

# CURSE OF THE TWISTED ROSE



LEE LACKEY

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by Lee Lackey



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*To my parents,  
who always fight for me.*



# One

Marlie spotted the blood-speckled beak of a buzzard perched on a sign that said **PSYCHIC**. She hated the things—scavengers and parasites that did not have the sense to stay on the ground. Of course, an attack by blue jays when she was a girl didn't help her opinion of birds, either.

The gravel road leading to the psychic shop crunched under the tires of Marlie's police cruiser with the words **HOUSTON POLICE DEPARTMENT** emblazoned on the side. The cruiser came to a stop, barely missing the remains of a barbed-wire fence alongside the road. Marlie nimbly stepped out onto the driveway; the green light under the trees illuminated a tattoo of a twisted rose, barely hidden at the nape of her neck.

In her early thirties, she could still be mistaken for a coed. Her straight brown hair was braided underneath her short-brimmed hat, which shaded a blunt, square face and arched cheekbones.

"Are you sure this is the place, Vasquez? I thought Dispatch told us it was one of those New Age shops, not a psychic. Or not a Christian one, at least. I think that's what the cross means."

A stocky man, half a head shorter than the woman, opened the driver's side door. He took his hat off in the summer heat, running a hand through short-cropped

hair. “There ain’t too much else out here, now is there, Franklin?”

“Don’t get all gruff with me, you old fart.” Franklin examined the wild kudzu and dewberry brambles around the clearing. “I’ve seen you drunk enough to flop on the ground like a dead cockroach.” She turned back to Vasquez. “And call me Marlie. You babysit my son. No need to be all formal around the civvies.”

Ignoring her request, Vasquez said, “Let’s get this over with. I hate house calls.”

The pair called their location in to Dispatch, then walked up wooden steps, past a covered porch, and through a glass door into the shop. Inside, curliques crosses and pictures of the Virgin Mary covered the walls. The dark-stained wood counter blocked the right side of the entry room, running all the way to the back wall. A pair of doors—one behind the counter, one for the public—straddled the far wall. On the other side of the counter, dozens of jars filled with herbs and spices covered shelves that stretched from floor to ceiling. A cheap cash register bisected the room in both directions.

Vasquez smiled knowingly at the jars. “How much you wanna bet one of those hides narcotics?”

“What do you mean? Everything about this place screams Bible-thumping Christian,” said Marlie.

“Tupac was a Christian, didn’t stop him from toking. The devil believes in the power of God; he just thinks he knows better than God.” Vasquez drummed his fingers on the countertop. “Where is this lady, anyway? She called about a prowler, and now she isn’t even minding her shop.”

Marlie glanced at the picture frames along the wall. Mostly religious iconography—nonsense to her. One picture in particular disturbed her: the Virgin Mary smiling, but her hair hung oddly. It was clumped with bloodred streaks.

At the end of the counter, the service door thumped open to reveal a shock of white hair framing a haggard face. Skeletal arms and fingers reached up to the counter, running along the well-worn wood. A hint of movement—the fluttering of tattered clothes—escaped the doorway before the old woman closed it behind her. She walked to the register, then put on a half smile. “What do ya be needin’, dearies?”

Marlie shifted her feet uneasily. “Did you call about a prowler?”

The woman looked shocked for a moment, then put back on the fake smile. “Oh yes, I suppose that’d be why you’re here. Had somethin’ stalking around the woods a few nights back. When you didn’t come then, I didn’t expect ya’ll to ever make it out here.”

Vasquez’s hard gaze scanned the jars lining the wall behind the woman. “They wouldn’t be after anything in particular, would they?”

The elderly woman smiled weakly. She tensed her shoulders and her eyes narrowed—staring directly ahead of her with an unnatural amount of willpower. “I recently acquired two very rare books: the Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses. To the right person, they are priceless.”

“That sounds about right,” said Vasquez in a tone that implied the opposite.

“How about we start with where you first saw the prowler?” Marlie looked uncomfortably from the woman to her partner. While she was used to Vasquez’s hunches, she never got used to the immense pressure he could exert on a suspect with just a few words.

The woman pressed her lips into a thin line. “Yes, I saw him in my back garden. You should start there.”

Vasquez leaned back nonchalantly. “Sounds good. But we also need to check your back rooms. Just to make sure he didn’t break in without you knowing.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible.” The old woman furrowed her brow. “Some potions are cooking in the back and cannot be disturbed.”

The older officer showed a false smile. “Sure. Let’s get to that garden, Officer Franklin. Who knows what we’ll find there.”

The hinges on the glass door creaked as the officers exited the shop. When the door closed behind them, Marlie spun to face her partner. “What’s the big idea behind this Franklin business? I told you to call me Marlie! It’ll put the civvies at ease.”

“And it’ll put you at ease. I wanted to remind you we’re not here as social workers—the civvies know it and so should you.” Vasquez spit in the gravel of the parking lot.

Marlie frowned. “I think we’d get a better chance at them if they think we’re friendly. You catch more flies with honey than vinegar.”

“What makes you think we want to keep the flies around? Agitate them with vinegar and they’ll lead you to the honey. Now let’s get to the back: I want to see if we can find any narcotics while we examine the windows.”

The rusted barbed-wire fence surrounded the parking lot, then narrowed to a path around the shop. Marlie felt slightly claustrophobic with the rusty metal on one side and the weathered wood covered by a rosebush on the other. The petals of the bush were a peculiar purple color—nothing like the red or white or even yellow she had seen. She felt more at ease when the bare dirt underfoot opened out into a wide garden.

Greasy buzzards blanketed the bare ground, shuffling and pecking at the soil. Marlie whistled, and the birds took flight. They settled on the branches surrounding the clearing, and then stared at the two uniformed officers.

“Freaking gut-buckets always give me the willies.” Marlie warily examined the pack of birds, ensuring they

were not going to sneak up on her. Something about the birds felt unnatural. It took her a moment to examine them, but she knew the reason behind her unease. They moved far more uniformly than usual.

Vasquez laughed. “Buzzards are our best friends. They tell us where to find victims. Unfortunately, it looks like this is from the prowler, not enough to get us entry into the rest of the shop.”

His dusky hand indicated a corpse rotting on a small hump of earth. The dog had a clean, sharp cut in its side. A dark streak of blood caked the grass leading to ivies climbing their barbed-wire border. Curiously, the blood seemed absent from the ivies, although dark red veins lined their leaves and stems.

Marlie walked up on the corpse hesitantly, covering her nose against the stench. “Poor dog—he even has tags. Looks like a Rottweiler that tried to defend his home. But why didn’t the psychic mention him?”

“Got me, but she makes my scalp itch. This isn’t worth getting any more officers out here. I’m going to check the windows. You follow that blood trail. Hopefully, you’ll find a lead or something that will satisfy the crazy witch.” Vasquez made a show of looking at the seal around the window panels, but it barely disguised his interest in the darkened interior of the house. “If this turns out to be a big bust, it could get me promoted to Detective.”

Marlie eyed the buzzards cautiously. “Are you sure that what you’re doing is a good idea? Those birds don’t look friendly.”

Vasquez looked at his partner incredulously. “You kidding? The great Marlie Franklin, champion kickboxer, afraid of beak and claw? I thought you beat up five bikers in a bar brawl.”

“Not afraid, just... concerned. Anything could be out there.” Marlie firmed her lips into a thin red line. She hated

going anywhere without backup. Sure, she could usually take care of herself, but one man with a gun would render her training useless. And the buzzards watching intently from the trees did not help.

“Git! The lady’s got to think we’re doing something about her problem. I need to check inside here to see what she’s hiding.” Vasquez scrutinized the house while waving Marlie away.

A buzzard let out a scratchy cry and flapped its wings. The rest of the pack shuffled disturbingly on their perches. Beady eyes focused on Marlie, following her as she moved to the edge of the garden.

A chill settled into Marlie’s stomach. She tried to ignore her silent audience, but felt her attention constantly drawn upward. “You leave me alone. I’ll have buzzard barbeque if you don’t,” said Marlie, her voice quavering slightly. An unspoken malice hovered around them.

A sickly vine tangled around her shoe when she got to the fence. Distracted by the birds, she didn’t notice the pull on her foot until it was too late. Marlie tottered over and fell into the rusted barbs of the fence. The vines clutched and grabbed her uniform, pulling her to the ground.

For a moment, Marlie struggled against the metal and vegetation holding her to the ground. Finally she managed to disentangle herself from the vines and barbs and stand up.

Dirt and leaves covered her hair. The vines, which had seemed alive the moment before, lay limp on the ground around her.

She glared at the plants in confusion. They seemed normal enough, now, but she had felt an evil intent when they had grabbed onto her. The more she thought about it, the less certain she became about her own memory of the last few seconds.

Laughing, Vasquez boomed from the house, “You look like the swamp thing, Franklin! Maybe you can use your

newfound affinity for plants to find the prowler's trail! Lord knows you'll need the help after you just made a mess of it."

Marlie looked dejectedly at the snarled mess of plants and dirt around her. A quick check of her uniform revealed only a few scratches and scrapes, although the shirt had several tears. "Thanks for the consideration, Vasquez. I only got scraped by rusty metal and could die of infection."

"Bah, you got your shots three weeks ago—after chasing that suspect over a junkyard fence. Too bad you seem to have gotten clumsier since last week. Now get your head together! I don't want to spend all day here!"

Marlie murmured, "And you've gotten meaner over the past week. Maybe I need to talk to your wife again—"

"What was that?"

"Oh, just saying I need to get back to Muay Thai class. Ever since your wife had her stroke, I've had a hell of a time getting a babysitter." Marlie's face went pale as she realized the thoughtlessness of her comment.

Vasquez frowned. "Get back to work, Franklin."

Marlie hesitated a moment, grimacing. "Sorry, Vasquez. I didn't mean—"

"I said get back to work, Officer. Or am I going to have to get over there and do the work for you?" His voice made it clear he had no intention of doing so, regardless of what she said.

She turned back to the torn-up trail. The vines and barbed wire lay in a torn circle around the spot where she'd fallen. The blood led up to her location, then disappeared in a mass of disturbed dirt.

Sighing, Marlie gingerly crossed the four-foot-high fence. She walked in a series of slow, concentric circles until she uncovered a drop of undisturbed blood. The blood led to a trail that spotted the ground all the way to the edge of the clearing. Unfortunately, her audience perched right above the trail.

Marlie ignored the buzzards peering down at her as she headed into the thick vegetation at the edge of the clearing. The Taser on Marlie's belt caught on a low-hanging branch, jerking her back. Cursing, she nearly ripped open her hand pulling the gnarled wood off. She dodged the occasional thorn and nettle as she followed the blood deeper into a more barren understory full of pine oak trunks. An occasional scuffed tree and disturbed rock accompanied the path made by the wounded dog—the intruder had also come this way.

The ground gradually sloped down to a steep drop-off ahead. As Marlie walked, the trees above her shook and cracked from the winged forms that followed her. The buzzards remained silent while she glared at them, daring them to make a run at her.

A rabbit darted out of a deadfall to Marlie's left and ran for the drop-off ahead. A buzzard screeched and dropped like a dart, wrapping its talons around the struggling creature. The bird of prey rose into the canopy then dropped its victim. The rabbit fell hard into the ground. Its legs kicked a few times in a last-ditch effort to escape, and then stilled as the buzzard landed next to it.

Marlie's fear of the bird morphed into anger at the blatant act of violence. She charged the grounded bird. A swift kick sent it squawking indignantly into the air. The officer checked the poor creature at her feet, but couldn't find any sign of life. "I'm sorry, little thing. I'll make sure your killer doesn't profit from you."

The soft fur, splotted with crimson, slipped easily into a small hole at the base of a tree. Marlie stacked rocks in a makeshift cairn above the rabbit while the buzzards cried overhead. Their sharp beaks lashed against the branches around them, causing an awful rattle to reverberate through the forest.

Marlie frowned at the killers above her. "And let that be a lesson to you! Violence won't get you anything!"

Satisfied, she retraced the remainder of the dog's trail to the drop-off. Over the edge of the sharp drop, Marlie carefully looked over steep banks, about eight feet high, that led to a small stream of water trickling over a bed of smooth stones. After gingerly lowering herself down, she examined a huge mess of mud and blood—signs of the fight between the dog and the prowler.

A large rut to one side began a long ribbon of tire track that continued downstream. The impression of the tires was larger than a dirt bike. Possibly a motorcycle. Sharp slashes along the bank and through the surrounding grass formed smooth, linear cuts—likely a sword or large knife. At the base of the opposite bank, a pack of cigarettes lay discarded and forgotten.

Marlie hopped across the small creek, taking advantage of the season's decreased flow. A closer look at the cigarettes revealed that they were new, no more than a couple of days old, with the image of a red hawk with spread wings on the front. She bent down to pick them up, and then felt the sharp pain of talons raking across her back.

Screams of aggression sounded as tree limbs shook from the launch of dozens of razor-beaked attackers. They swooped down at Marlie, buffeting her with their wings. The world around Marlie became a brown whirlwind of feathers and pain.

Panic swept through Marlie, twisting her face and hands. She bit hard into her lower lip while closing her eyes to protect them from attack. Back hunched over, Marlie nearly collapsed into unconsciousness before an inner strength softened her panic. Opening her eyes, she followed the flurry of activity surrounding her. Stinging erupted all along her body as the birds attacked with beak and claw, but she ignored it. Seeing an opening, the kickboxer set up in her fighting stance: left foot pointing forward, right foot opening to a forty-five-degree angle. In a flash, her right heel struck out in front of her, catching the glossy tail of

one of her attackers. “You should feel that kick when I’m in heels.”

The bird squawked, then struck back at her thigh. A cut lanced through Marlie’s uniform, leaving a long streak of crimson.

The injury pulled Marlie’s mind into razor-sharp focus. She struck out with her left hand; the first two knuckles of her hand caught a winged assailant in the beak. A long scratch split open her knuckles, but failed to break her concentration.

The mob of birds, shaken now, fluttered out into a wider circle. They gave Marlie a narrow berth, allowing her to set her feet more firmly against the ground. Surrounding trees could barely be glimpsed through the tight web of wings.

Determination stilled Marlie’s heart, freezing her entire body for a split second as she gathered power. She twisted her left shoulder backward first. She followed with her right shoulder, and her right leg hung temporarily weightless in the air. Whipping her shin in an arc, she brought it crashing through body after feathery body—six dropped out of the air. She twisted through a whole one-hundred-eighty degrees, left foot pirouetting perfectly against the ground. Her blow completed, the kickboxer settled to a stop, hands hovering in front of her face.

The mob broke, and Marlie took the opportunity to sprint across the creek. The buzzards indecisively floated. They stayed nearby, but could not muster the courage to go on the offensive again.

Marlie leapt up and grabbed large tufts of grass growing at the top of the sheer bank of the creek. Her grip slipped slightly as gravity took hold, but she managed to heave herself bodily out of the creekbed.

The buzzards swooped down after her, their courage regained. They chased her through the understory of the forest, darting between tree trunks and limbs. Occasionally,

one would clip a tree and spiral into the ground, but this never stopped them for long. A terrible force propelled them onward, heedless of injury.

Ignoring the searing pain in her thighs and ribs, Marlie leapt over fallen trees and pits. She picked up speed after spotting the dense cover that indicated the edge of the trees. The ground slipped and slid occasionally as she hit mud. A tight tangle of vines and brambles resisted her passage, and then she broke through to the clearing.