



## Désenchantement (Tome 1) - La malédiction de lady Walsh

*Lynn Viehl*

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Présentation de l'éditeur

Brillante détective privée spécialisée dans le domaine du surnaturel, Kit ne manque pas de perspicacité. Une qualité essentielle pour pouvoir aider sa nouvelle cliente, lady Diana Walsh, qui se pense victime d'une malédiction. D'après cette dernière, la première épouse de M. Walsh lui aurait jeté un sort depuis l'au-delà. Après enquête, Kit découvre en fait un complot de grande ampleur. Mais ses investigations sont mises à mal par la présence de Lucien Dredmore, un mage aussi puissant que séduisant. Extrait

Disenchanted & Co. CHAPTER ONE

"I know his first wife put a curse on me," Lady Walsh said. The lace edging her silk gloves fluttered as she folded her hands and placed them in a ladylike spot on her lap. "It's the only explanation."

A yawn tugged at my jaw; I swallowed it along with a mouthful of tea. "If you want an exorcism, Lady Walsh, there's a small horde of them on the first floor."

Her soft brown eyes shimmered. "Over the last month I've had fifteen of them to the house. The curse rendered them powerless. They couldn't even determine the nature of it."

"That's probably because there is no such thing as a curse," I said as kindly as I could. I heard a familiar scratching sound at the door and collected some coppers from my drawer. "Excuse me for a moment, milady. I have a delivery."

I closed the inner door to my office before I went to the entry and yanked it open. "Back for another go, then, Gert?"

"Satan's whore. I will not rest until I have sent you back to the hell that spawned you." The old woman produced a long gnarled twig and shook it at my face. "Wither and burn, wither and burn."

I folded my arms and waited several seconds, but neither I nor anything else burst into flames. "Apparently not today, love."

"I am made powerless." Gert lowered her stick and glared at me. "The Evil One protects you."

"Aye, and you'd think he'd give me a doorman." She looked thinner and hungrier than usual. "Go have some tea. You'll feel better." I offered her the coppers, which she snatched from my palm.

"Abbadon's pit of eternal fire awaits you," Gert promised. "You cannot escape it."

"I won't try, I promise." I watched her hobble off and then eyed the incantation she'd scribbled on the door's glass. No doubt it was meant to send me directly to some highly unpleasant level of hell, I thought as I took out my handkerchief and wiped it off. Gert always came with a backup plan for my doom.

I returned to my office, where Lady Walsh sat staring at the door. "Sorry about that."

She regarded me with appalled fascination. "You truly don't believe in magic."

"I truly don't." I smiled. "I also have an appointment to get to downtown. Do you want me to call for your coach, or do you need a private carri?"

“Wait. Please. I can show you proof.” The corkscrew curls framing her face bobbed as she began stripping off her gloves. “You can’t imagine how difficult it’s been, trying to hide this from my husband. When I woke this morning and saw them, I nearly screamed.”

I tried logic. “I presume your husband’s first wife died before he married you?” When she nodded, I asked, “How is it that would she even know about you, much less cast a curse on you from the grave?”

“I can’t say how these spells work, Miss Kittredge, but obviously her spirit has refused to leave the house.” She fiddled with a fold of her skirt. “I think seeing how happy I make Nolan has caused her to become jealous and vengeful.”

I was going to be late for my fictitious appointment, it seemed. “I’m sure an unexpected rash can seem like something malicious and supernatural in origin, especially for a woman as beautiful as you, but—”

She held out her soft, pale hands, and I forgot to breathe. Someone had used a knife to carve a word below the knuckles on each: GREEDY and SLUT.

My own hands trembled before I clenched them into fists. “Bloody hell.” She thought magic had done this, this brutal, malicious thing. “When did this happen?”

“I cannot tell you. After my husband left me last night, I slept alone with the doors and windows bolted from the inside.” She stared at the marks. “The curse did this to me while I slept. I never woke, not once.”

I gently took the hand marked SLUT and examined the wound. It appeared at first glance to be written in dark-red ink, but when I brushed a fingertip over the letters I felt the cut marks in her skin. “How did you explain the stains on your linens, milady?”

“There were none. Nothing on my gown, either. That’s why it has to be magic.” She watched my face. “That, and I suffer no discomfort. I can’t even feel them.”

Ladies were taught never to show pain, but not to feel it? “Were the other incidents like this?”

Her head moved in a tight nod. “The same two words every time, on the insides of my arms, the back of my neck, and . . .”

“And?”

She glanced over her shoulder and lowered her voice to a whisper. “On my knees.”

Whoever had done this hadn’t used a spell—more like a very thin, sharp boning knife. I knew of some salves that numbed the skin; that would explain why she didn’t feel the cuts. Or if someone had slipped some drugs into her wine at dinner, and gained access to her bedchamber through a hidden door or crawlspace . . . “Does your husband have any children from his first marriage?”

“Three. His son and two daughters. We are all quite good friends.” She hesitated before she added, “No, that’s not exactly true. They want their father to be happy. They tolerate me because I do that, I make him happy.” Suddenly she clutched at my hands. “I know your reputation, Miss Kittredge. There is no one in the city that can dispel magic as you do. I’m afraid to go to sleep. I keep thinking one morning I’ll look in the mirror and she’ll have cut them into my face—”

She collapsed against me and burst into tears.

I supported her by the elbows and made some comforting noises. This was why I seldom took on female clients; their silly notions and endless waterworks made it difficult to ferret out the truth. But someone had been secretly assaulting Lady Walsh, and no woman should have to endure that—in or out of her own bed.

I helped her back over to the client's chair and silently passed her my handkerchief before I took her teacup over to the cart to refresh it and give her a little time to mop up and compose herself. My tea was nothing special—whatever was on sale that week at the grocer's—but I added a dash of soother to the brew before I brought it back to her.

“You haven't told your husband about these attacks.” I didn't have to make it a question.

“I can't trouble dear Nolan with this.” She put her gloves back on before she sipped from her cup. “He's so loving and attentive, it would destroy him.” She gave me an owl-eyed look of mute, helpless appeal.

She was an old rich man's young trophy wife, likely the most fetching daughter of a posh who had fallen on hard times. Marrying Nolan Walsh would have resulted in some restoration of her family's fortunes and likewise assured Lady Walsh of a lifetime of comfortable financial security. She'd personally slice herself up before she endangered that.

I knew I was probably going to regret this. I didn't like working for the rich or titled, and I had other, very good reasons to avoid the Hill. But someone had gone to vicious lengths to torment her, and it was obvious from the repeated attacks that they had no intention of stopping.

“How will you bring me into your household?”

She brightened immediately. “I thought I would have you as a cousin—a very distant one, of course—who has only just discovered our family connection.” Her smile turned self-conscious. “I'm afraid that genealogy is one of my little self-indulgences.”

“Well, it isn't one of mine, so you'd better be the one to make the discovery.” Now, when to call. I checked my brooch watch and thought about the rest of my day. “Dinner is too intimate for a new acquaintance; it'll have to be tea. I'll also need an excuse to visit your bedchamber.”

She nodded quickly. “I keep some family portraits on my vanity. I can remark on your resemblance to my great-aunt Hortense and invite you up to see them.”

“Our great-aunt Hortense.” I sighed. “Lady Walsh, you should know that in the past I've been hired by other families on the Hill. Some of your servants might recognize me. If anyone asks, it's best that we not lie about how I earn my living.”

“I'm sure that Nolan will think it's charming that you, ah, work for yourself.” She glanced at the gold letters spelling out Disenchanted & Co. on the frosted glass of my office door. “He's very progressive that way about women, you know. He even believes we should have the vote, bless him.”

But he would never employ any women at his bank, I guessed, or trust them to manage their own funds.

“Good on your husband.” I held out my hand. “I'll see you at four.”

Lady Walsh clasped my hand tightly. “Thank you so much, Miss Kittredge. Oh, dear, what is your given name? With our connection I should call you by that.”

“I’m known as Kit.” Only one person left in the world still called me Charmian, but one day he’d walk in front of my carri and I’d put an end to that. “And you?”

“I’m Diana, and forever in your debt, Kit.” She gave my hand a final fervent squeeze and went to the door. A man dressed in cream-and-scarlet livery standing outside opened it for her and closed it before he followed her out of sight.

Odd that I hadn’t seen him when I’d confronted Gert. Most footmen waited with the coach; only the wealthiest of women used them as body servants.

“Or your dear, loving Nolan doesn’t quite trust you to leave the house alone,” I murmured under my breath as I picked up my keylace and knotted it around my wrist. “I wonder why.”



After I locked up the office, I took the stairs down to the underground level, better known to me and the other tenants of the Davies Building as the Dungeon.

The sole occupant of the understair had once been a royal machinist, one of the finest who had ever served H.M., or so the Honorable Reginald P. Docket would have everyone believe. We never asked why he had given up his choice position to immigrate; no one left England for the Provincial Union of Victoriana unless they had made a horrible marriage or committed an unpardonable offense against the Crown. Since Docket remained a bachelor, and his constructs sometimes didn’t perform according to spec, I imagined it to be the latter.

“Who’s that?” A sweaty face smeared with grease popped up from behind a cabinet filled with cogs and gears. “Kit? Oh, fabulous. You’re just in time for the latest bash.”

“Am I?” I glanced around me to see if anything appeared ready to clout me, fall on me, or explode. Most everything did. “I can come back later, if you like.”

Docket waved a wrench. “Nonsense. This is just the sort of thing you females love.”

I studied the cabinet he’d been fiddling with, which seemed to be sprouting mechanical arms with hooks on the end. “It’s a tenner printing press?”

“No. Take off your jacket and I’ll show you.”

“It’s almost new,” I warned him as I shrugged out of it. “I’m very fond of it.”

“Precisely why you need my HangItAll.” He adjusted one of the dials on the side of the cabinet and stepped away as its internal works began to grind and whistle. “Hold it out. Go on, it won’t bite you.”

With a great many misgivings, I held out my jacket. One of the mechanical arms stretched out, folding over on itself to form an elongated triangle with its hook at the top. It inserted one corner of the triangle into a sleeve as it pulled my jacket out of my hand and then tilted up as it inserted the opposite corner. The arm

retracted my jacket into the cabinet, catching a rod inside with the hook and neatly hanging it.

“You see?” Docket beamed. “You’ll never have to wait for a maid to answer your bell again.”

“That’s good, because I don’t have any maids or bells,” I reminded him as I peered into the cabinet. “You’ve got this working off your boiler, then?”

“I started out with hydraulics, but the joints leaked oil onto the garms. Bloody mess it was.” He caressed the side of the cabinet with his hand. “What do you think? I’ll wager someday one of these will be in every man’s front hall, and every female’s boudoir.”

“Possibly the wash house.” I reached in and removed my jacket from the interior, which caused him to yelp. Then I held it up so he could see the condensate drip from the sodden hem. “If you change the name to WashItAll.”

“Bloody hell, that wasn’t supposed to happen.” As he watched me wring out the sopping-wet material, he scratched at his chin whiskers. “WashItAll’s not bad. Would it sell, do you think?”

“I suppose, if you came up with a way to dry them as well.” I glanced down at the puddle forming around the base of the cabinet. “And install a catch basin.”

“Capital idea.” Never one to brood, Docket closed off the boiler feed valve and wiped his hands on a dirty rag. “So what can I do for you today, love?”

“I need some dippers and an echo.” I briefly described Lady Walsh’s situation, leaving out the names and personal details, and added, “The echo will have to be very small. Something I can hide in a satchel or under my skirts.”

“I’ve just the thing.” He disappeared into his mechanized warren, and after some loud banging and scraping emerged with an envelope and a small mallet. He led me over to the nearest worktable, shoved aside some blueprints, and set them out.

“Best tuck the dippers somewhere they can’t be spotted,” he said, carefully counting out from the envelope five thin, folded strips of paper. “Dip or dab them with a drop of wine, trace of powder, or whatever you think is tainted. If all’s not as it should be, they’ll show color.”

I removed and unfolded one strip and sniffed it. The chemical odor wasn’t so strong that it would be detected coming from my person. “Blue for drugs, black for poison?”

“Aye.”

I took out my da’s pocket watch and tucked them in the back of the case. I could get at them easily by pretending to check the time. I glanced at the little mallet beside the envelope “I can’t go about hammering on the walls, Doc.”

“Don’t have to.” He gestured for me to follow him over to one of the dungeon’s support walls. He placed the flat end of the mallet head against the wall, and flipped up the cap on the other end, revealing a magnifying lens. “Press in the bottom of the handle, like so.”

He demonstrated, and through the lens I saw a wide, solid green bar appear. The bar glowed faintly, as if it were hot.

“That’s a strut on the other side of the wall. Move it along careful-like”—he slid the mallet slowly across the wall until the green bar disappeared and the lens filled with rough green pebbles—“and there, you see? That’s the fill between the struts. The foundation walls down here don’t have any hidey-holes, but if there’s one in your manor house, it will show black on the lens. Then you’ve only to find the seams and pop it open.”

I took the mallet from him and studied it. “What makes it glow like that?”

He grinned, showing all the gaps in his teeth. “If I told you that, I’d have to marry you.”

Not because he loved me, I imagined, but to keep me from bearing witness. Once a woman gave her hand in marriage, she became her husband’s legal property. Property could not testify against its owner—something I imagined would prove useful if the Crown ever questioned the origins, and the exact rights claim, to any particularly clever mech.

Now it was time to dicker over price, which Docket and I usually took out in barter. “What do you want for them?”

“Two weeks’ laundering and five hot suppers hand-delivered,” he said promptly.

“One week laundering and two hot suppers by bucket,” I countered. As he started to bluster, I added, “And a grand pudding.”

He gave me a suspicious look. “What sort? Not plum. Too hot for that.”

“Summer pudding,” I said, and moved in for the kill. “Fresh-picked raspberry.”

“Raspberry.” Docket’s expression turned dreamy for a moment before he eyed me. “You’ll get all of the stains out of me coveralls?”

“An act of New Parliament couldn’t do that, mate.”

“Aye, well, I’d just dirty them up again anyway.” He wiped a filthy hand over the front of his bib. “Make it three dinners by bucket, and I’ll shake on it.”

“Done.” I kissed his bald, shiny pate. “In lieu of the shake.”

Embarrassed pleasure made his face rosy. “If only I were thirty years younger.” *Revue de presse*

“Viehl is a master of high action, bloody drama . . . and true love.” (Gail Carriger)

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