powerful, territorywise than I ever guessed had turned him down, until now. Leo always turned down vamps who thought they deserved to be the master of a city, because he was power hungry and had a god complex that was nothing new. Now the chief bloodsucker of the South was willing to discuss a change in status for a vamp who wanted my hometown? No way was that a total fluke. One factor that could have influenced the MOC was that a young vamp in Shaddock's scion lair found her sanity in just two years. That was a record. That was huge. Vamps had been trying to find a way to shorten or defeat the devoveo for two thousand years. But was it huge enough for Leo to reverse course? I had my doubts. No, there was something else. I just didn't know what. Yet. Leo never had just one motivation for anything, but layered motives, some focused on his political organization in the world of vamps like the parley with the witches in New Orleans, which was not going so well, last I heard. Some focused on ancient history. And because the chief MOC of the South was intensely curious about me, maybe some focused on me. Vamps, politics, blood, and sex were all parts of a single whole, and since I was on retainer to Leo, I was now a part of that political maneuvering. Lucky me. My own curiosity was sending me right into the middle of it all, maybe because so many things from the last job seemed like untied ends blowing loose and frayed in hurricane winds. My life, once so uncomplicated, had become a storm that should have sent me running away. But I hadn't run. I had to Finish the Job. The new bike took the hills of I40 with a little wobble. It was a chopped Harley masterpiece named Fang, with a gleaming royal blue paint job and handpainted sabertooth fangs on the gas tank between my legs. It was beautiful, comfortable, sexy as all get out, and had saddlebags to hold my traveling gear, but it wasn't the best bike for mountain riding. I'd not be buying Fang, no matter how much the owner hoped I would. My bastard Harley, Bitsa, had sustained damage in service to Leo and was in Charlotte for repairs at the shop of the Harley Zenmaster who built her out of parts of old bikes. I liked to think of her being in a spa for some sustained TLC. I wish I was getting some TLC myself. Instead I was riding into my former hometown on a gig that all my instincts said was dangerous. But weren't they all? I'd feel better when I had my weapons back. Most of my guns, knives, and my wardrobe, were being shipped in on the flight from New Orleans that would bring the vamp assigned to this parley. Roaring uphill around a big rig, I gave Fang some gas. Strands of loose black hair whipped in the truck's airwave, pulled free by road wind. Most of my hair was well secured, braided down my back beneath my summerweight leather riding jacket, but the shorter strands flew wild or stuck to me under the helmet's faceplate. The September sun beat down on me, parboiling me in my own sweat. I was here a day early, meeting the security team, setting up protocols and methodology, and getting the lay of the land. I had a lot to do in very little time. Near dawn, some thirtysix hours later, the helicopter landed. The vamp or Mithran, as they liked to be called had flown in to the Asheville airport from New Orleans in Leo's private jet and been transferred under heavy security to the helo, which had been sent ahead and kept under guard until needed. Now the artificial wind of the rotors whirled the hot, early autumn air, mixing the stench of helo engine, the effluvia of the city, a mlange of

restaurants, and the woodscent of surrounding mountains. The helo settled with a skirling wind and a horrible whine that hurt Beasts ears. I touched my mouthpiece. Report. If someone wanted to make a statement and send a message to the vamp community, now would be a good time. All quiet, Derek Lee said. He and two of his best were stationed in key spots on high ground, with lowlight and infrared scanning devices, and all the hightech toys that make former Marines happy. They also had lots of things that go boom and kill bad guys. They were in heaven. A sniper was scanning from the roof of the tallest building with acceptable lineofsight, targeting the antivamp protesters who had set up in front of the hotel. Four other men had secured the path from the hotels helicopter landing pad to the door. Id brought Derek Lee on as my personal assistant, and he had already proven himself worth his weight in gold, not that Id tell him. His expertise was costly enough, and hed demanded atrisk pay for his crew, which meant they were all making a large piece of change on this gig. Beast was close to the surface of my mind, adding her strength and speed to my body in case I needed it. My heart beat faster, breath drawing deep. I had done all I could to protect Katie, Leos heir, and keep her safe throughout the parley. She was a bloodsucking killer, but I liked Katie. Except it wasnt Katie who stepped to the ground. It was Grgoire, Leos number two scion, the vamp Leo had been dangling at me for several weeks. Until now, it hadnt been anything obvious or overt, just seeing the slight, blond, prettierthanagirl vamp at every meeting, at every lecture teaching me how to deal with a highclass vamp parley, at three vampstyle tasting events to educate me on the practice, and at the security meetings. And now the big surprise. Of course, I could be reading it all wrong, but the signs pointed to the blood master of the vamps wanting me bound to him one way or the other, and since I hadnt fallen in a swoon at his feet or into bed with any of the other vamps who had offered, he was tossing his best bud my way. Great. Just freaking great. It wasnt like I could totally dis the guysock him or something. I was up to my neck in Mithran protocol, according to the Vampira Carta, and had to follow the rules of vamp etiquette. But that didnt stop me from glaring at him. Grgoire, wearing a cloak that shimmered even in the predawn dark, tossed back the hood and found me in the shadows. He knew I wasnt human, they all did, because I smelled wrong, but none of them knew what I was, and I wasnt telling. His blond hair shifted and blew in the rotor breeze, the color of his scent a pale green, the honeygold of spring flowers, and luscious. He smiled, that slow smile they do when theyre trying to charm, the one that starts in their eyes and melts to their mouths, transforming their faces into angelic beauty. Fallen angel beautydeadly, but dang pretty. He was slight, at five feet seven, delicate, with dark blue eyes the color of the evening sky, and he carried himself with an elegance that put even the other vamps to shame. He started toward me, moving as slowly as a human, graceful as a dancer. Beast huffed with amusement and stared back at him through my eyes. I could feel them start that weird gold glow they do when shes near the surface. Beast likes Grgoire, and she loves playing catgames, but she wants to be in charge and not manipulated. Grgoires slow stalk faltered, a slight, uneven hesitation. He recuperated quickly, but I saw it and so did Beast. Inside my mind, she showed some fang. Mon amie, Grgoire said. You are lovely. Thanks, Blondie. Backatcha, I said, deliberately rude. I took his arm, pretending not to hear his chuckle. Apparently vamps think Im funny. Lets get you under cover before that loveliness gets you shot full of silver. It was a testament to his age and his courage that he didnt shiver at the thought. Or maybe it was all the wars hed fought in over the centuries. Grgoire looked fragile, but his file suggested he liked a good war, battle, or barroom brawl as much as the next guy. The fourstar Regal Imperial Hotel in Asheville had suites suitable for visiting dignitaries, congregating heads of state, and vacationing vamps. Grgoire whose standards are set a bit higher than most vamps, thanks to the century and the French royal court in which he lived prior to being turned didnt turn up his nose as I led him through the secure employee entrance and the upscale restaurant, into the lobby. There was no fresh blood around to ogle him, which might have been a downer for some vamps, but he seemed okay with it. And when I opened the door to his suite on the third floor, he stood inside and nodded, hands on his hips, his dark silk brocade cloak thrown back like a young Batman, if Batman had weighed a hundred pounds, had fangs, and looked about fifteen. But gorgeous. Utterly gorgeous. I quickly explained about the security and the bolthole/escapehatch. The Mithran Suite was decorated all in goldlike the vamp with gilded, armored steel shutters on the windows and an escape hatch in the floor at the foot of the bed, leading to a narrow passage down through the walls of the hotel and underground. The suite was secure up to SAMs Surface to Air Missiles. If an opponent was that determined, no one was safe. This is acceptable. I am not displeased. You have no idea how happy that makes me. I couldnt keep the sarcasm out of my voice. He laughed. You may join me here. Your presence in my bed would please me. And theeere it was. The invitation I had been expecting. Fortunately, after all the vamp manners studies, I had my line all prepped and ready to go. Grgoire, you are pretty beyond anything

I've ever seen. He nodded as if I spoke only the truth. I resisted an eyeroll. But I have a job to do, and climbing into your bed would surely turn my head and blind me to all proper responsibility. A strange look crossed his face, as if that one had never occurred to him. So, I'll reluctantly decline and see to your daytime security placement. I left, and Grgoire didn't try to stop me. I'd like to think he was flummoxed. Floored. Startled. But maybe he was tired, what did I know? I worked like a fiend all day with my team and with Grgoire and Clan Arceneaus primo bloodservant twins, Brandon and Brian Robere, finalizing safety measures and arrangements, and reading them into my plans and protocols. Grgoire's finest were lean, narrowwaisted, broadshouldered, and former military. Though they looked young, the Btwins were some of the oldest bloodservants I'd ever met. I liked them and they had kept up with the changes in technology and security protocols better than most old servants. We also met with Shaddock's head of security, an Asian guy named Chen, who had intense eyes and looked about ten. He already knew the hotel layout and had little to offer or request in terms of security changes. He was in and out like a precise laser attack, and he set my predator instincts buzzing. I wondered if we would both survive the parley, or try to kill each other. The big hoedown started just after midnight, with Lincoln Shaddock, the vamp asking for MOC status, arriving in Shaddock's limo and a group of three armored SUVs that we had brought in to provide secure transportation during the parley. We hadn't announced the date and time of the first meeting, and the antivamp protestors who had assembled out front were caught off guard, as was the media, so there was no big hoopla. Just a stately procession of vehicles pulling up out front and people emerging faster than human. The vamps were introduced in the lobby, which had been cleared of guests and swept for explosives and video and listening devices. Shaddock strode across the hardwood and silk oriental rugs like the beaked-nosed frontiersman he had been as a human: tall, rawboned, and rough around the edges despite his tuxedo. Grgoire stood with his back to the massive central fireplace, resplendent in gold brocade. I stood to the side, taking in Shaddock's heir and spare, and his primo and secondo bloodservants. I had studied their files extensively and, with a flick of a finger, I repositioned two of Derek's men into better position to cover the vamps not just to keep them alive, but to make sure the newcomers didn't pull weapons and stake Grgoire. Hey. It could happen. Lincoln Shaddock, said the vamp. His laconic tone was marked by a strong Tennessee/Kentucky accent, and his scent was unusual for a vamp, smelling like hickory bark, wood shavings, and barbecue. The vamp owned a BBQ joint in the middle of Asheville and he worked there most nights, which explained the scent, though the idea of a job was odd for a vamp. But then, Shaddock wasn't as old as most master vamps. Maybe he had to work like the rest of us poor slobs. I am bloodmaster of the Shaddock Blood Clan. Turned by Charles Dufresnee after the Battle of Monocacy, outside of Frederick, Maryland. Currently sworn to Clan Dufresnee, and with his permission, petition in the bloodmaster of the southeastern United States to acquire territory to include the city of Asheville, North Carolina, and to be granted hunting land and cattle and the rights to rule as Master of the City under his rule. Hunting land meant territory where vamps would hunt humans to drink from. Cattle meant the humans they'd be hunting. Ticked me off, not that I had a say in the wording or the reality of the meaning. The phrasing had been established centuries ago as part of the Vampira Carta, the legal document vamps lived by. The Carta also established the laws that gave me the right to hunt rogue vamps. That part of the law probably gave vamps the willies. I could only hope. Lincoln Shaddock gestured to the tiny young woman standing behind him. This here is Amy Lynn Brown, my youngest scion. The miracle vamp, the reason that Leo had allowed the petition and the parley. The darkhaired, brown-eyed girl looked terrified, and no one did anything to alleviate her nerves. Grgoire stepped to the side and studied her like a piece of meat. I hadn't known Leo was the bloodmaster of the entire southeastern U.S. until the first time I heard the introductions read during my parley training. He held the hunting license of every fanghead below the Mason Dixon Line, from the eastern border of Texas at the Sabine River, east to the Atlantic and south to the Gulf, with the exception of Florida and Atlanta. The Atlanta MOC was an independent of sorts, and Florida was run by a vamp I hadn't studied yet. Grgoire turned his attention back to Shaddock and bowed slightly, saying, Grgoire bloodmaster of Clan Arceneau, of the court of Charles the Wise, Fifth of his line, in the Valois Dynasty, turned by Charles the well beloved, the mad the son of the king. Here by decree of Leonard Eugne Zacharie Pellissier, turned by, and heir of, Amaury Pellissier, his human uncle and Mithran father, now true dead, to negotiate the petition of Lincoln Shaddock for rights to claim Asheville and surrounding territory as Master of the City . . . Yada yada. I zoned out on the confab, seeing a flicker of shadow at the front entrance. The protestors were trying to get in, bodies pressed against the glass, voices raised, chanting, Vamps go home. Vamps go home. Real original, and no threat unless they had guns or were willing to break in, which I had to consider. I touched my

mouthpiece to com channel and said to Derek, Moving to the front. Get the principals to the Black Bear Grill, out of sight. Copy, my second in command replied. He switched channels and relayed my orders. We had two communication channels, a command channel between Derek and me, and a general channel that went to all the security staff. Moving to the front, I listened as the Btwins and Shaddocks Chen led the way to the hotels restaurant, which wed taken over for the first night of the parley. I felt immensely better as the doors to the restaurant closed with a firm snap. This initial meeting allowed the primary negotiators to chitchat and take one anothers measure while their minions gave a final tweak to the rules the vamps would operate under, and shuffled and finalized the talk schedule. I had never been a bodyguard, and I wasnt looking forward to the whims of vamps changing my security measures on the fly, but that was part of the job tooflying by the seat of my pants, moving my men here and there and hither and yon and trying to keep everyone out of trouble. Playing in the vamp sandbox was an exercise in creative use and placement of assets. While they did what vamps and their blood meals do, I wandered around the hotel, making sure none of my men were mispositioned or left a blind spot where trouble might hide. I also triplechecked the communication gear and walked the entire external perimeter of the hotel, the nearby parking garage, and every hallway, stairwell, wine bar, nook and cranny of the joint. Again. It was obsessive but it also was keeping me awake. Near dawn, the first something unexpected happened. I was checking out the mens rooms off the lobby when I was alerted over my com headgear. Legs, somethings up. The bloodservants are going apeshit, Derek said. Wrassler, my number two guy, and one of Leos bloodservant security goons talked over the chatter. All I made out was, in here now . . . Leo . . . I hotfooted it out of the john, Beastfast. What? I asked as I entered the Black Bear Grill. They were all watching a TV monitor, local cable news showing a scene of flashing emergency lights: police, ambulance, even an antiquated fire truck with Cocke County Rescue Squad painted on the side. In the background I could make out a bridge and the reflection of red and blue flashing lights on still water. Onscreen was a wildhaired, heavily bearded man, maybe midtwenties, with multiple piercings and lots of body art. Dude it was bad. I mean blood and guts and stuff. The deputy was saying it had to be fangheads, what with the injuries. Like one a them rogues that goes psycho and eats people and shiuh, stuff. Like, sorry, dude. I cuss a lot. Oh crap, I murmured. My cell phone rang. It was Leo. Yellowrock. You will take any necessary personnel and deal with this. If it is a rogue, dispatch it. If it is something else, you will make this situation go away. Sure, Leo. But The line clicked off. I was just an underling, the paid help. Unlike the vamps, I didnt deserve good manners. Prsentation de l'diteur Jane Yellowrock is a shape-shifting skinwalker and vampire hunter for hire. But lately instead of just slaying vampires, she's been working for them. The vampires of Asheville, North Carolina, want to establish their own clan, but since they owe loyalty to Leo Pellissier, the Master of the City of New Orleans--and Jane's boss--they must work out the terms with him. To come up with an equitable solution, Leo sends an envoy with the best bodyguard money can buy: Jane Yellowrock. But when a group of local campers is attacked by something supernatural, Jane goes from escort to investigator. It's up to her to keep peace in the region, and unless she wants to face up to very angry vampire Master, Jane will have to work overtime to find the killer.

It's a good thing she's worth every penny