



# FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE

Black Rose

TAMELIA  
TUMLIN



# For Better or For Worse

by

Tamelia Tumlin

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## **Dedication**

To my son Jacob, my mom, Sue, and my Dad J.W. Tumlin  
Jr. (Buster) for being my support group and a special  
dedication to my wonderful editor, Callie Lynn Wolfe, for  
her patience and wisdom. Thank you all!

Kate Wentworth forced her legs to keep moving across the driveway even though every fiber of her being violently protested against it. Gravel crunched like brittle bones beneath her tennis shoes. A sound she likened to fingernails scraping across a chalkboard.

An involuntary shiver slid along Kate's spine as the two-story plantation home loomed ahead. Her steps faltered when she reached the porch.

It's just a house. I've been here a million times, Kate reassured herself. Still, fear held her feet hostage and made it nearly impossible to move. Kate took a long steadying breath before she stepped onto the bottom stair. The wood moaned beneath the shift in weight.

Cringing inwardly with each mournful creak, Kate squeezed the wooden guard rail.

"Ouch!" She yanked her hand up and stared at the offending splinter. "Damn!"

Biting back a cry, she brushed away the tears; tears that had nothing to do with a painful splinter and everything to do with her breaking heart.

*I can't do this. I just can't. No matter how much I love him.*

Every sinister shadow, silhouetted against the white frame house sent a new wave of panic racing through her veins. Even the subtle wisp of branches scraping along the top of the high-vaulted roof, prompted her mind's eye to conjure new horrors. Each one more terrifying than the last.

Bitterness clenched steel bands around her heart and fear nearly choked her. Kate leaned over the guard rail and struggled to breathe. Hot, humid air seeped into her lungs. Her chest tightened and she forced herself to take slow deep breaths. Passing out from lack of oxygen was not an option.

*Why did Louisiana have to be so muggy?*

Sweat beaded her brow and she wiped it away with her bare arm. The pale pink tank top she wore clung to her flat stomach like a second skin.

As the panic attack subsided, she straightened her body and tried to control her racing thoughts.

*He won't hurt me. He won't. Not my beloved Colten.*

A movement, caught her eye.

*Colten!*

He stood in the bay window, of his bedroom, staring morosely at the unforgiving moon. His slumped shoulders portrayed the demeanor of a beaten man.

Her heart melted at the misery she envisioned on his handsome face. As hard as this was for her, it had to be ten-fold for him.

Immediately, Kate's protective instincts kicked in. This is Colten. *Her* Colten. Not some monster.

He looked away from the moon and his gaze seemed to rest upon her.

Icy fear reared its ugly head once again sending prickles of awareness across her skin. *Oh, God! Does he see me?*

Her senses immediately escalated from the *I hope he doesn't break my heart*, caution mode, they've lingered in for the past year to panic mode, *run like the hounds of hell are on nipping at my heels*.

But she couldn't run. Colten needed her.

With a deep, fortifying breath, she climbed the small flight of stairs and remembered the way he had brought her chicken soup when she had been bedridden with the flu last winter. And not just the canned stuff either, but homemade soup, with fresh vegetables and steaming hot rice. Not to mention that without Colten's strength and consolation after her father's death two months ago, she might have slid into the darkness of depression permanently. He had been her rock. Now, it is time for her to be his.

Kate reached the front door, hand balled into a tight fist, she banged on the oak. This is the man who had taught her how to love unconditionally. And now she would return the favor. She would not let him go through this alone. Not anymore.

She waited.

Nothing.

She banged once more, harder this time. The sound seemed to echo through the Louisiana night, deep into the bayou behind the house and bounce eerily back at her. Somewhere in the distance creatures of the night echoed their own sorrowful tune, a haunting song that sent a new wave of panic through her. She had never been a fan of the mysteries of the bayou. Or the horrors that lurked within.

Kate shot a nervous look over her shoulder half-expecting to see some terrifying entity emerge from the black, swampy waters. Her knees trembled as she waited.

Still, he did not come.

Fishing the key out of her jean pocket and after three attempts, she managed to fit it into the keyhole. It finally clicked, and she turned the knob.

She rubbed her arms with the palms of her hands and closed her eyes a moment. *I can do this. I can.*

With as much determination as Kate could muster, she pushed the door open knowing she was about to witness the most horrifying event of her life. And she was powerless to stop it.

\*\*\*\*

Colten James flicked open the chamber of his father's revolver then spun the cylinder containing the lone silver bullet.

One shot.

One bullet.

That's all it would take.

Through the white sheer curtains that covered the bedroom window, the moon hovered just below the tops of the live oaks lining his drive.

*Damn moon!*

He hated the way it mocked him every month. Taunted him, mercilessly, with each painful ascent. He hated the moon. And he hated what he was.

Suddenly, his nostrils flared. Primal urges alerted the bloodlust within him, predatory desires that he had no wish to ever fulfill.

*Kate!*

She's here.

He scented her. And not just the familiar citrus

shampoo she used to wash her long blond hair. But her. The woman. The human essence.

"You shouldn't be here, Kate." The words sounded rough, coarse, and thick with emotion. He stood stiff, his back to her, not daring to turn around.

"Colten, I..."

"You shouldn't be here, Kate!" He choked. White-knuckled, he gripped the revolver in his hand. Oh, God! Why is she here? He had always been so careful. Always planning an excuse to be apart during each full moon. It had always worked.

Until now...

He heard her movement across the room towards him. Soft feather-like brushes across the hardwood floor. His grip tightened on the revolver cramping his already stiff fingers. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of the moon slowly inching its way above the trees illuminating the room with a bright soft hue.

Bile rose in his throat, he gagged and swallowed rapidly to keep from retching. God, it was so close. His stomach burned like the fires of hell.

"Go away, Kate! Now! I don't want you here."

The whisper of her soft-soled shoes hesitated on the hardwood floor. "Colten, let me help you."

"You can't help me. No one can." The words flat, but his shoulders shook as he spoke.

"Tell me what I can do." Her voice trembled, but he heard the determination in her words.

He spun away from the window to face her.

"Nothing! Don't you understand? I don't want you here!"

Her back stiffened and she lifted her chin a notch. The familiar stubborn gleam in her eyes told him all he needed to know.

She wasn't going to leave. Instead, she would witness his darkest secret.

The first tingle touched his nerves burning through his veins like the poison it was. It started in his hands then exploded into a white-hot wildfire consuming his body.

He shook his arms in sharp jerky movements wishing he could rid them of the tainted blood. "Why did you come



here tonight? I told you that I would be out of town.”

“But you’re not.” She said, twisting a long blond curl between her fingers. A nervous habit he had become used to over the past year.

She stood several few feet away but, with the heightening of his senses, he heard the rapid beat of her heart and sensed her unease through its wild staccato.

Colten sniffed the air in two quick fluid movements drawing in the sharp scent of adrenaline mingled with perspiration.

He knew that scent well.

Fear.

“How did you find out?”

“I found this when I was straightening up last week.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out a yellowed, torn piece of paper. She held it out to him with trembling fingers.

He reached for the paper then dropped it as if it had scorched his fingers. A low guttural moan escaped him.

He didn’t have to read it to know what it said. The words his father had written to him on his twelfth birthday were forever branded in his mind.

You’re a man now, Colten. The curse will come with the first full moon of each month. You will become a predator of the night. You cannot change it. You cannot hide from it. But if it becomes too much to bear, then use the silver bullet. It’s the only way to stop it.

“I’m so sorry.” The words barely above a whisper, though laced with torment. “I never wanted you to know.”

“I’m glad I found out.” She gulped. “Now, everything makes sense. All the business trips you seemed to always have to make. The edginess in your eyes every few weeks. I-I thought...” Tears filled her blue eyes.

“You thought what, Kate?” What could possibly be worse than this?

“I thought you had found someone else,” she whispered her lashes fluttering to her cheeks.

Colten inhaled sharply. “Oh, Kate, no. There has never been anyone else. How could you even think that?

You know I love you.” The pain in her eyes outweighed his personal torment. He wanted to comfort her. Hold her and reassure her that she was everything he had ever wanted.

Colten took a step forward but stopped. The pain in his gums increased as the canine incisors began to lengthen. Heat rushed through his loins, proof that his desire for her hadn’t diminished even as his thirst for blood intensified. He wanted her. He loved her. But he could not go to her. It was far too dangerous.

With a self-loathing growl, he turned away once more and stared out the window. The moon winked a secret jab at him from the treetops. Within minutes he would become a creature of the night. And then no one would be safe. Not even his beloved Kate.

“Go, Kate! You’re not-not safe.” Self-loathing marked every syllable though he stood erect awaiting his transformation into darkness.

“I’m always safe with you, Colten.” The melodic sound of her voice almost convinced him.

Almost...but not quite.

Damn the moon! She deserved better than this. She deserved better than him. His finger found the trigger on the revolver. He should just end it right now. It would be so easy.

“I can’t tell you that I understand this, Colten. Any of it. But, I do know you. And you’re not a monster. No matter what you think. Let me help you.” Her feet shuffled across the floor once more.

Colten stiffened when she reached him. The heat from her body, only inches from his back, teased him mercilessly. The man within wanted her with a basic desire that overshadowed his immediate horror, yet he couldn’t have her.

Coarse silver stubble began to encompass his body. He clenched his fist feeling as if he were being stuck with thousands of pins.

“Let me help you,” she whispered again and slid her arms around his waist. “I love you, Colten. Don’t shut me out.”

Firmly grasping his shoulders, she turned him around to face her once more. Azure eyes shone bright with unanswered questions, but she offered him a

tentative smile anyway. She took the revolver from his hands, her fingers brushing his ever so lightly and then tossed it onto the king-size bed.

"You won't need that, my love." She cupped his face in her hands. He flinched and closed his eyes trying to hide from the awful changes his body insisted on making. It's no use. There is nowhere to hide.

"You don't deserve this," he groaned and wrapped his arms around her.

He winced as the changes continued and the prickly sensation of the growing fur worsened.

"I don't deserve love?" Her breath felt warm on his cheek. She traced his jawbone with her finger ignoring the coarse hair sprouting there. "I don't deserve a man that brings me soup when I'm too sick to stand? Or a man who is my rock of strength during my darkest days? What exactly is it, that I don't deserve, Colten?"

"Kate, you don't know what you are saying." The hairs on the back of his neck stood straight up indicating that he was only moments away from becoming the demon he had come to loathe. "You don't know what I am. What I'm capable of."

"I know exactly who you are." She laid her head against his chest. If she felt the coarse hair beneath his white button-down shirt, she didn't let on. She didn't recoil and shriek. "You're a kind and giving man. You're the man I love."

"Kate. Oh...God...Kate." His muscles tightened and contorted with the beginning of strength unknown to any man. Within moments, he would be able to snap her beautiful, lithe body like a twig. "You have to go. Now!" His nostrils flared again as the scent of citrus wafted from her freshly shampooed hair. A scent that caused his heart to constrict. This is the woman he loved. The woman who had shown him how to love. He didn't want to hurt her. Or worse. But, in the span of a very short time, he would not be responsible for his own actions.

"Colten, you made a promise to me." She held up her hand displaying the diamond ring that glittered brilliantly in the moonlit room. "For better or for worse, my love," she whispered. "For better or for worse."

Colten laughed mirthlessly. "It can't get much worse

than this. Look at me, Kate.” He pushed her away. “Really, look at me. Is this what you love? A monster who maims and kills at will.” He loomed before her watching anxiously as her face paled before him. He waited for the shriek. The horror in her eyes. He waited for her to run screaming from the room as if the devil himself chased her. He waited, but she didn’t move.

Instead, she held her ground and said, “You have always been there for me. Let me do the same for you.” When he didn’t say anything, she added. “Tell me about it. How did this happen?”

Colten blinked. Where was the repulsion that he was supposed to see in her eyes? Was she blind? Did she not realize what he was?

“Help me understand, my love,” she whispered softly.

He pulled a sharp breath. Could he let her help him? “One of my ancestors joined a cult. My father’s great grandfather, I think, ever since then, the James’ family bloodline has been tainted by the curse of the moon, with only one way to end it.” He glanced at the revolver she’d tossed on the bed. “Only one way. My father left me the revolver when I was twelve along with the letter you found.”

“How many times have you ever wanted to use it?”

His laugh was humorless. “Every full moon.”

“Why haven’t you?”

His blue eyes stared into hers. Their color now taking on a distinct grayish hue. “Because my father used it the day before he left it to me. He’d lived with the curse for nearly fifty years. He warned me the changes would be subtle for the first few years, at least until I made it through puberty. I think knowing that my curse had begun was just too much for him. He took his own life and if I do the same then the curse has won.”

She nodded in agreement.

He ran a hand through his hair. “I’m just not sure how long I can do this. Maybe it *is* time to just end it.”

A determined light brightened her eyes and she challenged him with her jutted chin. “If you go, I go.” She reached into the pocket of jeans and held up a bullet. Colten swallowed hard. She couldn’t mean it. Surely, she wouldn’t take her own life?

“Kate, don’t be ridiculous. You have so much to live for.”

“If I don’t have you then I don’t want to live.” Her voice held a note of determination. And love. She meant it. If he chose the coward’s way out, then she too would follow suit.

His eyes drifted to the lone silver bullet in her hand. It glittered dangerously in the moonlit room.

Daring him.

Mocking him.

He clenched his jaw and said nothing.

“I can only imagine the torment you go through every month. Let me share the burden.” Her hand touched his cheek. He knew the coarse stubble felt rough, yet she didn’t flinch. Instead, she slowly trailed her thumb along his jaw line. “Let me help you.”

*Let her help me.* God, he wanted to. He wanted to have someone to share the burden with. Someone who understood. But he knew he couldn’t do that to her. She deserved so much more. “I can’t, Kate. I can’t ask this of you.” His voice sounded strangled even to his own ears.

“You didn’t ask, I offered. We made a promise to each other, Colten. For better or for worse.” Though the words were no more than a whisper, there was no mistaking the firmness in her tone. His Kate. His beloved Kate would stand by his side through thick and thin. Through sickness and health. He could see it in the tenderness of her gaze. She didn’t see him as a monster. She saw him only as the man she loved. And she always would. No matter how many times his body morphed into darkness. His Kate would be there at the end with the blessed light.

Hope flared in his heart. If Kate could see him at his absolute worst and still love him, then he knew he could somehow bear the curse, after all. He would find a way to endure the horrors that came with each full moon. With Kate by his side, he knew that he could bear anything. Kate reached across the bed for the revolver, flicked open the chamber and emptied the cylinder. Then smiled and stuffed both bullets into her pocket. “You don’t have to do this alone anymore. You have me now. Will you let me help you?”

“How? I’ve only been fooling myself. This-us-it will

never work.”

“Of course it will. Love can conquer anything. I truly believe that.”

He swept a hand across his face. “No, Kate. It can’t. I’ll live forever, unless I choose not to. You won’t.”

Kate’s lips turned up at the corners. “Then turn me.”

“Turn you? My God Kate, you don’t know what you are asking.”

“Yes, I do, my love.” She touched his cheek. Her fingers felt warm and soft on his skin. “I know exactly what I’m asking. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Even if that life is forever.” Her words wrapped around him like a warm blanket melting the last smidgeon of pain from his heart.

“I won’t turn you, Kate.” Colten pulled a hand through his hair. “I wouldn’t wish this torment on my worst enemy, much less you.”

“But—”

Colten silenced her with a finger on her lips. The warmth of her breath tingled his fingertip. “I’ll wait for you.”

“Wait for me?”

“When your life on this earth ends whether it be five years or fifty, I promise I’ll find you again.”

“Find me?” Kate drew her brows together.

Colten closed his eyes for a moment. The hard part would be to ask *them* for help. He wasn’t even sure if he could do it, but in order to hold onto Kate’s love, he knew he would have to.

His grey gaze hooded, he watched her reaction. “The cult my ancestors joined are still in the bowels of the bayou.” Then with an edge to his voice he added, “And they are just as powerful. There is a voodoo ritual of reincarnation that will guarantee your return to me time and time again.”

Kate shivered. “I don’t understand. I thought you despised the cult.”

“I do, but I love you more. If you still want to marry me I’ll take you to the High Priest. He can perform a ritual that will keep your body from aging and will ensure that you will come back when you die.”

“Reincarnation?” Kate gulped.

Colten nodded as guilt squeezed his heart. Maybe he was asking too much of her. Maybe simply ending his own life would be best. He shot a quick look at the revolver.

“But, I would have to grow up all over again. Will I even remember you? What if you can’t find me?”

Colten pulled his gaze from the gun and brushed a stray curl from her eyes. Primal urges raced through his veins. He immediately dropped his hand. It was getting too dangerous. He needed to put some distance between them. “I will always find you, Kate. Always.”

“What if you meet someone else while I’m growing up? That’s a long time to wait for someone.” Hurt filled her eyes and her bottom lip trembled.

Colten took a step back, his hands clenched by his side. The urges were getting stronger. His lust for blood strengthening.

“There will never be anyone else for me.” A smile hovered on the corner of his mouth. “Don’t you know that wolves mate for life?”

Kate relaxed. “Yes, they do, don’t they?” Her own lips turned up at the corners, determination back in the set of her chin. “We’ll go to the High Priest tomorrow. I love you, Colten and I’ll do whatever it takes to be with you.”

Still stunned at the love he saw shimmering in Kate’s eyes, Colten nodded and reached under the bed. He pulled out the steel chains and lock. His gray eyes met hers and held her gaze for a long moment. He could see his love for her mirrored in their blue depths. Colten knew then that he could trust Kate with his life. He handed her the key, then crossed the room to chain himself to the steel pole in the corner.

As the lock snapped into place, his eyes met Kate’s once more. She smiled and said, “For better or worse, my love”

He nodded then closed his eyes. Colten felt rather than saw the moon finish its ascent into the night sky. With a shudder his body completed its transformation into the beast as he whispered, “For better or for worse.”

## Epilogue

Seventy years later

Dipping a chip into the salsa, Colten savored the rich Mexican spices as he watched the waitress from the shadows of the back booth. Shoulder-length auburn hair, snapping green eyes, and a smile that could melt an iceberg.

It was her.

Kate.

Colten's pulse quickened. He had waited twenty long lonely years for this day.

Her body was different and her name now Jessie, but he wasn't fooled for a minute. Her soul was the same. The same sweet soul he had spent nearly fifty glorious years with. After Kate had died, he had suffered a painful emotional death. The only thing that kept him going was knowing that he would somehow find her again. And now he had.

Colten's heart picked up speed.

"Can I get you anything else?" The waitress set a fresh basket of warm chips on his table. When her light green eyes met his something akin to recognition flickered within them. But then was gone in an instant.

Colten smiled. "No, thank you."

Jessie moved away from the table. Colten reached out and touched her arm. "On second thought, I'd like another glass of tea." Electricity charged the air around them.

Her eyes widened. "Have we met before? You seem so-so familiar." She twisted a strand of auburn hair.

Colten smiled to himself. There was that nervous habit of hers that he had grown to love. And had missed for so long.

"Perhaps in another lifetime." He grinned with amusement. "But, if your free this weekend, I'd like to get



to know you better. How about having dinner with me?"

Surprise flashed across her face. "I-I don't know. I don't even know you."

"All the more reason to have dinner with me." He laughed. Getting to know her again was going to be a delight. Even if he had to take it slow. "I'm thinking Chinese. What do you think?"

"I love Chinese," Jessie murmured thoughtfully.

*I know.*

"And maybe some strawberry ice cream for dessert?" He arched a brow hopefully.

A mixture of worry, doubt, and temptation passed across her features until she seemed to make up her mind about a nagging doubt. With a laugh that lightened his heart she finally said, "Well, since you just offered my two favorite things in the world, how can I say no? Besides, Friday is my off day."

"Then it's settled. I'll pick you up Friday night at seven." Colten's heart skipped a beat. His life with Kate would begin again.

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