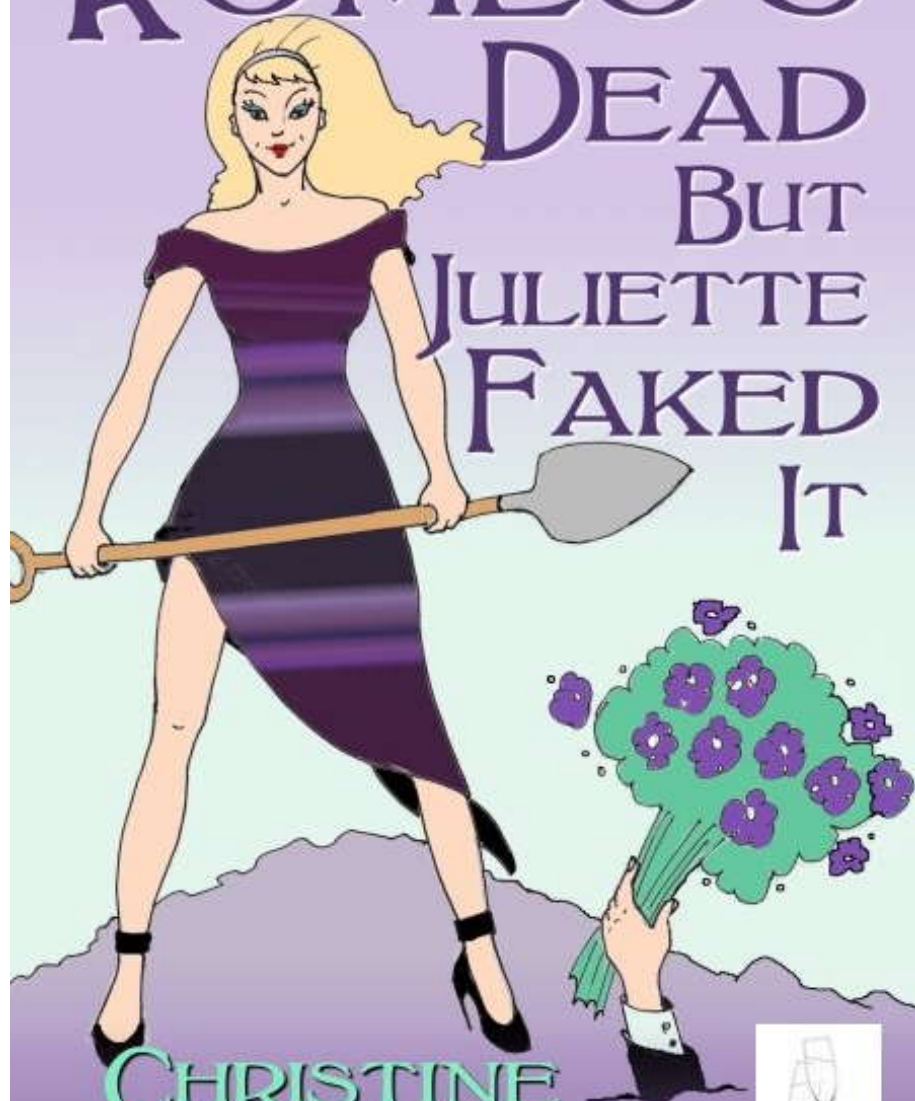


ROMEO'S DEAD BUT JULIETTE FAKED IT



CHRISTINE
MCKAY



Champagne Books Presents

Romeo's Dead But Juliette Faked It

By

Christine McKay



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Dedication

To Keith, my husband. Maybe if I kiss him enough he'll turn from a toad into Prince Charming. (Just kidding, sweetie!)

One

*Those who say living in the country's too tame for their blood
haven't walked alone in the woods at night.*

The bloated storm clouds, Mother Nature's thugs, threatened to prematurely end Gretchen's mushroom hunt. Muttering a curse, she adjusted the net bag she wore at her waist. Time trickled through her fingers like glitter clutched in a toddler's fist. She was at least a mile from her car and the clouds had yet to reveal their hand. Rain tonight? Rain tomorrow? No rain at all? Welcome to northeastern Wisconsin where the weather operated as if it were managed by a madman randomly punching a remote control.

She tripped over a broken branch and ungracefully fell, arms and legs sprawling like a discarded marionette. A wisp of hair drifted into her face. Tucking it behind her ear, she started to stand, then noticed the clump of morel mushrooms. That was worth the grass-stained knee and tomorrow's aches. Gretchen eagerly claimed the delicacies, carefully depositing them into her bag. Working as a seamstress in a town that favored broken wagon wheels as lawn ornaments meant being creative when it came to meeting the rent *and* affording unexpired food. Judging by her weight and the contents of her fridge and cupboards, she must have at least a half dozen chunky muses working overtime to inspire her.

The sound of a man's voice startled her out of her culinary dreams. Who else was out and about tonight, taunting Mother Nature? More mushroom hunters? Necking teenagers? Harried parents escaping for a little alone time?

Gretchen snorted, a half self-amused, half nervous giggle. Window peeping never intrigued her, but eavesdropping piqued her interest. She crouched behind a tangle of rotting elms. Whoever it was, she didn't want them to catch a glimpse of her bulging bag of 'shrooms.

The voice continued on, oblivious to her presence. Sometimes loud, sometimes imploring, it wound through the tree limbs, echoing overhead. The sun winked out in one last spurt of bright orange, abandoning her to dusk and the shadows. Time to call it a night. Only stupid people were caught unaware in the woods after dark. Curiosity, though, made her hesitate.

Her navy hooded sweatshirt and jeans blurred her outline, indistinguishing her from the underbrush. Gretchen paced through the woods, the voice a damning lure. The night creatures roused. Twigs cracked beneath squirrels' hurried footsteps. Trunks creaked and swayed in a ghostly breeze. At the edge of an unseen creek, a colony of frogs serenaded frolicking lightning bugs.

A faint white outline on the ground stopped her. Crouching, she touched her fingertip to the substance, then brought it to her lips. *Salt*. Confusion mingled with caution.

Buck naked, Willie Hayes stood in the salt circle's center. His arms swayed in rhythm to his chanting. A bit agnostic herself, she didn't want to stomp on his beliefs, whatever demented sect he might belong to. But really, who danced naked in the woods? She wrinkled her nose. The man's winter-bleached skin glowed like an incandescent bulb. The scent of aftershave mingled with crushed cloves made her eyes water. She pinched the bridge of her nose to silence a sneeze.

"I call on Athena. Protect us from this threat." He turned a half pace and faced north. "Persephone, daughter of Demeter, what stirs mocks the Underworld and all that dwells there. I beg you, force it to rest."

Gretchen sat back on her heels. What the hell? Willie ran the local hardware store. In her mind, sane, tax-paying citizens and Lark Creek board members didn't worship Greek gods.

Ire followed on the heels of dumbstruck. Two fat candles, one black, one purple, blazed on either side of him.

What idiot brought live flames into the woods? Granted, the ground was moist yet in spots, but where Willie was standing it was littered with dead grass, pine needles, and broken bits of bark. One gust of wind or a misstep and he'd have a full blown fire. She had half a notion to report him to the fire marshal.

A branch snapped to her left, a thick crack that didn't belong to a small critter. Her head jerked, attention directed toward the fresh silence. A new scent assaulted her, swamp muck tinged with the hint of minerals. It left a coppery taste on her tongue. She'd had enough. Let Willie explain how he burned down the woods. She slowly backed away from the circle.

Another branch snapped, this time on the right. Her heart lurched, two quick steps, then steadied. She knew these woods well. Nothing larger than a stray dog or deer lived here.

Willie screamed. She jumped backward, stumbled over a log, and landed on her rump. Willie, absorbed in his ritual or stoned or hey, maybe both, didn't hear her. All attention riveted on the knife he held in his hand. Blood dripped from the closed fist of his other hand. In the gloom, the blood appeared greenish as it ran down his oh-so-white arm. He thrust his bloody arm skyward, either beseechingly or angrily; she didn't want to stay and find out. Choking, Gretchen stifled an instinctive scream. Scrabbling backward, she bumped into a tree trunk. She worked her way to her feet.

Something howled awfully close to her. She thought she saw the gleam of gold. It winked out, then was joined by a second set. *Eyes.*

Spinning, Gretchen bolted for her car.

Running through the woods was never a good idea, in darkness or full light. Too many hazards existed, from fallen limbs to shoe-sucking mud to coils of grapevine that looped from tree branches like fat snakes waiting to ensnare one's throat. She ran full out, picking herself up when she stumbled, whimpering when she thought her heart might burst in her chest. By the time she reached her car, she knew she'd wrecked not only her clothes and mushrooms, but her hands and face as well.

Fumbling for the keys, she pulled them out of her jeans pocket. More brush cracked. She swore and jammed the key into the lock. *Damn. Damn. Damn. Wrong key.* Cursing all car manufacturers, Gretchen chose the other one and managed to open the door. Sliding into the driver's seat, she locked her door, then rested her head on the steering wheel.

What the hell just happened?

She'd let her imagination get the best of her, that's what. And ruined clothes and mushrooms in the process. Disgusted at herself, she started the car and flicked on the headlights. A wolf sat in the dirt road's center, tongue lolling, golden eyes watching her.

Okay, maybe her imagination wasn't so out of whack.

Why didn't it go after Willie? After all, he'd coated himself in blood. She shivered. *Not enough meat on his bones.* Wouldn't a wolf prefer a plump turkey over a grizzled rooster? She'd start that diet tomorrow.

She beeped her horn.

The wolf didn't budge.

Every year, some drunken hunter recited a tale of a wolf encounter in the local bar. She'd dismissed the stories as alcohol-induced fantasies. Wolves didn't share their territory with coyotes, and Lark Creek had a healthy coyote pack. Looked like the coyotes were screwed. She gunned her engine. The wolf blinked, then ambled off the road.

That sealed it. She was talking with John Bremmer, the town constable tomorrow. She might not mention Willie's naked ass, but people needed to know wolves had moved in. At the very least, they'd keep a closer eye on their pets, maybe fence in their yards. Lark Creek, the town's namesake, actually did wind through the town. Per the Department of Natural Resources, it was kept natural, providing near perfect cover for the wolves to trot down the creek side, creep into backyards and pluck unsuspecting—and she supposed, in a wolf's perspective, fat and tasty—pets off their porches. She shivered again, glad she didn't have a pet to worry about.

At home, Gretchen shut off the car. For once, being lazy had its perks. She could have just as easily headed down the creek on foot and entered Lark Creek urban legend, a victim of man-eating wolves. No. Better to fall victim to the wolves

than Willie. There was no end to small town nuttury.

She grabbed the sack of crushed mushrooms and headed up the walk. Tomorrow it might actually be warm enough to plant the calla lily and gladiolus bulbs. She'd already worked compost into the freshly turned beds. The thought of playing in the dirt banished the last dregs of the bizarre evening. Humming, she opened the house door, flicked on the porch light, and turned to survey her waiting beds.

She frowned. Someone or something had already been in them. Footprints squashed the soft earth that was pristine only hours before. Stooping, she examined the prints. Her jaw dropped. Either someone had acquired a big dog or the wolves had already found the creek to their liking. Returning to the house, she dropped the mushrooms on the kitchen table and slipped into her office. No canine got away with ruining her flower beds.

Armed with a twelve-gauge shotgun, a handful of shells, and a flashlight, she stormed out to the backyard. She had planned on adding an elegant flagstone staircase sloping to the creek's edge this year, a present to herself. Twenty wheelbarrows of dirt had already been moved; she had at least twice as many to go yet. The flashlight's beam played over the waiting pile of flagstone, the mounds of unmoved dirt, and the rough path she had carved in the hillside. Giant prints marred all the freshly turned earth. Her flashlight froze. The mangy mutts had actually burrowed into her slope. She vibrated in place, almost angry enough to track them down.

Almost. Common sense won out and she remained in place, uttering inventive curses instead.

What had so intrigued them they felt the need to excavate the middle of her lawn? Walking to the pile, Gretchen played the flashlight beam around the hole's edges. Something glinted at its bottom. Stooping, she touched the glittering projectile.

Hmm, it felt more like metal than stone. If someone had buried their dead appliance back here, she was going to give Willie Hayes a run for his money in the loony tunes department. Maybe she wouldn't stand buck naked in her yard, but she sure as hell would make a ruckus. Just because

her house teetered on the town's edge, that didn't make it the dumping station everyone thought it was. With a sigh, she retreated to the house to find the shovel.

An hour of hard labor later, she'd unearthed not an appliance, but a nearly seven foot long metal box. A chain wound around it like a ribbon-wrapped present, a padlock in lieu of a bow nestled in its center. Wiping the sweat out of her eyes, she knelt beside the box and tugged at the chain. Both chain and lock were solid. Holding the flashlight in her mouth, she rubbed her hand across the box's surface. There were words etched into it, but she couldn't make them out. Exposure to the elements had worn away the letters' curves. Rust and dirt took over where time had left off.

She glanced at her watch. Nearly ten-thirty. Thank God for the cedars along the property line. Only kids looking for night crawlers and adults with questionable motives played outside with shovels after dark. Especially on a chilly spring night. The sweat she'd worked so hard to accumulate froze to her back, bringing a shiver. She should just leave the mystery for the morning.

Curiosity got the better of her, though—darned if she didn't see a pattern linking the evening's warped activities—visions of treasure and whatnot dancing in her head. Trudging back to the house, she swapped the shovel for a pair of bolt cutters. Several minutes, a bruised knuckle, and a whole litany of curses later, the padlock lay on the musty-smelling ground. What kind of metal resisted corrosion and time? She'd been living here for just over twenty years; the box sure as hell looked older than that. Her great-uncle Albert occupied the house before her and while at the end he wasn't exactly what she'd call sane, she didn't think him capable at that point of burying something this big. Never mind the box appeared decades more worn than the shoe buckles and whatnot she occasionally unearthed in her flowerbeds. She shrugged. The mystery would probably be solved in a few more minutes or so. Then she could stumble into the house for a shower and sleep.

Removing the lid necessitated a final trip to the house for a pry bar. What must she look like covered in dirt, sitting in her yard in front of a coffin-sized box and armed with a pry bar, shotgun, and bolt cutters? She pried off the lid,

metal and her muscles groaned in protest. Picking up the flashlight, she shined it into the box.

A skeleton stared back at her, eye sockets vacant. Remains of satin and lace clung to the bones. Great, she'd just spent the better part of the evening violating someone's grave. Gretchen had seen corpses before. The bulk of her clientele were actually dead people being fitted one last time for their favorite garments. Corpse and skeleton were two totally different things, though. Corpses were more sad than scary. The skeleton... Well, illuminated by the flashlight alone, the word gruesome came to mind. Add that to the episode with Willie and the wolves earlier this evening... Mystery or not, time to call it a night.

She reached for the lid. A row of gold buttons winked in the artificial light. She caught her tongue between her teeth. Oh, she'd go straight to Hell for the thought dancing through her sleep deprived head. She needed to call the local historical society and the constable. In that order. The scent of sweat-soaked socks mingled with a fungus-like-athlete's-foot-meets-rancid-milk odor, floated past her nostrils. Gagging, she waved her hand.

The buttons sparkled like a runway supermodel assaulted by camera flashes.

God, were those buttons really gold? Stench forgotten, she reached for the button in the center of his chest. It perched on the exposed ribcage, resting quietly against something protruding out of the chest cavity.

Gretchen raised the flashlight. Her eyes widened. The skeleton had been staked through the chest.

Run. Run now! part of her screamed. The other part counted the number of shiny gold buttons and weighed it against the odds of being caught vandalizing someone's ancestor's grave.

She closed her eyes and counted to ten. How much jail time did one get for stealing from the dead? It was her backyard. Surely the dead person wouldn't begrudge her the money if he or she knew the situation she was in. Besides, anyone who'd gotten himself or herself staked couldn't have been on the right side of the law.

Maybe it wasn't human. Maybe it was a vampire. Cue forbidding music.

"Oh, shut up," she muttered. Sometimes she wondered why she hadn't gone into theater. Maybe the poor sot had tripped and fallen on a rake handle or gotten stuck with an arrow.

Eyes still closed, she reached for the button. Instead, her hand brushed the stake. She opened her eyes. The wood dissolved under her touch.

Shit. So much for preserving it for the Historical Society.

She seized the button and rocked back on her heels. It was heavier than she thought. How much was a solid gold button worth? And more importantly, who wandered around with something that expensive holding one's clothes together?

Another glint of color. She raised her eyes heavenward. "If this is meant to be a test, I'm going to fail miserably at it."

The skeleton's hands were clenched at its sides. Perched on a bony index finger, a bright blue sapphire twinkled in a silver setting. Forget prison. How much time would she spend in Hell atoning for this particular episode in her life? Holding the flashlight between her teeth again, she pocketed the button and reached for the ring.

Her good Christian mother would be so disappointed.

Her hands closed around the ring and bony fingers. She bet Mr. or Ms. Skeleton had one fierce handshake while he or she was alive. Gretchen managed to straighten the fingers, then slid the ring off.

Immediately, the other bony hand seized her wrist. She screamed, twisting in its bruising grip. The hand hauled hers up its chest. Gold buttons spilled through its ribcage. She groped for anything to use as a weapon.

Skeletons did not move. Fine observation. This one did.

Ignoring her thrashing, the skeleton dragged her hand to its lips. She swore its jaw worked, teeth clicking as molars ground against one another. The lower jaw popped and the mouth opened in a skeletal smile. Her gaze slipped higher and her heart skipped several beats. Bright green lights burned inside what had formerly been empty eye sockets. Gretchen forgot to breathe. Her scream trailed off into a series of whimpers. Her groping hand closed around the bolt cutters.

The jaw locked onto her wrist. Pain flared. Bursts of light tattooed the back of her eyeballs. She swung the bolt cutters like an awkward baseball bat, clipping the skeleton on the side of its head.

Someone shrieked. She didn't know if it was she or the skeleton. Hand freed, she fled to the house, slipped inside, and locked the door.

~ * ~

Gretchen climbed into the shower with her clothes on, shedding them as the water warmed. She did not see what she just saw. *Skeletons did not move.* She held her throbbing wrist under the water. And they definitely did not bite. Teeth marks imprinted both sides of her wrist. Wincing, she scrubbed soap into the half arcs.

She didn't remember eating any of her mushrooms. Maybe she had. Maybe Willie and the wolves and certainly the crazy box and its macabre contents were all part of a very bad delusion.

That was it, wasn't it?

She'd been picking mushrooms in poor light and misidentified them. She must have popped one in her mouth. A bad one. She shuddered. A very bad one. Dropping to her knees in the shower, she shoved her finger down her throat.

Vomiting actually made her feel better.

She sudsed and rinsed twice, then picked up and wrung out her clothes. The gold button slipped out of her jean pocket, clanging as it struck the tub's surround. She closed her eyes and rubbed her brow. If everything had been a hallucination, where did the button come from? Gretchen swallowed hard. A question best saved for tomorrow.

Massaging her still throbbing wrist, she studied the skeleton's thick ring balanced on the thumb of her injured hand. Funny, she didn't remember putting it on. She twisted the ring off and set it at the sink's edge, priding herself on the steadiness of her hands. Then she fetched some rubbing alcohol and poured it over her wounds.

Tomorrow none of this would be here, she reassured herself. She tore open a maxi pad and pressed it to her wrist, then loosely wrapped gauze around to hold the pad in place.

Tomorrow she would berate herself for being stupid and

thank God she hadn't managed to inadvertently poison herself.

Tomorrow couldn't come soon enough.

Two

Oftentimes the craziest people outwardly lead the most normal of lives.

Gretchen woke to something pressing uncomfortably into her cheek. She raised her head and blearily blinked at her hand. She was wearing the silver and sapphire ring again.

Jeezus. She blew out a breath.

Her wrist ached. Sitting up, she unwound the gauze and took off the pad. The bite marks, or whatever they were, had not faded. In fact, they looked infected. Sunlight poured through her windows, spilling over her comforter and dancing across the headboard. She glanced at the bedside clock. Great, not only had she overslept but now she needed to make time for a trip to the walk-in clinic for a tetanus shot. She fetched a fresh pad and poured a generous dose of alcohol over the wound. The sting brought tears to her eyes. With a hissed curse, she re-bandaged her wrist.

Pulling on a pair of sweats, she snagged a cup of coffee as she passed through the kitchen. Outside, her shotgun was still in the backyard, right where she imagined she left it. Oh, she could hear Daddy's voice chastising her for leaving valuable equipment in the elements, to be tarnished by the thick layer of dew coating the lawn. She'd wipe the gun barrel with an oily rag later. First thing on the agenda was to figure out what had happened last night.

There was no way she would approach that damn box without being suitably armed. Too bad the shotgun was her only firearm. Borrowing a cup of sugar or missing ingredient

from a neighbor was one thing. Knocking on their door and asking for a rifle or shotgun and a box of appropriate ammo was another. She traipsed out to the garage. Downing her coffee, she set the cup on her workbench and picked up a shovel. It'd have to do.

Outside, she cautiously approached the box. Holding the shovel handle with both hands, she peered over the mound of dirt. The box was empty. She kneaded her brow, feeling the beginnings of a monster migraine. Beneath her fresh bandage, her wrist throbbed. She glanced around, trying to make sense of last night by following her tracks in the dirt...Only there were no tracks. Not hers. Not the wolf's. Someone had raked the dirt. Out in the front yard, the flower beds along the walk were also raked.

She screamed, an inarticulate sound of frustration. Her voice echoed off the garage. Two doors down, Mr. Piddles, the neighbor's Jack Russell, started yipping.

How could this be happening?

Gretchen pulled off the ring and stared at it. "It's your fault," she said crossly.

In the early morning sunlight, the sapphire winked prettily, as if apologizing. Returning to the house, she wrapped the ring and the gold button in a swatch of spare silk. Now what? She hesitated leaving something so valuable lying around. On impulse, she tucked the parcel between her breasts. It wasn't like anyone was going to notice the addition to her double D's.

She checked her schedule. Between dressing the late Mrs. MacIntyre, letting out the waistband on a couple pairs of Reverend Byers' pants, and the after school graduation fittings, she needed to squeeze in a doctor visit and a stop off at Bremmer's office—aka the backroom of his wife's café, *Creekview Delights*. She didn't trust Eddie at the pawn shop to correctly appraise her new findings *and* keep his mouth shut. A trip to Green Bay where she'd be guaranteed anonymity would have to wait until later in the week.

~ * ~

Gretchen found John Bremmer seated in his office with a chunk of sweet bread and a burned smelling pot of black coffee. What remained of his thin white hair was carefully combed back and he reeked of heavily applied old man

cologne. His blue and white checked shirt was starched and neatly tucked into a plain pair of blue pants that clung to his hips by the grace of his belt alone.

John raised his hand. "Don't say a word. Willie Hayes has already been here."

Gretchen blinked. "He has?"

"Thank the good Lord you're okay. I know your folks raised you to be more careful. Wandering around the woods higher than a kite."

"Wait a second—"

"What if some of the locals' kids had seen you dancing around naked? Have you no shame?" He started to stand, hands propped on the desk, then noticed his cane leaning against the far wall, and thought better of it. He sank back into his chair and resorted to glaring. "You're lucky no one's going to press charges for indecent exposure."

She slapped her palms on John's desk, startling him long enough for her to get a word in. "Hold on. Willie was the one dancing around the woods naked. Chanting actually. With lit candles. I'd rather be slapped with indecent exposure than be known as the person who burned Lark Creek down. And I didn't come here for that. I came to report a wolf sighting."

John snorted and muttered to himself.

"How long have you known me, John?"

His bright blue eyes were lost in a ripple of wrinkles. "Since I delivered you forty-five years ago in the backseat of your daddy's station wagon and gave you your first spanking. Looks like you need another one."

She ignored his last comment. "Have I ever made something like this up? I never dabbled in drugs." Marijuana did not count. "Sides, everyone tried it back then."

"You did toilet paper my house when you were about fourteen."

She rolled her eyes. "I didn't and don't run around naked. And I saw a wolf in my headlights last night. It left tracks in my flowerbeds."

He straightened. "You have proof? Pictures? Tracks still there?"

"No."

Sighing, he sat back in his chair. "Run along to Willie's place and pick yourself up some Plaster of Paris. You see

tracks again, pour casts. You know how to do that?"

"Yes," she said through clenched teeth.

"Good." Grabbing his pencil, he started sharpening it with his pocket knife. He glanced up. "Go on. I've got real work to attend to."

She stormed out of his "office", thankful she'd worn a shirt long enough to hide the wrist bandage. She didn't know how to explain the bite marks, but if she started babbling about animated skeletons, she might get threatened with something worse than indecent exposure. Assuming she wasn't high last night—that possibility was shooting rather quickly up her list of probabilities—she needed to find that skeleton. Chances were whomever raked her beds and eliminated the wolf tracks, also had her body.

Her only suspect was Willie. She sighed. It was going to be a long day.

~ * ~

Gretchen didn't relish visiting Willie at the hardware store. So she saved it for the last appointment. After pinning and re-pinning the graduation dress on Sara O'Reily umpteen times and listening to her mother natter on about putting larger cups in the girl's bodice, talking to Willie didn't look so daunting.

Plopping the bucket of Plaster of Paris on the counter, she rummaged in her purse, careful not to meet Willie's eyes. She couldn't help but notice the bandage on his left hand. Same side as hers. She remembered seeing blood running down his arm. She swallowed hard. Mushrooms be damned, whatever the hell she'd experienced was real.

"How'd you cut your hand?" she asked, glancing up.

His gaze never left the cash register monitor. "Skill saw. Wanna see? Doc put in fourteen stitches."

"I know what I saw last night," she said in a low voice.

Willie set the bucket in a sturdy paper bag, folded the top, and stapled the receipt to it. He nodded toward her hand. "Your demon spawn bit you, didn't he?"

She blinked. The ring burned between her breasts. "You stay off my property, Willie."

He grinned, the stubble on his cheeks jutting out like whiskers on an irate cat. "You want some advice?"

"Not particularly." She picked up her bag and headed for

the door.

"There are vile things afoot. You'd be wise to leave for a few days until it's all over."

"I'm not leaving, Willie. And if I catch you or your big pet dogs roaming on my property, I'll put buckshot in your ass. Got that?"

His grin widened and he winked. "Sun's set, Ms. Parks," he said, reverting to formality as a customer wandered inside. "Better scurry home. Monsters come out after dark."

She clutched the bag to her chest and hurried outside. Behind her, Willie laughed.

~ * ~

He was right. The sun had set and the despite her bravado, Gretchen didn't want to be caught outside after dark. Not after last night. She hurried to her car, failing to notice she was on a collision course with another pedestrian...until it was too late.

The man neatly stepped out of her way. Her head jerked up. Where did he come from? Snagging a heel, she stumbled over the curb's lip. He caught her arm. Heat tingled through her and she swore the ring pulsed.

Her heels found the sidewalk and she rocked backward. "Excuse me. I wasn't paying attention."

He gave her arm a squeeze before releasing it. "No, the fault is mine. I deliberately stepped into your path."

She raised her head, eyes narrowing. Black pants, straight cut. A navy wool duster with a hem that needed mending and perhaps taken in at the waist. A white lacy blouse peeked between the open coat's folds. Talk about gender dysfunction. Were those gold buttons holding it closed? Just like the button in her possession. Her cheeks flamed. What an insane thought. She needed to keep her imagination in check.

She stole another look. The shirt did have gold buttons and the top one was undone. Undone or missing? She glanced at the man's face.

Curious bright green eyes met hers. "*Bonsoir.*" Before she could do anything, he took her hand and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. "I am Jean Louis Lautrec and you, I believe, are my soul mate."

The soul mate crap broke the spell, despite the

deliciousness of his accent. She jerked her hand away. "Excuse me?"

He grinned, revealing the gleam of white between his full lips. "Mademoiselle Parks?"

"Gretchen," she corrected him, then cursed herself for such stupidity. She took one step back. Those eyes looked so familiar. She put a hand to her exposed throat.

His gaze flicked to the bandage. "You have freed me from my bonds. For that, I am ever in your debt." He bowed and she glanced around wildly, hoping no one saw the outlandish display. "Come with me and I shall demonstrate my appreciation." His voice dropped a notch, sounding wicked and enticing at the same time.

She actually felt herself vagina shudder. Or was it doing a wet happy dance? "I'm sorry. You must have the wrong person." She stepped off the curb and reached for her car door.

"Gretchen," he said in that same low come-hither voice.

She froze. Wow, he actually made her name sound erotic instead of old fashioned.

He was suddenly at her side, hand laid over hers. "Our souls cry out for one another. Can you not hear them?"

She swallowed hard, trying to rein in her reaction to that smooth French accent and liquid green eyes. God, he smelled good. *Fear, you idiot. You should be feeling fear, not lust.* "My soul cries out for a dark chocolate whipped espresso with sprinkles. Unless you have that hidden somewhere on your person—" That brought to mind naughty images of her frisking him. She cleared her throat and tried again. "Please don't make me call the police."

"You would leave me?"

He sounded so hurt she almost laughed. "Yes, I'm going home." She opened the car door, forcing him to step back to avoid being hit by the swinging door.

"But I'll die without you."

She paused. The melodrama and game-playing were no longer funny. She wasn't a frumpy old woman but neither did she hold the illusion this scrumptious twenty something was at all interested in a forty-five year old in one inch heels and a dollar store purse. "They're taking tryouts for *Hamlet* at the community center right now. You're a shoe-in." She

rummaged in her purse and came up with a handful of change. "Here's bus fare." She held out her hand, but instead of taking the change, he made to kiss it again.

She jerked free again. "You just don't get it, do you?" She slid into her seat and attempted to close the door. Her can of pepper spray was stuffed next to the parking brake. He hadn't crossed her tolerance line yet, but he was certainly straddling it.

He blocked the motion. "I can bring you to heights no man can."

Her eyebrows arched. "So can a couple of batteries and a vibrator. And I'm guessing they carry a hell of a lot less baggage." Her right hand closed around the pepper spray.

"I will take you prisoner. I will make you understand."

Damn, those were the magic over-the-rainbow-wacky words. He crouched beside her. She pepper-sprayed him directly in the eyes.

With a roar, he stumbled backward. Slamming the car door, she drove off. She glanced in her rearview mirror. Crazy Mr. Jean Louis Lautrec stood in the road's center, glaring at her. What would Bremmer say if she called to report that?

He hadn't hurt her. Probably someone's idiotic foreign relative with a poor grasp of English and the appropriate manners that went along with the words. Didn't foreign men dig older women?

Soul mates. Her cheeks flamed even as she thought about it. What utter crap.

~ * ~

A package waited on her porch. Gretchen snagged it along with the rest of the mail. She hoped it contained Mrs. Tomalie's glass buttons. The woman called or emailed on a daily basis asking when her blouse would be finished. She pressed the answering machine button while sorting through the mail. Yep, Mrs. Tomalie again. Did the woman think she was some sort of magician? Glass buttons from Italy did not appear overnight.

Her mind wandered to the cutie she'd pepper sprayed. *Soul mates.* Why couldn't a nice forty or so widower have said the same words? Why did she only attract the crazy ones? Was it something she was wearing? Speaking of

which, she pulled the ring and button out of their hiding spot between her breasts and set them on the kitchen table.

His curly black hair actually looked good on him, as did the white lace. Not as emasculating as one might think. What would it feel like to run her fingers through a man's naturally curly hair? Gretchen blushed. *Not there*. On his head. She could almost feel the silky curls wrapping around her fingers. She'd undo the ponytail she'd glimpsed curling around the lacy collar and spread the curls over his shoulders, work the kinks out of his taut muscles—

She shook her head and blew out a breath. Jeezus, she needed to find herself a date.

Her imagination refused to ease up. A solid jaw like his could do some serious licking and sucking before it gave out.

She fanned herself with the leftover mail, then tossed the envelopes in the trash. Perverted old woman. She pulled a frozen dinner out of the freezer and popped it in the microwave, then carried the package to the kitchen island. Opening it, she unfolded the bubble wrap and paper, and stared at the contents.

She hadn't ordered this. *No way*. Her name and address were scrolled across the paper. No return address. *Coward*.

A wooden stake lay in the box, nearly a foot in length and carefully whittled to a point. Beside it, nestled in its own extra wrapping, was a glass vial with a cross-shaped stopper. What was this? A vampire killing kit? How charming. Halloween was nearly six months away yet.

There was one more wrapped item tucked into the corner. She hesitated, then pulled it out. Peeling off the tape, she rolled the item out of its tissue paper. Heavy, it sloshed as it moved. An expensively packaged perfume bottle rested in her palm, complete with the attached old-style globe-shaped atomizer. She pointed the nozzle away from her and spritzed the air. She wrinkled her nose, then sneezed. Waving her hand, she continued sneezing for a full minute. Yikes! She set the bottle back in the box.

Her microwave dinged the same time someone knocked at the front door. The odor of mashed potatoes and chicken wafted through the room. Gretchen glanced longingly at the microwave. Her stomach growled.

The rapping continued.

"I'm coming!"

Crazy Jean Louis Lautrec stood on her porch, a plain paper bag held in one hand, hand raised to knock again..

"That's it. I'm calling the cops," she shouted through the door.

He tipped his head, stared at the door, then spotted her in the glass pane. Their eyes met and locked. "You will do nothing of the sort. You will open the door."

Her hand closed around the doorknob. She flicked open the lock, and blinked. *What the—?* She re-locked the door. "Like hell."

"Mademoiselle, open this door."

She froze, warring with herself. Her hand inched toward the lock, fingers twitching. Her bandaged wrist throbbed.

"Gretchen, love, open the door." His voice flowed like warm honey, so sweet, so thick, so perfect. She wanted to do something, anything, to please him.

She stiffened. That wasn't her thought. Her fingers tightened on the knob.

"Now."

That was a command she couldn't refuse. She flicked the lock and opened the door. A cool wet breeze rolled in, like fog off Lake Michigan. She shivered.

Jean Lautrec took her limp hand and pressed his lips to her knuckles. "Thank you. Now why don't you invite me in and show me your lovely home?"

She took one step backward. His lips twitched. "Gretchen," he whispered.

The muscles in her inner thighs spasmed, threatening to turn her legs to mush. She swore she soaked her panties. "Come on in," she said, voice choked.

He shut the door behind him. Removing his long coat, he draped it over his arm. "Must you make everything so difficult?"

She blinked, spell broken. Grabbing the nearest weapon, which turned out to be her mother's vase, she held it in front of her. Foam and fake flowers scattered at her feet. "Get out of my house."

"But you just invited me inside." The smooth voice was back. She twitched, desperate to touch him, equally desperate to avoid being touched. He reached out.

She jerked back and bumped against the wall.

He sighed. "*Ma belle laide*, you aren't exactly my first choice either." He held his arms wide, palms up. "But here we both are and so we must continue." His voice changed. It was still low, but the previously resulting shivers now came with a side order of fear. "You will do as I say."

God, her wrist burned. Tucking the vase under her arm, she tore at the bandage. The wounds were bright red and irritated, though the surrounding skin was pale white and cool to the touch. She scratched at the marks. Just soothing the itch was a near orgasmic experience.

"Gretchen?"

She itched harder, tearing at the skin. The vase slipped from her grip. He was abruptly at her side, vase caught and held in one hand. He seized her wounded wrist with the other. She whimpered, gaze traveling to his face.

He studied the injuries. "Ah."

Even that inarticulate noise was like a caress.

"Why are you not wearing my ring?"

She licked her lips. Just how much control did he have over her? "I lost it," she said. Apparently not enough control to prevent her from lying.

His green eyes gleamed. "Had you kept it on your person, it would have prevented such a violent reaction." His gaze flicked to her neck.

Her poor heart increased its tempo. He paused, perfect brow furrowed for a moment. Her fingers itched to smooth the creases away. She'd bite her fingers off before she touched him.

"*N'importe*," he said at last. His lips curved. "All shall be mended shortly."

Three

There's a reason Juliet poisoned herself and it had everything to do with Romeo being impotent and melodramatic.

Gretchen didn't know what was wrong with her. One second she was certain she would call the cops, the next she was seated on the sofa and Johnnie boy was offering a glass of red wine.

"Drink it all," Jean said, setting the glass on the coffee table.

She obediently reached for the stem and downed it in one long drink. Her face scrunched up. It was a very dry wine. She sucked her lips into her mouth. Ugh. A coppery aftertaste lingered at the back of her throat. For once, the burn of mouthwash seemed appealing.

She carefully set the glass aside and folded her hands in her lap. Wouldn't her mother be pleased at her manners? Too bad they were coerced. She glanced into the kitchen. What was the man up to?

Jean held the unexpected package in his hands. "Where did you get this?"

"I don't know."

His eyes narrowed. He lifted the perfume bottle and sniffed. Hissing, he dropped it and backed away. "Hellebore. Think, Mademoiselle. Who did you tell about me?"

"What makes you think I know you?"

Spotting the silver ring, he crouched beside her, ring held between his thumb and forefinger. "I thought you lost it."

She licked her lips. "Looks like you found it."

He ground his teeth. "This is my ring. You took it from my hand."

Gretchen blinked. *Oh shit. Th-this was the skeleton?*

He smiled, as if reading her thoughts. The wide white grin revealed his sharp incisors.

She glanced at the injured wrist lying in her lap.

"Shall I prove it's a match?" he asked.

"No," she whispered, suddenly very afraid.

He put a finger beneath her chin and lifted it until she met his gaze. "Does your wound still pain you?"

She couldn't make her voice work.

"I'll take that as a no." His voice softened. "I won't hurt you. You freed me. I am in your debt." He slid the ring onto her thumb.

Her heart thudded against her breastbone. "I don't understand."

"Did you not read the inscription on my prison?" At her blank look, Jean sighed. "You broke my bonds, proving you and I are meant to be together."

A bit of spitfire returned, evidence, at least to her, that he'd loosened his power over her. "I used a bolt cutters. Anyone could have freed you. Male or female."

He shuddered. "There is much I have to learn about this era. I look forward to you teaching me."

"Look John boy, I have no intention of being your tour guide nor serving as your personal meal cart."

Gretchen swore his nostrils flared.

"It's Jean. My name is Jean." He laid the accent on thick.

"Whatever."

"Jean," he repeated. "You will scream it out as I give you pleasure. You will whisper it in the night when you seek me. It will be on your lips for all eternity."

A strangled noise escaped her throat.

"Do you not find me attractive?"

She sidestepped the question. "The girly blouse really doesn't do it for me."

He started to unbutton it. "You have something more suitable to this period?"

She caught a glimpse of pale white flesh and an impossibly perfect set of pecs. His nipples gleamed like pink pearls, surrounded by a light dusting of dark hairs.

Her mouth watered. "Umm, on second thought..." He finished unbuttoning, then slid the shirt off his shoulders and tossed it aside. He looked like an exotic Chippendale dancer sans oiled body. Pale flawless skin covered ropey muscles. A hint of ribs showed, but his stomach was smooth, like creamy vanilla ice cream. What did a vampire taste like? If he continued his performance and removed his pants, she was afraid she might die of TEMPTS, Too Effin' Much Pleasure Too Soon.

"You like what you see?" He sounded pleased.

"Why shouldn't I?" she retorted, cranky. "You're parading your twenty-something body in front of an old lady who's long since forgotten what smooth skin looks like."

It was his turn to snort. "You are forty-five, but a *bébé* to my four hundred plus years."

Her jaw dropped.

Amused, he sat back on his heels. "I've removed an article of clothing. Now you must do the same."

Gretchen held up a hand. "Wait a minute, buster. I never agreed to anything."

"Try *mon chéri* instead. It sounds more pleasant than this *buster*." When she didn't answer, he continued, "Take your shirt off now or I shall do it for you."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Try it and I'll hurt you."

"Very well. Arms down, Gretchen."

Her traitorous arms complied, lying quietly at her side. "Quit it," she said through clenched teeth.

Jean shrugged. "I gave you a choice. You resisted. I prefer to keep the rough sports in the boudoir."

All sorts of naughty images danced in her head. Smirking, he reached not for the top button of her blouse, but the bottom. She closed her eyes. Well, a glimpse of her stomach should put a damper on his libido. A tongue dipped into her belly button. Her eyes popped open. He undid another button and kissed the newly revealed skin.

His cold lips brought shivers. She couldn't be aroused by the half dressed vampire...with the delicious lickable body crouched before her...controlling her like a marionette. Her gaze traveled along the arch of his spine, dipping to the dimple where spine met buttocks. She shivered again. No,

not aroused at all. Just standard menopausal hot and cold flashes.

When he found her bra, he paused and studied the fabric. "What is this?" He traced the support band with a finger. She sucked in her breath. His fingertip trailed over the silky fabric and her nipples jutted through the material. He circled one sleek white peak.

God, she wanted his mouth on her. His head obediently dipped to her nipple. He nosed it, then gently closed his teeth around the sensitive nub. His rumpled black curls brushed the tops of her breasts. She had the absurd urge to run her fingers through his hair. Luckily, she could no more move her arms than she could her body. Her head tilted. *Interesting*. He didn't control every part of her body at all times. She was able to move a single hand earlier too.

Burying her face in his hair, she inhaled. She didn't know what she expected to smell, perhaps death or rotting meat. Instead, she caught the faint scent of lavender and aftershave. Confused, she paused, simply content for a moment to enjoy the pleasant scent and his silken curls against her cheek.

He stilled, tuned in to her attention.

It was now or never. Lovely scent or not, he held her prisoner. Her nose traced the outline of his ear. At this angle, she didn't think she could get a good grip on his earlobe. Neck it was. She lowered her head and bit him at the juncture of neck and shoulder as hard as she could.

His arms wrapped around her, his body bucking against hers. Not exactly the response she expected. Drawing back, she spit. Twin arcs filled with blood, leaving a bright red tattoo on his skin.

Jean raised his head, arms still twined around her. Her nipples scraped his skin, rising and falling in rhythm to his breathing. The delicious tingles played counterpoint to her fear. Solid black iris-less eyes watched her. She swallowed a scream. He blinked and a thin ring of green returned; any semblance of humanity was better than none. When he licked his lips, she caught the gleam of pointed teeth.

"Shall I return the favor?" he whispered, voice hoarse.

Apologizing seemed the best tactic. "I'm sorry."

Lifting her left hand, he pressed his lips to her cuts.

Pointy teeth slid neatly into their pre-slotted holes. It was more the thought of pain to come rather than actual pain that had her whimpering. One hand cradled her wrist, the other dangled at her waist. His jaw closed around her arm. Her heart stuttered, tripped over itself, then broke from a rapid trot into a full out gallop. Blood gushed through her veins. If he hadn't had a hold on her, she was certain she'd have swooned.

The bite marks she left on his shoulder turned from red to pink, then from pink to smooth unblemished white. Color flooded his cheeks and tinged his skin a more natural shade of pale, no longer the pallor of death but winter white.

She registered no pain. An unresolved ache settled between her thighs. He could ease that as well. She blinked. That wasn't her thought, but his. Erotic images danced in her head. She was nude and draped over a chaise lounge, his face pressed to her mons. She stood naked beneath a darkened sky, porcelain skin bathed in moonlight, and he drank from her femoral vein. She sat on a throne, legs splayed, a gown of red silk revealing more than it covered, while he stood behind her and played with her breasts. In all of the visions she recognized herself and yet, it wasn't her. She of the unmarred flesh, high perky breasts, and liquid gold locks was more lovely than Gretchen had ever been in her youth. She shoved the images away.

Jean raised his head. Blood dotted his lips like poorly applied lipstick. His tongue flicked out and licked all unnatural traces of it away. "Your turn."

She was afraid she knew what he meant.

He offered his wrist. She shook her head, a barely perceptible no. His lips curved. "Perhaps another glass of wine instead."

He stood, a movement so quick her eye did not register the motion. He was simply standing. He walked slowly to the kitchen and her gaze settled on the sway of his ass in the tight black pants he wore. Absolutely scrumptious. Returning with a full glass, he offered it. Parched, she cupped both hands around the goblet and drank. Again, the wine's taste made her scrunch her face and pucker her lips.

"Not exactly complimentary." She tracked his movements, but he only perched on the sofa's armrest.

"Look at your wrist."

Gretchen complied. Where there'd once been open wounds, there was now creamy skin. She glanced at the other wrist as if she might have forgotten which one he'd bitten, then examined them together. They no longer matched. The healed wrist's skin was as smooth as a baby's bottom. She ran her thumb across the new flesh.

"What have you done?"

He inclined his head. "Mended *ma moitié*."

Wait a second. The off taste in the wine. The distance he put between them. He'd been feeding her his blood all along. Her first thought was to vomit. The second was more practical. *Oh well*, said a tiny voice with a shrug. Who would really miss her if she vanished from Lark Creek tomorrow? Sadly, she could only think of Mrs. O'Reily and Mrs. Tomalie. "You tricked me."

"There are many who would die to be in your position."

She dropped his gaze, staring at her wrist again. No wrinkles. No worries about aging, getting ill, dying. She ran her thumb across the new skin again. His hands entered her line of sight and took both of hers. This time there was no elaborate show of courtesy. He just quietly held her hands.

"Do you really find me repulsive?"

Raising her head, she studied his face. Jean, the vampire, was a master of the bland expression. An errant curl tickled his eyebrow. She wished she had the courage to sweep it away. How much did he have riding on her response? "No," she said with a final sigh of defeat.

He squeezed her hands. "Good."

She cleared her throat uncertainly. "That doesn't mean I'm ready to become a bloodsucking sun-shirking ghoul."

Lifting both hands to his lips, he kissed them. She thought he hid a smile behind her hands. "I admit, my thoughts were more carnal than practical." He leaned forward, intent on claiming her lips. His eyes closed.

"How can you find me attractive?" she blurted out, pulling back at the last possible second.

His eyes flicked open, startling her, but he still maintained a grip on her hands and she'd hit the couch's armrest. No place to run. He kissed one cheek, just a brush of lips against skin. She trembled at the touch. God, it'd

been so long since a man looked at her like that. She wanted to believe him, but her practical side was already making its list of cons. And it vastly overshadowed the list of pros.

"You are as you are. When you are as I am, you will revert to your appearance in your twenties." He kissed her other cheek. "Sans acne, blemishes, excess fat, and whatever else troubles a woman's mind." He dropped his hands to cup her breasts. "Though I will miss your generous mounds." His thumbs stroked her nipples, sending frissons of pleasure through her body.

He kissed the corners of her mouth, his eyelashes tickling her cheeks, then moved to her throat. He hesitated there, seemingly mesmerized by the beating of her heart.

"I don't want to die," she whispered.

He didn't answer. Instead, he pressed kisses to her collarbone, lips sliding to the place where her heart beat the loudest and the fastest. She stared at the mop top of dark curls and was simply at a loss. His hands skimmed her sides, then circled to her back, stymied by the hooks and fastenings blocking what he'd no doubt intended to be a smooth move. He kissed his way down her belly, fingers still fumbling with the unfamiliar clasps.

God, her breasts ached. If he didn't have it figured out in two point five seconds, she'd do it herself. The constricting feel of the band eased. Grinning, his hands slid up her arms, palms skimming the light hairs. She squirmed. His forefingers hooked the bra straps and tugged them off her shoulders.

"What a *trésor*." Cupping her breasts, he kissed their tops, then nuzzled the tender valley between them.

He could say anything in French and she'd enjoy the velvety lure of his words. Gretchen tentatively touched the nape of his neck, fingers twisting into his hair. He bit her breast, a swift little nip that had her bolting upright. His tongue immediately soothed the skin and moved on. Had he drawn blood? She increased her grip on his neck. Whatever he was up to, it took his full concentration. The cords of his neck pressed into her palm. His spine bent in a rigid arc. Beyond that, she caught the smooth curve of his ass. When bared, would it look like a perfect double scoop of ice cream?

Her nipples enjoyed his attention, tightening until their

aching blurred the pleasure pain line. *Pick me. Pick me,* they seemed to say. He chose the left breast and traced the dark skin around the pebbled nub with his tongue. His other hand caught her free nipple between thumb and finger and pinched. Whimpering, she arched into his hand. His lips closed over her, his incisors scraping the rigid peak.

While he suckled, his hand slipped down her belly and undid her belt and zipper.

Sneaky bastard. Her vagina thrummed, clenching and unclenching, shivering in anticipation. He might actually undo her without shedding his pants. Halleluiah, a modern day miracle that'd be.

Wrapping a hand around her waistband, Jean tugged. Nothing happened. His growl of annoyance reverberated through her chest. She shared the laugh.

He raised his head and her breasts cried out in equal frustration. "I prefer my women in skirts."

"Too bad. I like my men naked and human. Fate's a spiteful bitch."

His grin widened to a full smile, no longer hiding his incisors. Mirth danced in his eyes. "*Touché*, my lady. *Touché*. I do enjoy your wit." He dipped his head, a mini bow. "I beg your aid."

Arching her hips, she wiggled out of her pants. He snagged her panties at the last minute and disposed of them. Her eyes widened. "Cheater."

"I could leave you to your own devices."

"I'll kill you twice if you do."

His silent laughter mocked her exasperation. He toyed with her curls, then, watching her face, slid a finger between her labia.

She exhaled, a long sound of relief. She wiggled against his finger, but he carefully kept it out of her vagina's grasp.

"You're drenched," he murmured, eyes darkening.

"Tease," she retorted.

"I prefer the word seducer."

A finger found her clitoris. His head returned to her breast and he latched onto her neglected nipple. For a moment, she forgot to be cautious. She held his head to her breast, fingers tangling in his hair, while her other hand played up and down his spine. His sound of delight spurred

her on. He slid two fingers into her, his thumb circling her tingling clit.

Round and round. He pressed as far inside her as he could, grinding her clit against her pubic bone. Seizing a nipple between his teeth, he stretched the tight flesh. It was too much sensation all at once.

She peaked, an immediate orgasm that hijacked muscle control, kidnapped nerves, and robbed her lungs of breath. She shivered and bucked against his hand, vagina clenching around his long fingers. The second sensation built before the first ceased. He licked the undersides of her breasts. Her whimper morphed into a squeal.

The lights flickered. She opened one eye. The lights were still on. Maybe she'd imagined it. Lord knew there was a light show going on behind her eyelids. He slid his slicked fingers up her belly. She shivered, aftershocks bringing tears to her eyes.

The sound of glass breaking shattered the mood.

Gretchen opened her eyes. The lights winked out, the room illuminated only by the streetlight.

That's odd. Eyes widening, Jean's mouth formed an O. Something scraped her breast. She tried to shake off the pleasure-induced lassitude. They both noticed the arrow protruding out of Jean's chest at the same time. He reared back, hand closed around the shaft. His eyes flared bright unnatural green, then winked out. Nothing human remained. Snarling, he pivoted and took one stumbling step toward the ruined window before collapsing on the floor.

Willie Hayes propped a foot on the broken window's sill, a cross bow held in one hand. A quiver of arrows was thrown over one shoulder and black cloth shrouded his body, save for the silver pentagram dangling around his neck. Robin Hood he was not.

Well, at least he was fully dressed. Gretchen's delayed scream sounded a second later.

Four

Burying a body's tough work. Digging up a body isn't any fun either.

"Did he bite you? Are you still of this world?" Willie started forward, pentagram clutched in one hand, crossbow in the other.

"My hero," Gretchen said sarcastically, trying to cover herself. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Saving you from the darkness."

"I had light until you presumably cut my power lines."

He stepped through the window, grinding shards of glass into the carpeting. She thought about whacking him in the head with Jean's half bottle of wine, but then she'd have two bodies bleeding on the carpet instead of one. Still, she picked it up as she stood, any weapon better than none.

Willie's gaze roved over her nude body.

"Pervert." Setting the bottle down, she grabbed her shirt.

Someone knocked at the door. With an eye still on Jean's inert form, Willie inched to the door and undid the bolt lock. Gretchen finished buttoning her shirt just as John Bremmer walked in. "Should've put the stake through his heart immediately," Bremmer said, glancing at the body. "You never did do what you were told."

With her private parts somewhat covered, her confidence returned. "If you don't have a warrant, get out of my house." She pointed to the door and hoped they didn't notice her trembling hand.

"Don't need one for spiritual dealings." Bremmer stepped

around the glass. "You'll be offering to clean the carpets, William. The door would've worked just fine."

Willie hung his head.

"Now set that bow aside and gimme a hand. Despite her numerous failings, Gretchen Parks' a God-fearing woman, too sharp to be tricked by the devil." Bremmer peered at her. "Ain't that right, Gretchen?"

"Bastard," she retorted. "You made me think I poisoned myself." She surreptitiously turned Jean's ring on her thumb so the jewel pointed toward her palm.

"You have. By dealing with the likes of that. Albert wasn't much better. I swore I wasn't going to stake another member of your family." His intense blue eyes held her trapped. "And I won't. William!"

Jerking, Willie started forward. He slung the crossbow over his back, then grabbed Jean's legs.

He'd staked Uncle Albert? And then, *Holy shit. Uncle Albert was a vampire. Think, damn it, think.* She was all out of ideas. The shock short-circuited her brain.

They dragged Jean through the living room and kitchen, then out the back door and down the porch steps. She grabbed Jean's long coat, wrapped it around herself, and followed. Was she the only one who could smell the vampire's lingering scent?

They stopped at the box she'd unearthed, lifted Jean's arms and legs and heave-hoed the body into it.

"Jean," she whispered. She didn't know the man. It shouldn't matter what happened to him. Damn it, it did matter even if she couldn't articulate why. She froze, hand on the porch railing.

"You resurrected this mess, Gretchen. You see it to its end." Bremmer's cold voice cut through the numbness.

She turned, wooden, and walked toward them. Jean's ring burned her palm. She didn't know what to do. Declaring to be Uncle Albert's murderer moved Bremmer to the villain list, but she didn't know whether to put Jean there as well or not. He'd taken her blood and coerced her. But he'd come to seduce, not kill. That arrow could have just as easily lodged in her chest.

The toss into the box had driven the arrow almost completely through Jean's heart. Meat and blood coated the shaft. Willie knelt, handcuffing Jean's hands and feet. With Bremmer's help, Willie lowered the lid, then laid a bead of caulk around its edge.

Willie gave her a sideways glance. "You're not going to fight for him?"

Be careful. Gretchen kept her face neutral. "I'd rather spend my energy prosecuting you for trespassing."

His face split into a grin, hair defying its gel and sticking up in short red spikes, a manic armed clown covered in dirt and blood.

They were the monsters, she decided.

Several wolves silently emerged from the darkness, padded around the corner of the garage, and trotted up the hillside. She froze.

Bremmer glanced her way. "They won't hurt you."

"As harmless as you are?" Sarcasm laced her words, though her voice trembled. She clenched her hands at her sides. They'd killed Uncle Albert. Now Jean. What would they do to her?

"They're Persephone's wolves," Willie added. "Guardians of the underworld denizens." He kicked the box. "Now that the escapee is secured, you don't have to worry 'bout them."

The wolves ignored her, circling the box instead and yipping amongst themselves. Bremmer and Willie shoved the box down the hillside.

She hurried after them. "Where'd you bury my uncle?"

Bremmer didn't pause, only continued propelling Jean toward the river. Slicked by the dew laden grass, the box picked up its pace. Oh crap. She had less than ten feet to come up with a compelling reason to keep him out of the river. Could vampires drown?

The box hit a swampy section and stopped beside the top of a puce-colored washing machine. Willie retreated into the brush. She heard a motor sputter and start. Willie's four-wheeler rolled into view, headlight glaring like a nocturnal Cyclops. He drove over Jean's box and stopped. The box sunk out of sight. So did most of the four-wheeler's tires. Undoing the winch, Willie tossed the hook to Bremmer. Bremmer wrapped it around a gnarly old oak. Pressing the

button, Willie slowly winched himself out of the bog. The muck grumbled, sucking and popping as the vehicle retreated. Jean's box was lost beneath the slop.

How was she ever going to get him out of there? When had she decided he was worth saving? First, she better focus on surviving the night.

Bremmer patted Willie's back. "Go on home. I'll walk Gretchen to the house."

They weren't going to kill her? She glanced from one face to the other.

"You sure?" Willie eyed her.

"Get yourself back before anyone sees you."

She didn't want to be walked to the house. She didn't want anything to do with Bremmer. With one last look in her direction, Willie puttered downstream. Three wolves trotted after him. Bremmer turned toward her. His knees were grass-stained and mud coated his shoes and hands.

"Is that where you buried Uncle Albert?" she asked.

"Only God-fearing folks belong in cemeteries, Gretchen." He started up the hill, clearly expecting her to follow.

She stared at the mud. She'd tried to pull the old washer out years ago. The mud refused to yield its prize, tearing the bumper off the neighbor's truck instead. Granted, it hadn't been that nice of a truck to begin with but it'd take a genuine tow truck or a backhoe to get Jean's box out. She doubted it could be done discreetly enough not to attract Bremmer or Willie's attention. She blew out a breath. Jean was screwed. So, she suspected, was she.

"C'mon," Bremmer called.

She slowly turned around and followed him to the house. Her lights were on again. She looked at Bremmer.

"Some idiot took out a power pole on Sixth Street. Looks like they got it back up and running." His smile was grim. "Lark Creek takes care of its own, Gretchen. Just like I'm taking care of you."

She bit her tongue to keep silent, afraid of damning herself.

They'd reached her house. One of Persephone's wolves was leaving a steaming pile in the middle of her porch.

Bremmer cleared his throat while they waited. "William will be around tomorrow to patch the window and clean up

the glass and blood."

"Don't bother."

"I said we take care of our own." There was an unfamiliar edge to his voice.

She shivered. *Dangerous*, it whispered. *Psychotic*. The wind picked up. The cedars shuddered. *Murderer*.

"I work out of my home."

"I know."

"Where will I work while dear William cleans the carpeting?"

He smiled, a small tight gesture. It took all her willpower to keep herself from stumbling backward. "You're resourceful. You'll think of something, Gretchen."

The wolf trotted down the steps, glanced at the pair, then headed for the river.

No matter how good they were at removing bloodstains from carpeting, she'd still see Jean's trail winding through the house. "I'm leaving," she said quietly.

Bremmer put his hands in his pockets. "It's your choice. Think, though. Where will you go?"

"For now, anywhere but here is just fine." She stepped over the wolf droppings and strode into the house.

~ * ~

Gretchen was still there at dawn. Her suitcases lay packed on the bed. She huddled in a chair, the bed's comforter drawn around her. If she left, Bremmer won. If she stayed, he won. If she hired a backhoe to dig Jean out, Bremmer would find a way to stop her. She hated the feeling of being cornered.

Jean's sapphire ring sparkled in the early morning light. Was he worth saving?

At eight, she began calling clients and canceling any fittings she had. At eight-thirty, she phoned the post office and asked them to hold her mail. By nine, she suspected word she was leaving had trickled to Bremmer. Loading her suitcases into the car, she pulled out of the driveway.

Gretchen drove aimlessly for a while. Drifting through the farmland surrounding Lark Creek, she realized Bremmer was right. She had no place to go. Pulling into Saint Selene Church's parking lot, she rested her head on the steering wheel. How had life gotten so complex so quickly?

Climbing out of the car, she shoved the keys into her pocket. How many people acted as Bremmer's eyes? For the most part, he spent the day in his wife's diner. Any overheard comment was fair game. Anyone, even herself, could have unwittingly helped him "patrol" the village.

She started walking, roaming between the graves, glancing at the headstones from time to time. The cemetery was quiet this afternoon, graves freshly raked, and flowers just beginning to knife their way through the soil. The liquid trills of a red-winged blackbird interrupted the silence, a bell choir-esque scale of notes. She raised her face to the sun's rays, drinking in its warmth.

Absently rubbing the smooth skin on her wrist, she stared at the tombstone before her, a simple gray and white speckled granite rectangle. *Albert Cervantes Parks*. Kneeling, she traced the letters. What had Uncle Albert done to raise Bremmer's ire? Preyed on Lark Creek's citizens? An opportunistic clump of tulip leaves blocked the inscription. She carefully parted the leaves. *My face in the shadows, my soul in the sun*.

Had Bremmer been jerking her chain? Was Albert buried here? Or did he lie somewhere else, trapped in suspended animation, a stake in the heart? She patted the mound of earth. "I'll be back," she promised.

Rising, she dusted off her pants. She had a vampire to dig up.

~ * ~

For every shovelful of mud Gretchen slung away from Jean's hole, another two took its place. Chunks of scrap wood strategically placed as "mud dams" helped, but if she wanted to excavate Jean before Bremmer or Willie found out, she needed to hustle. Sweat dripped off the bridge of her nose, her heart hammering as underused lungs tried to match the pace. The shovel struck metal. Ignoring the pain in the small of her back, she frantically dug.

Dropping to her knees, she used the pry iron to force the lid to slide sideways. Jean's head and chest slipped into view. She ignored him, intent on holding back the bog. Bracing a piece of plywood between the sidewall and Jean's body, the wood pitched drunkenly as mud trickled around its edges into the box.

She wiped a dirty hand across her forehead and bit back a scream of frustration. She glanced skyward. Easter egg colors painted the horizon. Only a few more moments of sunshine left. Then bye-bye sun. Hello darkness. She studied Jean's still form, bathed in the shadows cast by the slipshod mud blockade.

Skin a waxy tone, Jean's shackled hands were clenched into fists. Blood no longer oozed from the hole in his chest, but nor did it look healthy. Swallowing the lingering contents of whatever had been her last meal, she wrapped both hands around the arrow shaft and yanked.

Jean convulsed, back arching and eyelids fluttering, then lay still. She tossed the arrow aside. The absolute silence frightened her. She tapped his cheek. "John Boy, wake up." No reaction. Gripping his shoulders, she shook him. "Jean." His eyes remained closed, lips pressed tight. Her shaking grew more fierce. His head bobbed and blood oozed from the hole in his chest.

She abruptly sat back. She would not cry. Quitters cried.

Why wouldn't Jean just heal himself and open his friggin' eyes? Her eyes widened. Maybe he needed blood. She glanced around, as if expecting to find a willing donor or a terminally wounded woodland creature. Nope. Just her.

Oh for God's sake.

She chose her left hand and tried to wipe her wrist clean, an impossible task sitting in a bog. Pulling out her pocketknife would require digging in the mud. She tried to stand but succeeded in only getting as high as her knees. If she didn't come down with a nasty infection after this, her white blood cells should be elevated to super heroine status. Exposing the blade, she wiped it on her shoulder and said a small prayer. Then she put it on her wrist and cut across the bright blue vein. Blood sprayed out. Swearing, she pressed her wrist to Jean's mouth.

He didn't move.

She slapped him hard on the cheek. "Open up. Damn it, Jean. I'm bleeding to death for you." Tears struck the back of her hands and she swore again. "Ungrateful bastard."

Teeth latched onto her wrist.

A whimpering gurgle escaped her clenched jaw. *That hurt.*

His eyes flicked open, no trace of green in their depths. Chains rattled. Jean raised his manacled wrists, links broken between them, and gripped her forearm. The sucking deepened.

She winced. "You're hurting me." Her tears spattered his face, leaving bright pink dots on his cheeks. Maybe he didn't care.

He blinked and blinked again. A hint of green rimmed his black eyes, like moonlight haloing a full lunar eclipse. The sucking eased off, then ceased entirely. His jaw worked back and forth while his thumb caressed her wound. "You taste gritty," he said, his voice hoarse.

Gretchen laughed and cried, wiping away tears with the back of her hand. "You idiot, that's all you can say?"

The pupils shrank and more humanity crept into his gaze. He raised her wrist to eye level. "You shouldn't have cut yourself so deep." He paused. "And it's dirty." The scolding tone nearly undid her.

She hiccupped on another laugh. "We have to get out of here."

He frowned, still focused on her wrist. "It's not fully dark."

"Dusk," she retorted. "I was hoping the wolves only came out after dark. Up with you." She offered him her uninjured hand.

He stared at it for a long moment. "Have you had a change of heart?"

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend. I think Bremmer killed my uncle. And you," she added. "I don't want to be next."

"Ah." His hand folded around hers. He kept his thumb pressed to her bleeding wrist. "I don't suppose you have a clean bandage on your person."

"Didn't think I'd need one."

Scowling, he let her draw him into a sitting position, then propped himself against the box's skewed lid. "You look like something that crept out of a swamp." He glanced around and his brows rose. "I see. Rather innovative chaps, weren't they?"

"C'mon." She tugged. Now that he was awake, she was more afraid. Of him. Of her traitorous heart. Of Bremmer

and Willie most of all.

Jean's green-eyed gaze narrowed. He abruptly yanked her toward him, arm wrapping around her waist and securing her to his chest. The back of her thighs perched on the box's rim while her ass dropped into the box, resting in his lap. His erection nestled between her ass cheeks. Did vampires get a version of morning wood too? What did they call it? She squirmed in his lap, grinding him against her.

"Later, *ma petite crotte*." His little turd. Resting his chin on her shoulder, he lowered his voice. "We have visitors." His breath whispered across her earlobe, stirring the hairs at the nape of her neck.

She started to turn her head.

"Look at me," he murmured. He nibbled along the length of her neck. "I don't suppose you are immune to bullets?"

The sweet shiver turned to an icicle of fear. "No."

His grip tightened. "Damnation."

Something struck one of the boards. Wood splinters shattered around them like dangerous confetti. Jean jerked her backward, yanking them both into the box. The box shifted in the bog, swaying gently. Mud oozed inside, coating the back of her head. The hand holding her injured wrist tightened, just this side of painful. She managed not to whimper.

He nuzzled her neck. "You will stay here." An order.

"No. Wait." She tried to move and cursed when she couldn't.

Taking her hand, he wiped it on the shirt Bremmer had tossed in the box with him. It left Jackson Pollock-esque streaks on the white fabric, brown smudges mingling with the rusted bloodstains. He folded her now somewhat clean hand around her wrist. "Keep pressure on it."

"What are you doing?"

"Returning the favor of my life." Another gunshot spattered them with bits of plywood. Bracing his hands on the lid, he shoved. The surrounding mud devoured the lid. He kissed her on the cheek. "I shall return."

Then he was gone. A volley of shots followed in the wake of Willie's high-pitched scream. She shivered. A wolf howled and two more picked up the banshee wail. She wished she knew what the hell was going on. Damn Jean.

Damn men.

A gun barrel slid into her line of sight. *Crapola*. She rolled. The blast left her deaf, blowing a hole through the box's bottom just above her shoulder. Her neck stung. No doubt, compliments the powder flash.

She grabbed the barrel with both hands and forced it up. Another blast struck just above her head.

"Jean!" She hoped she screamed, but maybe it was only loud in her own head.

Something wrapped jaws around her forearm, breaking her grip on the gun barrel. A black muzzle dipped into her line of sight, then, with a yip, was jerked away. The flash of repeated gunshots lit up the hole like the black light strobe of a blazing disco ball. The compulsion keeping her in place vanished. She jerked upright.

Jean had his teeth buried in Bremmer's neck. Two wolves were latched around his legs. Jean flung a third off his back.

Her hand closed around the pry bar. Crawling through the muck, she struck the first wolf in the hind end. Yelping, it released its grip on Jean's leg and snapped at the metal. She caught it in the muzzle with an awkward backswing. Shaking its head, it splattered blood in all directions, then leaped at her.

Jean released Bremmer and swung around, catching the wolf by the neck. Gretchen heard the crack of its vertebrae. Staggering to her feet, she raised the bar like a bat and attempted to swing at the wolf gnawing the flesh off Jean's lower leg. God, she was dizzy. She swayed and abruptly there were two left legs and two wolves gnawing. She blinked.

Jean mouthed words at her.

"What?" she shouted back. "I can't hear you."

His eyes widened. It was the last thing she clearly saw. She blinked again but the haze remained. The fog claimed Jean's face, ate into the surrounding trees and the trickling ribbon of water, then completely severed reason from reality.

A green cat-eyed marble shattered a formation of pretty gold globes. The globes regrouped, led by a bright orange flash. She flung up a hand to forestall the charge. Whatever it was plowed right through her, charring her insides. She

screamed until her throat burned and her eyes bled. Then her brain mercifully ordered a retreat and she slipped into unconsciousness.

Five

Aide-toi, le ciel t'aidera. Help yourself and heaven will help you. Sometimes God has a fucked up sense of humor.

Gretchen woke feeling like she was on the backside of a weeklong bender that involved a circus of activity, from contortionists to fire-breathers. Head fuzzy, all thought centered on trying to soothe the oozing lump in her skull which once had been a fairly functional brain. When she finally permeated the layer of fog, pain crept in, not like the incoming tide, but as a tsunami, swamping her senses once again. She moaned.

A cool hand touched her cheek. "Better that you had not waked."

"Where am I?" she croaked. She raised her eyelids a crack, wincing when the dim light tortured her pupils.

"Safe."

She recognized the accent, the smeared S sound. *Jean*. Thoughts and images beat against her brain. She pushed them away. "I hurt."

"I can mend it all." He pushed damp hair off her brow. She turned her head, craving the coolness of his skin. His hand caressed her cheek, sliding to cup a bandage at her neck.

She frowned. More thoughts impinged on her tired brain. "Take me to the hospital."

"It's beyond that, *bébé*."

The words dropped into the pool of stillness surrounding her. The shuddering ripples forced her to open her eyes. Jean loomed over her. A crisp white blouse with tiny pearl

buttons replaced his ruined shirt. Weary eyes watched her carefully, his hand resting on her shoulder but fully prepared to keep her in place if need be.

She licked her lips. She couldn't feel her right hand. Her brows scrunched. She tried to wiggle her fingers. *What fingers?* her brain replied. Oh God, was she missing her hand? A gentle pressure from Jean kept her from jerking upright.

"Let me die," she said, the last bit of calm melting around her in a puddle of wax. Or maybe it was her skin that was way too soft, like the rind on an overripe melon. The giggle threatening to burst through her clenched jaw's defenses had no edge of humor to it.

"I cannot do that." He seemed genuinely distressed. "You broke my curse and we are bound. You die. I die. And I very much want to live."

A spasm tore through her, bowing her back and tearing a scream from her already raw throat. "It hurts," she whimpered. Weary from the assault, they seemed to be the only words her brain remembered.

"I know, *ma chérie*. Hold on a little longer."

She knew what he was about to do and she fought it. "No! I want to see the sun again."

"The moon's a benevolent mistress."

Tears streamed down her cheeks, salting her lips. "Don't," she pleaded, voice barely a whisper.

"Perhaps one day you will look at me and not curse me." His hand covered her eyes. Teeth sunk into her throat.

It was the last affront her body could tolerate. Her heartbeat sounded loud in her ears, flighty and fearful. Too much blood already seeped into the bandage at her throat. He'd chosen to make a fresh hole rather than lap at the ragged wound. A questionable kindness in her mind.

She flung up a hand. He caught it, fingers twining through hers. Her heart lurched, stilled. Silence ruled.

~ * ~

The second time Gretchen stirred, she didn't give Jean a chance to hold her hostage. She jerked upright, grabbing the side of whatever she lay on to keep from falling. Her vision whirled. She swallowed hard. The window shade was drawn. A thin yellow line delineated it from the sill. She blinked. It

wasn't actually a shade, but a square of wood tacked over the glass. So much for trying to catch a glimpse of the sun.

"I didn't expect you to rise so soon," Jean murmured.

He sat in the corner on an overstuffed chair, legs tucked beneath him. She didn't recognize the tiny room, barely more than a closet, but the smell... Pine-scented cleaners and the whisper of cologne swirled around her. Familiar scents.

"Where am I?" *What am I* was what she wanted to ask, but was too chicken shit.

His legs swung to the floor. "In your house, the attic to be exact. I believe it must have belonged to the uncle you mentioned. Not to my taste." He waved. "The wallpaper is much too busy and I prefer carpeting to wood, but it suited our needs." He stood and it was the first time she saw him awkward, torn between approaching her and remaining at a safe distance.

"I'm not going to bite your head off."

"You could," he said very softly.

She shivered. She ran her tongue around the inside of her mouth. Dental work had been done while she slept. She was missing two crowns and three fillings. Oh and her incisors were much too sharp. She didn't want to know, to think, to wonder. Her tongue snagged on the bottom tooth and ripped. A drop of blood trickled down the back of her throat. Her stomach growled.

"What have you done?" she whispered.

"I can provide a mirror, but it's very old and rare. Most items lack the strength needed to capture our reflections. I do not know where your uncle found it, but he left you a valuable treasure."

"You mean there's more?" Her voice rose an octave. She held out her hands. They looked normal, five fingers each, fingernails, not claws. Whew. She turned her hands over, studying their backsides. Her skin was milky white and smooth, flawless Victorian era flesh.

When you are as I am, you will revert to your appearance in your twenties.

She cupped her breasts. They were no longer size DD, but cute little C's. She jiggled them in her palms, then slid her hands lower. She had a tiny waist and soft curving hips.

"Jeezus."

"Would you like to borrow the mirror?"

Did she? He approached her cautiously and that made her laugh, a giddy high-pitched noise that startled them both. Perching on the bed's edge, he held out the mirror. She didn't trust herself enough to take it from him. She stared at the watery reflection. A heart-shaped face complete with lush pale pink lips and defined cheekbones stared back. She raised an eyebrow. The reflection did the same. She touched the curling locks of blonde hair, twisting a strand around her finger.

"This can't be real. How long have I been out?" She pinched the bridge of her nose. Definitely real. Definitely hers. Steeling herself, she opened her mouth. He started to withdraw the mirror. She wrapped her fingers over his, trapping him in place. "Wait."

The teeth were new. She tried a smile with her mouth closed and succeeded in looking benign.

He turned the mirror's face away. "You should eat something."

That burst her merry little bubble. She searched for another topic, anything that might deflect the worries and fears surrounding her new existence. "Jean, who cursed you? How did you end up in my backyard? How did Bremmer and Willie know about you?"

Setting the mirror on a side table, Jean returned with a drink. Clever man. He'd given her a plastic tumbler, saving himself from cleaning up shards of glass should she break it while hiding its contents behind the cheerful yellow exterior. "It's not a dark chocolate whipped espresso with sprinkles." His lips quirked, a flash of white pointy teeth he'd kept carefully tucked away before.

Should she ask who or what it'd belonged to? A new scent swirled on the air, arousing a part of her mind that'd long lain dormant. She instinctively growled. Eyes wide, she slapped a hand over her mouth.

"Ma belle, do not be embarrassed on my account."

She took the cup from his hands. The yellow plastic trembled, a side-to-side bumblebee swagger. This was her life now. Without Jean, Bremmer would have killed her. Come to think of it the bastard did kill her. Ooh, that made

her want to take a tire iron to him, but the after images of the body only turned her on.

Closing her eyes, she brought the cup to her lips. *Don't think about what it tastes like. It's not a wine-tasting seminar.* The liquid was warm and settled the angry slosh of her stomach juices. She drank the entire cup, envisioning chocolate cake, a scoop of vanilla ice cream, a piece of bloody rare steak. Can that thought. Mashed potatoes. Brats. John Bremmer laid out on the grill. Her stomach turned and she nearly vomited the contents.

Jean's hand covered her mouth. "Swallow."

She opened her eyes, met his anxious look, and deliberately swallowed.

"Good girl." Nodding, he withdrew the hand from her mouth and took the empty cup. "As to my curse. That is a long story. Let us say I stumbled into the town unaware of its pagan origins and inadvertently indulged in virgin and ah, forbidden fruit, reserved for a special ceremony. The local witch queen cursed me to remain under Persephone's care until a child from the Queen's own line broke my bonds." He patted her hand. "You see, she could have just staked me and poof." His hands made an exploding gesture. "I would have been no more. But she wanted me to lie awake and suffer."

"You were conscious the whole time?" Pity warred with disbelief.

"Minimally. After the first hundred years or so, I learned it was better to remain trapped in my dreams than pine in the dark." His words were casual but the shadows flitting through his eyes haunted her. Obviously, there were worst things than dying. She shuddered.

He mistook the gesture and wrapped the bed's comforter around her. The fabric smelled like it needed a good airing. She almost preferred being nude than subjecting herself to the odor. His hands dropped. She wished he'd keep them on her. Funny, a couple days ago, she'd have pepper-sprayed him for less.

He continued on. "Persephone's the Goddess of the Underworld. Daughter of Demeter, Earth's mother. She has a rather split personality, if you ask me. Cleaning up after her despotic mother while slapping thighs with a brooding dark

dweller who builds his ranks with his mother-in-law's offal."

Great, so they were dealing with a psychotic god. She could relate. Her head and her heart had tossed a single coin, but chosen dissimilar paths. *I'll pursue the vengeance part*, her brain told her heart, or what remained of it. *You figure out whether you want to fuck or flee*. The thing was, her heart had never been a big part of the decision-making process. Gretchen pictured it running around in circles, wringing its little arteries and crying, *The sky is falling. The sky is falling*.

He'd stopped talking and was looking at her. "I'm sorry. I kind of drifted off," she said.

"You are not yet fully restored. Your injuries slow the healing process." He started to reach for her and hesitated, hand still outstretched. "May I kiss you?"

"You never asked before."

"You didn't pose a threat."

She grinned, fangs pricking her lower lip. "Opportunistic bastard."

"I value my throat." He cupped her cheek and scooted closer. "There is so much to show you, but first we must be away. Your uncle's bolt hole will not conceal us for much longer. The wolves grew bold enough to circle the house early this morning."

"They know we're here."

His knuckles scraped along her neck, distracting her from her fear. "Yes."

"If Bremmer and Willie are dead, why are the wolves still bothering us?"

"It's the entire town, Gretchen," he said gently, lowering his gaze to a safe point between her chin and breasts. Fingers dipped beneath the comforter and played along her collarbone.

She shook her head. "No, it can't be. We went to Saint Selene's every week, everyone did. There's the little Lutheran church two blocks away and the synagogue—"

His hand closed over her shoulder and gave her a little shake. "I do not know about the others. But Selene's another name for the moon goddess."

"My parents didn't dance naked in the woods," she

retorted, truly angry now. In fact, in her mind, they'd never gotten naked, not once. Nor could she picture Reverend Byers or Mrs. Tomalie doing so. Jessica O'Reily, Sara's mother, well maybe...

"I will not argue with a woman. I've learned at least that much over the centuries." He took her hands. "Dusk is here; the night nips at its heels. Can you stand? We must be off."

"Don't change the subject."

He sighed. "We shall argue later, if it pleases you." He wiggled his brows, suspiciously cheerful. "And use sweet sex to wipe away your harsh words."

"I can't just leave everyone wondering what happened to me—Whoa!"

He drew her to her feet. She clung to his shoulders while her inner ears recalibrated and the blood sloshed uneasily in her stomach. Her legs trembled. "You need more sustenance," he whispered. Teeth nipped her earlobe and her legs wobbled some more, though not from weakness. "Take mine. I have it to spare."

Apparently her twenty-something body also came with a teenaged-boy's libido, because she found his comment an extreme turn on. Hadn't he mentioned something about escaping before the townsfolk arrived with their pitchforks and torches?

He feathered kisses along her neck, also incredibly distracting. Hands skated up the sides of her body, detouring to tease the undersides of her breasts. Speaking of which—"How did I get naked?"

"I undressed you," he said simply, planting a kiss on a very erect and appreciative nipple. She and he both seemed fascinated by her perky breasts. "To bathe you."

She wished she'd been awake for the show. He licked the underside of one breast, fingers tweaking the other nipple. "Oh," she breathed. Crouching, he kissed his way down her stomach—hey, she actually had kick-ass abdominal muscles—and delved into her bellybutton with his tongue. He dropped to his knees, hands resting at her hips.

She found the long line of his neck fascinating, watching with the same single-minded focus as a cat guarding a birdbath. Even when his nose and most of his face vanished between her thighs, she couldn't resist staring. Framed so

prettily by dark curls, the prim white shirt collar delimited the delicious territory.

Mine, the newly awakened part of her brain claimed.

She was afraid to move. His tongue tangoed with her clitoris, dipping, plunging, and whirling. A slow heat crept up her legs, precious blood migrating to her nether region, plumping her clit. Her vagina, flush and ready, twitched in anticipation. His fingers twirled in her juices, sliding up and down the length of her labia.

Lifting a hand, she trailed her fingers from his earlobe to his shirt collar. His curls wrapped around her, silky tempters in their own right. "Jean," she whispered. Heat and need coiled in her stomach.

He pulled back, lips gleaming, eyes unnaturally bright. "Take what you need, *ma chérie*. I intend to." Fingers plunged inside her, curling to bump her G-spot. She gasped. He smiled, deliberately licking his incisors.

"You wouldn't dare." He pressed a kiss to her inner thigh, fingers working in and out. Her vagina clenched. *More*, it screamed, then realized she'd voiced that need out loud.

"As mademoiselle wishes." He shed his pants with one hand in record time, fingers still stroking. Like the Pied Piper and his tiny minions, all her blood obediently followed the siren call. The tiny pearl buttons on his shirt ground against her bared skin as he slid up her body, his shaft slipping between her thighs.

Clinging to him, she whimpered. He stretched her, a sweet pulling sensation. She stood on her tiptoes, burrowing her face into his neck. He smelled like salvation and damnation. She licked his pulse point, gently grasping his Adam's apple in her mouth. He hummed. The vibrations shuddered through her.

He pulled back slowly, turning his head and arching his neck. "Here, Gretchen."

"I-I can't." Her mouth watered.

He rested inside her while he undid the first three buttons of his shirt, baring more of his throat. A single finger raked a long line across the pale expanse of skin. Blood blossomed, staining the vanilla flesh. She pressed her nose to his throat and moaned.

He resumed thrusting. Her vagina fought his retreat,

clutching him, forcing him to drag himself out, one inch at a time. Her tongue flicked out, licking at the red line, her newly awakened vice and fix rolled into one. The heat and need and impending explosion built, intolerable, a feast for the senses even as everything blended into one pulsating demand.

She bit him, teeth sinking into yielding flesh. He thrust deep, shaft burrowed as far as it could go. Latched onto his neck, she screamed. Blood rolled down her throat and pooled between her thighs. Her hips bucked against him. He wrapped his arms around her and flung them on the bed. Then he pounded himself into her, while her back bowed and she maintained her grip on his throat, alternately sucking and drowning.

The pleasure pain line blurred. His hands clenched her breasts, marking them in his haste to wring another drop of ecstasy from the hard little nipples. She gripped his arms, fingers curling around his biceps, straining to drag him with her into her blissful hell.

He pulled back when she'd had enough to drink, capturing her bloody lips with his own. Swallowing her irritated growl, he rolled them so she straddled his body.

"Show me your frustration," he taunted, tweaking her nipples. He worked in and out of her, scraping her clitoris, sending her nervous system into a flurry of mind-blurring twitters.

He needn't have wasted the words.

Hip bones jarred. Teeth and tongues clashed. She fought the orgasm back, trying to prolong the sensation. Too late. Her breath caught. Heartbeats slowed and stopped. The stillness lasted an eternity. Her nerves stretched like taffy, pleasure vibrating along their fibers. Jean's eyes were solid green, as glittering and cold as his jeweled ring.

Everything shattered.

Nerves. Bones. Muscles. Heart. Soul.

Released from its Pied Piper thrall, blood rushed into her extremities. She wavered on passing out.

Jean's fingers dug into her arms, bringing her back to herself. A shit-eating grin split his face. "Better than a dark chocolate whipped espresso with sprinkles, no?"

"Arrogant bastard," she muttered.

He pulled her tight, tucking her head beneath his chin. "What a *trésor* you are, *ma belle*."

She'd never met a man who liked to snuggle. It warmed her heart, frightening her with the intensity of emotions it stirred. Damn it, why did he have to go and make her fall in love with him?

Six

Who coined the phrase "falling in love?" It's more like rocketing down a ski hill in a little red wagon.

"Umm, Jean?"

He snuggled closer, murmuring a string of French words she couldn't decipher.

Not that she didn't like the way one hand massaged her ass cheek while the other strummed her spine, but didn't they have more important things to worry about? Like getting out of town before being shot at, burned, or whatever atrocity Persephone might have in mind? Jean nibbled on her ear. Damn romantic. How'd he managed to stay alive for four hundred years?

Still trapped in the circle of his arms, she drew back far enough to get his attention. His gaze lowered to her breasts.

She slapped him on the ass. "Focus."

He blinked and stared at her with innocent eyes. "I am."

"Villagers. Torches. Wolves. Ring any bells?" She tried not to breathe while she spoke. The rolling of her breasts seemed to act like a hypnotist's coin.

"All of them," he replied, gaze still centered on her breasts.

She cupped his face in her hands, forcing him to look at her. "You can play with them later. How do we get out of here and where are we going?"

Sighing, he pulled back and sat up. The sheets puddled around his waist where his very alert manhood bobbed like a fabric-draped B movie ghost. Now her attention was diverted. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"You are incorrigible, Madame." He grinned, showing his fangs. "And yes, it is Madame for you are mine now." His eyes dared her to argue.

She rolled hers. Madame. Mademoiselle. Whatever. As long as he kept his French ass alive, she didn't care what he called her.

He rose from the bed with the grace a ballerina or gay male dancer would envy and strode to the covered window. Peeking through the crack, he muttered a curse. "I believe I underestimated their resourcefulness."

Clutching the sheet to her chest, she dragged it to the window with her. She glanced outside. Lit black candles ringed the house. Wolves lolled here and there, acting as lookouts. She recognized two men.

"I thought you said Bremmer and Willie were dead."

"They are."

She stared at the familiar figures. Willie's head tilted at an odd angle, as if he'd decided to look at the world from a horizontal position, ear resting on his shoulder. He moved with a hitch, using an old-style straw broom to keep his balance. Others strolled behind him, faces and shapes hidden by black cloaks. She was too far away to make out the silvery symbols lining the edges of their cloaks.

Bremmer walked alone, a sword held in one hand, a clump of weeds in the other.

She pulled back. "I don't understand."

"They devoted their lives to Persephone. Hell's guard dog Garm will not let their souls pass until they complete her task."

"To kill us."

He met her gaze, expression carefully blank. "Yes."

She didn't like the idea of fighting the people she'd grown up with. "So can we turn into bats or mist and just fly away?"

His eyebrows vanished beneath a mop of curls. "Where did you get such nonsense?"

She waved. "Never mind."

"We must fight magic with magic." He returned to the bed. Rummaging beneath it, he drew out several boxes. "Your uncle left us another treasure. Rebecca Park's Book of Shadows." He handed her a heavy leather bound tome.

She looked at him, expression blank.

"The witch queen's diary. We need a god or goddess at our back. She must have detailed the ritual she performed to invoke Persephone's aid."

"What about Uncle Albert? Maybe we could find him. Another person on our side can't hurt." His sympathetic gaze unnerved her. She rambled on. "Bremmer said he staked him. So we just have to dig him up, pull out the stake—"

Jean put a finger to her lips. "We are unique, *ma moitié*. Most of our kind, once staked, are simply no more. The goddess's curse has given us an advantage. It will take stakes in both of our hearts before we are forced to depart to the netherworld. Heaven or Hell or whatever place your religion leans toward."

So Uncle Albert was really dead. She sighed. And she had two lives to squander before she'd truly be dead too. First, though, they had to get out of Lark Creek alive, er, whatever. She sat in the plush chair, the book balanced in her lap. Jean nodded encouragingly. She cracked the book.

The handwriting flowed directly from a penmanship teacher's bible. She could almost hear the sound the ink-dipped pen made as it scrawled across the pages. Illustrations peppered the pages, ranging from the diagram of a flower to the detailed contents of a cat's stomach. She flipped through the book, searching for a year or some sort of date. Everything referenced the time of the moon.

A pain ripped through her chest. She coughed, hand to breast. She couldn't get air. Jean put his hands on her shoulders, linking them. The suffocating feeling retreated.

"What the—"

"Bremmer." His lips pressed tight, face paler than normal. "Calling. Yanking Persephone's power through us."

She hurried through the book. "What about conjuring a ghoul? They like dead people, don't they?"

"What do you think we are?"

"Good point."

Peering over her shoulder, he jabbed at a page. "Here." He fetched another box. "I recognize the ingredients. Albert must have been trying to invoke the same spell."

She shuddered. Had her uncle lived through a similar hunt, sitting alone in his hidden room, waiting for them to

find him? He'd failed. What made Jean think she'd have better luck?

Jean arranged a small ring of purple candles around them. Whispering a word, they lit.

"Neat trick."

He shrugged. The slight smile didn't reach his eyes. He sprinkled oil and crushed herbs over them. The dried herbs drifted in the air like dead man's confetti. She sneezed.

The pulling sensation vanished. She wished she could see the expression on Bremmer's face now.

Jean's hands rested on her shoulders again. "Albert failed because he was a man."

She bit her lip. "I'm not a witch."

"Her blood flows through you." He paused. "Or it did."

She didn't want to think about that. She put her finger on the page, marking the words. "Okay. Here goes. *Ab ovo usque ad mala.*"

"From beginning to end," Jean translated. "Demeter to Hecate, Dawn to Death. *Dum vivimus vivamus.* Oh dark Mother, aid us. Send the usurper to her place. *Ab ovo usque ad mala.*"

The candles guttered, flames darting sideways, but stayed lit. Shadows skittered across the floor. The hair rose at the nape of her neck. Jean's fingers curled into her shoulders. She blew out a pent-up breath. It crystallized in the air, hanging suspended before them.

"Please," she whispered.

"Welcome, Daughter," came the reply.

Did Jean hear the voice too? It hid in the scratching of branches against the windowpane, veiled itself in a swirl of dead leaves. She shared its eyes, or maybe it shared hers. Her hands gripped the edges of the book, white-knuckled, trying to cling to this reality and her place in it. Hecate had other plans.

Gretchen stood before Bremmer, a twist of shadow and brittle winter leavings. Her breath stirred his offering of nightshade, turning it to ash.

Yelping, Bremmer dropped the weed. He swung the sword before him, both hands clenched around its black handle.

"We need to leave," she heard herself say. Her voice

echoed, a far off warning, not of this time, this place.

Someone called her name. Names carried power, but the creature wielding it lacked the strength to bind her. Some part of her struggled to the surface. *Jean!* "Jean," a crow called, mocking her.

The wolves crouched at Bremmer's feet, whimpering and yipping. "Silence!" he commanded. The crowd's chanting ceased.

She opened her mouth and a dry laugh escaped, a crackling dusty noise more fit for forgotten tombs than a sidewalk in Lark Creek. Frost coated the black candles. "You dare challenge me. Crawl home, little queen. Your lord may show you mercy. I will not."

The sword tip wavered. "Gretchen? Is that you? I can still save your soul. Take my athame. Purge yourself."

She didn't know what semblance she wore, human, vampire, or otherwise. What shared her skin didn't abide by human courtesies. Stepping forward, she touched the tip of his sword. Bremmer's eyes widened. She noticed, then, that his throat was ripped out. Someone had carefully applied a flesh-colored bandage, but the wound oozed around it, weeping maggots.

"Thanks, but I don't need saving," she replied.

The sword's shiny edge dulled. Like a cheap photograph left in the sun, the color leached from Bremmer. The impressive black hilt faded as did his hand, his arm, and the neat blue and white checked shirt covering what remained of him. He opened his mouth, but no words came out.

She moved on.

The wolves cowered, tails tucked between their legs. She swept past them, gaze centered on Willie. A chill wind frolicked in her wake, turning everything it touched to stone.

Willie balanced on one foot, broom held in front of him like a weapon. "I call on Athena—"

"She won't come."

The broom shook in his hands. Behind him, the crowd dispersed, scattering for their homes. "I call on Apollo."

Gretchen laughed, a crow's caw. Her hand closed around his broom shaft.

Willie stared wildly into her eyes. "Please. I want to live."

"You're already dead."

He convulsed, hands still latched onto the broom. His chest heaved as if something inside him worked to escape. Blood trickled out of his nose, mouth, and eye sockets. His mouth opened and he vomited. A red winged blackbird flew out. They both watched it.

She held out her arm, a crooked limb draped in cobwebs and dead leaves. The bird perched there. "Go. Find your goddess." Fluttering its wings, the blackbird bobbed its head and took flight.

An owl swooped out of the sky and seized the bird in its talons. The blackbird shrilled, its voice cutoff mid-cry. Feathers drifted down.

She turned toward Albert's house. Behind her, Willie collapsed.

Jean stood in the driveway. "Gretchen," he whispered. For the first time, she saw fear in his eyes.

She stopped before him. Her body lay still in his arms, wrapped in his coat, her face turned toward his chest. Pity sprouted, unfurling silver leaves. She stretched out her hand.

He stepped back. "No. We are bound. Where she goes, I go."

Dead leaves danced along the pavement, tripping over Jean's shoes and skittering up the walk. "You'd dare defy me."

He licked his lips. "No. But I doubt you want a vampire trailing after you for all eternity."

She laughed, the crow's caw burbling out her lips. "Just so. Take her then. I shall satisfy myself with the rest."

He bowed his head.

She shuffled up the walk, casting leaves and sticks in her wake. Violets sprouted in the concrete's cracks. She raised her arms. The wind shrilled past, wild and unfettered once again. The house shuddered, rustling on its foundation, shattering windows and shedding shutters.

Turning her head, Gretchen spat. Dusty herbs clung to her tongue. Her vision pitched and she flung out a hand to catch herself. Someone already had a hold on her.

She opened one eye. She lay in Jean's arms. They stared at one another.

"Hi," she whispered.

Jean pressed his face into the crown of her hair. "My heart overflows. You've come back to me."

For once, she didn't care how silly his words sounded. She was simply content to be held. Hecate didn't give them much time. "Better run," she advised, her voice dissolving in the wind.

An electric wire snapped, sparking as it fell against the house. Imbued with temporary life, the propane tank waddled around the building, reeling like a blind hippopotamus. Monsieur Voltage met Mademoiselle Gas.

Jean ran.

Epilogue

Spitting into the wind is ill-advised. So is taunting deities.

Gretchen donated the land where Albert's house and Jean's prison once lay to Lark Creek with enough funds to turn it into a public park. Lord knew, the residents needed a morsel of happiness to lay claim to. And with Jean's squirreled away investments (and their flat in Paris, yacht in the Mediterranean, and swanky condo in San Diego), she had little need for a plot of land soaked in hate.

The only caveat—and after all she'd been though, she viewed it as a miniscule constraint—was that Bremmer and the wolves' statues be displayed there. It made it a rather morbid park, but she hadn't asked the wolves to be set next to the playground. Some disturbed board member laid claim to that faux pas. Bremmer faced the creek, tucked behind a screen of climbing roses.

She and Jean sometimes returned to the park, only on full moon nights, to lay a bouquet of midnight blue roses at Bremmer's feet. Not for Bremmer, of course.

Even cranky old goddesses like to be thanked.

Merci, Hecate.

About Christine

Crotchety vampires, modern-day witches, fallen gods, scheming Fates, and shape-shifting dragon men: come play in Christine McKay's twisted and often times humor-filled imagination. At the nagging of family and well-meaning friends, Ms. McKay earned a Bachelor's Degree in Computer

Science (back when it wasn't cool to be a woman in a computer class), but it's a degree sprinkled with unlikely classes like creative writing, abnormal psychology, farrier science, and police ethics. Held hostage by a neurotic Jack

Russell Terrier, she spends as much time as she can translating her daydreams into (mostly) coherent stories.

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