

# SUMMER'S ASHES





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A Novel By

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*For Caitlin, who knows that magic happens.*

—P. W.



## THE END OF THE EARTH

Most kids celebrate the end of the school year with a party, or having your best buds meet you at the skating rink, or getting your mom to pay for everyone's admission to a cool movie. Not me. Nope. What did I get?

I got stuck moving to the end of the earth. Okay, maybe not really the end, but just a few bus stops short of it.

It wasn't really my mom's fault. In fact, if you want to get right down to it, the whole thing was *my* fault. After all, I was the one who cast the spell in the first place.

I guess I ought to back up a bit. My mom was out of work. She's out of work a lot, and we move every few months, or at least that's what we've done for as long as I can remember. I have been to something like ten schools in eight years, or maybe even more than that. I've lost count, really.

My brother Sean is ten, four years younger than me, and he's kind of a geek. Most of his friends are comic book characters, not real people, so he doesn't really mind it as much when we move. He just finds a new geek store in whatever town we're in, and then he's happy.

I don't think Mom likes moving, but she says she has to go where the work is. She's trained as a nurse, and she says that sometimes hospitals just can't afford to pay people enough. That's why we move a lot. If she could work nights, it would be different, but she can't because it's just the three of us. No one with a brain would leave a pair of kids alone all night in Chicago.

At any rate, she brought home another pink slip, and it seemed like the world was going to end again.

"What are you going to do now?" I asked.

"I don't know, baby," she said sadly. "I'll start looking first thing in the morning. I've got two weeks before I'm officially unemployed, so maybe I'll find something."

I heard her crying into her pillow that night, when she thought Sean and I were asleep.

"Kieran," my brother whispered from the hallway.

"Go away," I muttered. I didn't want to talk to anyone.

He didn't go away. Instead, he came and sat on my bed. I thumped him with a pillow. "I said get out."

"No, Kieran, listen," he said softly. "We've got to do something."

I sighed. "Yeah, Sean, I know. But I don't know what." I rolled over and faced the wall.

"I don't know either," he murmured. "But I hate hearing her cry."

I did too. Mom cried a lot these days. She'd find a job, work for a few months, and then the inevitable happened. She'd be laid off again. It wasn't her fault. She worked hard.

It was just really crummy luck.

Sean was still sitting on my bed, but wasn't saying anything.

"What?" I asked, peeking over my shoulder.

"Nothing," he said innocently.

I sat up. "Whenever you say 'nothing,' it means you've come up with a really brilliant idea that you don't want to share," I pointed out.

"That's because you always tell me how stupid they are," he reminded me. He ran a hand through his spiky hair. Sean's hair is kind of a honey blonde, like mine, but mine is straight and down to my waist. His is short and porcupiney-looking. Most of the time Sean looks like he just rolled out of bed.

"I'm supposed to tell you you're stupid," I continued. "I'm your sister. It's what we do. Now spit it out, Sean."

"You're gonna laugh."

"Probably," I admitted. "But at this point, I'm willing to try just about anything. Sean, we've lived in four different apartments in Chicago in two years. I'd do anything I could to find Mom a job that she could stay at for more than one school year, okay?" In fact, at this point, even one *semester* in the same place would be good.

I could see him grinning as the streetlights shone through my window. An El train rumbled past, so Sean had to wait until the building stopped shaking before he could talk.

"Dad's books," he said.

I had no idea what he was talking about. "Dad's books? What about them?"

"There's a whole box of them," Sean said.

I frowned. "I know that. You want to sell them? They might be worth some money, but I don't know if we should—"

"No, no," he interrupted. "Not sell them. Have you ever *looked* at them?"

I thought for a moment. I hadn't really opened the trunk containing my dad's belongings in several years, at least six apartments ago. It seemed that all the books had struck me as boring at the time.

"There's some on mythology, I think, right? And ancient history?" I asked.

Sean nodded eagerly. "That's not all."

I had a sneaking suspicion that my brother was on to something big, but had no idea what it could be. "Just tell me, Sean."

He reached under his bathrobe and pulled out a tattered, leather-bound book. "Witchcraft," he said.



I stayed up all night reading the leather-bound book. On the inside leaf an inscription read: *The Grimoire of Daimon Ash*. I didn't know who Daimon was, but he was certainly an ancestor of my father's. Sean explained to me that a grimoire was sort of like a wizard's book of spells.

Below Daimon's name was a list of several other Ashes, ending with our father, Luke Ash. In addition to the grimoire, there were a number of other books on witchcraft and the occult in my father's trunk.

I stared at the books, amazed. I didn't really remember my father, and Sean had only been a few months old when our dad died. I wondered if my mom knew about all of these books. Weirdly enough, I wasn't creeped out by them, and neither was Sean, even though most kids probably would have been.

"This is what we need," I whispered to him, as we sat in my room the next day. Mom was out in the kitchen updating her résumé on an old typewriter. "This is the

key, Sean. There's got to be something in there that will help us."

We had gone through each of the books, one by one. Some, I just didn't understand. Others were books of spells and rituals, some written by hand, and some commercially published.

I flipped to the end of Daimon's grimoire. At various points in the book, I noticed that the handwriting changed. This must have been when the book changed owners.

The last section was written in faded blue ball point pen, the lettering straight and angular.

My dad's handwriting.

And then, while I was thinking about my father, when I was wondering what kind of guy he had really been, that was when I saw it. The last entry in the book: *A Spell to Acquire Gainful Employment.*

"Sean," I said, "check this out!"

He grinned at me. "Gainful employment sounds pretty good to me, how about you?"

"Any employment is good, but gainful sounds even more official," I agreed. If this worked, everything would be cool. We could get my mom a job, and then maybe we wouldn't have to move again.

So there we were, two weeks later, out on the roof of our apartment building. According to the grimoire, we had to wait until just before the full moon, which Sean said would be in three nights.

"Do you have everything?" he asked me.

I nodded, and pulled out my backpack. "I think so. Do you really think this will work?"

He shrugged. "Dad must have thought so, right? I

mean, he wouldn't have written these down if he didn't believe, would he?"

I didn't know what to think, really. I was still getting used to the idea that my dad might have been involved in witchcraft. "Okay," I said. "Let's do this, alright?"

It was late spring, and the air was cool and crisp coming in off the lake. Chicago in May was nice, and I was used to hearing the horns honking, the wail of sirens off in the distance, and the elevated trains screeching by. I hoped that we wouldn't have to leave Chicago. I really loved it.

Sean clicked his flashlight on and opened the book. I began to read aloud:

**A SPELL TO ACQUIRE GAINFUL EMPLOYMENT**

**First, cast a circle, and call upon the Four Quarters to watch over you.**

"What does it mean to cast a circle?" Sean asked with a frown. "And what are the Four Quarters?"

"I thought you knew all this stuff. Just pay attention." I had read the entire thing, and planned ahead, so I had put little sticky-notes on the pages I needed. I pulled a stick from the backpack.

"What's that?"

"My magic wand. Now shut up." I cleared my throat, and turned to face north. With my arm extended, and the stick—I mean, the wand—pointed skyward, I solemnly intoned, "We ask the powers of the North, the Guardians of the Earth, to watch over us."

I gave my wand a little swish, and turned to face east. "We call upon the powers of the East, the Guardians of Air, to watch over us," I said, my voice a bit louder now. I

turned again. "We call upon the powers of the South, the Guardians of Fire, to watch over us."

Finally, I looked to the west, and saw the city spread out as far as the eye could see. "We ask the powers of the West, the Guardians of Water, to watch over us!"

I looked at Sean, who was eyeing me suspiciously. "The circle is cast," I announced.

"Okay," he muttered. "Now what?"

**Light two green candles for prosperity, and place one on either end of the altar.**

We didn't have an altar, but there was a wooden picnic table up on the roof. Sometimes in good weather we came up here to barbeque chicken and eat dinner. Sean dug the green candles from my backpack. They smelled like Christmas trees.

"Be careful with the matches," I ordered. I didn't want my brother setting the whole building on fire just trying to light a couple of candles. I continued,

**Cut out two poppet shapes to represent your target and, sitting between the green candles, begin stitching them together.**

I rooted in the bag some more, and pulled out two scraps of tan cloth. Sean squinted at them. "Where'd those come from?"

"It's an old shirt that was in the bottom of Dad's trunk, under the books. I thought it would be okay to use it, don't you?" A part of me thought that maybe using my dad's shirt would give this whole thing a little more...meaning. After all, if he could help us out, he would probably have wanted to.

I cut two gingerbread-man shapes out of the shirt,

and started sewing them together. It took me a while because I'm not really good at sewing. Actually, I'm terrible at it.

"Hurry up," snapped Sean. "The candles will be all burned out before you get done."

I stuck my tongue out at him. Brothers can be such a pain. Finally, the little doll was stitched nearly all the way around.

**Before sewing the poppet shut, place a taglock inside, so that there is a magickal link between the target and the job.**

I had learned that a "taglock" was something to connect my mom to the spell. "Ta-da!" I announced, holding up a copy of Mom's résumé. I folded it up as small as I could and stuffed it into the doll.

"Wait!" said Sean. "Put this in there, too."

I blinked. "Sean, what *is* that? It looks like hair!"

"It is. I stole it from Mom's brush in the bathroom."

I wrinkled my nose. "Okay, that's nasty."

"Hey, better safe than sorry. Put it in there, would you?"

Reluctantly, I took the wad of hair and jammed it in beside the résumé. Finally, with a few last stitches, I closed the poppet and snapped off the thread with my teeth.

I held up my handiwork proudly. "Not bad, huh?"

Sean snorted. "It looks awful, but it's gonna have to do." The breeze was beginning to pick up, and he shivered. "I'm cold. Let's get on with this."

I placed the poppet between the candles, and laid the book on the table beside it. *Okay*, I thought. *Here goes nothing.*

**A job for Melanie is what we seek,  
she needs it in the next two weeks.  
A nurse is what she's trained to be,  
and she needs the work, as all can see.**

I paused and took a deep breath. The wind picked up a little more, and the candle flames flickered. I had worked hard on my little chant, and I thought it sounded pretty good.

**Find employment for her soon,  
by the time of next month's moon  
My arms raised over the table, I commanded:  
A place must need her, and need her skills,  
so let them call her as they will.**

I realized my voice had gotten louder and stronger, and I felt the wind sweeping through my hair.

**By all the power that lives in me  
as I will, so it shall be!**

The candle flames vanished in a sudden gust of wind, and there was a crash from behind me. I jumped and spun around. A copper birdhouse had blown down from the railing. Sean was staring at me.

"Wow," he said. His eyes were like pie plates.

"What?" I asked. I felt alive, vibrant...almost as if my body was humming with the energy of the wind.

He watched me for a second. "That was really cool," he grinned. "You looked...different, for a minute."

There was another bang behind me, and I whirled around. It was Mr. Paretsky, the building superintendent. "Whaddya doin' up here? Ya darn kids! Get outta here!" he yelled. Mr. Paretsky only had one eyebrow. It went over both eyes.

Sean scooped up the grimoire, and I shoved the candles and the poppet back into my backpack. We raced back inside and down the stairs to our apartment.

As we reached the door, Sean grabbed my arm. We were both panting, partly because of Mr. Paretsky, and partly because of...well, it had just been exciting, up on the roof.

“What do we do now?” my brother whispered. I could hear Mom inside doing the dishes.

“Now, we tell Mom we’ve been upstairs looking at the moon. And then,” I said firmly, “we wait and see what happens.”

Two weeks later, when Melanie Ash, RN, BSN, had been officially unemployed for nearly five days, a letter arrived.



“Kieran,” my mom said, “it’ll be cool, really. It’s an island. Won’t it be fun?”

Fun, she told me. Ha.

I wanted to smack my brother. After all, he was the one who had convinced me to try the spell in Daimon Ash’s grimoire. And now, we had gotten exactly what we wanted. Mom had indeed been offered a job.

On some piddly little island off the coast of Maine.

“Why do we have to move there? Why can’t we just go for a little while, like a vacation?” I asked, as I helped her fill yet another box. It was like my entire childhood had been packed up in cardboard, and not for the first time, either.

Mom sighed. “I know I’ve been kind of mysterious about the whole thing, since I got the letter from Amber.

But there's more to it than just a job."

I rolled my eyes. "What's so special about it? And who is Amber, anyway?"

She put her hand on mine. "Amber was your dad's cousin. They grew up together."

I scowled. I had never heard of Rowan Tree Island until this morning, and I was darned if I wanted to go off and live with a bunch of relatives who hadn't even bothered to write to us for ten years.

"Look," my mom began again. "It's a chance for me to maybe move us somewhere that we can stay for a while. I don't know what prompted Amber to think of me when the clinic nurse quit, but she did, and the doctor there is willing to give me a job based on Amber's recommendation alone." She sighed, and I felt guilty. All of this was my fault.

"It's your father's family, Kieran. After Luke died... well, we sort of lost touch with each other, and I guess it's as much my fault as it is theirs." She took my hands, and stared into my eyes. "Kieran, I have a feeling that everything happens for a reason. I think," she paused, "that we were meant to go to Rowan Tree Island."

I didn't say anything. I was scared something mean would come out.

"And besides," Mom finished, "other than me, you and Sean don't have any family."

Now I felt even worse.

"I'm sorry, Mom. It's just that all my friends are... you know. They're here, not on that stupid island," I muttered, sealing the box angrily.

She smiled then. Mom's really pretty when she smiles. "Your friends can come visit us, okay? Maybe they could

fly out on summer vacation or something.”

A door slammed somewhere downstairs, and I knew Sean was home from the library. He went there every day after school because they had free Internet access. He’s really smart and can do all kinds of things with a computer. I think it’s pretty cool, actually, but I don’t tell him that because it would go to his head.

“So anyway,” Mom continued, “my plan is to move us to Rowan Tree as soon as school ends next week, and get settled in as soon as possible. Amber says Dr. Birch wants me to start no later than the end of June.”

I leaned back against the dresser. “So you think there are kids there my age?” I asked hopefully.

“Count on it,” Mom said. “Also, Amber owns a book shop, and maybe she’d let you work there a few hours a week. Let’s wait until we get there, though, until we start making any big plans, okay?”

I nodded. Maybe things wouldn’t be so bad out there after all. Even if Rowan Tree Island *was* the end of the earth.



Sean rapped on my bedroom door. “Kieran?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you ready? It’s time to go.”

I looked around. The movers would be here soon, putting all of our stuff in a van, while we drove east in Mom’s beat-up Mazda. A train rattled by the building, and I choked back tears.

I might never hear another El train again.