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FIRST EDITION

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For South Dallas, that Glorious Queen.

Sunny South Sorceress

Pilot Episode

Sasha Kehoe



"I can make your life difficult if you don't do
this for me."

UNWELCOMED GUEST

1/7

WRITTEN BY SASHA KEHOE

Dallas is a mean bitch of a city. Mad with power. Deep with it. Full to bursting with it. It's a source. Probably why people have such a bad attitude. Why shit's always a half-step from crazy. But everyone stays busy. Stays distracted from it - stays minding their own business. That's what I like. Makes it easy to lay low. Just trying to mind my own damned business.

Who the hell is this bothering me?

Shredded bits of lettuce were getting everywhere. Sean brushed them off her lap and car seat, onto the floor. She'd spread the plastic-y paper out onto the middle console, arranged the thin tortilla chips and the Taco Bell queso that no matter what, she couldn't replicate. It had to do with the smell of the fast-food place, she thought. Wherever it was shipped from, how it was frozen and unfrozen by a rude underpaid teenager who almost always forgot to put napkins in the bag. The more she was hassled at the drive-through, the better the food was. Pure magic. She'd circled the block three times before deciding that she wouldn't let the tacos get soggy. She tried not to elbow her drink out of the cupholder as she folded her arms awkwardly and half-hunched over her midnight craving fix.

She didn't want to be eating in her car. She wanted to be kicked back on her old leather couch, bare-assed and surrounded by tacos and liquor as was her god-given welcome-back-home right to be, but no. She wiped queso from her knuckle onto the fabric of the passenger headrest. There was a sorcerer in her house.

She ate five tacos, a handful of broken chips dipped in creamy queso, and washed it down with a Sprite. No one came out of the house. She watched the windows of the 1940's two-story. Whoever it was had to have heard her pull up; the '84 Olds Cutlass was loud. Burnt orange that shimmered, too, but they wouldn't be able to see that in the dark. Point is, the whole block must've heard her pull up. There was a light on inside, but she was like eighty percent sure that she'd left it on herself.

The wards around the house were broken. That, she felt right off. Then the lingering presence of whoever was inside. That unnatural bloodline, Seidh magic. A real sorcerer. Born and bred. She got out of the car, left the garbage balled up and tossed on the floorboards. Her backpack went up and on her shoulder. She took a pin from the dashboard, pulled it from the straw doll she kept hanging from the rearview. Pricked her finger. Blood dewed up and when she blew it towards the house, the drop split and trailed down both sides of her fingertip.

A friendly. Hard to believe.

She licked her fingertip clean, then ran her tongue over a spot in the roof of her mouth. A tortilla chip had gotten dug in good. She leaned against the car a moment, sucking at her teeth, thinking.

She walked the perimeter of her house. It was a mid-sized place, red brick and wood that had once been painted white but was now rotted and peeling in...mostly everywhere. She wasn't exactly handy. Place wasn't glamorous but also didn't scream rob me please, I'm all alone and worth it. It didn't scream much of anything - hardly anyone knew she lived there. Most people thought it was abandoned, condemned, or both. She liked it that way. Pearl, her eighty-year-old neighbor who usually kept her nosy self perched up in the

windows, didn't come out. Which meant no one had seen the sorcerer sneak into her house. Pearl kept an eye and ear on everything on Pine Street. Almost had the feel of a witch, but wasn't one. Just hard-lived and wise.

Sean found the break. The entire outside part of a windowsill had been torn off and the faded wards with it. She frowned at the ugly gash it left beneath her barred window and tucked the discarded wood in the crook of her elbow as she walked up her front steps.

That's just an asshole thing to do.

When she opened the front door, a man was sitting in her armchair. Just sitting up in the dark, backlit by the light in the kitchen for effect. She flipped the light switch. It was Marion. That made sense. Good-looking light-skinned dude with short reddish-brown hair and freckles. A scrier, one of the best. She gestured to him with the windowsill.

"You're fixing this," she said and dropped it on the table next to the door. He looked maybe a little bothered that she wasn't absolutely wetting herself over his performance, but he tucked his pride into a tight smile.

"It was raggedy work."

"It was cheap. What do you want?"

He looked her up and down, the way guys do when they think they're being cool. You don't need to do all that to evaluate someone. But when you wanted someone to know they were being judged, it was the kind of thing you would do. Sean stared at him, flat-out. He didn't intimidate her, but she knew better than to show even that.

You never give a sorcerer more than is absolutely necessary.

"I want a fence," he said.

"I'm not a fence."

He smiled, but it was childish. "Come on, you know somebody."

She scoffed. "I don't even know you."

He smiled that dumb smile again, and pulled out a piece of fabric that was mostly elastic, and a little cotton and lace. He twirled it on his finger. "Yours?" he asked and flung the thong at her. She caught it in the air, stuffed it into the pocket of her dress.

"No. How'd you find me?"

"By reputation." He crossed one leg over the other. Sean crossed her arms and rolled her eyes.

"If you're all that, how come you can't find your own fence?"

"I don't know of any. I'm good - very good - but not that good. Not yet."

Sean pursed her lips together. Ambition looks bad on some people. Real bad.

"What'd you steal?" she asked. She walked past the chair. Checked the rest of the room. He didn't get up. Everything looked in place, but she'd been gone for two days. How long had he been there? What all of hers had he gotten ahold of?

"Steal?" He only cocked his head towards her, as if he couldn't be bothered to make the effort to maintain eye contact. He'd decided that he was going to play I'm the big man in the big chair like it wasn't her goddamned chair he was in.

She really couldn't stand sorcerers sometimes. All the theatrical, tiring bullshit - she'd been talking to him all of five minutes but it felt like they'd been dating five years and were having a not-fight fight.

“Must not’ve been dealing with a local. Folks around here know better than to trust you, Marion. Reputation, you know?” She looked at the back of his head while she fixed two drinks from the half-empty liquor bottles on the dry bar in the corner, out of hospitality. He’d been in her bottles, she could tell. Helping himself to her Hennessey, not touching the Jack. Sipping her Grey Goose but leaving the Tito’s. All in her Patron but leaving the Cuervo. She frowned and chose the Goose, splashed a little coke in it. Swirled them up to serve.

“I’ll make it worth your while. You can move out of this...place.” She saw that he waved a hand toward the air.

“I own this house.”

“I meant this neighborhood.”

She waved a hand at him. “Fuck outta here with that,” she muttered. “I like it here.”

“And you’re graverobbing?”

She shrugged. Her bag was still on her shoulder. “Pays the bills.” She stood in front of him again, stared straight down that evaluating gaze. He took the drink she handed him.

“You always do your scavenging dressed all...?” he lifted an eyebrow toward her suggestively.

“I stay cute,” she answered and threw back her drink. Her fingernails were tapered into glittery black points, her lashes were feathery and flawless, her brows were full and arched, she’d just found the perfect melanin-friendly summer blush and she was rocking the shit out of these Italian leather booties paired with a mustard-colored dress that hung flatteringly away from her taco-baby-belly. The sleeves of her cropped black jacket kept her arms hidden. She didn’t always feel like dealing with the stares her tattoos got. She’d had a good haul weekend and she’d treated herself with some self-care. Priorities.

“You’ve got sauce on your dress. Some little piece of lettuce or something, too.”

Shit. She brushed a hand over her chest.

“Is that it?” she asked.

“I like the wing-thing with your eyeliner,” he said with a grin.

“I mean, is that it? You’ve already broken hospitality by breaking my wards and entering my home without my permission,” she told him.

“You’re a traditionalist,” he half-sighed. “I don’t trust anyone I know,” he said, which wasn’t an answer.

“Sounds like you have bad friends,” she said, which wasn’t an offer.

“You have no friends. That’s the kind of person I need. Put me in touch with someone, and I’ll be on my way.”

She twisted her lips and narrowed her eyes at him. His aura hinted at his strength, not that she went knocking that deep. May as well have been a copperhead curled up in that chair; she wasn’t about to extend shit out to him. “What’cha got?”

He reached into his jacket pocket - he was wearing a blazer, one of those with the bold metallic flower prints that was all the moment. He held something between two long fingers.

A glass slide for a microscope, secured in a translucent plastic case.

“Science project?” she asked.

He paused for effect.

“Blood from the oldest Risen in existence.”

She slammed her glass down on the table! “You’re goddamned kidding me!” she growled. “Bringing that into my house? You trying to scry him up? Get the fuck out.”

That smile she already hated. “I’m not suicidal. But I’m willing to sell it to someone who is.”

“No one’s going to touch that and you know it! You’re asking me to bust dead heads so you can earn a few bucks?”

“Not just a few.”

“Not worth my while, sure as shit not worth my life.”

“I can make your life difficult if you don’t do this for me.” The words were soft. The threat, less so.

“You want to go that way?” she whipped back at him. He put his hands together like a prayer and leaned towards her.

“I don’t. I’m sorry. I get excited. Help me. If you don’t want money, what’s it you want? Information, maybe?” He paused again, full of melodrama. “Maybe about your parents?”

She shook her head at him. The audacity of this bitch. She adjusted her bag on her shoulder, kept wanting to shake her head like it would loosen the grip this situation had on her. She put a hand up and headed towards the door.

“I know everything I need to about my parents,” she said. “Watch your mouth. I’ll be back in the morning,” she said shortly.

“Two sorcerers can’t share a roof?” he said. “I’ll be able to find you, O’Shaughnessy. That’s a fact.”

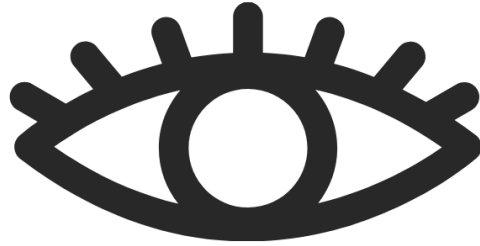
“I know what you do,” she told him and pointed her finger towards him forcefully. “Fix the ward. I’m not here or anywhere near you while you’ve got that blood on you.”

“You thought of your price?” he asked with a smile.

“Shut up,” she scoffed. “Don’t touch my shit while I’m gone.”

She slammed the door behind her.

Sean couldn’t sleep in her car. She needed a threshold to be past, a roof to be under. She wasn’t sure yet how serious Marion was but she was old enough to know not to take chances with a man whose ego was that huge.



"What kind of trouble are you in?"

OPEN ARMS

2/7

475 in gold plating on a teal door. Three flights of stairs up, metal steps and red paint peeling from the handrail. Someone in the parking lot was having a cookout. Music was bumping and the grill was going, both probably until the morning.

The door swung open when she arrived in front of it.

Alisha still had lipstick on, so Sean hadn't caught her sleeping. Braids, black like licorice, framed her face. She was fair-skin and had naturally dark circles under her eyes that she didn't bother to cover with makeup.

"You shouldn't open your door like that," Sean said.

"I felt you coming," Alisha said. She nodded her head towards the stairs. "And I heard you."

"You saying I walk loud?"

"I'm saying you walk *funny*. I knew it was you."

Sean reached into her pocket and pulled out the panties. She handed them to Alisha, whose mouth twitched in a smile.

"Come in."

Alisha's cheek was warm against hers when she leaned in to kiss one, then the other. Sean knew that it would've been proper to kneel and sweep her hand against the floor as a greeting in the witch's house, but she wasn't into ancestor worship. Alisha let it slide.

"This is new," Sean said.

Alisha was deep into Yoruba. The Afro-Caribbean rituals and customs are marked indelibly in the blood of the descendants of Yoruba tribes. In America, that's the descendants of slaves. Masters for generations had tried to swipe it out, but the ancestors kept making their claim. If not through the blood, then through the Echo. Natural magic calls on people to carry it forward. To protect itself, and the mortal realm with it, Earth and all. Yoruba gods, Orishas, draw in witches and sorceresses alike. Arms out and open like that are hard to ignore when you're looking for a home.

Alisha's altar was to Yemeya, a supreme river deity. Other Orishas that had been featured on the candle-laden table were no longer present - with exception of Legua, who had his tricky hands in everything. His clay-and-cowrie-shell head idol occupied a back corner next to an offering of a cigar and a small bottle of rum. In the center of the altar, a porcelain bowl filled with water and seashells rested at the feet of a statue of a woman. Her nude figure was painted black, so dark and oily that she looked wet, as if it had just been brought up from the river. A white cloth with blue fringe was draped over her face. Her two hands were above her head, holding up a figure of the moon. The statue was nearly three feet tall and on top of the altar, Sean was face-to-face with it. She could make out the mounds of her cheekbones and lips beneath the cloth and thought for a moment that she could see two eyes, open and staring at her through the fabric.

"What kind of trouble are you in?" Alisha asked. Sean jumped. When she looked again, the statue was just a statue.

"What?" she asked. Alisha raised an eyebrow at her.

“It’s been three months. You can’t just show up here with my panties in your pocket and your bag on your shoulder and expect me to think that you’re not in some kind of trouble.”

“I just need a place to spend the night. That’s all.”

“What’s wrong with your place?”

“It’s haunted.”

“Again? We can do a cleansing,” Alisha offered without missing a beat.

“No, I’m working on it.”

“Are you sure? I can take you to the Babalawo. He could help.”

“This is beyond that,” Sean said evasively.

“Outer magic?” Alisha asked gingerly. Sean nodded but didn’t say anything. She sat on the couch. Alisha joined her.

“If you would join a coven, you’d have somewhere to go when you needed help with whatever kind of ‘cleansing’ you’re needing to do.”

“Covens are for witches and priestesses. Not sorceresses.”

“Not your coven,” Alisha persisted, crossing her arms.

“It’s not mine anymore. Listen, they play by a lot of rules that I’m just not into. Can I crash here?”

“Only if you tell me what’s up. Don’t lie. I’ll know if you’re lying.”

It wasn’t true. Alisha wasn’t that good. But if Alisha even *thought* she was lying, that would be just as bad.

“How about I trade you something instead?” She set her backpack on the coffee table. “I’ve got some good stuff here. Free of charge.”

“Nothing’s free from a sorceress.”

Sean chuckled. *True that.* Alisha reached and pulled out a small wicker basket with a lid that had a latch on it.

“Okay, anything but that,” she said quickly. “This is already claimed.”

Alisha looked like she was going to press about what was in the basket then thought better of it.

“This, then,” Alisha said and pulled out a jar with a butterfly in it.

“Are you sure? I’ve got graveyard dirt in there. Raw honey from a wild hive. A natural hagstone. Keep looking.”

“I’ve made my choice,” Alisha said with a certain way she closed her eyes and nodded her head slow that kept Sean from asking any more. “Maybe it’s not you I’m supposed to save tonight.”

She went to the window and lifted it open. She unscrewed the metal bands of the mason jar and the yellow and black Swallowtail butterfly floated from the jar out into the night.

“Don’t bother trying to save everyone, all the time,” Sean said as she closed her backpack, tucking the wicker basket back inside. “Sometimes you have to look out for yourself.”

Someone downstairs was smoking weed. The perfume of it climbed the side of the building and came in through the open window.

“I just want to help people,” Alisha said quietly, after a while. “My blessing will come. Power’s stirring, Sean. I know you can feel it. Things are changing.”

“We’ve been saying that for generations, Lisha.”

“It’s different, and I think you know it.” She looked at Sean, but Sean knew that she wouldn’t get a read off her. Good, not that good. Alisha’s magic was too well-intentioned to be forceful. And without force, good intentions are useless to change anything.

She sat next to Sean on the couch. “You remember that this is a pull-out, right?”

“It’s like that?” Sean said with a smile. For old time’s sake. She wasn’t really expecting anything else, and truthfully she needed some time to think. But a little flirting never hurt anybody.

“Go to bed,” Alisha laughed.

The butterfly came floating back through the window. It landed on the statue’s head, the wings spread open.

“Hm,” was all Alisha said before giving Sean another kiss on the cheek and going back to her bedroom.

Sean ignored the faint whispering from the altar.

Sean got up before Alisha. Must have been a weekend. Alisha had a regular nine-to-five as far as she could remember and only slept in on the weekend. Being a self-employed sorceress insulated Sean from the daily grind, calendars, and time in general. Time moved differently in South Dallas, anyway. She couldn’t put her finger on anything else on it, it just did. Moved more naturally, she thought. Unnatural as that was.

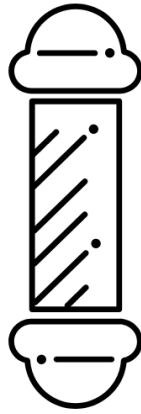
After a quick, hot, shower, Sean took out her makeup kit and got ready. She sighed hard at her reflection.

Damn. I was just getting my look down.

Her shoulder-length hair had been up in twists, which added extra structure to her curls. They’d finally layered in the way she wanted, fully moisturized, chemical-free and recovered, doing their best *I’m a kinky curly goddess* thing.

She started by shaving off her eyebrows. She pulled her hair up high, in a tight bun on top of her head. The whole thing gave her a who, me? look of surprise. She made sure that the hairs were washed down the sink. She let the water run awhile before she drew her eyebrows back on.

She didn’t say goodbye before she left. Alisha would understand.



"I'll just call you Red."

SHAVE AND A HAIRCUT

3/7

The Car Wash had a name, she was sure. Must have. But everyone just called it the Car Wash. You can find people there any time of day or night. Every now and again there'd be some local news story about something (not their business) that went down at the Car Wash.

Who would be at a Car Wash at two-thirty in the morning?, they ask. What were they doing?

The exact kind of thing you'd expect to be going on anywhere at two-thirty in the morning. But it was okay to not bother with saying that because the people who don't live here don't care, and the people who do live here know better.

"Hey, Sister - you need help?" Someone asked when she stepped out of the car. An older man, stick-thin, with a plain white shirt on and a cup in his hand approached her. "Let me help you out," he insisted.

"You detail?" Sean asked.

"Yeah, I do," he said and drew his eyebrows together as he looked at her car. "I seen you driving around here," he said. "We always wondered who you were."

"Yeah," Sean said. "Listen, I'll give you a hundred dollars to detail this car,"

"A hundred dollars?"

"And when I get back, another hundred, okay?" she finished. "But look here," she gestured him over to the car and opened the passenger side door. She went to the floor of the car and picked up a hair from the floorboard. "Not one hair left behind, okay? Everything in here is trash, you don't worry about that. When I get back, I want it to be just leather seats and floormats, ok? Can you do that?"

He nodded vigorously. "No, I can do that. I got my stuff right here." He gestured to a brick wall in the shade where a milk crate was stacked with bottles and personal belongings. "It's going to be like brand new, alright? Alright?"

"Alright," Sean laughed. "I'm counting on you."

He introduced himself as Jimmy. Sean didn't offer her name.

"I'll just call you Red," he said.

She walked along the short strip of businesses next to the Car Wash. A barbershop pole outside of a window had caught her eye.

Place smelled like an old-school barbershop. Linoleum checkered floors. Alcohol aftershave. The ancient collection of spritzes and sprays in quarter-full dusty bottles that lined the space below the long mirror. A poster of the Dallas skyline hung on the wall next to a portrait of Dr. Martin Luther King. The barber was an older woman with processed hair that was big and teased out, red lipstick, a gold front tooth, and a kind smile. She told her, hold on a minute, baby.

Sean sat in one of the chairs that lined the wall. A small table had magazines on it. Porn was mixed in casually, and Sean chuckled to herself. *Gods, I love this neighborhood.*

"You want to do what-now?" the barber asked her.

"Shave down the sides, and I need the top cut short and bleached hard."

"Bleached hard? Baby, do you mean dyed? You want it blond?"

“I mean bleached.”

The long points of a wide-tooth comb were prodding her scalp as the barber started to part her hair.

“Girl, your hair is so healthy.” She tsked one more time. “But alright.”

The barber, named Sherrie with an I-E had been cutting hair for more than forty years, it turned out. In the same shop. There were some kids whose hair she cut whose grandfather’s hair she’d also cut. Her hands were steady with the razor. Sean didn’t ever ask to see what Sherrie was doing - she’d given her free rein. Her scalp burned with whatever Sherrie had put in it before she took her over to the hair washing station.

“It’s going to kill your curls,” she said. “But you’re young. They’ll come back.”

When Sherrie finally got Sean back in the chair, turned her around to the mirror, and whipped the bib off, Sean was impressed.

There was a shock of white-blond hair down the center of her head, a curly Mohawk that faded into the black of her natural hair color. Sherrie had shaved lines into the fade, and the parts added a sharp edge to the look.

“Sherrie, you cut the *shit* out of my hair!” Sean said. “I was two seconds from just shaving it all off when I saw the pole outside.”

“Is this about a man?” Sherrie asked. “Some kind of revenge thing?”

Sean shrugged. “Kind of.” She paid Sherrie, then cleared her throat. “Is it okay if I sweep up this hair?”

No hair on her clothes, and none in her car. Jimmy had passed her inspection. Her car felt brand new.

She drove towards the city. She pulled over into the shoulder under an overpass and put her blinkers on. Hopped the side rail. Ball bearings rattled in the spray paint can as she shook it. A triangle in luminescent hot pink went up on the concrete pillar, about the size of her hand. She pricked a finger and dabbed at the center of the triangle until a decent-sized dot stood out at its center. She hopped back in the car.



"Are you working again?"

BRUNCH

4/7

“Is Keith in today?” Sean asked the woman behind the counter.

“If we’re open, he’s here,” the woman laughed. She was the right kind of woman you wanted working in a restaurant: full-bodied and sharp-eyed. Like she ate well, but was picky about it. It was about lunchtime, and the small staff was buzzing around to serve the influx of customers. “Is he expecting you?” the woman asked, one eye on the front door and the other on the tables that needed to be served.

“He should be.”

“Alright, then just go on back and see him.” She flipped the counter up to let Sean walk through. “Do not step in the kitchen”, she said sharply and raised one finger. “And please, do not distract him for too long. We’re one seven-top away from being slammed, you hear me?” she said, opening her hand into what looked like a call on god. “You can tell him we need another floor manager too, tell him that,” she laughed before returning her focus to the restaurant floor.

Sean stood at the door of the kitchen, careful not to cross with even her toes. Keith’s head snapped up, his chef’s hat bobbing like a goose. He started to take off his apron as he approached her.

“I was wondering if you were going to make it by,” he said and led the way to his office in the back.

“I promised not to keep you long,” Sean said and slipped her backpack off. She brought out the wicker basket with the lid latched closed. Inside was a bundle of cotton cloth. She passed it over to him. “It’s about a pound.”

He unfolded the pecan truffles and blew out a low whistle.

“These are gorgeous, too,” he remarked. Sean didn’t agree - they looked like tuberous little walnuts or malformed and undersized potatoes, but to each their own. “Where do you get these?” He asked, teasing her.

“You wouldn’t need me if I just told you, now would you?” She laughed. “Speaking of middlemen,” she said, “Do you know anyone who’s working as a fence?”

“Are you working again?”

“No.”

“Because that sounds like you’re working again.”

“I’m not.”

“Does this have something to do with the sorcerer at your house?” He cocked his head and stared half at her, half into the middle distance. Sensing things. “You’re also being followed.”

“How about this: I’ll tell you where the truffle spot is if you take this job off my hands.”

“You can’t just dip back into working like that. Why don’t you just get rid of him?”

“I don’t do that anymore.” She pulled up her jacket sleeves to show her arms. He nodded.

“I’m not going to take the job. Neither should you. It stinks. I’m going to tell you this, at no cost, that you need to get rid of the sorcerer.”

“It’s Marion. The big scrier out of Louisiana.”

“I’ve heard of him.” He shook his head. Opened a drawer on his desk. Pulled out something wrapped in a small cloth like an eyeglass wipe. He put it on the desk, slid it over to her.

Inside was a fork. Silver with ornate floral decorations down the handle.

“I can’t afford it,” she told him.

“It’s a gift. It’s not like you’re giving out favors anymore, right?”

She nodded and picked up the fork. She went to put it in the pocket of her jacket.

“Ah. Left pocket,” he said. She switched hands and did just that.

“Thank you.”

“Why don’t you come help out in the kitchen? It’d keep you out of trouble.”

“Trouble comes to find me. I’m not good with people.”

“Better than you think.”

“Not good with having a boss, then.”

She strolled out of the restaurant and went to her car. Didn’t see anyone in the rearview. Drove past the spot on the underpass. No one there.

She drove straight back down to the Sunny South side, where the overpass to 45 used to be. Stopped her car there, did up another triangle on the new concrete barrier the City was putting up. She was running out of stick pins and fingers that were unstuck.

There was a burger joint on one of the corners of Malcolm X Boulevard. It had been there since forever, a six-by-six place with two people working it all day, serving burgers day in, day out, dawn ‘til dusk. She asked for no mustard on her chili burger. They always put it on there anyway. She was pretty sure they had all the buns done up with sauces well before anyone actually ordered anything. She didn’t care. It was still good. They didn’t make small talk. There was other business going down on the corner, but everyone really just minded their own. She sat on the hood of her car. Watched everyone from beneath her thick lashes. Wanted to go home. Couldn’t. Not yet.

Just going to have to do this some other kind of way.

She wiped her hands clean, stuck her keys in her right pocket, and started walking down the street.

It wasn’t long before she felt it - Seidh. Like Marion, they carried their Seidh loud. Sorcerers like that would make a regular person’s skin crawl. To Sean, it was like they were wearing expensive cologne but had decided to bathe in it rather than spray it.

“Hey. Hey, yellow dress,” one of them said.

“What’s your tattoos mean?” the other laughed. Her sleeves were still pushed up to her elbows, rocking a straight out of the eighties look. But he was talking about the sleeve of black ink that covered her forearms. He couldn’t see that the bands were blackest at her elbows and then faded down until they reached her hands. It meant more that he didn’t know what they were.

Someone snatched her elbow! She was twirled around forcefully by her right arm, pinned to the wrought iron gate that separated the sidewalk from the old cemetery on the other side. He fished in her right pocket and took her keys, tossed them to his partner. Patted the other pocket down and felt nothing. They crowded around her, in case any prying eyes might look too long.

The tattoos felt tight around her arms like blood pressure cuffs. The sorcerers stared down at her, stone-faced. The one in her face was Hispanic, the other black. They both had sigils tattooed on their neck. Nothing Sean recognized off-hand, but it meant that they wanted to be power players.

“Where’s the blood?”

“You’re here to shake me down? Who sent you?” Sean asked back, keeping her voice sharp as the edge of a steel blade. The sorcerers looked at each other like *this bitch*.

“Where is it?” he asked through his teeth.

She reached into her left pocket and pulled out the fork. They laughed.

“This bitch got a fork in her pocket!” the second sorcerer laughed.

“We about to have brunch, bro?”

She stabbed his hand with the tines. He lowered his shoulder and crushed her against the gate. The wind was knocked out of her and her face got mushed - she was pretty sure she lost an eyelash - but she jabbed the fork upwards at him and pushed her way back. She struck at their hands like a snake anytime they reached for her. They growled in frustration as she pricked their hands, fingers, cheeks, necks, and chests with the fork. There was no hair to grab onto, so they tried her jacket, dress. Every time, *wham wham!* with the fork.

It was all a flurry of anger and determination, but Sean saw that they were starting to gasp for breath. Their cheeks and hands were swelling. Sean looked at the fork.

You brilliant green witch, you. She silently thanked Keith as she knelt over the sorcerers.

“Who sent you?”

“Nero,” one of them choked out. “From Tennessee. Got a crew up there.”

“We’re looking for the scier. For the blood.”

“I’m not working with the scier.”

“That’s not what Nero says,” he panted. “Scier sold the blood to you.”

“Is that what Marion’s telling folks? Shit.”

“Please, call back your magic.”

“Magic? I’m not in anymore. I’ve *been* out.” But it didn’t matter - they had both gone unconscious.

They better not die. That’d be a bad look.

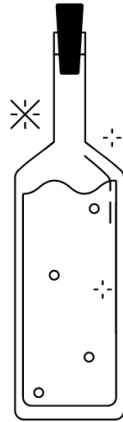
She put the fork back in her pocket.

Now I have a whole other sorcerer on my back.

She hadn’t heard of this guy Nero. *Must be an up and comer.* Not her world, not her business.

It got dark quick after that. She drove back towards town again. Someone was standing under the glowing triangle, hoodie on, leg kicked up as they leaned back against the pillar. Sean kept driving. Looped back across town, went to the other spot.

Same person was there, too. Same hoodie. Same position. Eyes right on her car. The hood slipped back. A pale woman with her hair slicked back from her blacked-out eyes watched her drive by.



"There's no one innocent left."

REPUTATION

5/7

Sean closed her front door behind her, quick. The scrier was sitting in her chair still, scrolling through his phone, bored. She closed all the blinds and locked the door. She peeked out her side window at the street out front. No one there.

"I'm being followed," she told Marion. "Maybe by more than one someone. Who else have you brought down on me?"

"Sounds like the sooner you get this issue off your hands, the better."

"You told someone that I have the blood."

"I may have told someone that you're taking care of my problem. If he assumes that means you have the blood,"

"Shut up," she scoffed. "Fine. You want the blood gone. You want money. Let's get this done with."

"My info," he said, and handed her a slip of paper with wiring information on it. Overseas bank. "Once the transfer is done, I'll be out of your hair." He looked at her again. "I liked you better before."

"Fuck yourself hard," she said politely.

"You sure you don't want anything?"

"I want you to fix those wards before I come back. You're top-notch, right? Better than the guy I paid to do it before. I want them nice and tight."

"Heard you were top-notch once, too. Heard that there was a deal that went bad for you. Must have been real bad. Bad enough that you were able to drop off the scene like that. Unscathed. No favors for anyone to call on." He looked at the tattoos on her arms. "Then you went and maimed yourself."

"What I didn't do was go around making enemies. Or stealing from the people who hired me," she said pointedly. "How is it they've found me already but not you?"

"Perk of being the best scrier in the south. Things that can be found can be un-found. I'm the only thing keeping them from knocking down your busted-ass door."

"You know, the problem with sorcerers like you, who think they've got it all figured out because they got really good at *one* thing - is that you forget your general education. You forget the rules."

"The Dark Compact," he scoffed.

"Weak as it is, it's still in play. I'm giving you a chance to rethink yourself, Marion. I really am." She crossed her arms at the sorcerer. He frowned his face up in genuine confusion and borderline annoyance.

"Are you that upset about the wards? They wouldn't have kept me out. The Dark Compact doesn't protect humans from each other. Witch, sorcerer, whatever. It only keeps the monsters out. You don't need wards to do that either. Any threshold of a human residence works just the same." He shifted in the chair. "You got spooked, Sean. Doesn't mean the rest of us are living scared."

"Would you like a drink?" she asked through her teeth.

"Ugh. Hospitality. Sure. I'll take a drink," he agreed as if she were begging him to *please finish all my alcohol*.

She walked over to the bar and made two drinks. Marion was still doing the silly thing where he wouldn't turn his head to look behind him. *So macho.*

"There's not going to be a fence for the blood. Even if there were," she said as she handed him the gin and tonic, "I wouldn't pass this problem on to some innocent. I'll take care of it."

"There's no one innocent left."

"Maybe you're right," she said and looked down at her glass. Marion made a face.

"This drink tastes like an old man."

"I'll need to take the blood with me."

Suspicion was slapped all over Marion's face.

"No one else is going to take the job. I suspect you know that, and that's why you're here. So if you want it done, this is how it goes. Because you got yourself into some stupid shit, and now you've gotten me in it with you. You know how these dead heads work?"

He made no expression.

"By the rules, Marion," she explained. "You know anything about Risen contracts?"

"I know that you've dealt with the Risen before."

"Reputation, I know." She paced across her floor. "You show everything up front. You strike a deal. Everyone goes their separate ways. Unless there's trouble."

"And if there's trouble?"

"You know my reputation, don't you?"



"Middleman? Bullshit."

DEADS

6/7

Eight hours until dawn.

Her cell rang. Keith.

“A couple guys were found with a bunch of puncture wounds. Off Malcolm X. You hear about that?”

“Some stupid stuff happened earlier.”

“Yeah, but these guys came up drained of blood. Looks like some biters got them good.”

Shit.

“Everything’s cool,” she said.

“Doesn’t sound like everything’s cool, Sean.”

“Have you ever heard of a guy named Nero? Tennessee?”

“No, never have. You stay safe, Sean.”

“Yeah, I know,” she said and hung up.

She sat on her car hood and thought a while. She stared at her house. The blinds in Pearl’s window moved. She waved. Got into the Cutlass, drove to the old overpass. Someone was collapsed against the concrete, knees up to her chest, head hanging to one side. Same hoodie as earlier.

Shit.

Sean slammed the car into park and got out. Looked around - no one looking her way. She reached down to grab the woman. Ice cold.

Not good.

She pulled the woman over to her car, dumped her in the passenger seat.

The yellow overhead light of her interior shone on the woman’s face. Or what should have been a woman’s face. The eyes were blacked out still, but her skin looked rubbery and stiff, bloodless and pale. No lips, just a slit for a mouth with bony serrated teeth inside. Bloody foam gushed up from behind them. Sean leaned the Risen back, tilted her chin down, and strapped the seatbelt across her.

Please don’t let me get pulled over with this overdosing pre-dead white girl in the car.

Sean turned the engine and headed towards downtown.

“You can drop face,” she told the member of the Risen.

“It may be the only thing keeping me alive,” came a hissing whisper from behind those sharklike teeth.

“How’d you drain *both* sorcerers before you realized they were poisoned? When I left them, they could barely move! What are you, new?”

“They weren’t answering my questions. I got carried away. I’ll metabolize the toxin. But I gotta be honest, this sucks dick,” she groaned. “I was looking for you.”

“Oh, I know,” Sean said. “I kind of put up billboards, right? You couldn’t just, you know - wait?”

“Stop the car. I’ll fuck you up,” she groaned.

“Fuck me up? I’ll fuck *you* up, keep talking. I just got this shit detailed, I don’t need you puking or shitting or bleeding or whatever it is that’s going on with you over there in here, alright?”

“I’ll fu-,”

“Hey!” Sean cut her off. “Enough of that. You just focus on not dying right now, ol’ Miley Cyrus wannabe lookin-ass.”

That got the dead woman quiet.

“Why are you helping me?” the Risen asked, then convulsed slightly.

“I’ve got a lot going on and in my experience, the fewer dead people,” she glanced sideways at the Risen, “really dead people - at the end of the day, the better. You are new. Just got out your Big Seven? Working as a merc? You earning favors or paying them off?”

“Give me the blood,” she panted. Sean shook her head.

“I can’t do that. But I can get you anywhere in the city you can get help. You got a place?”

“Yeah. We’ve got a doctor.”

The Risen directed Sean to an apartment building on the edge of downtown, near the public library next to one of those trendy health grocery stores. It was nice. The interior looked either newly remodeled or barely used. Maybe both. Wide hallways, fake wood flooring. Warm lighting. Sean supported the Risen, who could just barely walk. Bitch was heavier than she looked. *Greedy ass*, she thought. *Sending new biters out here, hungry and shit*. The Risen pointed to the elevator. Top floor, then down the hall.

“Which door?”

“Any door,” the Risen said. Sean knocked on the nearest one.

A nerdy-looking dude answered. Tall, thin, zero muscle mass. Glasses, brown hair. He looked Irish-pale or office-pale, not dead-pale. But Sean sensed right off that he was as dead as the woman slung around her shoulder.

“Looking for a medic,” Sean said. “One of yours?” The guy seemed to snap to it - he’d been a little busy taking her in.

“Right, come in.”

“I can do it myself,” the Risen hissed.

Sure. It wasn’t a good look having some mortal helping her out.

“Okay,” Sean said and shrugged her off. The Risen fell straight forward. Her forehead cracked against the floor. Sean stepped over her.

The room she walked into was an enormous lab. It took up the whole floor of the building, or at least that entire side of the hall. Like stepping into a hospital wing. She could tell there were several rooms connected by double doors. Microscopes, vent hoods, Bunsen burners - and other things that she didn’t know the names of. The Doctor Risen was helping the other up.

“Blood poisoning?” he asked Sean.

“Sticking her teeth places she shouldn’t. Her meals were micro-dosed with something, I’m not sure what.” Sean pulled the fork from her pocket. “They had some kind of reaction. Most likely some kind of plant-based thing.” The Risen reached for it. Sean pulled back a little.

“It was a gift to me, and now I’m gifting it to you,” she said carefully before releasing it.

“I’m afraid that I don’t have any food to offer you,” he said. “Or drink.” He set the female Risen in a chair and hooked her up to a blood bag after a few questions. He dropped the fork into a plastic bag, labeled it, and sat it on a table. “I also don’t have any money and I don’t give out favors.” He looked at her sideways. “You’re a sorceress, right?” He squinted at her. “Right?” He asked again, a little unsure.

“I’m here because she needed help. That’s all,” Sean said. “I would have much rather this had gone a different way.”

“Out of my pay grade,” he said, and put up his hands.

“I feel that,” Sean grumbled. “What’s with the fake hallway?”

“I keep the top two floors. Research. And I live here.”

“Live being the operative word.”

“Hardy-har-har,” he said flatly. “Please, tell me another joke, I haven’t heard that one before.”

“Dude, calm down,” Sean said. She sat on a stool. People were real freaked out by deads. Not her. When they weren’t being all agro they were alright, even. *Shit, it’s the living wearing my ass out. Haunting me harder than any dead I ever met.*

And she’d met plenty, but she slid her thoughts right over that. Didn’t want to go there.

The Doc went on. “I’ve got tenants on the bottom two floors. They’re quiet. Pay rent on time. I keep the rent low, fixed, and I pay for daycare. I won’t ever have to worry about finding new tenants or anyone asking any questions about what I do here. Works for everyone.”

“Blood-sucking socialists, for real,” Sean laughed. “That’s cool, though. Smart way to lay low. I’m all about that.”

“This is you laying low?” he asked, one eyebrow going up to his hairline. She saw that behind his glasses his eyes were kinda blue, kinda gray. The pale green shirt he wore made them a little more gray, but washed him out bad. Especially under the fluorescent lights. Man needed a tan it would kill him to get.

“I don’t like trouble,” she said. He was still looking at her hard.

“Bindings?” he asked, his eyes flicking to the tattoos on her forearms. Sean nodded. He nodded, too.

“I see you looking at me,” she said quietly. Seriously. “I know, alright? But I don’t practice anymore. I’m out.”

“What do you need then? With her?”

“Yeah, I’m still in the fucking room,” the blond Risen bit out. She was looking better. Had her human face back on.

“Didn’t nobody miss your mouth, though,” Sean said, turning to her. “But now that you can talk, I need you to chit chat with whoever it is that sent you to my neighborhood, and we’re going to need to have a meeting.”

“You’re claiming territory?”

The tattoos squeezed at her arms. The eyes behind the cloth on that statue flashed in her mind. Whispers of the Orishas were from lips right behind her ear. She calmed herself. Blocked it all out.

“No. I’m out of that lifestyle,” she said firmly. “I’m just a middleman like you. I have something your boss wants, and there’s a price attached to it. It’s just money. No favors. No magic.”

She snorted like she didn’t want anyone to ever call her pretty.

“Middleman? Bullshit. I thought sorceresses were all about that power shit,” fake-Miley scoffed. Her eyes were brown; she’d dropped the dramatics. Without all the extra, she looked like a fifteen-year-old. Flat-chested, turned-up nose, smudged black eyeliner, wearing cynicism like it was a personality. She stood up, pulled the IV out. Was all bowed up, chin raised and everything. “I could just take it from you now. We could,” she said, volunteering the Doc up with her. He sat back in his chair and pushed his glasses up his nose like *nuh-uh, no you don’t*.

Sean just stared at the Risen. Kept her face still like they liked to do.

“Listen, Punk Barbie, do you know who I am? Who I was?”

“Are you supposed to be somebody?”

Sean smiled with her lips tight together. “No. No, I’m not,” she said. “But you might want to check with somebody who is before you do something stupid.”

“She’s a guest in my home,” the Doc said. “She’s given me a gift. It wouldn’t be very hospitable of me to let you do anything...stupid,” the Doctor agreed.

“How did Nero get the blood in the first place?” Sean asked. “I’m guessing that’s who the scrier stole it from.” The Risen rolled her eyes and put a hand on her skinny hip.

“Hell if I know. Those guys didn’t know shit. I never heard of Nero. I was told about Marion, and Marion’s been telling people that you’re the one to go to for problems like his. Says he sold the blood to you.”

“What blood?” the Doc asked. The women looked at him. He raised his hands.

“You’re right, never mind. None of my business.”

“That’s not what happened.” Sean handed the Risen the slip of paper that Marion had handed her. “But he wants what it’s worth.”

“So you are working for him.”

“I just want this night to end. I’m inviting you and your client to meet with me. Let’s make a deal.”

The Risen folded the paper into her palm and lifted her chin.

“I’ll get you a meeting.”

“Cool. Now if you don’t mind, I need a bath and a drink.”

“You said it,” the Doc muttered. Sean gave them a two-fingered salute and left the deads to their business.



"None still living."

DONE DEAL

7/7

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Sean sat in her car a few moments. She leaned against the steering wheel and looked at the city.

What people didn't understand about sorcery was the same thing they didn't understand about Dallas. Everyone has an idea about what it is, but it's all the surface stuff. Smoke and mirrors. Lights and glass. That's the appealing part. But the real threat lies beneath. Lies in that power. The same way the City was slowly marching itself down the corridor of South Dallas, waiting out, stirring up, pushing out the people in her neighborhood - that was the same with sorcery. Everything has a cost, and the highest price isn't money. It's blood.

What a shitshow this is.

Sean turned the engine and headed down the half-lit overpass that took her home, the skyline behind her, looking over her shoulder.

People throw a lot of chaos your way so you don't have time to think. She hated that shit.

Sean walked through the door. Marion had the nerve to be asleep in her chair. She slammed the door behind her.

"Oh, I'm sorry, were you trying to sleep?" She marched over to the bar and started loudly making a drink. *Is this what marriage feels like? Because this seems like what marriage would feel like.*

She noted that she'd have to pick up some more stickpins and hoped to never go through so many at once again. All but two of her fingers hurt. The drink sloshed over the edge of the glass, she handed it to him so hard. Straight Cuervo. She wasn't wasting the good stuff, not tonight.

"Maybe you thought I'd be somewhere trying to watch my back in case Nero sent some other goons, right?" she asked, throwing back her own drink. "They're dead, by the way."

Marion looked shaken.

"Don't look like that, I didn't do it. But you know, Marion," she said, and finally took a seat. Her leather couch felt so damn good. She relaxed. She didn't even care that Marion was taller than her, sitting in the chair - which she was sure had been his point all along. Trivialities. "I've never heard of Nero. Been really thinking about it. And here's the thing, Marion. I've heard of everybody. I've been around a long time." She tapped a finger on the rim of her glass. Poured herself another two shots worth of tequila. "So maybe there's this up and comer, or maybe there's just you. And you hire two low-level sorcerers pimping out their Seidh to intimidate me. Only they don't actually know anything, do they? In fact, they know so little that when a member of the Risen - a biter, you'd call them - gets her teeth in, they don't have enough information to get her to stop. Because it was all made up. They never were with Nero. Obviously had no idea who you were. They were talkers, your guys. Can't imagine that they'd find their sense of loyalty facing down the fangs.

You wanted me to find a fence quick. What did I say - *'bust some vampire heads'?* You really thought that's what I did, right? Reputation is weird like that."

Marion looked disgusted.

So I'm not wrong.

"Where's the blood?" he asked.

"I have it here." She showed him the glass slide and set it on the table between them.

"It's not worth all this, you know. Check your accounts."

His hand was right on his phone. Eyes went all wide.

"Told you they pay up front. They're also good about getting what's due them.

They're going to be coming to collect."

"Why do you still have the blood?"

"It's not my deal. It's yours."

"I got what I wanted," he said.

"Not what you deserve," Sean grumbled. Marion smiled that stupid-ass smile of his.

"People rarely get that, ma," he laughed.

He pulled a gun and shot her. In the gut, like a bitch.

She inhaled deeply, involuntarily. She pressed a hand to the wound and exhaled slowly. Tried to keep her heart steady.

"They're going to find you, Marion."

He laughed. Stood, tucked the gun back into the breast pocket of his jacket. "They hadn't found me yet, have they?"

He started rifling through her drawers as she bled on the couch, about to rob her blind as well.

"They've been following you. Probably have a lot of questions about how you got that blood. How many people did you fuck over in the process?"

"None still living." He did praying hands at her when he turned to talk down to her. "It's going to be easier for you if you just shut up and die, OK honey? They got their blood, that's all they want. I'm about to disappear. Live somewhere that's sunny year-round."

"They know *my* blood, though. I made sure of that. Considering that my blood is *in* you, how long you think it'll take them to sniff you out and hunt you down?" Sean laughed, then groaned. She shifted a bit. No pain in her spine. Bullet must've gone right through.

Marion was horror-stricken. Went pale, and suddenly his light skin seemed jaundice-yellow.

"What?"

She waved her fingertips at him. He couldn't see the little pinpricks there, but he could guess.

"You never once watched me make your drink. That's the problem with you macho types. You forget basic shit. You ignore the rules of hospitality," she said, nodding towards her bullet wound. "You never even got the ward fixed, did you?"

"I'll wait 'til dawn," he shrugged. "You'll be dead by then. I'll be gone before they can come looking," he laughed maniacally.

There was a knock at the door. Marion jumped when it swung open.

The blond Risen was standing there. Her eyebrows went up at Sean, then tight together in a glare at Marion. Behind her, another Risen. Male. Wearing a long ceremonial robe.

Never a good sign.

They walked over the threshold.

“You - you can’t come here,” Marion stuttered. “This is a *house*. It’s - it’s a mortal - mortal *residence*,” he enunciated like he was on court TV. His judge was still as a shadow.

The Risen’s eyes looked past Marion to Sean.

“You’ve broken hospitality,” he said flatly, though his Nigerian-sounding accent gave it some melody. This Risen was dark-skinned, handsome. Sean caught herself trying to flip her hair over her shoulder, then remembered that she’d chopped it off. For nothing, it turned out.

“No, I,” Marion stuttered.

“Were we also not invited, which we are,” the Risen continued in his Gregorian-chant-eerily-beautiful voice, “She’s damned.”

Marion was almost white with fear as he looked over his shoulder at her.

“*Damned?*” he squeaked.

Bet your ass is missing those wards now.

“She has no protections,” the Risen confirmed.

“Reputations.” Sean laughed over a short breath. It made blood spurt from her belly. “Funny like that.”

“I have the blood,” Marion said.

“I *own* the blood,” the Risen said. “Our deal is made. You and I have new business now.” He stared at Marion and let his eyes go black. “Run.” To the blond, he said, “Give him a head start. It’ll be good practice for you.”

The dead woman smiled and Marion had his back against the wall as he slipped past them. He ran out her front door and into the night.

“Hell yeah,” the blond Risen giggled, then took off after him.

Sean panted. She felt her skin stitching together, healing already. Her blood wouldn’t let her die. The whispers were back behind her ear. *Not yet*, they said. The Risen watched her. He seemed amused. She gestured to the dry bar in the corner.

“Can I offer you a drink?”



About the Author

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OBJ

Sasha Kehoe was born and raised in South Dallas, Texas and loves writing paranormal romance that bites, kicks, and punches its way through a book - especially if there's a smart-mouthed heroine involved! Now residing in the country with a wonderfully supportive husband (along with a cat, dog, and a coop full of chickens) she spends a completely necessary amount of time pondering the universe, fate, magic, and mayhem.

Visit SashaKehoe.com for more books, videos, updates & more!