

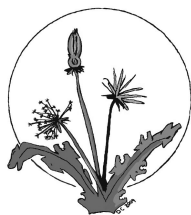
#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *PALE DEMON*

KIM HARRISON



**A
PERFECT
BLOOD**

A Perfect Blood



KIM HARRISON



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Chapter One



The woman across from me barely sniffed when I slammed the pen down on the counter. She didn't care that I was furious, that I'd been standing in this stupid line for over an hour, that I couldn't get my license renewed or my car registered in my name. I was tired of doing everything through Jenks or Ivy, but DEMON wasn't a species option on the form. Friday morning at the DMV office. God! What had I been thinking?

"Look," I said, waving a faded photocopied piece of paper. "I have my birth certificate, my high school diploma, my old license, and a library card. I'm standing right in front of you. I am a person, and I need a new driver's license and my car registered!"

The woman gestured for the next guy in line, her bedraggled graying hair and lack of makeup only adding to her bored disinterest. I glared at the tidy Were in a business suit who had moved to stand too close behind me, and nervous, he dropped back.

The clerk looked at me over her glasses and sucked at her teeth. "I'm sorry," she finally said, tapping at her keyboard and bringing up a new screen. "You're not in the system under witch or even other." She squinted at me. "You're listed as dead. You're not dead, are you?"

Crap on toast, can this get any worse? Frustrated, I tugged my shoulder

bag up higher. “No, but can I get a dead-vamp sticker and get on with my life?” I asked, and the Were behind me cleared his throat impatiently.

She pushed her thick glasses back where they belonged. “Are you a vampire?” she asked dryly, and I slumped.

No, I was obviously not a vampire. From all accounts, I looked like a witch. Long, frizzy red hair; average build; average height; with a propensity for wearing leather when the situation demanded it and sometimes when it didn’t. Until a few months ago I’d called myself a witch, too, but when the choice was between becoming a lobotomized witch or a free demon . . . I took the demon status. I didn’t know they were going to take everything else, too. Demons were legal nonentities on this side of the ley lines. God help me if I should land in jail for jaywalking—I apparently had fewer rights than a pixy, and I was tired of it.

“I can’t help you, Ms. Morgan,” the woman said, beckoning the man behind me forward, and he shoved me aside as he handed her his form and old driver’s license.

“Please!” I said as she ignored me, leaning toward her screen. Beside me, the man grew nervous, the spicy scent of agitated Were rising up.

“I just bought the car,” I said, but it was obvious this date was over. “I need to get it registered. And my license renewed. I gotta drive home!”

I didn’t—I had Wayde for that—but the lie wouldn’t hurt anyone.

The woman eyed me with a bored expression as the man took a moment to write his check. “You are listed as dead, Ms. Morgan. You need to go down to the social security office and straighten it out there. I can’t help you here.”

“I tried that.” My teeth clenched, and the man in front of the counter fidgeted as we both vied for the scrap of worn carpet. “They told me I needed a valid driver’s license from you, a certified copy of life from my insurance company, and a court-documented form of species status before they’d even talk to me, and the courts won’t let me make an appointment because I’m listed as dead!” I was shouting, and I lowered my voice.

“I can’t help you,” she said as the man pushed me out of his space. “Come back when you have the right forms.”

Shoved to the side, I closed my eyes and counted to ten, very conscious of Wayde sitting in one of the faded orange plastic chairs under the win-

dows as he waited for me to realize the inevitable. The twentysomething Were was one of Takata's security people, having more muscles than tattoos showing from around his casual jeans and black T-shirt, and the small, stocky man had a lot of tattoos. He'd shown up on my doorstep the last week of July, moving into the belfry despite my protests, a "birthday gift" from my mom and birth father/pop-star dad. Apparently they didn't think I could keep myself safe anymore—which bothered me a lot. Sort of. Wayde had been on my mom's payroll for nearly four months, and the anger had dulled.

My eyes opened, and seeing that I was still in this nightmare, I gave up. Head down, I gripped my birth certificate tighter and stomped to the bank of orange plastic chairs. Sure enough, Wayde was carefully staring at the ceiling, his feet spread wide and his arms over his chest as he snapped his gum and waited. He looked like a biker dude with his short, carefully trimmed orange-red beard and no mustache. Wayde hadn't told me this was a lost cause, but his opinion was obvious. The man got paid whether he was playing chauffeur for me or camped out in the church's belfry talking to the pixies.

Seeing me approach, Wayde smiled infuriatingly, his biceps bulging as his arms crossed over his wide chest. "No good?" he asked in his Midwestern accent, as if he hadn't heard the entire painful conversation.

Silent, I fumed as I wondered how the woman could treat me like I was just some jerk-ass nobody. I was a demon, damn it! I could flatten this place with one curse, burn it to nothing, give her warts or turn her dog inside out. If . . .

Hands clenched in fists, I gazed at the decorative band of charmed silver on my wrist, glinting in the electric light like a pretty bauble. If . . . If I hadn't wanted to cut off all contact with my adopted kin. If I wasn't such a good person to begin with. If I wanted to act like a demon in truth. I'd devoted my life to fighting injustice, and being jerked around like this wasn't fair! But no one messes with a civil servant. Not even a demon.

"No good," I echoed him as I tried and failed to get rid of my tension. Wayde took a deep breath as he stood. He was small for a man, but big for a Were, coming to my five foot eight exactly, with a thin waist, wide

shoulders, and small feet. I hadn't seen him as a wolf yet, but I bet he made a big one.

"You mind driving home?" I asked, handing him my keys. Crap, I'd had them in my hand for only the hour it had taken to get to the front of the line. I'd never get to drive my car legally.

Introspective, Wayde fingered the lucky rabbit's foot key chain, the metal clinking softly. There wasn't much on it these days—just the key to a car I couldn't drive and the key to Ivy's lockbox. "I'm sorry, Rachel," he said, and I looked up at his low, sincere voice. "Maybe your dad can fix something."

I knew he meant Takata, not the man who had actually raised me, and I grimaced. I was tired of going to other people for help. Hands in the pockets of my little red leather jacket, I turned to the door, and Wayde slipped ahead of me to open the milky glass. I'd get the car registered to Jenks tomorrow. Maybe Glenn could help get my license pushed through—they liked me down there at the human-run Federal Inderland Bureau.

"Ms. Morgan?" crackled and popped over the ancient PA, and I turned, a stab of hope rising in me even as I wondered at the hint of worry in the woman's voice. "Please come to window G."

I glanced at Wayde, who'd frozen with his hand on the door. His brown eyes were scanning the room behind me, and his usually easygoing expression was professionally wary. The switch surprised me. I hadn't seen it before, but then, it had been pretty quiet around the church since I'd officially switched my species to demon. Very few people knew the band of silver around my wrist truncated about half my magic arsenal. It was basically a Möbius strip, the charm's invocation phrase never ending, never beginning, holding the spell, and therefore me, in an in-between space where it was real yet not completely invoked and barred any contact with the demon collective. Long story short, it hid me from demons. My inability to do ley-line magic was an unfortunate side effect.

"Ms. Morgan, window G?" the worried voice came again.

We turned our backs on the bright, windy day beyond the cloudy glass. "Maybe they found another form," I said, and Wayde slid into my personal space, making me stifle a shiver.

"If you'd give the I.S. and the FIB the lists they want, you'd get your

citizenship faster,” he said, and I frowned. This didn’t feel good. There was way too much whispering behind the counter among the no-longer-bored clerks. People were looking at us, and not in a good way.

“I’m not going to write out every single demon curse so they can decide which ones are legal and which ones aren’t,” I said as I found the hand-lettered, dilapidated *G* hanging over a small window at the end of the room. “Talk about a waste of time.”

“And this morning wasn’t?” he asked dryly.

I ignored that, hopeful as I approached the woman waiting for me. She was dressed like a supervisor, and the flush on her face ratcheted my worry tighter. “Ah, I’m Rachel Morgan,” I said, but she was already lifting the counter to let me into the back area.

Eyes bright, she glanced at Wayde. “If you could come with me, Ms. Morgan. Both of you, if you like. Someone would like to speak to you.”

“If it’s about—” I started.

“Just please come back,” she said, standing aside and ushering me through in excitement.

My gut tightened, but I wasn’t helpless, even lacking half my magic, and Wayde was with me. Again my eyes touched on the band of charmed silver. I didn’t like being without ley-line magic, but I’d rather that than the demons knowing I was alive. I’d made a few mistakes during the last year, the least of which had caused a leak in the ever-after. The entire alternate reality was shrinking, and as soon as the demons realized it, they’d probably take turns at me.

The woman sighed in relief as she closed the partition behind us, her low heels clacking fast as she led us to the back offices. An elated, frazzled living vampire in a black dress suit sat behind a cluttered desk in one, her face flushed and her eyes bright. She was young, professional, and probably bored out of her mind with working in an office day in and day out if the photos of her skydiving and running zip lines that were posted to her three-by-two calendar on the wall meant anything. Her office was overflowing with stacked folders and files in a weird mix of organized clutter. She probably took on more than she could handle. Trying to prove herself at the office, maybe as she clearly liked doing on her weekends?

I’d guess her human heritage was Hispanic, with her long dark hair

pulled back in a simple clip and her dusky complexion, dark eyes, oval face, very red lips, white teeth, and pretty eyelashes. Her fingers tucking in her blah-brown blouse were long and slender, her nails painted a dull red. I could sense her confidence as she looked up at our entrance, a strong thread of self that ran through her. She was a living vampire, but clearly not high on her master's favorites list. I thought it odd that the more favored a living vampire was, the more emotionally damaged she was. This woman was clearly one of the forgotten. Lucky her. Being forgotten meant you lived longer, and having been forgotten, she'd probably lack most of the darker abilities that Ivy, my roommate, had developed in order to survive.

"Nina," the supervisor said, and the young woman stood, by all appearances not interested in me as she stacked the papers on her desk in a vain attempt to tidy up. "This is Ms. Morgan, and, ah . . ."

Wayde stepped into the hesitation, extending his hand as he moved both of us into the small, cluttered room. "Mr. Benson," the Were said. "I'm Ms. Morgan's security. Pleasure to meet you, Ms. Ninotchka Romana Ledesma."

The elaborate name rolled off his lips as if he'd grown up in the south of Spain, and surprised, I looked at the nameplate on the desk and decided I'd stick to Nina.

Nina blinked, her gaze going from him to me as if seeing me for the first time. "Ah, good to meet you," she said as she confidently shook Wayde's hand. She turned to me, hesitating as she saw my hands deep in the pockets of my red coat. "Sit if you want."

I glanced at Wayde. Nina was excited, yes, but not about us. *Was someone else coming?* I thought, looking at the only open chair in the cramped office.

"Uh," I started, blinking when Nina shifted her bra strap and took a peek down to make sure everything was where it was supposed to be. "Do we need another chair?"

"No," she said abruptly as the woman who had brought us back here left, closing the door behind her. "Unless your security wants one. But don't they usually stand?"

"I'm fine," Wayde said as he took up a position just inside the closed door. "Ma'am, just what is it you want with Ms. Morgan?"

Tense, the young woman ran a hand down her hip and sat behind her desk, hiding her hands when she noticed her fingers trembling. “I don’t want anything. It’s not me, it’s *him*,” she said, and the tang of excited vampire reached out and smacked me. God, she smelled good, and I felt a tingle from the vampire bites under my perfect skin. “I’ve never done this before. I didn’t even know he knew I was alive, and now this!”

“Ah, all I want is my license renewed and my car registered in my own name,” I said, shaken from the surge of pheromones. I’d been right. She lacked control, but if she had been forgotten, it didn’t matter much. “If you can’t help me, I’m leaving.”

Alarm flashed over the living vampire, and she almost stood. “Someone in the I.S. would like to talk to you,” she said, her eyes wide. “I’m the only one here he wants to work through. My cousin is in the I.S., and well . . .” Flashing me a nervous smile, she suddenly looked scared. “It’s an honor to be asked to channel a master.”

I felt for the chair behind me and sat down. “A dead vamp wants to talk to me?” I gingerly perched on the edge of the seat. Sure, it was daylight, but the dead ones were still awake, deep underground. Apparently one wanted to talk to me, one so old that slipping into an unfamiliar living vampire was possible. *Not good*. But maybe he could get my car registered for me . . .

Uneasy, I glanced at Wayde. He shrugged and fell into parade rest. “Fine,” I said. “But make it quick. I’ve got to ask Jenks to register my car since you won’t do it through me.”

Ignoring my sarcasm, she shivered violently, jerking once as her eyes became unfocused and she reached for the stability of the desk with a white-knuckled strength. Her breath came in with a slow, sensual sound, her hair falling forward as her head bowed. She sighed, her red lips closing and her gaze sharpening on her hands gripping the edge of the desk. Slowly her fingers let go and her hands dropped into her lap. She seemed to grow taller as she pulled herself straight and looked at me—smiling to show her pointy little canines. I shivered at the new glint in her pupil-black eyes. I couldn’t help it, and her smile grew wider still as she took in the shape of my face in a decidedly masculine fashion. It wasn’t Nina anymore.

I stiffened as she breathed in deeply, shifting her shoulders back as she

tasted my unease, something Nina probably wasn't skilled enough to read on the air currents. The slight grimace as she looked down at her clothes made me wonder if she was uncomfortable with being in a skirt, or because of the cheap fabric. Her confidence before had been within herself. Now it was the assurance that she could do anything she wanted and no one would think twice. From the door, Wayde whistled, his arms loose at his sides.

"You've never seen this before?" I asked, and he shook his head. I watched "Nina" look over the room, placing herself, hearing things I could only guess at, sensing things I'd seen on the way in. "I once saw Piscary take over Kisten," I said softly. "Ivy hated it when Piscary took her over."

Across from me, Nina smiled. "She enjoyed it," she said, her voice sounding deeper, richer, more sophisticated. "Don't doubt that."

Realizing I had crossed my knees submissively, I put my feet square on the floor and leaned back in my chair as if relaxed—but I wasn't. This was eerie, seeing a man in a woman's body, and I was sure the undead vamp was a man. Someone's phone was vibrating, probably mine, and I ignored it.

Nina stood, gracefully catching her balance and frowning down at the scuffed heels she was wearing. Her hand came out to me in invitation, and I cursed myself when I found my hand rising to hers against my will, shivering as she breathed deeply over it, sensing what he/she was doing to me. "It's good to see you again, Ms. Morgan," she said slyly, and I reclaimed my hand before she tried to kiss it. God, I hated dealing with the old ones.

I glanced at Wayde, standing stiffly by the door. "You were the driver in San Francisco," I guessed, remembering that the driver had been channeling an undead vamp of some importance, eavesdropping on coven business as he drove me out to take care of someone they couldn't.

Smiling to hide her teeth, Nina inclined her head, looking devilish and seductive both as she took up a slightly wide-footed stance. It was really weird. This was not the flustered vampire who had been here when I walked in. And it wasn't what Nina would become when she died her first death. It was someone else entirely, someone old.

"I don't like not knowing who I'm talking with," I said, trying for annoyed but hearing it come out as petulant.

“Today I look like Nina,” she said, settling back in her chair and grimacing at the dirty corners of the office and the lack of a window. “You may call me that.”

“Who *are* you?” I said more firmly, and she just smiled, steeping her fingers.

“Someone who can help you,” she said, and I rolled my eyes as Wayde coughed. From my bag on the floor, a tiny ping told me someone had left a voice mail. “If you’re willing to make an effort, that is,” Nina continued, ignoring Wayde. “We failed in recognizing you. We let you slip from us. You’ve done well, but you could do even better—with a little . . . structure.”

“I’m not coming back to Inderland Security,” I interrupted, flushing. Crap, if that’s what this was about, I might be in trouble. Saying no to them could shorten your life span. But all Nina did was send her pupil-black gaze to a paper on her desk. It was a copy of my license. Under it was a blank registration form. I sighed, remembering the world we lived in. Damn it, my phone was ringing again, too, but anyone important like Ivy or Jenks would know to call Wayde.

“I might work a job for you, though,” I added grudgingly. Still Nina said nothing, her black eyes making me fidget. If the dead vampire had really been here, he could have tempted me into anything, but Nina was a young, forgotten vampire, and she didn’t have the right hormones turned on for the vampire she was channeling to use. Yet.

“What is the job?” I prompted, wanting to get out of here before I asked to have her baby.

The light in her eyes speaking of a possessive strength, Nina smiled, showing enough teeth to make me stifle a shiver. “Right to the point,” she said as if it pleased her, and I stared when she tried to put a foot on one knee, checking her motion at the last moment when her skirt caught. She reclined instead to look even more masculine, more in control, not caring that she was showing a healthy portion of leg. “You do know the only reason I didn’t notice you was because Piscary saw you first?”

Piscary was dead now, but I liked this even less. “What do you want?”

Nina tilted her head, dangerously suave as she eyed me from under her thick eyelashes. Ivy had given me that look before, and I stifled a flash of libido, knowing it was coming from the pheromones Nina was kicking out.

“I want you and Ivy Tamwood to help us find a group of Inderlanders committing demonlike crimes in and around the Cincinnati area. We have three sites to look at.”

I sat up, shocked. “Three! How long has this been going on?” There’d been nothing in the papers, but then, if the I.S. didn’t want it in the news, it wouldn’t be.

“Several weeks,” Nina said in regret, her gaze falling from mine for the first time, “which would be evident once you looked at the data, so listen as I tell you what you won’t find there.”

My eyes squinted. But ticked off was better than being turned on. “You should have come to me right away,” I said. “It will be harder now.”

“We thought it was *you*, Ms. Morgan. We had to make sure it wasn’t. Now that we know for sure, we wish to engage your services.”

Engage my services. How old is this guy? “You’ve been following me,” I said, remembering that itchy feeling between my shoulder blades whenever I was out: the grocery store, the shoe mall, the movies. I had thought it was Wayne, but maybe not. Crap, how long had they been shadowing me?

“Three weeks,” Wayne said, answering my unspoken question. “I didn’t know it was the I.S. or I would have told you.”

I turned to him, appalled. “You knew someone was following me and didn’t think I needed to know? Isn’t that your job?” I snapped, and Nina chuckled.

His expression closed, Wayne looked first at Nina, then at me. “It’s *my* job, and *my* call.”

“We believe there’s more than one person responsible for the crimes,” Nina broke in, and my attention was recaptured by his/her silken, aged voice. It was still Nina’s, but the self-assurance was mesmerizing. “There seem to be two modes of operation, harvesting, then dumping. Witches. All the bodies were those of witches.”

My expression twisted. I didn’t like the sound of that. “Harvesting? That’s ugly.”

Nina took a deep breath, almost as if she’d forgotten to breathe—which was a distinct possibility. “It’s the dumping that’s disturbing us the most. Nina will escort you through the newest site, and by the time you’re done, a courier will have delivered to your church the information we have

on the earlier crimes. I'd rather you not come into the I.S. tower, if you don't mind."

"Not a problem," I said softly, thinking it over. Demonlike crime, not demon crime. I didn't want to risk the demons knowing that I was still alive. But if it was truly demonic work, it would be all over the airways. Demons are not subtle. No, it was probably a group of wannabe witches dabbling in black magic, giving demons a bad name. Taking them out would not only make me feel good but it might help me get my citizenship pushed through.

"Okay," I said, and her soft, pleased sigh slipped over my skin like a silk scarf, raising gooseflesh. "I have to make a call. And that's even assuming I take the job. What does it pay?"

Nina reclined in her chair as if she owned the entire building. "What do you want?" she asked, her slim fingers gesturing gracefully, the red-painted nails catching the light. "Money?"

The word held a badly hidden disdain, but no, I didn't need money. My purse was plenty fat. Literally. My credit cards had been canceled, my bank account, my phone plan, everything. I was unwillingly off the grid and carrying cash thanks to the money Trent Kalamack had given me, money originally from the Withons, a small (by his standards, not mine) token amount he'd demanded as an apology for their trying to kill him. Good thing I had a bodyguard.

"A valid driver's license would be nice," I said, fighting not to look at the form on the desk. With that, I might get my bank account back. "And my car registered in my name." The independence would do wonders for my self-esteem.

Leaning forward with a masculine huff of air, Nina brushed her long fingers through the forms between us, making me wonder what it would feel like to have those sensitive fingertips on me, and I shivered again. It wasn't her/him, it was the vamp pheromones rising in here, and I leaned past Wayde to crack the door. Office chatter, loud and excited, drifted in, and the undead vampire smiled, knowing why I had cracked it, though Nina wouldn't have had a clue.

"I'd appreciate a list of the curses and how they're performed so we can decide which are legal and which are not," she said, and I caught back a bitter laugh.

“You have a library card, right?” I said flippantly. “It’s all in there.”

Nina cocked her head and eyed me from around her long, beautiful eyelashes, making my heart thump. “Not all of it,” she said softly, her words like an old jazz song down my spine.

I licked my lips and sat straighter, knees pressed together and hands clasped in my lap. “I don’t deal with my legal kin—Nina,” I said tightly, not liking the undead playing on my libido, and not through a young, innocent woman. Raising my hand, I jiggled the band of silver preventing me from tapping a line. He knew I had it. They all did. “I’m a limited-magic demon. Give me my car registration and my license, and I’ll find them for you. That’s my offer.”

“Done,” Nina said so quickly that I wished I’d asked for more.

Nina leaned forward, her long hand extended. I took it, and as we shook, the undead vampire left and I was suddenly shaking Nina the DMV worker’s hand.

Nina’s eyes widened as she gasped and pulled away. The scent of sweat rose, thick, and she fell back into her chair, her head lolling as her legs splayed awkwardly under the desk. “Wow,” she gasped to the ceiling, her lungs heaving as she struggled to catch up on the air her guest had probably forgotten to take in. Her face was pale and her fingers were trembling, but her eyes were so bright it was as if electricity was arcing through her. “What a rush!”

I looked at Wayde, who seemed nonplussed, and Nina suddenly sat up as if remembering that we were still in here. “Ah, thank you, Ms. Morgan,” she said, rising to her feet, full of energy. “I’ll get your registration started and give you the address to the cemetery. I’d take you there myself, but I have to do something for him first and will meet you there. I have to go.” Eyes wide, she caught her breath, and I swear I saw her shiver.

The paper was a soft rustle as she darted for the door, her speed edging into that eerie vampire quickness that Ivy, at least, took great pains to hide from me. I jerked, staring at Wayde as Nina’s exuberant voice echoed in the outer offices. “My God! I could hear everything!”

Exhaling, I unclenched my fists. Track down some bad witches. I could do that. Like *Nina* had said. All it would take would be some detective work—which I sucked at—and some earth charms—which I could still do. “I should call Ivy,” I said softly.

Looking uncomfortable, Wayde handed me my bag, and I slipped a hand inside to find my cell phone. I frowned at the missed-call number. *Trent? What does he want?*

“That’s probably a good idea, Ms. Morgan,” Wayde said, leaning over to look out the office door, but I was having second, third, and fourth thoughts.

Good idea? Right. That was the last thing this was.