



Red Glove (The Curse Workers Book 2)

By Holly Black

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The cons get twistier and the stakes get higher in this second book of The Curse Workers trilogy: “a sleek and stylish blend of urban fantasy and crime noir” (*Booklist*).

Curses and cons. Magic and the mob. In Cassel Sharpe’s world, they go together. Cassel always thought he was an ordinary guy, until he realized his memories were being manipulated by his brothers. Now he knows the truth—he’s the most powerful curse worker around. A touch of his hand can transform anything—or anyone—into something else.

After rescuing his brothers from Zacharov’s retribution and finding out that Lila will never be his, Cassel is trying to reestablish some kind of normalcy in his life. That was never going to be easy for someone from a worker family tied to one of the big crime families, and a mother whose cons get more reckless by the day. But Cassel is also coming to terms with what it means to be a transformation worker and figuring out how to have friends.

But normal doesn’t last very long—soon Cassel is being courted by both sides of the law and is forced to confront his past. A past he remembers only in scattered fragments and one that could destroy his family and his future. Cassel will have to decide whose side he wants to be on because neutrality is not an option. And then he will have to pull off his biggest con ever to survive. Love is a curse and the con is the only answer in a game too dangerous to lose.

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Red Glove (The Curse Workers Book 2) By Holly Black Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #328755 in eBooks
- Published on: 2011-04-05
- Released on: 2011-04-05
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

Review

* "Black again delivers complex characters and a nicely developed alternate universe where magic workers are social pariahs. This powerful, edgy dark fantasy won't disappoint Black's fans."--*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

"Dark, disturbing fare, crafted by a master; readers of the trilogy's first will be supremely satisfied."--*Kirkus Reviews*

"Readers will be happy to slip back into Black's elaborate, fascinating world of workers, curses, and the seeming ease with which everyone has learned to live in a world where no one, not even family, can be truly trusted, and this sequel offers satisfying additional glimpses into this nearly familiar but ultimately shockingly different world."--*Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*

"The Curse Workers series continues to offer a sleek and stylish blend of urban fantasy and crime noir."--*Booklist*

About the Author

Holly Black is the bestselling author of the Spiderwick series. Her Modern Faerie Tales series is comprised of *Tithe*, which was an ALA Top Ten Book for Teens and received starred reviews in *Publishers Weekly* and *Kirkus Reviews*; *Valiant*, which was an ALA Best Book for Young Adults, a *Locus Magazine* Recommended Read, and a recipient of the Andre Norton Award from the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America; and *Ironside*, the sequel to *Tithe*, was a *New York Times* bestseller. *White Cat*, the first book in the Curse Workers series, was a *Kirkus Reviews* Best Book, and ALA Best Fiction for Young Adults, and received starred reviews from *Publishers Weekly*, *Kirkus Reviews*, and *BCCB*. *Red Glove*, the second book in the Curse Workers series, received a starred review from *Publishers Weekly*. Holly has also written a collection of short stories, *The Poison Eaters and Other Stories*. She lives in Amherst, Massachusetts. Visit Holly at blackholly.com.

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Red Glove

CHAPTER ONE

I DON'T KNOW WHETHER it's day or night when the girl gets up to leave. Her minnow silver dress swishes against the tops of her thighs like Christmas tinsel as she opens the hotel door.

I struggle to remember her name.

"So you'll tell your father at the consulate about me?" Her lipstick is smeared across her cheek. I should tell her to fix it, but my self-loathing is so great that I hate her along with myself.

"Sure," I say.

My father never worked at any consulate. He's not paying girls a hundred grand a pop to go on a goodwill

tour of Europe. I'm not a talent scout for America's Next Top Model. My uncle doesn't manage U2. I haven't inherited a chain of hotels. There are no diamond mines on my family land in Tanzania. I have never been to Tanzania. These are just a few of the stories my mother has spent the summer spinning for a string of blond girls in the hope that they'll make me forget Lila.

They don't.

I look up at the ceiling. I keep on staring at it until I hear my mother start to move in the adjoining room.

Mom got out of jail a couple months back. After school let out she relocated us both to Atlantic City, where we've been grifting rooms and charging up whatever food and drink we want to them. If the staff gets too demanding about payment, we simply move down the strip. Being an emotion worker means that Mom never leaves a credit card at the desk.

As I think that, she opens the door between our rooms.

"Honey," Mom says, as though it's not at all weird to find me lying on the floor in my boxers. Her black hair is up in clips and wrapped in one of her silk scarves, the way she always wears it when she sleeps. She's got on the hotel robe from the last hotel, tied tightly around her ample waist. "You ready for some breakfast?"

"Just coffee, I think. I'll make it." I push myself up and pad over to the complimentary pot. There's a bag of grounds, sugar, and some powdered creamer sitting on a plastic tray.

"Cassel, how many times do I have to tell you that it isn't safe to drink out of those things? Someone could have been brewing meth in it." Mom frowns. She always worries about the weirdest things. Hotel coffeepots. Cell phones. Never normal stuff, like the police. "I'll order us both up coffee from the kitchen."

"They could be brewing meth there, too," I say, but she ignores me.

She goes into her room and I can hear her make the call. Then she comes back to the doorway. "I ordered you some egg whites and toast. And juice. I know you said you weren't hungry, but you need to keep your strength up for today. I found us a new mark." Her smile is big enough that I almost want to smile along with her.

That's my mom.

Believe it or not, there are magazines out there called, like, Millionaire Living or New Jersey Millionaires or whatever, that feature profiles of old guys in their homes, showing off their stuff. I have no idea who else buys them, but they're perfect for my mother. I think she sees them as gold digger shopping catalogs.

That's where she found Clyde Austin. He's on the page after a feature with curse-worker-hating Governor Patton at his mansion, Drumthwacket. Despite a recent divorce, according to the article, Austin still manages to enjoy a lifestyle that includes a private plane, a heated infinity pool, and two borzois that travel with him everywhere. He has a home in Atlantic City, where he likes to go out to dinner at Morton's and play a little blackjack when he can get away from the office. The picture of him shows a short, squat dude with hair plugs.

"Put on something dirty," Mom says. She's at her desk, altering a new pair of bright blue gloves. She's seeding them with tiny holes at the fingertips: small enough to go unnoticed, big enough for her skin to touch

the mark's.

"Dirty?" I say from the couch I'm slumped on in her suite. I'm on my third cup of coffee, all three choked with cream. I ate the toast, too.

"Wrinkled. Something that makes you look homeless and desperate." She begins to take down her curls, one by one. Soon she'll start rubbing gunk into her skin and curling her eyelashes. It takes her hours to get ready.

"What's the plan?" I ask.

"I posed as his secretary and pretended I forgot when his reservation was for," Mom says. "At Morton's. Wasn't it great how the magazine comes right out and says where to find him? It absolutely worked. He's going to eat there at eight o'clock tonight."

"How long have you known that for?" I ask her.

"A couple days." She shrugs, making a careful line of black above her eyes. There's no telling how long she really knew. "Oh—and grab the plastic bag over by my suitcase."

I slug down the last of the coffee and get up. The bag contains panty hose. I put them on her desk.

"They're for you."

"You want me to look homeless, desperate, but also kind of fabulous?" I ask.

"Over your head," she says, turning in her chair and miming the gesture like I'm a moron. "If Clyde works out, I want him to be able to meet you as my son."

"It sounds like you've really got some plan cooked up," I say.

"Oh, come on," she demands. "School starts in less than a week. Don't you want to have a little fun?"

Several hours later Mom clops along the boardwalk behind me in platform heels. Her white dress blows in the late summer wind. The neckline is low enough that I'm worried her boobs are going to actually fall out if she moves too fast. I know it's disturbing that I notice, but I'm not blind.

"You know what you're supposed to do, right?" she says.

I wait for her to catch up. She has on gold lame gloves and is carrying a gold clutch purse. I guess she decided against the blue. Altogether it's quite an outfit. "No, why don't you tell me for the millionth time?"

I see the fury pass over her face like a storm. Her eyes go hard.

"I've got it, Mom," I say in what I hope is a conciliatory way. "Go on ahead. We shouldn't be talking."

She totters off toward the restaurant, and I walk to the railing, looking at the sea. It's the same view I had from Zacharov's Atlantic City penthouse. I think of Lila with her back to me, staring out at black water.

I should have told her I loved her back then. Back when it would have meant something.

Waiting is the hardest thing about any con job. The moments slip by and your hands start to sweat, anticipating what's coming. Your mind wanders. You're all keyed up from adrenaline, but there's nothing to do.

Distraction leads to disaster. Mom's rule.

I turn back toward the restaurant and slip my gloved hand into my pocket, touching the wadded-up piece of panty hose. I hacked off the foot with a room service knife.

I keep focused, eyeing the crowd, watching my mother vamp up her incredibly slow stroll. We could be here awhile. And, honestly, this plan might not even work. That's another thing about cons; you have to go after a bunch of marks before you find the perfect one. The one you can really take for all he's worth.

We wait for twenty minutes, almost a block apart from each other. Mom has done all the innocent things someone does on a nighttime stroll: smoked a cigarette, checked her lipstick, made fake calls on the cell phone she borrowed from me. I, on the other hand, have taken to begging for change. I've made about \$3.50 and am about to land another quarter when Clyde Austin lurches out of Morton's.

Mom starts to move.

I jump up and take off toward her, yanking the panty hose down over my face. That slows me down some, because there is no way in hell these things are sheer. I can barely see.

People start yelling. Yeah, because a guy with hose over his head is never the good guy. He is, in fact, the stereotype—maybe even the archetype—of a bad guy.

I keep running, flying past my mother and yanking the gold clutch out of her hand.

She adds her screams to the chorus.

"Thief!" my mother screams. "Help! Heeeeelp!"

Now, this is the tricky part. I have to keep running, but I have to run just slowly enough that a drunk and out-of-shape guy with a couple of martinis rolling around in his belly actually thinks he can catch me.

"Please—someone!" Mom shrieks. "He has all my money!"

It's really hard not to laugh.

I practically run into Clyde, making sure he's got a shot at me. But I've got to give it to Mom. She's right when she says that guys want to be knights in shining armor. He grabs for my arm.

I let myself fall.

It's a bad one. Maybe it's the panty hose over my face, or maybe I'm just off balance, but I go down hard on the asphalt, scraping one hand so roughly, I can feel my glove shred. I'm pretty sure I scrape my knees, too, but all they feel is numb.

I drop the purse.

Clyde clocks me in the back of the head before I can push myself to my feet. It hurts. She better appreciate this. Then I'm up and running. Full out. Pulling that crap off my face and hurling myself through the night as fast as I can.

Leaving Clyde Austin to be a hero, bringing a damsel in distress her golden clutch purse.

Leaving him to notice how charming she is when her eyes well up with gratitude.

Leaving him to check out her rack.

* * *

Mom is exultant. She breaks out the bottle of Prosecco from the minibar while I pour frothing hydrogen peroxide over my hand. It stings like crazy.

"He wants to meet for drinks tomorrow night. I told him it was the least I could do to take him out. He said that, after what I'd been through, he was going to pay, and that was that. Now, doesn't that sound promising?"

"Sure," I tell her.

"He's going to pick me up here. At six. Do you think I should be ready when he gets here or do you think I should invite him in for a drink while I do a few last little things? Maybe be in my robe?"

I make a face. "I don't know."

"Stop thinking of it that way. This is a job. We need someone to provide for us. Pay for your fancy school—and Barron's loans. Especially now that Philip can't be sure how long he's going to stay employed." She cuts me a dark look, like I somehow forgot that I'm the one that got him in trouble with the boss of a crime family. Like I am going to start caring. They've done much worse to me.

"So long as you don't work Clyde," I say quietly. "You don't need to. You're plenty charming on your own."

She laughs and pours her Prosecco into a water glass. It fizzes like the peroxide. "Like mother, like son. We're both charming when we want something. Right, Cassel?"

"So I want you to stay out of jail," I say. "So what? Is that supposed to be a secret?"

The doorbell of her room buzzes. "What did you order?" I ask her, and head over to open it.

Mom makes a sound of alarm, but she's too late.

Clyde Austin is standing in the hallway, a bottle of Jack Daniel's swinging from one hand. "Oh," he says, embarrassed. "I must have the wrong room. I thought—"

Then he gets a good look at me—at the blood on my jeans, the scrape on my bare hand. And he sees my mother sitting on the bed. And he knows. His face goes ugly.

“You set me up,” he says. “You and her.” The way he says “her” tells me everything he’s thinking about us.

I start to explain, when he swings the bottle at my head. I see it moving, but I am too clumsy, too slow. It makes a hollow, horrible thunk against my temple.

I hit the carpet, dizzy. Dull pain makes me nauseous. That’s what I get for underestimating the guy. I roll onto my back just in time to see him over me, raising the Jack Daniel’s to strike again.

With a shriek Mom rakes her nails against his neck.

He whirls around, wild, swinging. His elbow connects. She flies back against the desk. Her magnifying mirror cracks against the wall, the shards falling like glittering confetti.

I reach up my bare hand. I could stop him with a single touch.

I could change him into a cockroach.

I could transform him into a puddle of grease.

I really want to.

Clyde has gone still, though, looking around like he suddenly doesn’t know where he is. “Shandra?” he says gently, reaching for my mother. “I’m so sorry. Did I hurt you?”

“That’s okay,” Mom says in a soothing voice, getting up slowly. She winces. There’s blood on her lip. “You just came by to bring me a little liquor, didn’t you? And you saw my son. Maybe you mistook him for someone else.”

“I guess,” he says. “We got along so well that I figured why wait until tomorrow night? And then . . . He does look like the mugger, you have to admit.”

Mom’s an emotion worker. She can’t change his memories; my brother Barron could do that, but he’s not here. What Mom can do with a single bare-handed touch is make Clyde Austin like her so much that he’s willing to give her the benefit of the doubt. About anything. Everything. Even this.

A wave of dizziness overwhelms me.

“That’s true, baby,” she says. “He does look a little like the mugger. It was an honest mistake. I’m just going to walk you to the door now.” Her fingers go to his neck, which should make anybody flinch—bare fingers, no glove—but it doesn’t bother him at all. He lets himself be steered.

“I’m really sorry for what happened,” he says. “I don’t know what came over me.”

“I understand,” Mom tells him. “And I forgive you, but I don’t think that we can see each other tomorrow night. You get that, right?”

Shame heats his face. “Of course.”

My vision blurs. She says something else soothing, but not to me.

* * *

We check out in the morning. Sunlight makes my brain feel like it's throbbing inside my skull. Sweat slicks my skin—the kind of unnatural sweat that comes along with injury. Each movement makes me as dizzy as riding a thousand roller coasters all at once. While we wait for the valet to get my car, I fumble through my backpack for sunglasses and try to avoid looking at the dark bruise on Mom's shoulder.

She's been totally silent since she told me we were leaving—all through packing and even the ride down in the elevator. I can tell she's seething.

I feel too sick to know what to do about it.

Finally my ancient and rusted Benz drives up to the front of the hotel. Mom hands something to the driver and gets the keys while I slide in on the other side. The seat is hot on the backs of my legs, even through jeans.

"How could you answer the door like that?" she shouts as soon as we pull away from the curb. "Not looking through the peephole. Not calling out to ask who was there?"

I flinch at her voice.

"Are you stupid, Cassel? Didn't I teach you better than that?"

She's right. It was thoughtless. Stupid. Private school has made me careless. It's exactly the kind of dumb mistake that separates a decent con man from an amateur. Plus the blowback from the emotion work makes her unstable. Not that she isn't normally pretty unstable. But working magnifies it. So does anger. There's nothing for me to do but ride it out.

I was used to her being like this when I was a kid. But she's been in jail long enough for me to forget how bad she can get.

"Are you stupid?" she screeches. "Answer me!"

"Stop," I say, and lean my head against the window, shutting my eyes. "Please stop. I'm sorry, okay?"

"No," she says, her voice vicious and certain. "No one's that pathetic. You did it on purpose! You wanted to ruin things for me."

"Oh, come on," I say. "I wasn't thinking. I said I was sorry. Look, I'm the one with the goose egg to show for it. So we have to leave Atlantic City? We'd have to leave in a week anyway when I went back to school."

"You did this to me because of Lila." Her gaze is on the road, but her eyes glitter with fury. "Because you're still angry."

Lila. My best friend, who I thought I killed.

"I'm not talking about her," I snap. "Not with you."

I think about Lila's wide, expressive mouth turning up at the corners. I think about her spread out on my bed,

reaching for me.

With one touch of her hand, Mom made Lila love me. And made sure I could never, ever have her.

“Hit a nerve?” Mom says, gleefully cruel. “It’s amazing you actually thought you were good enough for Zacharov’s daughter.”

“Shut up,” I say.

“She was using you, you stupid little moron. When everything was said and done, she wouldn’t have given you the time of day, Cassel. You would have been a reminder of Barron and misery and nothing more.”

“I don’t care,” I say. My hands are shaking. “It would still have been better than—” Better than having to avoid her until the curse fades. Better than the way she’ll look at me once it does.

Lila’s desire for me is a perversion of love. A mockery.

And I almost didn’t care, I wanted her so much.

“I did you a favor,” my mother says. “You should be grateful. You should be thanking me. I got you Lila on a silver platter—something you could have never in your life had otherwise.”

I laugh abruptly. “I should be thanking you? How about you hold your breath until I do?”

“Don’t talk that way to me,” Mom roars, and slaps me, hard.

Hard enough that my battered head hits the window. I see stars. Little explosions of light behind the dark glasses. Behind my eyelids.

“Pull over,” I say. Nausea overwhelms me.

“I’m sorry,” she says, her voice seesawing back to sweet. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. Are you okay?”

The world is starting to tilt. “You have to pull over.”

“Maybe right now you’d rather walk than deal with me, but if you’re really hurt, then you better—”

“Pull over!” I shout, and something about the urgency of my tone finally convinces her. She steers the car abruptly onto the shoulder of the road and brakes hard. I stumble out while we’re still moving.

Just in time to heave my guts up in the grass.

I really hope no one at Wallingford wants me to write an essay on how I spent my summer vacation.

Users Review

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