



Would-Be Witch (Southern Witch)

By Kimberly Frost

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In the small town of Duvall, Texas, the only thing that causes more trouble than gossip is magic.

The family magic seems to have skipped over Tammy Jo Trask. All she gets in the way of the supernatural are a few untimely visits from the long-dead, smart-mouthed family ghost Edie. But when her locket—an heirloom that happens to hold Edie's soul—is stolen in the midst of a town-wide crime spree, it's time for Tammy to find her inner witch.

After a few bad experiences with her magic, Tammy turns to the only one who can help: the very rich and highly magical Bryn Lyons. He might have all the answers, but the locket isn't the only thing passed down in Tammy's family. She also inherited a warning...*to stay away from anyone named Lyons...*

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Editorial Review

Review

“An utter delight.” —Annette Blair, national bestselling author of *Never Been Witched*

“Bewitchingly fantastic!”—Dakota Cassidy, national bestselling author of *Accidentally Dead* and *The Accidental Werewolf*

“Witty, sexy, and wildly imaginative.”—Nancy Pickard, Agatha Award–winning author of *The Virgin of Small Plains*

About the Author

Kimberly Frost is currently at home in a small town known as Houston where she is taking dictation from her characters and working on the next book in the Southern Witch series.

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Chapter 1

Jenna Reitgarten is awfully lucky that my witch genes are dormant, or I'd have hexed her with hiccups for the rest of her natural born life. She stared at me across the cake that had taken me thirty-six hours to make, a cake that was Disney on Icing, and shook her head.

"Well, it's a really pretty cake and all, Tammy Jo, but it's got too much blue and gray. It might be good for a little boy, but Lindsey just loves pink—"

"The castle stones are gray and blue, but the princess on the drawbridge is wearing pink. The flower border is all pink," I said, tucking a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

"Uh huh. I'll tell you what. I'll take this one for the playroom. I'll put the other cake, the one with the picture of Lindsey on it, in the dining room. And I can't pay two hundred and thirty dollars for the castle, since, after all, it'll be a spare."

"Why don't I just sell you the sheet cake?" I asked, glancing at the flat cake with the picture of her three-year-old decked out in her Halloween costume. Lindsey was dressed, rather unimaginatively, in a pink Sleeping Beauty dress.

"And what would you do with this one, honey?" Jenna asked, pointing at the multi-story castle, complete with lakefront and shrubbery.

"Maybe I'll just eat it."

She laughed. "Don't be silly. Now, you'll sell it to me for a hundred thirty dollars or I'll have to complain to Cookie that you didn't follow my instructions and then—"

"I followed your instructions," I said, fuming. "You said 'think fairy tale princess.' Well, here she is." I flicked the head of the sugar-sculpted princess, knocking her over on the blue bridge.

Jenna gasped. "I've had just about enough from you," she said, standing the princess back up. "You know we order once a week from this bakery for the Junior League meetings. Cookie will have your hide if you lose my business."

Cookie Olsen is my boss, and "Cookie" fits her like "Snuggles" fits a Doberman. As a general rule, I don't want Cookie mad at me, but I was in the middle of remembering all the reasons I don't like Jenna, which date back to high school, and I really couldn't concentrate on two annoying women at the same time.

"You can buy the sheet cake, but you can't have the castle cake."

She huffed impatiently. "A hundred seventy for the castle cake, and that is final, missy."

I'd never noticed before how small Jenna's eyes were. If she was a shape-shifter, she'd be some kind of were-rodent. Not that I'd seen any shape-shifters except in books, but I knew they were out there. Aunt Mel's favorite ex-husband had been eaten by one.

I come from a line of witches that's fifteen generations old. They've drawn power from the earth for over 300 years. Somehow I didn't think Jenna would be impressed to hear that though.

Jenna flipped open her cell phone and called Miss Cookie. She explained her version of the story and then handed the phone to me.

"Yes?" I asked.

"Sell her the cake, Tammy Jo."

"No, ma'am."

"I'm not losing her business. Sell her the cake, or you're fired."

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

"Good girl," Cookie said.

I handed the phone back to a very smug Jenna Reitgarten.

"Bye-bye," she said to Miss Cookie and flipped the phone shut. She dug through her wallet while I put the castle cake into the box I'd created for its transport. I took out the sheet cake, which was already boxed, and set it on the counter.

"That'll be forty dollars," I said.

"What?"

"Cookie said I could sell you the castle cake or get fired, and I'm going with option B. A cake this size will feed me for a month," I said. "Longer if I act like you and starve myself."

Jenna turned a shade of bright pink that her daughter Lindsey would have just loved. Then she tried to reason with me, she threatened me, and she waved her stick arms around a lot.

"Sheet cake, forty dollars," I said.

Her complexion was splotchy with fury as she thrust two twenty-dollar bills at me. "Lloyd won't hire you. Daddy uses him to cater meetings and lunches. And there are only two bakeries in this town. You'll have to move," she said.

"Well, I'll cross that drawbridge when I come to it," I said, but I knew she was right. Pride's more expensive than a designer purse, and I can't afford one of those either.

Jenna stalked out with her sheet cake as I calculated how long I could survive without a job. I'm not great at math, but I knew I wouldn't last long. Oh, to heck with it. Maybe I will just leave town. If Momma and Aunt Melanie came back and found me gone, it would be their fault. I hadn't even gotten a postcard from either of them in a couple months, and the cards that came were always so darn vague. They never said what they were doing or where they were. I really hoped they weren't in some other dimension since I might need to track them down for a loan in the very near future.

* * *

Like most ghosts, Edie arrives with the worst kind of timing. It's like getting a bad haircut on your wedding day, making you wonder what you did to deserve it.

There was a strange traffic jam on Main Street, and I was trying to get around Mrs. Schnitzer's Cadillac when Edie materialized out of mist in the seat next to me. It certainly wasn't my fault that it startled me. I rammed the curb and then Mrs. Schnitzer's rather substantial back bumper.

I held my head, wishing for an ice pack or a vacation in Acapulco. Then I got my wits together and moved my car into the drive of Floyd's gas station and out of traffic. I grimaced at the grinding sound I heard when I turned the wheel too far left. I hoped the problem wouldn't be expensive to fix given my new unemployed status. With my luck, it would be. Maybe I could just avoid left turns.

Mrs. Schnitzer didn't bother to get her Caddy out of people's way. She slid out from behind the wheel of her big car and sidled up to mine. She wore a lime green polyester skirt that showed off her own substantial back bumper, which, except for missing the dent, matched her car's perfectly.

She asked me a series of questions like, what was wrong with my eyes (plenty since I can see Edie, my great-great-grandmother's dead twin sister), was I on drugs (not unless you count dark cocoa), and what did I think Zach would say when he found out (which I decided not to think about.)

Edie was decidedly silent in the co-pilot's seat. She was dressed in a black, sequined flapper dress, which is a bit much for daytime, but I guess ghosts can get away with some eccentric fashions, being invisible to most people and all.

"Here Zach comes now," Mrs. Schnitzer said, beaming.

"Great," I mumbled and checked my rearview mirror. Sure enough, a broad chest of hard muscle covered by a tight, white t-shirt was approaching.

Mrs. Schnitzer said, "Tammy Jo ran right into the back of my car. And I've got to get home to get ready for the mayor's party. I don't have time for this nonsense today, Zach."

In other words, "Deputy Zach, straighten out your flaky ex-wife." I clenched my teeth, resenting the implication.

He played right along with her. "Y'all go on, Miss Lorraine. I'll deal with this."

She wiggled back to her car and drove her dented bumper off into the sunset. Zach tipped his Stetson back, showing off dark blonde curls and a face that inspires women to cat fights.

"Girl, you're lucky your lips are sweeter than those cakes you bake, or I'd have revoked your license a long time ago."

I'd had a fender-bender or two in the past. Mostly, they weren't my fault.

"Eddie showed up—"

"Tammy Jo, don't start that. It still chaps my ass that I paid that quack Chulley sixteen-hundred bucks to get your head shrunk, and all I got for my trouble was a headache."

"I told you it wouldn't work."

"Then you shouldn't have gone and wasted my money. Now listen, I'm busy. You go on home and get ready for Georgia Sue's party, and I'll talk to you there."

"We're driving separate?" I asked. Zach and I have an on-again-off-again relationship, but we were supposed to be on-again at the moment, as evidenced by the fact that he'd slept over the night before last and I'd made him eggs and bacon for breakfast.

"Yeah, I'll be late," he said. "I was at T.J.'s when they called me to give them a hand with this. Longhorns were on the thirty-yard line. You believe I'm out here today?"

On game day? Frankly no. If there's no ESPN in heaven, Zach will probably pack up and move to hell. The fact that he forgets our anniversary and everybody's birthdays every year, but has the Longhorn and Cowboy football schedules memorized as soon as they come out is just one of the reasons our marriage didn't survive. Another small problem was the fact that I still believe in the ghost sitting silently in my passenger seat, and he felt a psychiatrist should have been able to shrink her out of my mind with a pill or stern talking to.

I looked around at the traffic jam as Zach examined my front end. "So what's going on here?" I asked. He didn't answer, which is kind of typical. "What's happened?" I repeated.

He looked at me. "What's happened is you crashed your car, which means I'll have to call in another favor to get it fixed. Unless you've got the money to pay for it this time?"

Now didn't seem the right moment to mention I'd gotten fired. "I'm going home," I announced.

"You think you can handle it?" he asked, his lips finally curving into that sexy smile that could melt concrete.

"Yes."

"Good. Gimme some sugar." He didn't wait before stealing a wet kiss and then sauntering off just as quick.

"Hi, Edie," I said, as I maneuvered back into traffic. "I really wish you wouldn't visit me in the car."

"He still has quite a good body."

"Yes."

"Are you together?"

"Kind of." Like oil and vinegar. Mix us up real good and we'll work together, but sooner or later, we always separate.

"So it's just sex," she said, voice cool as a snow cone.

I sighed. "You shouldn't talk like that."

"He is forever preoccupied and yet often overbearing, an odd and terrible combination in a man. It wouldn't matter so much if he could afford lovely make-up gifts, like diamonds."

"Can we not talk about this please? I've had a rough day."

"I heard you quit your job. Well done."

"I didn't quit. I can't afford to quit. I was fired."

"That's not what I heard."

"Well, what did you hear? And who from?" It unnerved me that there were ghosts that I couldn't see strolling around spying on me. Did they watch me in the shower? Did they watch when Zach parked his boots under my bed? I blushed. Edie noticed and laughed.

I stole a glance at her exquisite face. With porcelain skin and high cheekbones, she was prettier than a china doll. She wore her sleek black hair bobbed, either straight or waved, depending on her mood and her outfit. Her lips were painted a provocative cherry red today. Rumor had it that Edie had inspired men to diamonds...and suicide. It was generally accepted in my family that one of her jilted beaux had murdered her, but she never shared the details of the 1926 unsolved New York homicide of which she'd been the star.

"How are you?" I asked.

"I'm dead. How would you be?"

I opened my mouth and closed it again. I had no idea. Was it hard being a ghost? Was it boring? She was very secretive about her life, er, afterlife.

"What made you visit today?" I asked, still trying for polite small talk.

"I heard you showed some backbone. I decided to visit in the vain hope that you might be turning interesting."

I frowned. Edie could be as sweet as honey on toast or as nasty as a bee sting. "I'm so sorry," I said. "For a minute I forgot that this isn't my life. It's your entertainment."

Her peridot eyes sparkled, and she favored me with a breath-taking smile. "Maybe not vain after all. Did I ever tell you about the time I stole a Baccarat crystal vase from the editor-in-chief of Vanity Fair and gave it as a present to Dorothy Parker? I liked the irony. He fired her, you know."

"Who was the editor?"

"Exactly," she said with a smile. "Getting fired isn't such a bad thing. You just need a present to cheer you up. As luck would have it, one is on the way."

"One what?" I asked, peering at her out of the corner of my eye. She couldn't take a corporeal form. There was no way for her to pick something up from a shop or even to call into the Home Shopping Network, which was really a very good thing. From what I knew of Edie, she had very expensive tastes. There was no way in the world I would have been able to pay for any "presents" she sent me.

"What's this?" Edie asked as she moved through the passenger seat to the back.

"A cake," I said.

"It's a Scottish castle. Eilean Donan. Robert the Bruce still visits there. You're such a clever, clever girl. Only you have the bridge a bit wrong."

"I've never been to Scotland. It's just a castle I made up."

In the rearview mirror, I saw her tilt her head and smile. "Did you see it in a dream perhaps?"

"A daydream," I said hesitantly.

"It's about time, isn't it?"

"About time for what?"

"I'll see you later." She faded to mist and then to a pale green orb of light that passed out of the car and was gone.

I was happy that she'd liked my cake, but troubled by what she'd said. I was afraid she was thinking, as she had before, that I was finally "coming into my powers." She'd proclaimed as much on other occasions and had always been disappointed. No one in the history of the line had ever had their talents appear after the age of seventeen. Here I was twenty-three years old now; I knew I was never going to be a witch. In a lot of ways, it was a relief. Magic always tempted my mother. She'd mixed a potion to help her track down a lost love, and she hadn't made it home to Duvall in over a year. Finally her twin sister, Aunt Melanie, had gotten worried and had gone after her. Now who knew where they were? And what about Edie? She was said to have had remarkable powers, but they hadn't saved her life, had they? They may even have drawn something evil to her. Magic was dangerous, and I was glad I didn't have it. Really, I was.

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