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The Drafter (The Peri Reed Chronicles Book 1)

By Kim Harrison



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In the first explosive book in the Peri Reed Chronicles, Kim Harrison, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of the *Hollows* series, blazes a new frontier with an edge-of-your-seat thriller that will keep you guessing until the very end.

Detroit 2030. Double-crossed by the person she loved and betrayed by the covert government organization that trained her to use her body as a weapon, Peri Reed is a renegade on the run. Don't forgive and never forget has always been Peri's creed. But her day job makes it difficult: she is a drafter, possessed of a rare, invaluable skill for altering time, yet destined to forget both the history she changed and the history she rewrote. When Peri discovers her name is on a list of corrupt operatives, she realizes that her own life has been manipulated by the agency. Her memory of the previous three years erased, she joins forces with a mysterious rogue soldier in a deadly race to piece together the truth about her fateful final task. Her motto has always been only to kill those who kill her first. But with nothing but intuition to guide her, will she have to break her own rule to survive?



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The Drafter (The Peri Reed Chronicles Book 1) By Kim Harrison Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #46816 in eBooks
- Published on: 2015-09-01
- Released on: 2015-09-01
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

Review

“Absolute perfect anytime read. Go find a comfy spot and sit down, because Harrison has provided an afternoon of sheer fantastical suspense.” (Suspense Magazine)

“The amazingly gifted Harrison is back... the multifaceted layers of this storyline will keep readers guessing—and riveted. This is going to be one truly wild ride.” (RT Book Reviews, 4 stars)

“A kick-ass start to a new series!” (BookRiot)

“Entertaining...Harrison delivers moments of lyrical intensity.” (Publishers Weekly)

“In this action-packed near-future urban fantasy novel...the puzzle of piecemeal memories is intriguing, and all the action keeps things interesting.” (Locus Magazine)

About the Author

Kim Harrison, author of the #1 *New York Times* bestselling Hollows series, was born in Detroit and, after gaining her bachelor’s degree in the sciences, she moved to South Carolina, where she remained until recently returning to Michigan because she missed the snow. When not at her desk, Kim is most likely to be found landscaping her new/old Victorian home, in the garden, or out on the links.

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The Drafter

CHAPTER

ONE

FIVE YEARS LATER

Peri Reed reclined in the plush leather chair across from the CEO’s desk, her feet up on the coffee table, enjoying the adrenaline pooling as she waited in the dark for Jack to find what they had come for. His mood was bad, but that wasn’t her fault. Bored, she helped herself to a foil-wrapped, imported chocolate from a nearby dish.

“Really, Peri?” Jack said at her mmm of appreciation.

“So hurry up.” Licking her lips, she deftly folded the foil into a tiny hat, which she set jauntily on the statue of the naked woman holding the dish. “This guy knows his chocolate.”

“I prepped for glass. Wave technology isn’t even on the shelves yet,” Jack complained, his tan face pale and distorted through the holographic monitor. The touch-screen projection hazed Jack’s athletic shape and black Gucci suit, and Peri wondered whose ass the CEO of Global Genetics was kissing to get the new holographic

touch-screen technology.

“My good heels are in the car. Waiting. Like me,” she prompted, and he hunched, his jabbing fingers opening and closing files faster than a texting fourteen-year-old.

Impatient, Peri stood and ran a quick hand through her short black hair. Her mother would hate its length, insisting that a woman of quality kept long hair until she was forty, and only then allowed it to be cut shorter. Moving to the window, Peri smiled at her manicure in perverse satisfaction. Her mother would hate the color as well—which might be why Peri loved the vibrant maroon.

Shaking her hem down to cover her low-heeled boots, she exhaled her tension and focused on the hazy night. The black Diane von Furstenberg silk jumpsuit wasn’t her favorite, even if it had been tailored to fit her precisely and was lined with silk to feel like ice against her skin when she moved. But add the pearls currently in the car with her heels, and it would get second and third glances at the upscale pool hall she’d picked out as a spot where she and Jack could decompress.

If we ever get out of here, she thought, sighing dramatically to make Jack’s ears redden.

The projected monitor was the only spot of light in the office suite with its heavy furniture and pictures of past CEOs. Surrounding buildings were lit by security lights dimmed to save power. Low clouds threw back the midnight haze of Charlotte, North Carolina. This high up, the stink of money had washed away the stink of the streets. The corruption, Peri thought, stretching to run a finger over the lintel to intentionally leave a fingerprint, is harder to hide.

“One of these days, that’s going to bite you on the ass,” Jack said as she dropped back to her heels. Her print would come up as classified, but it would also tell Opti that they’d been successful—or at least that they’d come and gone. Success was beginning to look questionable. Five minutes in, and Jack was still searching for the encrypted master file of Global Genetics’ latest engineered virus, the hidden one that made it race-specific.

The faint clunk and hum of the elevator iced through her. Her head tilted to the cracked door, and she shocked herself with the sweet candy still on her lips. She never would’ve heard it had the floor been busy, but in the silence of a quasi-legal, government-sanctioned break-in . . .

“Don’t leave my sight,” Jack demanded as he hooked the rolling chair with his foot and pulled the leather throne toward him to sit. His fingers hesitated, jabbed the holomonitor, then waved the entire field to the trash. His brow was furrowed, and the glow of the projection made his face appear gaunt and his blue eyes almost black. Feeling sassy, Peri sashayed to the door, liking being paid to do what anyone else would be jailed for. Jack looked too sexy to be good at the computer stuff, but in all fairness, he was as proficient as she in evasion and offense. Which is why we’ve survived this long, she thought as she slipped the flexible, palm-size wafer of glass out of her pocket and powered it up. Her Opti-augmented phone was glass technology, and up until seeing the CEO’s wave, she’d thought it was the best out there. Hitting the app that tied into the building’s security, she brought up the motion sensors.

The screen lit with a harsh glow. Dimming it, she crouched to peer into the secretary’s office. One wall of the outer office was open to allow for a view of the common office area beyond. Intel said the night guard was cursory, but intel had been wrong a lot lately.

The app finished its scan and vibrated for her attention. No movement, she thought as she looked at the blank

screen, not trusting it. “I can’t do my job from here,” she whispered, tensing when the elevator hummed to a halt and a beam of light lit the ceiling. Keys jingled. The translucent screen in her palm lit up with a bright dot. Shit.

“I can’t do mine if you leave my sight,” Jack said. “Stay put, Peri. I mean it.”

Arcs of harsh light played over the ceiling—closer, coming closer. Adrenaline coursed through Peri once more, and the soles of her feet began to ache. “Catch,” she said, rolling the phone into a tube and tossing it at him. He scrambled for it, his silhouette tight with anger against the city lights.

“Let me know if we get more than one,” she said as she yanked on her pendant, jerking the tiny felt marker from its cap. “Otherwise, keep working.”

“Don’t go out there without me,” he said, his sudden alarm at the click of the pen uncapping jerking through her.

“Just find the files. I’ll be right back.” J IN OFFICE she wrote on her palm, avoiding him as she blew it dry, recapped the pen, and tucked it behind her top.

“Peri . . .”

“I wrote a note,” she said, nervous at his angst, and she slipped out, easing the door nearly closed behind her. Dropping to the flat carpet, she wiggled across the receptionist’s office and peered around the end of the desk, propping herself up on the flats of her arms to wait for a visual on the guard. Jack was right to be concerned. He had to witness a draft to anchor her. But to fail meant the deadly virus might reach an already decimated Asia.

That’s why they were here, to find and remove the files concerning the virus before a second wave of death washed through what had once been nearly two-thirds of the world’s population. Opti had commissioned the first wave three years ago, when Asia’s political hierarchy thumbed their noses at the new CO2 levels set by the United Nations and therefore threatened the entire world with continued rising global temperatures. But this second wave of tactical bioengineered population reduction was illegal, funded by the Billion by Thirty club with the sole intent of broadening their financial interests in Europe. Peri thought it amusing that she and Jack had helped almost half of its members gain their admission.

The light on the ceiling became focused. Warning prickled her skin as the jingling keys grew louder and a uniformed man came around the desks. Peri’s brow furrowed.

It wasn’t the guard that Bill, their handler, had told them would be here. This man was younger and thinner, and wasn’t singing along with his phone. As Peri watched, he tucked his flashlight under his arm and used a card reader to go into one of the private offices ringing the floor. Lips pressed, she waited until the guard came out with a square bottle of something sloshy.

Damn. He was a lifter: familiar with every office and comfortable with treating the building as his personal, no-card-required shopping mall. The best case would have him on the alert for anything out of the ordinary as he strove not to get caught. The worst case would have him in the CEO’s office sampling the chocolate.

Breath held, Peri crept back to Jack. He looked up from her phone as she eased the door shut, frowning when the lock clicked on and a red light from the door pad glowed in the dark. “Don’t leave my sight!” he

whispered, yelling at her in a soft hush.

“We got a lifter,” she said, and Jack’s fingers hesitated.

“He coming in here?”

“Give me a second, I’ll go ask him.”

Mood sour, he returned his attention to the crystalline projection. Peri padded over for her phone, breathing in the light scent of his sweat as she tucked it away. Her mind drifted to the sensation of his touch on her skin as his quick fingers searched folders and files. “Maybe the files have a biometric lock?” she suggested.

“No. I simply think it’s not here. We might need to hit the labs downstairs,” Jack grumbled, doing a double take when he realized her lips were inches from his ear. “Peri, back up. I can’t work when you’re that close.”

“The labs? Good God. I hope not.” Peri leaned to put her arms across his shoulders. Her bag—filled with all sorts of interesting things that needed an artist’s touch to get past TSA—rested on the desk, and she wondered if she should get something out of it, but everything was noisy. “Why don’t you shut it down. He’s just shopping, and we’ve got all night.”

“It’s not here,” he muttered, and she pushed off his shoulders and went to listen at the door. Hearing a sliding clatter, she roughly gestured for Jack to cut the light. Grim, Jack stood, fingers still flicking files about the screen. “I thought wave technology had a sleep corner,” he whispered.

Peri tensed. Footsteps. Coming closer. “Shut it off. Now!”

Jack’s face was creased in the dim glow. “I’m trying.”

The guard was in the secretary’s outer office, and she settled into a balanced readiness beside the door. He was coming through it—she knew by the prickling of her thumb and the itch in her feet. “Damn it, Jack. I haven’t drafted in six months. Don’t make me do it now.”

“Got it!” he whispered, fingers waving across the monitor as he found the off switch.

“Got it” wasn’t good enough, and with a tiny beep from the locking pad, the door clicked open and the security guard came in, flashlight searching.

He was a cool customer, she’d give him that. Silent, he took in Jack, standing behind the desk like a guilty teen found looking at his dad’s porn. Expression twisting, the man dropped the bottle and reached for the pistol on his belt.

Peri moved as the bottle clunked on the carpet. The man yelped, shocked when her crescent kick slammed out of the dark and into his wrist, knocking his handgun into the secretary’s office. Hand to his middle, the security guard dropped back. His shock turned to anger when he saw Peri’s slim figure cloaked in chic black. True, it looked suspicious, her in the dark and in an upper office where she had no right to be, but add some jewelry and Louboutins, and she was ready for a five-star restaurant. “You’re nothing but a little bitty girl,” he said, reaching for her.

“I prefer the term fun-size.”

Grinning, Peri let him grab her, spinning around and levering him up and over her shoulder. He'd either go where she sent him or he'd dislocate his arm. He went, hitting the carpet with a muffled thump.

"Ahhhhhoow!" the guard groaned as he pulled the unbroken whiskey bottle out from under him. The flashlight rolled, sending shiny glints across the black panes of glass.

Jack frantically worked at the computer, his head low and blond hair hiding his eyes.

Enjoying the chance to take the big man down, Peri gathered herself to fall on him. Eyes wide, the guard jerked away, and she changed her motion into a heel jab that never landed, then fell into a ready stance between him and the handgun. We have to get out of here, like now.

The guard spun upright, fumbling for the radio on his belt. "Put a wiggle in it, Jack!" she exclaimed, lashing out with a crescent kick, a front kick, then a low strike to his knee as she drove the guard back—anything to keep him from his radio. She loved the adrenaline, the excitement, the knowledge that she had what it took to beat the odds and walk away without reprisal.

The man shook it off, and she lashed at his ear, lurching when she hit his jaw instead. A solid thump on her right shoulder sent her reeling. Peri stumbled, feeling the coming bruise. Anger fueled her smile. He was good and liked to cause pain. If he landed a clean strike, she'd be out—but beating those odds would only make her win more satisfying.

"Quit playing with him!" Jack shouted.

"I need to burn off some calories if I want cake tonight," she said as the guard felt his lip, thoughts shifting behind his eyes when his fingers came away shiny with blood. Suddenly he ran for the door and his handgun.

"We're having pie, not cake, and stay where I can see you," Jack called.

She jumped the guard, snagging a foot before he reached the door. He went down, dragging her across the carpet. Chin burning and eyes shut, she let go when he kicked. Peri jerked away, gasping when the guard turned, looming over her with his fist pulled back.

"No!" Jack shouted as the guard struck her full in the face and her head snapped backward. Dazed, Peri wavered where she sat.

"Don't move! Or I fucking shoot her!" the guard shouted.

She couldn't see straight. The gun pointed at her held no meaning as she tried to figure out what had happened. Dizzy, she felt her face, jerking when the pain exploded under her fingers. But it focused her, and she looked at Jack behind the desk. Eyes meeting, they silently weighed their options. Jack had a handgun and she had a blade in her boot. They'd never needed extraction from local authorities in their entire three years together. She wasn't planning on starting now, and certainly not getting fingered by a dirty rent-a-cop.

"You at the desk!" the guard barked, and Peri's gaze on his handgun narrowed as she estimated the distance. "Come here where I can see you," he said, one hand fumbling behind his back for his cuffs. "Hands up. You make a move to lower them, and I shoot her."

Hands in the air, Jack edged out from behind the desk. He coughed, and the barrel of the guard's gun shifted

to track him.

“Bravo!” a clear, masculine voice exclaimed from the doorway.

The guard turned, shocked. Peri lashed out in a spinning kick. Impact against the guard’s hand vibrated through her even as she followed through and rose into a crouch and from there to a stand, the flat of her still-swinging foot slamming into the guard’s head.

Spittle and blood sprayed and the guard crashed into the coffee table. His handgun fell, and she kicked it to the far windows. Jack went for the man in the doorway. Knowing he had her back, Peri followed the guard down, fist clenched to hit him somewhere painful.

But the guard was out, his face bloody and his eyes closed. Resisting the urge to hit him anyway, she looked up as Jack shoved an older man in a suit into the office at gunpoint.

“Impressive,” the man said, nodding to the guard. “Is he dead?”

“No.” Peri stood. What the hell? she thought, unable to read Jack’s tight expression. This couldn’t be a test. They’d already had their yearly “surprise” evaluation job.

“Good. Keep it that way,” the man said as if he was in control, regardless of having no weapon, if Jack’s hasty but thorough pat-down was any indication. “I’ve been meaning to take him off the payroll, but I’d prefer unemployment over a death benefit to his wife.”

This isn’t how we do things, Peri thought as Jack shoved the man into one of the cushy chairs, where he fixed his tie, affronted. Peri looked from the slightly overweight man to his photograph on the desk, posing with a stiff-looking woman in too much makeup. This was his office. Bloody toothpicks, Bill will have a cow if I off a CEO.

“I have what you came for,” the manicured, graying man said, his soft fingers reaching behind his coat to an inner pocket.

Peri lunged. Her knee landed between his legs and he gasped at the near miss. One hand forced his head back; the other pinned his reaching hand to the arm of the chair. “Don’t move,” she whispered, and irritation replaced his shocked pain.

He wiggled, wincing when she shifted her knee a little tighter. “If I wanted you dead, I wouldn’t be here myself,” the man said, his voice strained but angry. “Get off me.”

“Nah-uh,” she said, fingers digging into his neck in warning, then louder, “Jack?”

Jack eased close, the scent of his aftershave familiar as he reached behind the man’s coat to slip free an envelope. It had Jack’s name on it, and Peri went cold. He knew we’d be here?

“Get off,” the older man said again, and this time, Peri eased back in uncertainty.

Jack passed his handgun to her, and she retreated to where she could see both the CEO and the downed guard. The crackle of the envelope was loud, and the older man readjusted himself, giving Peri a dark look. “What is it?” she asked, and Jack unfolded the paper inside and shook a pinky-nail-size memory chip into his

hand. “Is it the files?”

Her attention shifted to the CEO when he palpated his privates as if estimating the damage. “No. I printed out the highlights to justify my request. You tell Bill that what I found warrants more than a paltry three percent,” he said, shaking his arms to fix the fall of his coat. “Three percent. I just saved his ass and he thinks I’m going to take three percent?”

“Jack?” Peri whispered, disliking her uncertainty. He knows Bill? What’s going on?

Face white, Jack angled the printed page to the faint light coming in the window. Fingers fumbling, he tipped the chip onto his glass phone. It lit up as the data downloaded, and Jack compared the two, going even more pale as he verified it.

The man leaned toward the side table, his gaze lingering on the foil hat before he took a chocolate from the dish. “You’re very good, missy. Watching you . . . I’d believe you myself.” He smiled, white teeth gleaming in the ambient light.

Jack looked more angry than confused. Peri’s gut knotted. The CEO knew Bill. Was he proposing a deal?

“You made a mistake.” Jack folded the paper around the chip and tucked it away with his phone.

The man snorted and put an ankle on a raised knee. “The only mistake is Bill thinking he can get something for nothing. He can do better. I only want a fair price for what I have.”

Shit, Peri thought, her alarm mutating to anger. He was trying to buy them. They were Opti agents. Drafters and anchors had to be trustworthy to a fault or the government that trained them would literally kill them. Drafting time was too powerful a skill to hire out to the highest bidder, especially now.

Fear settled in her like old winter ice, cracked and pitted, as Jack cocked his head at the angle he always had when he was thinking hard, and a weird light was in his eye.

“Jack?” she said with sudden mistrust. “What’s that list?”

His expression cleared. “Lies,” he said blandly. “All lies.”

The CEO bit into a chocolate. “The truth is far more damning than anything I could invent. It’s a list, lovely woman, of corrupt Opti agents,” he said as he chewed. “Your name is on it.”

Users Review

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