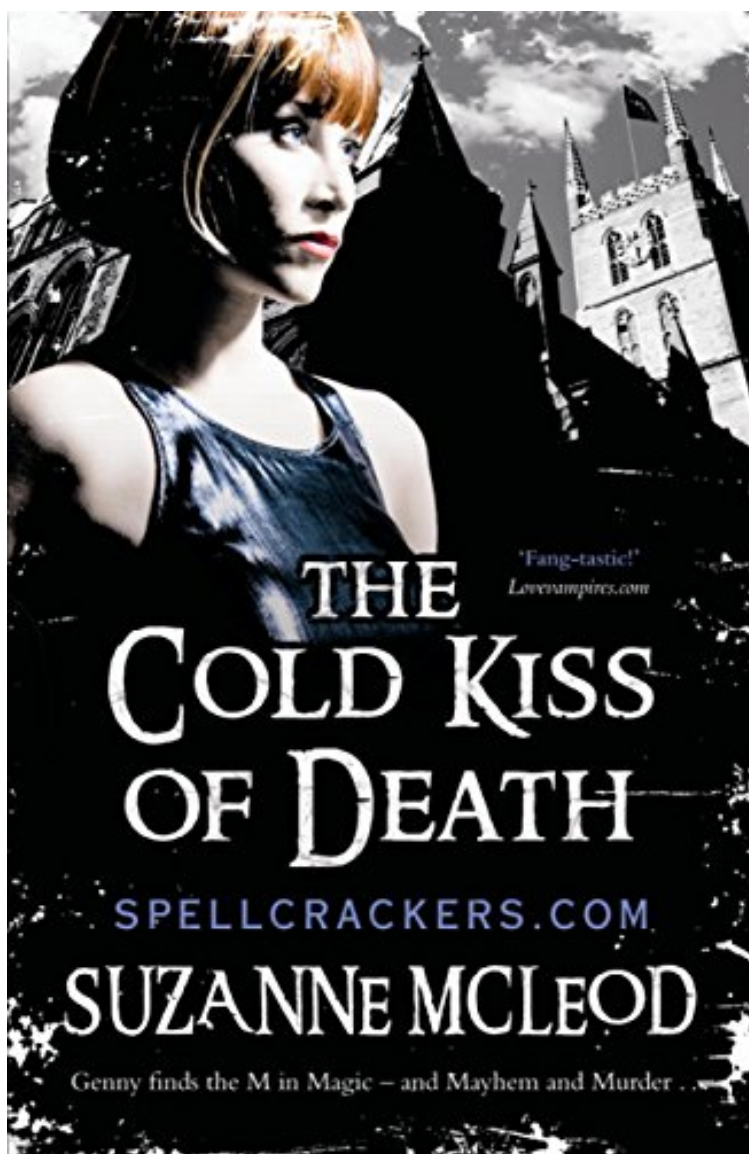


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# The Cold Kiss of Death



*Par Suzanne McLeod*  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurAll Genny wants is to live the quiet life and to do her job at Spellcrackers.com, but there's her tangled personal life to sort out first. She's being haunted by ghosts who want her help. Her witch neighbours want her evicted. Genny's sort-of-Ex - and now her new boss - can't decide whether he wants their relationship to be business or pleasure. And then there's the queue of vampires all wanting her to paint the town red - how long will it be before they stop taking no for an answer?But when one of her human friends is murdered by sidhe magic, Genny is determined to find the killer. She needs help to find the real murderer, and that means calling on some of the most capricious and seductive fae - but her search is hindered by the vampires, who have their own political agenda. All the evidence points to Genny - she's the

only sidhe fae in London - and she's named the main suspect; it's not long before she's on the run, not just from the police, but from some of London's most powerful supernaturals. Extrait Chapter One

The child stood barefoot and ignored in the cold, sheeting rain; her long dark hair was tossed by the fractious wind and her ragged clothes hung off her undernourished body. She was no more than eight or nine years old. She waited, staring at me from dark angry eyes. My heart beat faster at the sight of her, fingers of fear scraping down my spine and setting my teeth on edge. All around her people hurried across the wide expanse of cobbles towards the warm lights of Covent Garden, heading for the shelter of the glass-covered market with its shops, cafs, street entertainers and busy market stalls. The late-October storm raging through London meant the witches were doing a roaring trade with their Body-Brolly spells, Dri-Foot Patches and Wind-Remedy Hairpins: twenty-first-century commerce at its most expedient. And none of the late-afternoon punters stopped to help the child. No one even noticed her, other than me. But then the girl was a ghost. Not many humans have the ability to see ghosts. I'm sidhe fae. Seeing ghosts isn't a problem for me at least not the seeing bit but having a ghost decide to haunt me? Well, that had definitely become a dilemma ever since Cosette had appeared a couple of weeks ago. I told myself again it was stupid to be afraid of ghosts not when they couldn't physically hurt the living and forced myself to ignore the irrational need to turn and run. Taking a deep breath, I continued jogging steadily towards her. As I neared, she held her hands out in supplication and opened her mouth wide, and the storm-winds shrieked and wailed as a surrogate for her silent scream. I stopped in front of her and suppressed a shudder. 'Cosette, we really need to find a way to communicate,' I said, frustration almost edging out my fear. 'I want to help, but I can't if I don't know what's wrong.' She grasped her shift and ripped it open. The three interlacing crescents carved, red raw and bleeding, into her thin chest didn't look any better than the last dozen times I'd seen them. The wounds weren't lethal they weren't even recent; Cosette had been dead for at least a hundred and fifty years, judging by her clothes but my gut twisted with anger that someone would do that to a child. The triple crescents were something to do with the moon goddess, but what they meant to Cosette, her death, or why she was haunting me, I was having trouble finding out. I'd asked around, done the in-depth internet trawl, spent a fruitless day in the witches' section at the British Library, hired a medium and hadn't that been a waste of time and money and got nowhere, so even Cosette's name was one I'd given her and not her true one. Next stop in my ghost-appeasing hunt might have to be a necromancer. And finding one of those wasn't going to be easy. Necros aren't the sort to advertise their services, not when commanding the dead as opposed to just talking to them is illegal but both Cosette and I needed the break. 'I see it.' I stared at the bloody symbol and shivered as my wet hair dripped cold down the back of my neck. 'But I still don't know what you want me to do about it.' Dropping her hands to her sides, she stamped a foot in silent annoyance. Then, as usual, she moved to peer around me as if she'd seen someone, flickered, and disappeared like a light popping out. Nerves twitched down my spine as I thought that this time there would be someone or something creeping up behind me. I turned to check. The facade of St Paul's Church loomed blankly over me, a candle-like glow shining through its tall arched windows, the tall brass plaque on its false entranceway a dark rectangle against the sandstone. Goosebumps pricked my skin, the chill from my rain-soaked running shorts and vest adding fuel to my anxiety. Three Soul Protectors of the Soul huddled together under the church's high overhanging roof, the reproduction lantern above them throwing the red Crusader crosses on their long grey tabards into sharp relief. Briefly I wondered why the rain hadn't driven them to decamp into the Underground, their usual MO when faced with bad weather; no point trying to Protect Souls from the vamps, witches and anything magical which included me and the rest of London's fae when those souls weren't around to be preached at. I put them out of my mind and scanned the church for anything that might have spooked Cosette. The gates to either side of the building gaped wide, leading into the shadowed garden beyond. I peered at a darker patch nearest to me and stretched out my inner senses. 'Well, if it isn't the sidhe sucker-slut,' a familiar voice sneered behind me. 'Bet she's waiting for her vampire pimp.' I turned slowly, giving the woman a cool stare as I faced her. She stood smirking at me from under a huge black umbrella, her brown curly hair frizzing in the damp, the navy security uniform she was wearing bulging around her more than ample body, making her look like the Michelin Man. Ex-Police Constable Janet Sims. The 'ex' bit was her own fault she'd had a crush on a colleague, a friend of mine, and her jealousy had led her to ignore procedure and me, when I'd needed help which was her choice, but of course, I was the one she blamed. Just my bad luck that after she'd been sacked, she'd got herself a job working for Covent Garden Security, and now she just happened to 'bump into me' on a daily basis. 'Nah, she's waiting for the paparazzi, aren't you?' Janet's blonde-bitch sidekick lifted her hands to camera-frame me with her fingers. 'Over here, Msssss Taylor,' she yelled, then pulled a mocking

'poor you' face. 'Only the paps have stopped coming round, Genevieve. You're yesterday's news now, and no one wants a sidhe sucker-slut round here, so why don't you take your orange catty eyes and run off to Sucker Town where you belong.' Mentally I sighed; getting my picture on the front page with London's big-cheese vampnow thankfully deceased was causing me more problems than I could've imagined. Still, Janet and her sidekick were a smallif, thanks to that enormous broolly, annoyingly dryproblem, even if they now amused themselves by hunting for my metaphorical blood with almost more zeal than a vampire. So far I'd kept my patience, and practised turning a deaf ear, but 'Well, I can't stand here chatting all evening.' I pushed my wet hair back from my face and added sweetly, 'I've got a hot date with a satyr to get ready for.' Sadly, the satyr was my boss and the hot date was work, but hey, you go with whatever you've got when faced with a pair of wannabe harpies. I smiled at them, enjoying the green-monster glow that leapt into their eyes, then turned and walked away, not listening as they muttered snidely behind me. As I got to the corner, I glanced back and focused that part of me that can see the magic. Just as I'd suspected, an Eye-of-the-Storm spell cast a greasy slime over Janet's huge black umbrella and dripped fat globules down around the two women. For a moment I hesitated. All I had to do was cup my hand and call the spell; the wind would strip the huge monster of a broolly from Janet's grip and leave the pair of them screeching and scrambling like a pair of proverbial drowned rats in the storm. I curled my fingers into a tight fist and told myself not to crawl down to their level. Their jibes weren't worth it, nothing more than sticks and stones and all that. Of course, the bit about words not hurting was fine until the words came with magic attached to them but Janet and her sidekick weren't witches, just witches' daughters. Their fathers had been human, not sidhe, and the two women might live in a world of magic, they might even catch glimpses of it, but they'd never be able to use it. They'd had to buy the Eye-of-the-Storm spell, and any spell worth its salt wasn't cheap, as I knew only too well. I laughed; a short mirthless snort. I might be sidhe, made of magic, but that didn't mean I could do much with it. Oh, I could see the stuff, even call or crack or absorb a spell, but no matter what I tried, my own spell-casting abilities had proved to be about as good as those of a witch's daughter. I didn't know why; just one of the magic's little ironies. Still, that particular magical difficulty was an old one; I had others much higher up the list, including whatever it was Cosette the ghost wanted. I jogged towards my flat, wondering where the hell I was going to find a necroother than, maybe, literally in hell? Five minutes later and I was home and in the dry, or at least in the communal hallway; I still had five flights of stairs to climb. I placed my palm on the front door and the cobalt-blue of the Protection Ward shimmered up like a neon-fuelled heat-wave in the dimness, then disappeared back into the framework as it activated. Taking my hand away, I breathed in the familiar scent of beeswax polish mixed with the more recent and much less welcoming additions of musty damp earth and garlic. 'Damn witches,' I muttered, wrinkling my nose at the smell. I flicked the switch but as usual nothing happened; the bulbs in the light fitting hanging from the high Edwardian ceiling were still missing. The landlord, Mr Travers, was going through his shy phase. It didn't matter to my witch neighbours; they could all conjure bright-spheres. But while I've got orange 'catty eyes' although personally I prefer to call them ambermy night vision isn't much better than my spell-casting abilities, so I had to rely on the streetlight filtering in through the stained-glass transom window above the front door. And it did nothing to relieve the deep shadows creeping up the stairs or to illuminate the tall, dark, unmoving shape on the first-floor landing above me. My pulse hitching, I peered into the darkness, then sighed with jittery relief as I finally made out the thick handle and bound birch twigs of a defensive spell-broom. Damn witches again! Not only were they laying the garlic on a bit thick, but they also insisted on cluttering up the stairs. Still, at least it wasn't another ghost. I shuddered and grabbed the towel I'd stashed before my run and rubbed it over my damp face and hair. Toeing off my running shoes Eligius, the goblin cleaner, isn't the type to appreciate wet footprints on his highly scrubbed black and white tiled floor. I pulled a dry sweatshirt over my head and felt the chill start to recede. 'Genny.' A deep bass voice made me jump. 'If I might have a word, please?' Heart sinking, I pasted a smile on my face and turned to face my landlord. 'Of course, Mr Travers.' So long as that word isn't eviction, I added silently, looking up at the nearly eight-foot-tall mountain troll. He was still doing his impression of the Incredible Hulk, except where the Hulk was green, Mr Travers was various shades of brown. A voluminous camel-coloured velvet sack-thing covered him from neck to ankle, leaving his lumpy brown and beige arms bare. The pale beige was his natural colour; the brown, misshapen lumps were baked-on earth that hadn't yet flaked away. He'd been happily stratifying in the basement a counter-effort against the erosion from London's air pollution when my neighbours had insisted he dig himself out to deal with their concerns. In other words, me. 'I'm sorry, but Witch Wilcox has complained again.' His forehead cracked into deep fissures as he frowned. Witch Wilcox lived on the third floor, and was the most vociferous in her

determination to have me evicted. Not only that, she was retired from the Witches' Council, so not someone who was easily ignored. 'I'm not sure I've done much to complain about,' I said, aiming for diplomacy. 'It's not about anything you've done as such, Genny,' he rumbled grumpily. 'Her granddaughter's come to stay with her for a while. Apparently the girl's just lost her job and her boyfriend both and is feeling a bit fragile. Witch Wilcox says she's not sure that having a sidhe fae living in the same building is a good idea in her granddaughter's current condition' he leaned over and tapped the mailbox particularly with all the mail the vampires keep sending you. 'What the? Forget diplomacy! 'What does she think I'm going to do, drag her granddaughter off to a vamp club and force her into Getting Fanged just because the suckers are sending me a few letters?' I snorted. 'I mean, even if I did decide to do something so utterly stupid, her granddaughter's a witch, so no way would any licensed vamp premises let her past the door.' 'I know that, Genny, and so should she.' He scratched his arm furiously, causing little clods of dirt to fall onto the marble-tiled floor. 'I've tried reminding her about the old agreements, and that there isn't a vampire in Britain that would break them, but she doesn't want to listen.' 'The agreements weren't just old but ancient, dating back to the fourteenth century, when the vamps and witches ended up in a mediaeval Mexican stand-off with a group of Church-sanctioned vigilante witch-hunters. The hunters' zero tolerance policy towards enchantments and sorcery didn't discriminate when it came to finding a likely perpetrator. Faced with a mutual enemy, the vamps and witches voted on survival and negotiated a live-and-let-live truce; one that's still in force today. Of course, nowadays the witches like to forget who saved them from being tortured and crispy-fried at the stake, but the vamps have longer memories and longer lives thanks to the Gift some of them had no doubt been there as well as the whole my-word-is-my-honour thing going on. So witches, or anyone under their protection, which had included me until a couple of months ago, would be the last to end up as the wrong sort of guest at a vampire's dinner party. Unfortunately for me, it doesn't stop the witches being paranoid. 'I wanted to keep you informed, Genny.' Dust puffed from Mr Travers' head ridge in an anxious beige cloud. 'I really am sorry, you're a good tenant.' His brow ridges lowered in sympathy. 'But if she takes her complaints higher, well, it won't be up to me any more.' 'I know, it'll be up to the Witches' Council.' I patted his arm in a vague attempt to thank him, then wished I hadn't as I dislodged a large lump of dried mud, revealing a patch of raw, wet-looking skin beneath. The musty smell increased and I struggled not to cough. 'Let's hope the Council don't take her too seriously,' I added when I could. 'I'll be putting in a good word for you anyway, Genny.' He dug in the pocket of his sack dress and pulled out a paper bag, offering it to me in apology. 'Butter pebble?' I took one, not wanting to be rude. 'Thanks.' I smiled, adding, 'I'll save it for later.' Much later, like never, seeing as I wasn't into breaking my teeth. 'And thanks for letting me know. I'll try and sort the mail problem.' He briefly smiled back, his mouth splitting to show his own worn-down beige teeth. 'I've been thinking um, actually, I was wanting to ask you something, Genny.' He paused and looked down, seeming embarrassed at the small pile of earth by his feet. 'Umm, that is if you don't mind?' 'Course not,' I said. He nudged the earth with his slab-like toes. 'I was wondering about getting polished,' he rumbled quietly, his eyes flicking up to meet mine then back to the ground. 'I've heard a lot about it, but I wasn't sure if I was too old but there's a party for Hallowe'en, and he held out his patchy arms 'I can't go like this.' 'Er, I don't think 'I know the younger trolls do it,' he rushed on, his face cracking with worry, 'and some of the concrete ones, but I didn't want to look silly or anything. What do you think, is it a good thing or not? And I'm not sure if it will hurt; some of these new methods aren't always the best, are they?' I blinked, not sure if I was qualified to give beauty tips to a troll; and I liked Mr Travers, no way did I want to give him the wrong advice. But the only troll I knew well was my friend, Hugh Detective Sergeant Hugh Munro and he was in the Cairngorms with his tribe, recuperating after being injured in the line of duty. Hugh was more of a traditionalist, but thinking of him 'Well,' I said, frowning, 'I know a troll who's got himself polished, he works for the police, Constable Taegrin's his name.' And Constable Taegrin might possibly know where I could find a necro, so 'I could ring him and see if he'll talk to you about it, if you want?' I added. 'That would be great, thanks, Genny!' Mr Travers' face split in a relieved smile. 'I knew you were the best person to ask.' He held the bag out again. 'Another butter pebble?' I accepted politely and he ambled almost silently away down the hall, mumbling about finding a dustpan and brush. Feeling slightly bemused, I tucked both sticky pebbles into a carrier bag, together with my wet shoes, then turned to contemplate the offending mailbox; my personal pigeon-hole was full as usual. No wonder Witch Wilcox was complaining. The eerie theme tune from Halloween drifted tinnily through the hallway and it took me a second to realise it was my phone ringing. The ring-tone wasn't my choice, just an irritating consequence of my job working for Spellcrackers.com. I'd cleared out a gremlin crew from Tower Bridge and the critters had retaliated by springing a techno-hex on

my phone. I'd been trying to crack the hex for over a week, never mind it was nearing All Hallows' Eve and sort of appropriate having the phone run through a selection of horror film ring-tones was so not professional; it unsettled too many of the clients. I grabbed the phone from the back of my running shorts but my irritation turned to a grin as I checked the caller ID. 'Grace,' I said, then remembered why she was calling; my vamp-mail problem was worrying her, and while I loved her to bits for checking I was okay, neither of us needed the extra stress. I tried for a distraction. 'Don't suppose you know any necros, do you?' 'I'm a doctor, Genny, not an information service,' she said in her usual no-nonsense voice. 'Plus, I don't think a necro's going to help you if that medium didn't. I told you, wait until Hallowe'en; you'll be able to talk to your ghost then.' Wrapping the towel round my shoulders, I shuddered. 'There is no way I'm spending that night in a churchyard. That'd be like asking you to stay in the same room as a spider.' 'Humph! Well as you keep telling me, spiders can't hurt anyone, and the same goes for ghosts. Plus it's a cheaper, quicker option than a necro,' she pointed out. 'Then again, HOPE is likely to be busy that night, so you might not have time to visit a churchyard.' HOPE is the Human, Other and Preternatural Ethical Society's clinic. The clinic treats Vampire Venom and Virus infection, or 3V, to give it the more politically correct moniker, as well as anyone who falls foul of magic. Grace was one of the Speciality Registrars there it was where we'd met and become friends and she was right; Hallowe'en is always like half-a-dozen full moons wrapped up in one. All the loonies human and Other would be out, and HOPE would end up dealing with the fallout, in addition to more than its usual number of anxious humans wondering if Getting Fanged had been the cool choice after all. 'Don't tell me,' I said, hopping on one leg then the other as I pulled off my wet socks. 'I'm going to be asked to come in and work.' 'I don't think there's any asking involved,' she laughed. 'That new admin manager's got you and all the rest of the volunteers pencilled in on the rota.' 'That's because someone showed him the CCTV tape from last year.' I tucked the sodden socks into the carrier bag. 'The one where the Chelsea Witches' Coven are having hysterics 'cos their darling daughters thought it might be fun to go partying over in Sucker Town.' Getting Fanged at one of the vamp celebrity clubs is safe enough the only time the vamps go into the red is when it involves blood, not cold hard cash so no one ends up with 3V from visiting them; just with the odd blood-loss hangover from overenthusiastic donating. But Sucker Town is a popular destination on All Hallows' Eve and the rules are different there. Vampires give trick or treat a whole new meaning. 'They were lucky the vamps gave them a wide berth and none of them got bitten, let alone infected,' Grace huffed. 'Stupid, irresponsible idiots. Let's hope the lecture they got about the downsides of 3V and G-Zav 'the venom-junkies' methadone' made an impression and we don't have a repeat this year.' 'Hope so,' I agreed wholeheartedly, having first-hand experience of those same 'downsides' myself since my fourteenth birthday just over ten years ago now. Being dependent on G-Zav is so not a fun way to live but it beats the alternative of being some sucker's blood-slave. Or at least I always thought it had. Now I wasn't so sure. 'Anyway, apart from being rattled by your ghost,' Grace said cheerfully, interrupting my wavering thoughts, 'how's my favourite sidhe this wet and windy evening?' I snorted. 'Given that I'm the only sidhe in London and the only one you know, your bedside manner sucks.' 'And talking of vampires?' Her voice rose with the question. 'None of the suckers jumped out at me, so I'm still here, still taking the tablets, and I've still got my requisite eight-plus pints of blood.' 'I can tell most of that by the fact you're on the phone,' she said drily. I grinned. 'Your powers of deduction are second to none, Grace.' 'Now we've got past the rather excessive compliments,' she said with more than a touch of snark, 'let's get back to the vampires and how many invitations today.' I poked at the invitations filling my mailbox and said, 'About the same,' hoping she would accept that. Trouble was, now that every vamp and their blood-pet knew about my 3V infection it made me an even more attractive meal ticket than before. So far, it was just invitations ultra-polite requests for my company at various celebrity-studded functions, all sent in identical expensive cream envelopes but the hard knot in my stomach told me it probably wouldn't be long before the vampires dispensed with the postal option and started delivering their 'invitations' in person. And didn't that give me something fun to look forward to. 'How many?' Grace asked, her voice as sharp as surgical steel. Dogs and bones have nothing on Grace when she wants something, so I gave in. 'Hold on a min.' I slid the phone onto the mailbox and dug out the latest batch, squinting at them malevolently in the dim light. Genevieve Taylor, Bean Sidhe, was written across the top envelope in a bold, rust-red script. Holding the envelope to my nose, I sniffed, and the faint scent of liquorice and copper made my mouth water the sender had mixed his or her blood into the ink but then, the vampires don't miss a trick when it comes to self-promotion. Ignoring the annoying throb that the scent raised into life at the curve of my neck, I ran my finger over the envelope edges, counting, then picked up the phone. 'Nine today,' I said. 'Two more than yesterday!' I could hear the

worried tap-tap of her pen in the background. 'That's not good.' 'Tell me about it,' I muttered. 'I feel like I've got this big sign round my neck: Exclusive trophy sidhe - latest must-have accessory for those of the fanged persuasion next thing you know they'll be queuing round the block. That'd really make the witches throw their cauldrons out of their prams.' Grace's sigh echoed down the phone. 'Talking of witches, have you heard yet if the Witches' Council are going to reinstate their protection?' 'I don't think I'm high on their list of priorities.' I dropped the invites on the top of the mailbox, thankful Grace couldn't see me cross my fingers at the evasion. 'But it's been ages, they should have been able' I winced as she went on accusingly, 'You haven't asked them, have you? Why not, Genny? And please don't tell me it's some obscure faerie pride thing.' 'It's nothing to do with pride, Grace.' I picked at a loose thread on the towel, pulling it as it unravelled. 'There's just no point, that's all. You know the only reason the witches gave me back my job at Spellcrackers was because of the Mr October murder fiasco. And it's not just the job, but my flat too.' No way could I live in Covent Garden without the Council's permission. 'I'd really be pushing my luck if I asked for anything more.' Never mind the witches were probably going to succeed in getting me evicted anyway at this rate but I kept that to myself. 'I still think you should ask, Genny,' she said. 'It would put a stop to your stupid idea about coming to some sort of arrangement with that vampire' The sound of her office phone ringing interrupted her and she said hurriedly, 'Gotta go, love you.' Feeling guilty relief at not having to rehash the next part of the conversation, I tucked the phone away and pursed my lips at the pile of invitations. I turned the top envelope over; the red wax seal on the back was impressed with the shape of a clover leaf. That told me it was from Declan, master vampire of the Red Shamrock blood, one of London's four blood families. The conniving Irish bastard so didn't know when to quit. Quickly I checked the seals on all the rest, but the one I was half-dreading, half-hoping for, the one from the vampire I wanted to 'come to an arrangement' with, still wasn't there. Malik al-Khan. Nearly a month since he'd last put in an appearance. I was beginning to wonder if he ever would. And if he didn't, then all my 'conversations' with Grace about 'arranging' to solve my 3V problem the vampire way instead of the medical one would be for nothing. Malik was the only possibility; I didn't trust any of the others. Not that I really trusted Malik, but I ripped the envelopes in half, pulled open the junk mail bin under the mailboxes and shoved them in, then slammed the door shut. My only wish was that I could dispose of the vamps themselves as easily. I closed my eyes and massaged my temples, trying to ease my ever-present headache; popping G-Zav tablets like they were sweeties might be keeping a precarious lid on my venom cravings, but the side-effects were about as pleasant as being roasted alive over a dwarf's furnace. Sighing, I put the towel in the carrier bag with my socks and shoes, then headed for the stairs, the pervasive smell of garlic increasing as I climbed. The real puzzle was why some enterprising vamp hadn't just gone straight for the caveman thing, knocking me over the head and dragging me off by my short sidhe hair. Of course, it's illegal for a vamp to use any form of coercion physical or psychological without their victim's consent (not that vamps have victims any more, now they're called customers, a.k.a. fang-fans). And the vamps are good at playing the law-abiding game, so the last time one of them won a one-way trip to the guillotine for unlicensed feeding was back in the early eighties. But the humans don't think we fae need the same protection as humans, not when the vamps can't mind-lock us or trick us with their mesma unless they'd infected us, and not when we're often seen as more dangerous than the once-human vampires. Then there's the fact that we fae are even more of a minority than the blood-suckers; a minority that's not as politically aware and not always as pretty. So it's not surprising we get a less-than-fair hearing when it comes to human justice. Or that we end up as fair game for the vamps. What we really needed was a great public relations manager. Idly I wondered if the one that had kick-started the vamps' Gold-Plated Coffin promotion was still around. Not that I had the money to pay for a no-expenses-spared PR campaign. I could only just afford my rent, and that was with the subsidy I got from working for a witch company. I stepped onto the third-floor landing and the garlic stench almost overpowered me. I stopped to cough, glaring at Witch Wilcox's door. Of course, I wouldn't need the subsidy if she succeeded in getting me evicted. 'Ow!' Something stung my bare calf. I hopped and slapped at my leg, then looked at her door. Crap. It wasn't just the garlic she'd laid on a bit thick; she'd added to the Vamp Back-Off spell sprayed on her door and the magic now spread over the landing like an enormous sea anemone, its deep purple body fanning out into a multitude of paler violet-coloured fronds that rippled through the air and circled a dark hole that looked disturbingly like a gaping mouth. 'That's different,' I muttered in amazement. The thing looked more like a trap than a vamp deterrent, and my calf was throbbing like someone had branded it with a red-hot poker. Whatever the spell was, no way did I want to tangle with it. Carefully, I inched my way along the landing, keeping my back tight against the wall. As I moved, the fronds shifted, questing towards me as if they'd

caught my scent. I breathed in sharply as one whipped past my stomach and ducked as another narrowly missed slashing across my cheek, the eye-watering smell of garlic and bleach trailing behind it. Then as three more of the lethal fronds flailed after me, I turned and bolted for the stairs, carrier bag clutched under my arm. I jumped, yelping, as the spell stung the back of my neck, then as I almost missed the steps, I managed to grab for the banister and safety. I sat down heavily on the stair, breathing shakily as I checked the welt on my calf; the skin wasn't broken, it was just swollen, red and painful. Gingerly, I touched the back of my neck. It felt the same. What the hell was the daft old witch doing, casting whatever that anemone thing was? It seemed excessive, even with her paranoia about her beloved granddaughter never mind the fact that even if a vamp managed to bypass the Ward on the building's main door, none of them could pass over her threshold; unless of course she was stupid enough to invite them in. I glowered down at the spell. The fronds were undulating lazily now, but I got the impression they were just watching and waiting. 'It would serve the old witch right if I cracked her spell,' I grumbled, rubbing my sore leg. Trouble was, true spell-cracking blasted the magic back into the ether, which made for a quick clear-up except the cracking also blasted apart whatever the spell happened to be attached to. Somehow I didn't think I'd get away with turning the witch's door into a pile of jagged splinters. I could always tease it apart, the safer, if more laborious, way of dismantling spells, but that would take more time than I was willing to spare. And she'd just replace it anyway. Damn. I thought about saying something to Mr Travers, but the garlic meant the spell was somehow tagged for vampires not that eating garlic will stop a vamp from getting the munchies; some of them actually like the added flavour. Mind you, smearing a bulb or two over the pulse points might make them think seriously about dining elsewhere, as would chilli: red swollen lips are bad for the image, never mind the pain. Of course, the garlic smearing only works if the vamp's brain is still engaged and they're not lost in bloodlust. Not much stops a vamp then. I had no idea why the bleach was in there maybe it just made a handy, albeit nasty base. But whatever the reason, the old witch's Anemone spell was the business. And then there was my problem with actually complaining: how was I supposed to explain why magic aimed squarely at blood-suckers was taking its ire out on me? Somehow I doubted that my 3V condition would be enough, never mind it was easy to disprove. And letting everyone in on the real reason my last secret would mean not just eviction, but losing my job too. No, there was no way I could complain, not when it meant admitting my father was a three-hundred-year-old vampire. My phone broke into my musings with something that sounded suspiciously like the theme from A Nightmare on Elm Street. Damn gremlins! I checked the display to see a message from Grace; she was coming round after her shift ended. I texted her back to say I was working and to let herself in, then as I caught sight of the time, everything, gremlins, ghosts, witches and blood-sucking vampires, went out of my mind. I had a job to go to; my 'hot date with a satyr' or rather, my boss, Finn, and if I didn't hurry up I was going to be late. Then my 'date' would be 'hot' for all the wrong reasons. Presentation de l'diteur All Genny wants is to live the quiet life and to do her job at Spellcrackers.com, but there's her tangled personal life to sort out first. She's being haunted by ghosts who want her help. Her witch neighbours want her evicted. Genny's sort-of-Ex - and now her new boss - can't decide whether he wants their relationship to be business or pleasure. And then there's the queue of vampires all wanting her to paint the town red - how long will it be before they stop taking no for an answer? But when one of her human friends is murdered by sidhe magic, Genny is determined to find the killer. She needs help to find the real murderer, and that means calling on some of the most capricious and seductive fae - but her search is hindered by the vampires, who have their own political agenda. All the evidence points to Genny - she's the only sidhe fae in London - and she's named the main suspect; it's not long before she's on the run, not just from the police, but from some of London's most powerful supernaturals.