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Wiccan
Wonderland
Traci Hall

Holiday eBook Freebie

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Rhiannon shut her eyes and tightened her seat belt as the tiny plane fought the storm. Electric flashes of lightning zapped outside the window, and her stomach lurched as the plane dipped.

I don't want to freaking die.

"How can you even *think* about pie?"

"Pie?" Her mom had a bad habit of misreading Rhee's mind. "Geez, Mom. We should have waited for better weather."

"There's no time. If we don't find Tisha's spirit by dawn..." Starla clutched the triple goddess charm on her necklace. "She needs us. Can't this plane go any faster?"

Not without falling apart. Unlike her mother, Rhee didn't mind flying – in something bigger than a two-seater made of plastic parts. Forget free drinks, there wasn't even a flight attendant. Tisha's freaked out coven members had sent a private plane from Vegas, and her mom was so worried about her best friend that she actually got on it.

As the landing gear met the icy tarmac, Rhee sent a prayer of thanks to the Goddess.

Starla sped down the steps and bee-lined for the waiting limo. The driver, a tall man in a black trench coat and beret, opened the rear door. "Merry meet," he mumbled.

"How's Tisha?" Rhee asked, bypassing polite conversation.

The driver pressed his lips together as if struck mute by emotion. Then, "Nothing's changed. Akashi will explain once we reach the sacred circle."

The sacred circle. Inundated with childhood memories, Rhee recalled when she believed in magick. On Yule eve, the longest night of the year, she and her parents went from house to house with gift baskets of oranges, apples, and holly. A sprig of holly by the front door invited good fortune. They'd always stop at Tisha's house last and have apple cider with cinnamon.

Tisha had a private backyard where the coven met to celebrate around the annual Yule log cut from an Ash tree. In the morning each member of the coven would take a smoldering piece of the log home to keep until the next Yule. Tradition.

Ten minutes later, the limo drove up the well-lit driveway of Tisha's country home. Rhiannon should have been exhausted from the night's events at their own house. Starting with inviting a town of witch-haters to the Godfrey's Yule bonfire - Crystal Lake, Washington style - then hunting down her friend's wicked uncle, and

ending with banishing Suz, the spirit in the farmhouse. Instead, she was filled with nervous energy. She wanted to help find Tisha, but how could she?

Rhee raised her psychic shields and exited the limo, holding a hand out to help her mother. Starla's wide blue eyes glowed from her pinched face. Her red hair was swept back into a messy ponytail. Right now, they probably looked like twins. *Her mom needed her.* "It's okay. We'll find Tisha and bring her back." *Who was she trying to convince?*

The limo driver led them into the house. "Back here," he said in a gruff voice. Despite her psychic shields, Rhiannon was hit with emotion as she walked through the front room. Mistletoe, holly, evergreens...Tisha had decorated for Yule in a typical Tisha way. *So what had gone wrong?*

Why had Tisha tried to perform a spell on one of the most powerful nights in the Wiccan calendar? Most covens celebrated with food and spiked cider – a joyful greeting to the New Year. Rhiannon didn't remember her parents ever taking part in a spell crafting ceremony. In keeping with cosmic balance, the power on this night was increased – and so was the danger.

The Goddess might grant your wish, but there was always a price to pay.

Rhiannon headed for the open glass slider doors to the bonfire burning in the backyard. People danced in a circle around the fire, hands clasped. Rhee listened to the intent of their prayer — a safety spell for their coven leader. She went to join them.

"No." The limo driver pulled her back. "This way."

With a wistful glance over her shoulder, she turned toward Tisha's private room. It was a true witch's sanctuary with high-ceilings and open spaces - candles flickered from every possible surface. Gold candles, white candles, black candles.

"Tish?" Her mother gasped and ran across the room toward a long stone table. Tisha, flat on her back with her arms crossed over her chest, looked dead.

Rhee felt the heat radiate from her moonstone pendant. The coven had blessed it, and it was responding to Tisha's power. "She's still alive."

"Yes." Akashi stepped from the shadows, her body draped in a satin blue, hooded robe. She pushed the hood back, assessing Rhee from head to toe. Her white face was framed with ebony hair. "You've grown Rhiannon. We need your magick."

"I don't, I, uh...I don't do witchcraft." *I'm Science Girl, remember?*

Akashi laughed, baring white teeth. "It doesn't matter what you call it, we need your gifts to bring Tisha back from the gray."

"You sent Tisha into the unknown?" Starla clasped Tisha's arm. "She's like marble. Why didn't you call me?" Starla's voice rose with each question.

“We tried, and nobody answered. Weren’t you having your own Yule celebration? That’s the reason Tisha had to attempt this without you.” Akashi crossed her arms as she stared accusingly between Rhiannon and Starla.

“I had no idea she was planning-” Starla waved her hand from Tisha’s head down to her bare feet. “This.”

Rhee glared from Akashi to the silent limo driver and strode to her mother’s side. “You brought us here to help *you*. What’s going on? All we know is that sometime after midnight, when we’d just sent a spirit to the afterlife - ” Rhee shrugged as if she did that kind of thing all the time, “- I was psychically open, I guess, because all of a sudden I heard Tisha calling my name. Then a guy’s voice shouted ‘no’, and the connection broke. We called you, you sent the plane and the limo, and here we are.” Rhee lifted her chin, refusing to accept any of Akashi’s blame. “Your turn.”

To her surprise, Akashi’s shoulders slumped. “I’m sorry. This man – what did he sound like? Are you sure that he didn’t say anything else? Was Tisha afraid?” Two tears rolled down Akashi’s pale cheeks. “I’ve tried every spell I know... I feel,” Akashi tapped her heart with her fist, “as if she’s trapped.”

Rhee shook off her irritation and accepted that maybe Akashi wasn’t a total witch after all. Just worried, as they all were. Rhiannon studied Tisha, noting each detail of the still figure. Her flawless ivory skin held a faint blush. Her slender figure, dressed in a hunter green, ankle length, velvet gown, didn’t move – not even a twitch. Her hands were clasped together over her chest. Rhiannon peered closer. “What’s she holding?”

Akashi wiped her cheeks. “Her wooden heart. She uses it whenever she needs to call up her spirit guide.”

Rhiannon felt a chill creep along her shoulders and down her spine. She didn’t want to, but she knew she had to lower her shields. At least a little bit.

Which was just enough.

Go away. The masculine voice with an unidentifiable accent echoed in Rhiannon’s head.

Who are you? Rhee reached out for her mother’s hand.

Leave us!

The voice was filled with torment, and Rhiannon recognized it as the same one who had been with Tisha earlier. “Where is Tisha?”

Speaking out loud broke the thread of contact between them. Her mom trembled. “Who was that? Is Tisha okay?”

“I don’t know, Mom.” Feeling a lot out of her league, Rhee looked around the room. “I don’t know magick. I have my moonstone pendant, and I have my psychic training as a very, very beginner medium.”

“Tisha always said you had more natural magick than any other witch she’d ever known.” Akashi burst into tears. “If you can’t help, then Tisha will die by sunrise.” She pointed out the window, where the skies were still blessedly dark. “We must hurry.”

I’m not a witch. Absorbing the heavy strain in the room, Rhee decided to argue over the details later. “What do you know about Tisha’s spirit guide? What is her name?” Rhee paced the candle-lit room, breathing in the Yule scents of pine and bayberry. She wondered if there was any way Suzanne, the spirit who had just crossed to the other side, could help her now.

The limo driver spoke. “Her spirit guide is male. His name is Gregor. He has been the guide for each female witch in Tisha’s family for over five hundred years. He is *cursed*.” The limo driver hooked the brim of his beret further down over his face.

Starla sighed. “That’s right. Tisha always felt guilty that he was psychically chained to her bloodline for eternity. She hated to call on him – so why would she do it now?”

The limo driver and Akashi exchanged a look. Akashi answered in a whisper. “She fell in love with him.”

Rhiannon’s knees buckled and she grabbed the edge of the table before she fell to the ground. *Love. It made normal people insane.* “Is this some sort of witch-suicide – like, she *wants* to be in the gray unknown to be with her phantom lover?” She eyed Tisha’s still figure. “Did she take anything?”

“Drugs?” Akashi slashed her hand through the air in anger. “Never. She doesn’t believe in suicide, either. No, she is trying to set Gregor free from her ancestor’s curse.”

Starla moaned and collapsed into a wicker chair. “On Yule eve, when the Goddess gives birth to the new Sun God...when the power of love and peace is magnified! She’s risking her own life to end his servitude?”

The limo driver stepped forward, dipping his shadowed head toward Rhiannon. “I am an acolyte, learning at Tisha’s feet. You must help her find the way back from the gray. How can I help you?”

Akashi stood next to him, facing Rhiannon with stubborn determination. “We can’t give up, no matter the sacrifice. The coven is praying for her safety, dancing for energy and hope. Tell us what you need, and we will get it for you.”

Rhee had a creepy feeling that they’d sacrifice a goat if she asked them to. She swallowed. “I think...” She looked at her mom, who was staring at Tisha’s clasped hands – ivory hands that held the carved wooden heart of Tisha’s spirit guide to her barely beating one.

Leaning over the table, Rhee slowly pulled the heart free from Tisha’s hold. Carefully, with full psychic shields in place, Rhee cradled the worn heart between her palms. How would a witch go about calling for her spirit guide? *Yo, dude?*

"We need to put you in a protective circle," Akashi said firmly. "I don't want anything to happen to you, too."

Starla stood. "Rhiannon, are you sure that you should do this? Your energy has got to be depleted because of the ceremony with Suzanne. I..." her mom blinked back tears, "I don't want to lose you."

Rhee's heart skipped. She was an emotional wuss and hated the whole mushy feelings stuff. "Drama, Mom, geez. You aren't going to lose anybody. If it makes you feel better to put me in a bubble —"

"Circle," the limo driver corrected stiffly.

"Right. Circle. Go ahead. Work your hocus pocus." Rhee glanced out the window. The sky was getting imperceptibly lighter, and the sense of urgency ratcheted up another notch. "But hurry."

"This room is already highly charged with magickal power. Stand here in the center, while we surround you with twelve vibration stones." Akashi handed the basket of stones to Starla. "Space them evenly."

Her mom did as instructed, pausing over each rock to say a personal prayer. Rhee felt the hum of the stones through the soles of her feet the second the twelfth one was in place. "Can I start now?" *Hurry*. The heart in her palms seemed to beat.

"Wait." Akashi held her arms out, clasping hands with the limo driver on the right, and Starla on the left. Her mom and limo guy joined hands, sealing Rhee inside the intimate circle. "Now you may begin."

Rhee cupped the wooden heart, and lowered her shields.

Tisha. Tisha. Rhiannon dove into the gray unknown, the space between life and death where spirits roamed freely. She held the heart like a talisman against the spirits who would try and steal her body as their own. She willed her soul to travel quickly. *Tisha? I've come for you! I'll bring you home.*

Silver light the size of a bowling ball stopped before her, flickering off and on like a dying light bulb.

The heart is mine. How did you come by it? Only a witch of Giselle's line may call me forth while holding my heart.

Gregor? Ew. I'm holding your actual heart? Rhiannon's lip curled with distaste.

I was cruel with my love and Giselle killed me, trapping my spirit within that wooden prison until I'd paid for my crimes.

Tisha had never picked easy men to love, and this one was no different. Figured. *Where is Tisha?*

She wants to banish me. I'll not go.

She doesn't want to banish you – she feels like you've done your time, already – she wants to set you free. Were all men so difficult? So let's just go get her, and you can move on to the next plane of existence. 'Kay?

The silver ball swelled with raw emotion.

You listen, wench, I'll not give up the only good thing I know. My life is Tisha's life. My soul belongs to her and her line. Without her, I am nothing. NOTHING

Blasted by his anger, it took all of Rhee's control to keep her particles in one shape. She opted to let the wench comment slide, being as he was five hundred years behind the times. She remembered everything that Mrs. Edwards, who was training her to be a medium, said about spirits and ghosts, and used it to try and convince Gregor to pass over.

Gregor, you have to go to the light – the brightest light. You will pass through, and you won't feel this anger any more. Tisha is rewarding your service to her family by setting you free.

I will never be free and neither will she

Rhiannon shivered with foreboding. He was going to keep Tisha's soul forever? Was this a price Tisha would willingly pay to free Gregor from the curse? From far away, she heard her mom and Akashi urging her to hurry. Morning was coming.

You must let her soul go before dawn comes, or she will die. Is that what you want? Her death? There is no guarantee that her spirit will remain with yours once the body is gone!

I love her

Rhiannon backed away from his splintering spirit. *And she loves you – enough to set you free. Would you trap her as you were trapped for all this time?*

AHHHHH

His cry of anguish reached each layer of her flesh and blood. Then she felt the smooth caress of Tisha's gentle spirit, and understanding filled her being. Tisha's ball of light was pure gold, and it fluttered around Gregor's silver circle like a butterfly.

Gregor loved Tisha, and Tisha loved him, just as she had when she went by the name Giselle. Star-crossed and cursed, if Gregor's spirit was set free now, the two might have a chance at love in another lifetime. But if Gregor refused to cross over, then they would never be on the same plane.

Tisha, you risked your life to tell him this? Rhiannon clasped the wooden heart tight in her spectral hands.

Love is worth every risk. The gold ball dimmed. Rhee felt her spirit being pulled by the power from the circle.

It is time to go, Tisha.

NONONONONO! Gregor's silver ball grew to the size of a watermelon and anger came from it in waves, crashing against Rhiannon's spirit.

Tisha's gold light split into a mass of dark tendrils.

Rhiannon quickly tossed the wooden heart into the center of the pulsing silver mass. It exploded into millions of silver shards. She grasped a piece of the dying gold light and envisioned the circle.

Tisha's golden essence blacked out, and Rhee was plunged into cosmic darkness. Without the heart, without the light, she and Tisha would both die in the gray unknown.

Panic overwhelmed her as she was separated from the energy of the three in the circle. Despair surrounded her and she fought to be free of the crushing terror. A shadow – death - loomed over her when suddenly she remembered her pendant.

Yanking at the silver chain, she held the coven-blessed moonstone in her palm, concentrating on finding the witch's circle. She heard the low hum from the vibration stones, and then her mother's voice. *Rhiannon.*

Her soul crashed into her body, knocking down the three.

Dazed, Rhiannon leaned over on one arm, lifting her face to the welcoming dawn coming in through the open window.

"You did it, Rhee, Tisha's awake." Starla helped her to her feet.

Akashi searched the ground around the table. "The heart of the spirit guide is gone. Disappeared."

"I threw it at Gregor." *And he'd exploded.* Would Tisha ever forgive her?

The limo driver took off his beret, revealing dark hair and flashing silver eyes. He reached into his inner trench coat pocket. "This is mine," he said in a voice filled with wonder. He opened his hand, and they all stared at the carved wooden heart.

Rhee's jaw dropped as she recognized the accented voice from the spirit world coming from the limo driver's mouth. "Goddess have mercy," she muttered. "That is some *serious* magick."

He stalked over to the table where Tisha laid, her eyes open and filled with happy tears. He placed the wooden heart over hers.

"My heart," he said. "Belongs to you."

Author Biography

Traci Hall is new to the YA publishing world – but far from new when it comes to understanding the teen brain – which is most complex.

Having barely survived being a teenager, Traci decided to raise them as well. Character studies, their feeding habits, and even their lack of hearing skills, has challenged her in ways she never imagined when the bunny, er, died

Happily married forever to the same great guy, who shares Traci's dedication to reliving the worst of their teen years, Traci has two teenagers, an XBOX 3, PLAYSTATION 3, and WIRELESS INTERNET for all five of their computers. Traci spends a fortune on those chicken soups that you just need to add water to (minus the veggies, of course) and Cream Soda. Easy Mac, brownies and delivery pizza make up the rest of the menu at Chez Hall. At any given time there are four to twenty teens just hangin' out.

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