

LOVE HAS NEVER BEEN  
SO DEADLY.



# REBEL WITCH

THE CRIMSON MOTH: BOOK TWO

KRISTEN  
CICCARELLI

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR







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WEDNESDAY BOOKS  
NEW YORK



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**FOR THE BRAVE ONES  
WHO LIGHT THE WAY**

# PART

# ONE

*In the beginning, there was darkness. Until the Seven Sisters laughed and a world burst into being. The sisters walked its waves and carved its shorelines. They breathed life into all things and bound the world together with love, goodness, and beauty.*

*But they couldn't stay forever. Before moving on, they chose a select few to watch over the world in their absence. To help these guardians love and protect their creation, the Seven Sisters gave them a gift.*

*The gift of magic.*

*And then, like a flame extinguished, they vanished.*

—CREATION MYTH FROM THE CULT OF THE ANCIENTS

# ONE

## GIDEON

**GIDEON TUGGED AT THE** jacket of his stolen uniform. The forest green fabric was stiff, as if it hadn't been broken in.

The poor guard he'd taken it from was currently unconscious and tied up in a supply closet on the third floor of Larkmont Palace. Four other guards hadn't been so lucky. Their bodies were floating in the frigid waters of the fjord.

He'd had no choice.

Gideon was deep in enemy territory. If discovered, he'd be better off dead.

His thoughts were a dark contrast to the bright ballroom he stood in. Musical instruments hummed as they warmed up, preparing for the private recital that was about to start. Chandeliers winked overhead as servants wove between the glittering guests in Prince Soren's ballroom, offering one last round of refreshments before the music started.

As Gideon stood along the wall, watching the room like the other guards, his gaze fixed on his mark: the beautiful girl in the golden dress.

Rune Winters.

Prince Soren stood beside her, his palm pressed to the small of Rune's back. The Umbrian prince wore a tailored suit, his family's silver crest stitched into the cape slung stylishly over one shoulder, and his hungry gaze roamed down the dress Rune wore, inviting his rich friends to do the same.

Gideon's blood burned as he watched them.

It was a beautiful gown—he couldn't deny it. Made by some fancy designer, it likely cost a small fortune. But it wasn't *Rune*. Gold didn't suit her, and the cut was severe. The plunging V neckline ended a few inches



above her belly button in front and at the base of her spine in back, sending a powerful message:

*Look at her. She's mine.*

The prince wanted his guests to admire the beautiful witch on his arm. To Soren, Rune was an exotic creature. A living artifact he was determined to add to his collection.

If Harrow's intel was correct, one week ago, the prince had asked her to marry him. And Rune had accepted, on one condition: if Soren wanted her for a wife, he had to give Cressida an army.

It's why Gideon volunteered for this job.

With an army, Cressida would wage war against the New Republic. If she won, she would reinstate the Reign of Witches and more people would die.

Gideon couldn't let that happen. So long as Rune was the lynchpin in this unholy alliance between Cressida and Soren, he couldn't let her live.

Gideon had kill orders and he was going to see them through. Right here. Tonight.

He'd waited all evening for his chance. Standing against the wall of the ballroom, sweating in this stolen uniform, he watched Rune flirting with her betrothed. Watched Soren flirt back: touching her with hungry hands, devouring her with haughty eyes.

It was driving him to the brink.

Alex was barely in the ground, and Rune was already engaged to another man. A prince, no less.

*Is that what she wanted all along—a prince?*

He was a fool to think he'd ever had a chance.

Gideon fingered the gun holstered at his hip. He was ready. More than ready. All he needed was the right moment ...

"Do you miss your home?"

Gideon scanned the circle of party guests surrounding Rune and Soren until his gaze landed on the speaker: a young woman with wheat-gold hair braided into a crown.

Rune laughed. "Can you miss a place where everyone wants you dead?"

Gideon watched her press her champagne glass to her red lips, then tip the last swallow into her mouth.

It was her third drink tonight.

Not that Gideon was counting.

“What was it like before the revolution?”

“We witches once lived as you do,” Rune said, motioning to the grand hall they stood in, where chandeliers twinkled and marble columns propped up the painted ceiling. “Our lives were full of music, beauty, art...”

*Yes, thought Gideon. And your luxuries came at the expense of our misery.*

The buzz and hum of fiddles grew louder. Gideon glanced across the room, where guests began to fill chairs facing the musicians.

“That way of life was stolen from us the night Gideon Sharpe led a group of revolutionaries into the palace.”

At the sound of his name on her lips, his attention shot back to her.

“He murdered two queens in their beds while his comrades cut the rest of us down in the streets. He would have let them murder me, too, if Cressida hadn’t saved me.”

Gideon bristled. *You’re leaving out a lot of the story, sweetheart.*

“It must be heartbreaking,” said the prince as his knuckles grazed the bumps of Rune’s spine in a slow path downward. “To be so far away, knowing the horrible things taking place there ... I’m glad you’re free of it.”

Soren’s arms slid around her waist, in what might have been an effort to comfort her, but felt more like a reminder: Rune was *his*.

Gideon rolled his shoulders, forcing himself to relax.

“Witches are still being slaughtered for nothing more than the crime of being what they are,” said Rune, studying her empty glass from within Soren’s arms. “I’ll never be free until every last one of my sisters is free, too.”

The hum of instruments fell silent and an announcement sounded: the recital was starting.

One by one, the circle of guests dispersed, moving toward the musicians.

Twining his fingers through Rune’s, Soren tugged her toward their seats. They’d barely walked two steps when the first song started, and Rune’s footsteps faltered.

Gideon watched her jerk to a stop.

“Everything all right?” asked the prince, turning back to her.

As the music rose, Gideon glanced to the musicians. The song was familiar. But why he recognized it, he didn’t know.

“I-I need to powder my nose.” Rune seemed to be struggling to compose herself. “I’ll be right back...”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Soren. “The concert has begun.” He lowered his voice. “This recital is for *you*, Rune. To celebrate our engagement. You need to be here.”

His fingers white-knuckled around hers.

Gideon’s eyes narrowed. His body tightened like a coiled spring as he watched Soren drag her onward. Closer to the music. The very thing she was trying to get away from.

“I need...” Rune tried to tug her hand out of his. When Soren appeared to grip harder, refusing to release her, Gideon stepped out of position along the wall. The guards stationed ten paces down glanced his way, reminding Gideon that he was surrounded by enemies. He couldn’t draw attention to himself.

Also: Rune didn’t need to be rescued. This was made clear as she stepped directly in front of Soren, blocking his path to the chairs.

“I promise not to miss much.” Pushing herself onto her toes, she slid her pale arms around the prince’s neck and grazed his cheek with her lips, lingering there. When Soren’s free hand settled on her hip, admiring its curve, she added: “Later tonight, when the recital is over and the guests are gone, I have something special planned for you.”

Gideon’s heart dropped at those words. As he watched Soren slide his hand up and run his fingers along Rune’s jaw, his entire body turned to stone.

“Something special?” the prince murmured, leaning down to press his mouth to Rune’s.

Slipping her hand into his brown hair, Rune kissed Soren back, giving him a taste of what was to come. Soren pulled her in closer, and Gideon knew this wasn’t the first time. There had been other kisses. Probably more than kisses.

The realization awoke something in him. Something tremulous and aching. It knotted around his rib cage, threatening to drag him to the bottom of the sea.

*Enough.*

He reached for his pistol.

But before he could finish this, Rune slipped out of Soren’s grasp.

“I think you’ll like my surprise.” Her cheeks were rosy as she walked backward. “See if you can guess what it is while I’m gone.”

Rune winked. The prince's eyes darkened with lust.

Gideon was going to be sick.

Rune spun on her heel and strode away, leaving Soren and Gideon to stare after her, the dress putting her on full display.

She rushed past guests making their way toward their chairs and guards stationed along the walls. As she hurried to the door, she nearly ran straight into the servant coming through them, halting just before they collided. The young woman balanced a shaking tray of glasses in one hand and held a bottle of whiskey in the other.

Gideon watched Rune exchange a few words with the servant, take the bottle from her, and disappear into the hall.

*There it is.*

The moment he'd been waiting for.