



Black Heart (The Curse Workers)

By Holly Black

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Love is dangerous and trust is priceless in Holly Black’s “powerful, edgy dark” fantasy series (*Publishers Weekly*).

Cassel Sharpe knows he’s been used as an assassin, but he’s trying to put all that behind him. He’s trying to be good, even though he grew up in a family of con artists and cheating comes as easily as breathing to him. He’s trying to do the right thing, even though the girl he loves is inextricably connected with crime. And he’s trying to convince himself that working for the Feds is smart, even though he’s been raised to believe the government is the enemy.

But with a mother on the lam, the girl he loves about to take her place in the Mob, and new secrets coming to light, the line between what’s right and what’s wrong becomes increasingly blurred. When the Feds ask Cassel to do the one thing he said he would never do again, he needs to sort out what’s a con and what’s truth. In a dangerous game and with his life on the line, Cassel may have to make his biggest gamble yet—this time on love.

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Editorial Review

Review

* "The conclusion to Black's brilliant and unusual Curse Workers trilogy lives up to its predecessors. . . . The perfect end to this gem of a trilogy. If you haven't discovered this series yet, get going; if you're already a fan, why are you even reading this review?" --*Kirkus Reviews*, ***STAR**

"This latest installment from best-selling author Black is sure to be on readers' radars."--*Booklist*

"This book doesn't stand alone, but is a welcome addition to the series."--*School Library Journal*

"The smashing ending to Holly Black's Curse Workers trilogy will keep readers guessing to the final page."--*Shelf Awareness*

"Fast-paced action, multifaceted characters, and an interesting paranormal world will keep readers hooked."—*VOYA*

"To be sure, knowledge of the first two books is absolutely crucial to the enjoyment of this one but fans of the series will be thrilled by this richly developed tale. . . ."--*Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*

"*Black Heart*, the most accomplished in an incredibly accomplished series, continues to raise the stakes even higher. . . . As in the previous novels, Black toys with the reader, but to complain would be a sin. The truth is, *Black Heart* is essentially a perfect book."--*Locus* (Gwenda Bond)

About the Author

Holly Black is the author of The Curse Workers series: *White Cat*, *Red Glove*, and *Black Heart*; *The Poison Eaters: And Other Stories*; and the Modern Faerie Tales: *Tithe*, *Valiant*, and *Ironside*. She is an editor of *Zombies vs. Unicorns*, and she collaborated with Tony DiTerlizzi on the bestselling Spiderwick series. Holly lives in Amherst, Massachusetts, and you can visit her at BlackHolly.com.

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CHAPTER ONE

MY BROTHER BARRON sits next to me, sucking the last dregs of milk tea slush noisily through a wide yellow straw. He's got the seat of my Benz pushed all the way back and his feet up on the dash, the heels of his pointy black shoes scratching the plastic. With his hair slicked back and his mirrored sunglasses covering his eyes, he looks like a study in villainy.

He's actually a junior federal agent, still in training, sure, but with a key card and an ID badge and everything.

To be fair, he's also a villain.

I tap my gloved fingers impatiently against the curve of the wheel and bring a pair of binoculars to my eyes for about the millionth time. All I see is a boarded-up building on the wrong side of Queens. "What is she *doing* in there? It's been forty minutes."

“What do you think?” he asks me. “Bad things. That’s her after-school job now. Taking care of shady business so Zacharov’s gloves stay clean.”

“Her dad won’t put her in any real danger,” I say, but the tone of my voice makes it pretty obvious I’m trying to convince myself more than I’m trying to convince my brother.

Barron snorts. “She’s a new soldier. Got to prove herself. Zacharov couldn’t keep her out of danger if he tried—and he’s not going to be trying real hard. The other laborers are watching, waiting for her to be weak. Waiting for her to screw up. He knows that. So should you.”

I think of her at twelve, a skinny girl with eyes too large for her face and a nimbus of tangled blond hair. In my memory she’s sitting on the branch of a tree, eating a rope of red licorice. Her lips are sticky with it. Her flip-flops are hanging off her toes. She’s cutting her initials into the bark, high up, so her cousin can’t claim she’s lying when she tells him she got higher than he ever will.

Boys never believe I can beat them, she told me back then. But I always win in the end.

“Maybe she spotted the car and went out the back,” I say finally.

“No way she made us.” He sucks on the straw again. It makes that rattling empty-cup sound, echoing through the car. “We’re like ninjas.”

“Somebody’s cocky,” I say. After all, tailing someone isn’t easy, and Barron and I aren’t that good at it yet, no matter what he says. My handler at the agency, Yulikova, has been encouraging me to shadow Barron, so I can learn secondhand and can keep myself safe until she figures out how to tell her bosses that she’s got hold of a teenage transformation worker with a bad attitude and a criminal record. And since Yulikova’s in charge, Barron’s stuck teaching me. It’s supposed to be just for a few months, until I graduate from Wallingford. Let’s see if we can stand each other that long.

Of course, I’m pretty sure this isn’t the kind of lesson Yulikova’s been imagining.

Barron grins, white teeth flashing like dropped dice. “What do you think Lila Zacharov would do if she knew you were tailing her?”

I grin back. “Probably she’d kill me.”

He nods. “Probably she would. Probably she’d kill me twice for helping you.”

“Probably you deserve it,” I say. He snorts.

Over the last few months I got every last thing I ever wanted—and then I threw it all away. Everything I thought I could never have was offered up on a silver platter—the girl, the power, a job at the right hand of Zacharov, the most formidable man I know. It wouldn’t even have been that hard to work for him. It probably would have been fun. And if I didn’t care who I hurt, it would still all be mine.

I lift the binoculars and study the door again—the worn paint striping the boards and crumbling like bread crumbs, the chewed-up bottom edge as ragged as if it had been gnawed on by rats.

Lila would still be mine.

Mine. The language of love is like that, possessive. That should be the first warning that it's not going to encourage anyone's betterment.

Barron groans and throws his cup into the backseat. "I can't believe that you blackmailed me into becoming Johnny Law and now I have to sweat it out five days a week with the other recruits while you use my experience to stalk your girlfriend. How is that fair?"

"*One*, I think you mean the extremely dubious benefit of your experience. *Two*, Lila's not my girlfriend. *Three*, I just wanted to make sure she was okay." I count off these points on my leather-covered fingers. "And *four*, the last thing you should want is *fairness*."

"Stalk her at school," Barron says, ignoring everything I've just said. "Come on. I have to make a phone call. Let's pack in this lesson and get a couple of slices. I'll even buy."

I sigh. The car is stuffy and smells like old coffee. I'd like to stretch my legs. And Barron is probably right—we should give this up. Not for the reason he's saying but for the one that's implied. The one about it not being okay to lurk around outside buildings, spying on girls you like.

My fingers are reaching reluctantly for my keys when she walks out of the worn door, as though my giving up summoned her. She's got on tall black riding boots and a steel gray trench. I study the quicksilver gestures of her gloved hands, the sway of her earrings, the slap of her heels on the steps, and the lash of her hair. She's so beautiful, I can barely breathe. Behind her follows a boy with his hair braided into the shape of two antelope horns. His skin is darker than mine. He's got on baggy jeans and a hoodie. He's shoving a folded-up wad of something that looks like cash into an inside pocket.

Outside of school Lila doesn't bother wearing a scarf. I can see the grim necklace of marks on her throat, scars black where ash was rubbed into them. That's part of the ceremony when you join her father's crime family, slicing your skin and swearing that you're dead to your old life and reborn into wickedness. Not even Zacharov's daughter was spared it.

She's one of them now. No turning back.

"Well, now," says Barron, gleeful. "I bet you're thinking we just observed the end of a very naughty transaction. But let's consider the possibility that actually we caught her doing something totally innocent yet embarrassing."

I look at him absently. "Embarrassing?"

"Like meeting up to play one of those card games where you have to collect everything. Pokémon. Magic the Gathering. Maybe they're training for a tournament. With all that money she just handed him, I'm guessing he won."

"Funny."

"Maybe he's tutoring her in Latin. Or they were painting miniatures together. Or he's teaching her shadow puppetry." He makes a duck-like gesture with one gloved hand.

I punch Barron's shoulder, but not really hard. Just hard enough to make him shut up. He laughs and adjusts his sunglasses, pushing them higher on his nose.

The boy with the braids crosses the street, head down, hood pulled up to shadow his face. Lila walks to the corner and raises her hand to hail a cab. The wind whips at her hair, making it a nimbus of blown gold.

I wonder if she's done her homework for Monday.

I wonder if she could ever love me again.

I wonder just how mad she'd be if she knew I was here, watching her. Probably really, really mad.

Cold October air floods into the car suddenly, tossing around the empty cup in the backseat.

"Come on," Barron says, leaning on the door, grinning down at me. I didn't even notice him getting out. "Grab some quarters for the meter, and your stuff." He jerks his head in the direction of the boy with the braids. "We're going to follow him."

"What about that phone call?" I shiver in my thin green T-shirt. My leather jacket is wadded up in the backseat of my car. I reach for it and shrug it on.

"I was bored," Barron says. "Now I'm not."

This morning when he told me we were going to practice tailing people, I picked Lila as my target half as a joke, half out of sick desire. I didn't think that Barron would agree. I didn't think that we'd actually see her leaving her apartment building and getting into a town car. I for sure didn't think that I would wind up here, close to actually finding out what she's been doing when she's not in school.

I get out of the car and slam the door behind me.

That's the problem with temptation. It's so damn tempting.

"Feels almost like real agent work, doesn't it?" Barron says as we walk down the street, heads bowed against the wind. "You know, if we caught your girlfriend committing a crime, I bet Yulikova would give us a bonus or something for being prize pupils."

"Except that we're not going to do that," I say.

"I thought you wanted us to be good guys." He grins a too-wide grin. He's enjoying needling me, and my reacting only makes it worse, but I can't stop.

"Not if it means hurting her," I say, my voice as deadly as I can make it. "Never her."

"Got it. Hurting, bad. But how do you excuse stalking her and her friends, little brother?"

"I'm not excusing it," I say. "I'm just doing it."

Following—*stalking*—someone isn't easy. You try not to stare too hard at the back of his head, keep your distance, and act like you're just another person freezing your ass off in late October on the streets of Queens. Above all you try not to seem like a badly trained federal agent wannabe.

"Stop worrying," Barron says, strolling along beside me. "Even if we get made, this guy will probably be

flattered. He'd think he was moving up in the world if he had a government tail."

Barron is better at acting casual than I am. I guess he should be. He's got nothing to lose if we're spotted. Lila couldn't possibly hate him more than she does. Plus, he probably trains for this all day, while I'm at Wallingford studying to get into the kind of college there is no way I am ever going to attend.

It still annoys me. Since I was a kid, we've competed over lots of things. Mostly, all those competitions were ones I lost.

We were the two youngest, and when Philip would be off with his friends on the weekends, Barron and I would be stuck doing whatever errands Dad needed doing, or practicing whatever skill he thought we needed to learn.

He particularly wanted us to be better at pickpocketing and lock-picking than we were.

Two kids are the perfect pickpocket team, he'd say. One to do the lift, the other one to distract or to take the handoff.

We both practiced dips. First identifying where Dad kept his wallet by looking for a bulge in a back pocket or the way one side of his coat swung heavily because something was inside. Then the lift. I was pretty good; Barron was better.

Then we practiced distraction. Crying. Asking for directions. Giving the mark a quarter that you claim they dropped.

It's like stage magic, Dad said. You've got to make me look over there so I won't notice what's happening right in front of my face.

When Dad didn't feel like fending off our clumsy attempts at lifts, he'd bring us to the barn and show us his collection: He had an old metal tackle box with locks on all the sides, so you had to run the gauntlet of seven different locks to get into it. Neither Barron nor I ever managed.

Once we learned how to open a lock with a tool, we'd have to learn to pick it with a bobby pin, with a hanger, then with a stick or some other found object. I kept hoping that I'd be naturally great at locks, since I was pretty sure I wasn't a worker back then, and since I already felt like an outsider in my family. I thought that if there was one thing I was better at than all of them, that would make up for everything else.

It sucks to be the youngest.

If you get into the supersecure box, we'll sneak into the movie of your choice, Dad would say. Or, I put candy in there. Or, If you really want that video game, just open the box and I'll get it for you. But it didn't matter what he promised. What did matter was that I only ever managed to pick three locks; Barron managed five.

And here we are again, learning a bunch of new skills. I can't help feeling a little bit competitive and a little bit disappointed in myself that I'm already so far behind. After all, Yulikova thinks Barron has a real future with the Bureau. She told me so. I told her that sociopaths are relentlessly charming.

I think she figured I was joking.

“What other stuff do they teach you at federal agent school?” I ask. It shouldn’t bother me that he’s fitting in so well. So what if he’s faking it? Good for him.

I guess what bothers me is him faking it better than I am.

He rolls his eyes. “Nothing much. Obvious stuff—getting people to trust you with mirroring behavior. You know, doing whatever the other person’s doing.” He laughs. “Honestly, undercover’s just like being a con man. Same techniques. Identify the target. Befriend. Then betray.”

Mirroring behavior. When a mark takes a drink from his water glass, so should you. When he smiles, so should you. Keep it subtle, rather than creepy, and it’s a good technique.

Mom taught it to me when I was ten. *Cassel*, she said, *you want to know how to be the most charming guy anyone’s ever met? Remind them of their favorite person. Everyone’s favorite person is their own damn self.*

“Except now you’re the good guy,” I say, and laugh.

He laughs too, like I just told the best joke in the world.

But now that I’m thinking about Mom, I can’t help worrying about her. She’s been missing since she got caught using her worker talent—emotion—to manipulate Governor Patton, a guy who hated curse workers to begin with and now is on national news every night with a vein popping out of his forehead, calling for her blood. I hope she stays hidden. I just wish I knew where she was.

“Barron,” I say, about to start up a conversation we’ve already had about a million times, the one where we tell each other that she’s fine and she’ll contact us soon. “Do you think—”

Up ahead the boy with the braids steps into a pool hall.

“In here,” Barron says, with a jerk of his head. We duck into a deli across the street. I’m grateful for the warmth. Barron orders us two coffees, and we stand near the window, waiting.

“You ever going to get over this thing with Lila?” he asks me, breaking the silence, making me wish I’d been the one to do it, so that I could have picked another subject. Any other subject. “It’s like some kind of illness with you. How long have you been into her? Since you were what, eleven?”

I don’t say anything.

“That’s why you really wanted to follow her and her new hire, right? Because you don’t think that you’re worthy of her, but you’re hoping that if she does something awful enough, maybe you’ll deserve each other after all.”

“That’s not how it works,” I say, under my breath. “That’s not how love works.”

He snorts. “You sure?”

I bite my tongue, swallowing every obnoxious taunt that comes into my mind. If he doesn’t get a rise out of me, maybe he’ll stop, and then maybe I can distract him. We stand like that for several minutes, until he sighs.

“Bored again. I’m going to make that phone call.”

“What if he comes out?” I ask, annoyed. “How am I going to—”

He widens his eyes in mock distress. “Improvise.”

The bell rings as he steps out the door, and the guy at the counter shouts his customary “Thanksforcomingcomeagain.”

On the sidewalk in front of the deli, Barron is flirting like crazy as he paces back and forth, dropping the names of French restaurants like he eats off a tablecloth every night. He’s got his phone cradled against his cheek, smiling like he’s buying the line of romantic nonsense he’s selling. I feel sorry for the girl, whoever she is, but I am gleeful.

When he gets off the phone I will never stop making fun of him. Biting my tongue won’t be enough to keep me from it. I would have to bite off my whole face.

He notices me grinning out the window at him, turns his back and stalks to the entranceway of a closed pawnshop half a block away. I made sure to waggle my eyebrows while he was looking in my direction.

With nothing else to do, I stay put. I drink more coffee. I play a game on my phone that involves shooting pixelated zombies.

Even though I’ve been waiting, I’m not really prepared when the boy with the braids walks out of the pool hall. He’s got a man with him, a tall guy with hollow cheekbones and greasy hair. The boy lights a cigarette inside his cupped palm, leaning against the wall. This is one of those moments when a little more training would help. Obviously running out of the deli and waving my arms at Barron is the wrong move, but I don’t know the right one if the boy starts moving again. I have no idea how to signal my brother.

Improvise, he said.

I walk out of the deli as nonchalantly as I can manage. Maybe the kid’s just hit the street for a smoke. Maybe Barron will notice me and come back over on his own.

I spot a bus stop bench and lean against it, trying to get a better look at the boy.

This isn’t a real assignment, I remind myself. It doesn’t matter if he gets away. There’s probably nothing to see. Whatever he’s doing for Lila, there’s no reason to think that he’s doing it now.

That’s when I notice the way that the boy is gesturing grandly, his cigarette trailing smoke. Misdirection, a classic of magic tricks and cons. *Look over here*, one hand says. He must be telling a joke too, because the man is laughing. But I can see his other hand, worming out of his glove.

I jump up, but I’m too late. I see a flash of bare wrist and thumb.

I start toward him, not thinking—crossing the street, barely noticing the screech of a car’s brakes until I’m past it. People turn toward me, but no one is watching the boy. Even the idiot guy from the pool hall is looking in my direction.

“Run,” I yell.

The hollow-cheeked man is still staring at me when the boy’s hand clamps around the front of his throat.

I grab for the boy’s shoulder, too late. The man, whoever he was, collapses like a sack of flour. The boy spins toward me, bare fingers reaching for skin. I catch his wrist and twist his arm as hard as I can.

He groans and punches me in the face with his gloved hand.

I stumble back. For a moment we just regard each other. I see his face up close for the first time and am surprised to notice that his eyebrows are carefully tweezed into perfect arches. His eyes are wide and brown beneath them. He narrows those eyes at me. Then he turns and runs.

I chase after him. It’s automatic—instinct—and I’m wondering what I think I’m doing as I race down the sidewalk. I risk a look back at Barron, but he’s turned away, bent over the phone, so that all I see is his back.

Figures.

The boy is fast, but I’ve been running track for the last three years. I know how to pace myself, allowing him to get ahead of me at first when he starts sprinting, but catching up once he’s winded. We go down block after block, me getting closer and closer.

This is what I’m supposed to do once I’m a federal agent, right? Chase bad guys.

But that’s not why I’m after him. I feel like I am hunting my own shadow. I feel like I can’t stop.

He glances back at me, and I guess he sees that I’m gaining on him, because he tries a new strategy. He veers abruptly into an alley.

I take the corner in time to see him reaching for something under his hoodie. I go for the nearest weapon I can find. A plank of wood, lying near a stack of garbage.

Swinging it, I catch him just as he gets out the gun. I feel the burn of my muscles and hear the crack as wood hits metal. I knock the pistol against the brick wall like it’s a baseball and I’m in the World Series.

I think I’m as surprised as he is.

Taking slow steps, I hold up the plank, which is split now, a big chunk of the top hanging off by a splinter, the remainder jagged and pointed like a spear. He watches me, every part of him tense. He doesn’t look much older than I am. He might even be younger.

“Who the hell are you?” When he speaks, I can see that some of his teeth are gold, flashing in the fading sun. Three on the bottom. One on top. He’s breathing hard. We both are.

I bend down and lift the gun in one shaking hand. My thumb flicks off the safety. I drop the plank.

I have no idea who I am right now.

“Why?” I say, between breaths. “Why did she pay you to kill him?”

“Hey,” he says, holding up both his hands, the gloved and ungloved one, in a gesture of surrender. Despite that, he seems more stunned than scared. “If he was your friend, then—”

“He wasn’t my friend.”

He lowers his hands slowly until they rest at his sides, like he has made a decision about me. Maybe that I’m not a cop. Maybe that it’s okay to relax. “I don’t ask why anyone wants anything. I don’t know, okay? It was just a job.”

I nod. “Let me see your throat.”

“No marks.” He pulls the neck of his shirt wide, but there’s no scarring there. “I freelance. I’m too pretty for all that bullshit. No one puts a collar on Gage.”

“Okay,” I say.

“That girl—if you know her, you know what she’s about.” He reaches into his mouth, pulling out a loose tooth—a real one—black with rot at the top. It sits like a flawed pearl in the palm of his glove. Then he grins. “Good thing murder pays so well, right? Gold’s expensive.”

I try to hide my surprise. A death worker who loses only a single tooth with each hit is a very dangerous guy. Every curse—physical, luck, memory, emotion, dream, death, and even transformation—causes some kind of blowback. As my grandfather says, all work works the worker. Blowback can be crippling, even lethal. Death curses rot a part of the worker’s body, anything from a lung to a finger. Or, apparently, something as minor as a tooth.

“What’s a death worker need a gun for anyway?” I ask.

“That gun’s real sentimental. Belonged to my gran.” Gage clears his throat. “Look, you’re not going to shoot. You would have done it already. So can we just—”

“You sure you want to double-dog-dare me?” I say. “You sure?”

That seems to rattle him. He sucks on his teeth. “Okay, all I know is what I heard—and not from . . . *her*. She never said anything, except where I could find him. But there’s rumors that the guy—he goes by Charlie West—bungled a job. Killed a family in what was supposed to be a simple smash and grab. He’s a drunk coward—”

My phone starts to ring.

I reach down and tug it out of my pocket with one hand, then glance down. It’s Barron, probably just having realized that I ditched him. At that moment Gage vaults himself at the chain-link fence.

I look at him go, and my vision blurs. I don’t know who I’m seeing. My grandfather. My brother. Myself. Any of us could be him, could have been him, coming from a hit, scrambling to get over a fence before getting shot in the back.

I don’t yell for him to get down. I don’t fire a warning shot or any of the stuff that I could do—that a federal agent trainee watching a murderer escape should do. I just let him go. But if he’s got the role that I was

supposed to have, then I have no idea how to be the person left in the alley. The good guy.

I wipe off the gun on my green shirt, then tuck it in the waistband of my jeans, against the small of my back, where my jacket will cover it. After I'm done, I walk to the mouth of the alley and call Barron.

When he arrives, he's with a bunch of guys in suits.

He grabs me by the shoulders. "What the hell were you doing?" his voice is low, but he sounds honestly shaken. "I had no idea where you were! You didn't answer your phone."

Except for that last time, I hadn't even heard it ring.

"I was *improvising*," I say smugly. "And you would have seen me if you hadn't been busy hitting on some girl."

If his expression is any indication, only the presence of other people keeps him from strangling me. "These guys showed up at the murder scene right after the cops," he says, giving me a loaded look. As mad as he is, I understand what he's trying to communicate. *I didn't call them*, his expression says. *I didn't tell them anything about Lila. I didn't betray you. I didn't betray you yet.*

The agents take down my statement. I tell them that I followed the hit man, but he got ahead of me and over the fence. I didn't see where he went from there. I didn't get that good of a look at him. His hood was up. No, he didn't say anything. No, he didn't have a weapon—or at least nothing other than his bare hand. Yes, I shouldn't have followed him. Yes, I know Agent Yulikova. Yes, she will vouch for me.

She does. They let me go without patting me down. The gun remains tucked in the back of my jeans, rubbing against the base of my spine as Barron and I walk back to the car.

"What really happened?" Barron asks me.

I shake my head.

"So, what are you going to do?" he asks, like he's challenging me. Like there's even a question. "Lila ordered that hit."

"Nothing," I say. "What do you think? And you're not doing anything either."

Girls like her, my grandfather once warned me, girls like her turn into women with eyes like bullet holes and mouths made of knives. They are always restless. They are always hungry. They are bad news. They will drink you down like a shot of whisky. Falling in love with them is like falling down a flight of stairs.

What no one told me, with all those warnings, is that even after you've fallen, even after you know how painful it is, you'd still get in line to do it again.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Roy Brown:

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Eric Lowe:

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