

VEGAS IS GOING TO HELL... UNLESS DELILAH STREET CAN STOP IT.

CAROLE NELSON DOUGLAS



dancing
WITH
WEREWOLVES

DELILAH STREET: PARANORMAL INVESTIGATOR

SNEAK PREVIEW!
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Delilah Street, Paranormal Investigator

**DANCING
WITH
WEREWOLVES**

Carole Nelson Douglas



**An Excerpt From
DANCING WITH WEREWOLVES**

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Meet Carole Nelson Douglas

The author of more than fifty novels—mainstream, mystery, thriller, high fantasy, science fiction, and romance/women’s fiction, Carole Nelson Douglas has been nominated for or won more than fifty writing awards. She was an award-winning journalist for the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* until moving to Texas in 1984 to write fiction full time. Carole is probably best known for her books featuring Midnight Louie, a feline supersleuth.

As a child Carole loved the Sherlock Holmes stories, but as an adult found something missing: strong women. That literary lack drives her multi-genre odyssey: “I began *Amberleigh*, my first published novel, in college because I was fed up with the wimpy heroines of then-popular Gothics,” she says. Since then, she’s reformed the fiction genres by providing strong female protagonists. She enjoys writing popular and genre fiction “because it’s so influential; it forms attitudes that shape society.” Find out more about Carole (and her cats!) at www.carolenelsondouglas.com.

You’ll meet her newest heroine, Delilah Street, here in the pages of this “sneak peek” at *Dancing With Werewolves*. *Dancing With Werewolves* is Carole’s first venture into urban fantasy, but we’re sure you’ll find she’s mastered this genre as well as she has the rest she’s tried. We’re confident you’ll find Delilah to be as delightful, sassy, smart, and strong as we have and want to pick up a copy of *Dancing With Werewolves* as soon as it is available this fall.

Drop by the Juno Books Web site at www.juno-books.com; check the blog and sign up for our newsletter so you’ll be able to keep up with Carole’s books and all the other great fantasy we are publishing.

Paula Guran
Editor, Juno Books

Prologue: The Millennium Revelation

I saw Satan fall from heaven like lightning.

—Luke 10:18

For the first time in the history of humankind, the turn of the Millennium was tracked around the globe like an incoming comet zooming over the earth from the black night sky.

People everywhere joined to watch the exciting evidence of this invisible moment of time arrive. Exploding nebulas of fireworks in the midnight heavens marked its passage. Space satellites and television stations tracked its progress.

From the Pacific islands and Australia to China, where fireworks and gunpowder were born, to Europe to America, rockets bursting in air, just like in the national anthem. They illuminated the edge of oncoming midnight.

A world globe stood next to the TV screen so we kids could track the necklace of fireworks circle the earth. On TV, men and women in exotic locales—Singapore, Sri Lanka, Krakow, Paris, New York City, San Francisco, Peru, Easter Island—sounded breathless and triumphant. They announced the magical Millennium moment over their microphones as the thousand-year turn of the centuries overtook each of the world's time zones.

Even the littlest kids in the orphanage were allowed to stay up past midnight to watch.

The oldest at eleven, I thought that there could be no more delicious moment than standing under those glittering showers of light with a microphone like a lollipop in my hand, telling everyone all about it.

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Oh, we had piles of bottled water and dry foods stocked in the basement, and all the residence's computer screens were darker than night. Primal fears underlay the outward celebrations of the Millennium. Some people swore the Year 2000 would bring technological chaos, or an old-fashioned End of the World cataclysm. And I was living through it, a skinny, careful kid with no history who dreamed of making some, someday.

The nightmares hadn't started yet.

Mine. And everybody else's.

We all are so much older now, and not much wiser.

I'm twenty-four and hold that TV microphone in my hand on a windswept scrap of high plains turf called Kansas, reporting the continuing aftermath of that landmark night and its unexpected revelations.

Ironic, how all the pundits, religious and secular, had feared the wrong bogeymen when the twentieth century turned its hoary head over its shoulder to mark the end of the second thousand years after Christ with the sharp slash of a scythe. Before 2000. After 2000.

I'd been taught the religious implications, of course, and even back then had a reporter's dubious eye about ballyhooed adult events. Later, I understood it all even more.

The apocalyptic crowd had predicted Armageddon, the Antichrist abroad, raising Hell quite literally. The dark, evil dead would be drawn from their graves to battle the Lord of the Second Coming and His legions of shining Angels.

World leaders had feared a terrorist cascade of bombs bursting across the globe to broadcast religious strife, anger, and hatred.

Computer geeks had predicted that Y2K, the Year 2000 in their geeky shorthand, would short-circuit computer programs the world over. The preprogrammed 0000s and 1111s would go berserk with the stress of recording the unprepared-for calendar shift to 2000, plunging us all back into the chaos of an abacus age.

They were all right in a way, and all wrong.

Instead—wonder of wonders—the lost, the legends, the outcast, the feared, the bogeymen and women of more simple-minded times, witches

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and ghosts, werewolves and vampires and zombies, oh my—rose from the graveyard of myth, demanding recognition, revealing themselves as endlessly ongoing inhabitants of our same human planet.

Religious leaders were torn between dismissing them all as demons . . . or the benighted mentally ill. The divide between both conditions had always been hairline-thin.

Politicians wavered between rallying popular feeling against the new-old population . . . or registering them to vote.

Techno-geeks veered between calling them a bunch of hallucinatory Luddites . . . and wanting to get them online blogs.

I found myself with mixed feelings too, not sure whether I was destined to be a casualty of this bizarre new turn in human history, or its recording angel.

And then things really got weird . . .

Chapter One

“Authorities say,” I said clearly into the microphone I held, “that medical examinations will reveal this as just the scene of another rural juvenile prank, nothing more.”

I held my position while the station videographer wrapped the take. No moving. You never knew when you were really on or off camera. A savvy TV reporter learned to freeze like a department store mannequin before and after filming a stand-up.

Of course I hadn’t believed a word I said.

If you don’t cooperate with the police in the early stages of a crime story, they’ll cold-cock you later, just when everything is getting juicy. They’ll cold-cock you anyway, just for the fun of it.

Speaking of juicy, the three corpses were bone soup inside their intact skins. No way does any weapon known to human do that. Yet the “authorities” were playing the incident like a frat-boy prank for the public. So this was just a semi-crime scene.

That scene was a Kansas cornfield and my mid-heeled reporter pumps were sinking arch-deep in clods of dirt or shit, depending.

“Del,” the lieutenant said as soon as the day-bright camera light had turned off and we were all plunged back into a rural darkness where no crickets chirped.

Crickets always chirped in the spring country night, which was yet another sign that this was one eerie crime scene.

Lieutenant Werner, short, dark, and rotund, escorted me over the clods to the unpaved road, where a sleek black car stood shrouded in gravel dust. We had a working history, so I accepted his part-gallant, part controlling male custody. Besides, that car was very interesting. Out of state license plate. Way more than unmarked police car class. Cool.

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“Agent Edwards wants to talk to you.”

Agent Edwards. Not the county agricultural agent, not state police. Fed. *Hello, Fox Mulder, maybe?* Just when you need a hero.

“Miss Street,” the man said.

I nodded, unsold. Viewed in the headlights from his car, Agent Edwards was an East Coast yuppie, no hair below the tops of his ears or the back of his stiff white shirt collar. Cornfields were as alien to him as crop circles, but I knew a lot about both.

“You cover the ‘paranormal crime’ beat around here, I understand.” Edwards put a sneer inside his quotation marks.

“I don’t think you do understand,” I answered. “What . . . bureau are you with?”

“Office of Rural Security. We handle uncooperative farmers on the mad cow disease issue, fertilizer thefts, anything that involves national safety. So all suspect incidents are a federal case. Media rights bow to national security nowadays. We demand your discretion.”

“I know I have to give it, but that doesn’t mean you can’t tip me off early in return.”

He nodded. Not a real “yes.” As if I hadn’t noticed.

“Miss Street, you know this community, this terrain. What do you think?”

What I thought was that Agent Edwards was a stupid tight-ass, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t be one of the still-closeted supernaturals. He broadcast an air of “other.” Maybe it was just East Coast ego toward heartland hicks, not the arrogance the supers often felt toward we mere mortals. Then again, he could just be the usual officious bureaucratic prick.

What I thought about the corpses would get me a strait jacket in the state hospital, but I tested him. “The bodies have been turned into creamed corn in a can, Agent Edwards.”

“Interestingly put, Miss Street. Why? How?”

“We’ve had a lot of crop circle activity lately.”

“Rubes with rider lawn mowers. Pranks.”

I might have told him. What I’d seen. What I’d put together. The “rubes” comment killed it. I lived here. Worked here. Maybe had been born here.

Suck grass, Fed.

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• • •

I sat in my car while everyone else peeled away into the darkness, riding a pair of blazing headlights. Werner and his partner were last. He leaned on my open car door. Between the '56 Cadillac's width and the wide door, we nearly blocked the two-way road. Dolly and me. That was the car's name. Dolly. She was built like a fortress. I often needed one.

"You don't want to hang around out here, Del. Could still be dangerous."

"Just gotta record a few notes while they're fresh." I held up my lipstick-size machine. "I'll be okay. It's all over out here, whatever it was."

"The Agri bastard is probably right."

"Aren't they always?"

Werner laughed. He was just looking out for me. That's what was nice about living in a smaller city. The police radio screwed onto Dolly's humongous drive-shaft hump buzzed.

Werner nodded at it. "You're wired into us if you need anything."

"I'm okay, you're okay. Good night, Leo."

I watched his taillights fade into the absolute country night.

I'm not a particularly brave woman, but I am determined.

Once me and Dolly and the dark were an uncrowded three-way again, I left the car, toting a heavy-duty flashlight. Dolly's trunk could hold everything, including the kitchen sink.

The flashlight spotlighted the corpses' massive profiles. Three dead cows, their huge carcasses pulverized to broken bones floating in precious bodily fluids inside the intact cowhide. That intact hide was most unusual for livestock attacks, which usually involved cryptic mutilations.

I played the intense light over the ground markings. What Edwards had described as "moo-cow hooves wandering into a scene of punk prankery," I saw as local livestock blundering into a mysterious crop circle creation incident.

I'd also spotted some very non-bovine marks on the rough soil. Maybe the spooked animals had been stampeded into the crop circle by something.

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My flashlight hit the highs and lows of the alien footprints. Not “moo-cow” hooves, but huge heavy *footpads*. Way too big for werewolves, but what else pulled down adult cows except were-packs, or even natural wolves, of which very few were left?

I squatted to measure the tracks mixed in with the milling hooves.

Dinner-plate size. Clawed. Almost wiped away by some trailing . . . appendage.

Okay. Cow tails are scrawny and just long enough to swat away horseflies and not much else. This was almost a . . . a *reptilian* trail, making a long, S-shaped swath. Cows with lizard tails? Not even a rare were-cow could leave marks like that.

I stood. The cows had been attracted to the activity at the crop circle. Lights. Action. No camera. Something had followed and then slaughtered them. I'd get another station videographer out here in daylight to film the footprint evidence without the prying eyes of the authorities present. Even the local cops had a stake in not stirring up the populace with alien invasion or supernatural slaughter stories.

In less than half an hour, I was back in my rented bungalow, jubilant, rerunning the audiotaped second version of the stand-up I'd sneaked in under the noses of the local cops and the Fed.

“Authorities are perplexed by a crime scene where local cows apparently have been cooked inside their hides by forces beyond conventional firearms or other weapons. Found dead yesterday in a field outside of Wichita, Kansas. . . .”

Found dead.

Found live was the story of my life so far: I'd been found alive, from birth, but just barely.

Found dead always made a much better story hook.

Chapter Two

After work the next day, the latest report on my story safely digitalized and under wraps for a debut on the evening news at ten, I crashed at home by seven that night. How does a weird phenomenon TV reporter relax? By watching national network forensic autopsy shows, natch.

So there I am, sucking up microscopic forensic details on TV with the rest of the country, when *wham-o!*

It all happened so fast. The camera zoomed in closer than the world's best lover. A maggot writhed like a stripper from the dark cave of a deadly pale . . . but delicately shaped . . . nostril. With a tiny blue topaz stud.

The camera dollied back. *Hmm*. Not a bad-looking nostril at all. In fact, it's a dead ringer for mine. Tiny blue topaz stud and all. A very dead ringer. Literally.

I can feel my cold sweat. This is the same old nightmare: me flat on my back, unable to move, bad alien objects coming at me. Except I'm not dreaming, I'm watching network TV on a Thursday evening, like eighty million other people in America.

The object of the camera's affection is a body on the hot TV franchise show, *Las Vegas CSI V, Crime Scene Instincts*, what I nickname *Criminally Salacious Investigations*. Media is my business. I have a right to mock it. I am not in a mocking mood at the moment.

Who has tapped my very personal nightmares for network exposure? While my stomach starts to churn, the camera retracts farther.

Holy homicide! The turned-up nose *is* mine! And the chin, the neck, the collarbones, the discreet but obvious cleavage, the muscle-defined calves visible past Grisham V's burgeoning backside. . . .

Even the toenails are painted my color, Glitz Blitz Red.

I look down and wiggle my bare toes shimmering blood-bright in the living room lamplight. I'm alive but I'm alone, in all senses of the word.

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Me with a body double? A doppelganger. A replica. A clone?

Can't be. I'm an orphan so abandoned that I was named after the intersection where my infant self was found.

So who's been trespassing on my mysteriously anonymous gene pool?

I haven't taped the damn show, so I can't rerun my media centerfold moment. Who knew? I'm used to being on TV, but I've never acted, never aimed at a career as a corpse, and I've never been to Las Vegas.

My white Lhaso apso, Achilles, sensing agitation, came bouncing over to comfort me, that floor-length lovely hair shimmering in the bluish light of the television. I absently stroked his long silky ears.

Lhasas are often taken for largish lapdogs, but they've got terrier souls. Achilles is twenty pounds of Tibetan staple gun. I used to wonder why centuries ago the Dalai Lamas bred Lhasas as temple guard dogs . . . until I got Achilles as a puppy. He was a growling relentless rusher, that short toothy jaw snapping with playful nips. I'd push him back and he'd joyously charge me again. If an intruder ever fell down in a pack of these, it would be Piranha City. Flesh stripped from bone.

In fact, Achilles was named for his playful puppy habit of nipping at my heels wherever I went. And because he's my soft spot, my Achilles heel.

Yeah. I'm an orphan, I'm single. I love my dog.

And apparently I'm now anonymously famous. Or infamous.

Chapter 3

Achilles' sturdy body next to mine was pure comfort as I impatiently waited for the *CSI Las Vegas* show to end. When the legally required credits ran, though, the local station cut them to the size of the fine print in a pre-nuptial contract. That made room for teaser images from the upcoming ten o'clock news. The information that this was "A Hector Nightwine Production" ran in letters two inches high, but I couldn't read one name from the cast list. Not that a corpse usually gets a credit, not even on the reality TV funeral shows

The local station, by the way, is my station, WTCH in Wichita, Kansas.

In fact, I had the weird experience of catching a flash of my face on the upcoming footage of the nightly news show. I'm used to that, but not after the shock of being personally dissected on prime time network TV.

My piece on the latest local ritual mutilation and killing incident should run at least number three on the story roster tonight, right after the top two national stories.

I basked for a moment in the sheer joy of where and who I was. I had a great job and I was doing good work, important work. Woodward would have been proud of me but Bernstein probably would have wondered why I was wasting my talents on a Podunk town in the heartland.

Maybe that was because it was the heartland. My heart, my land. What a Brave New World it was out there after the Millennium Revelation of 2000! I'd been young enough to adapt fast, just a misplaced kid with an itch to become a reporter someday.

Of course some of the older folk couldn't accept witches, werewolves, and vampires as near neighbors, not after eating up scary tales about

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them all their lives. Kids, though, were rapt. After the Millennium Revelation, we learned these creatures—er, supernaturals—weren't necessarily evil, as humans weren't, just different breeds. Serial killers, for instance, were pretty much a human phenomenon until recently.

Yet there were criminal elements among the newly outed supernatural population. When I graduated from J-school and got my first job at WTCH-TV, I was so hooked on these new but ancient resident species that I made them my beat.

I reported the crimes that occurred where the various breeds met and went wrong, fascinated by what twisted any creature to act outside the limits of its kind. I felt an unspoken kinship with the supernaturals. I'd been both outcast and—when I attracted attention for a too-good grade or even just the way I looked—preyed upon during my various institutional lives.

I couldn't wait to get out on my own. That's when my life would begin. And now the "beat" I'd built at WTCH, the sense of reporting what was really going on, despite the community's tendency to bury bad news and anybody different in the back forty . . . well, I *thought* I was making a difference. For the public, for the people who watched my reports, for me, the world in general. I guess you have to be young to believe so much in your own potency.

My piece running tonight focused on the crop circles that scribed ancient fertility symbols into the Kansas wheat fields. My thesis was that they weren't of alien, off-world manufacture, but an expression of the alien within our recently upended worldview and ourselves. Maybe they were a positive, attracting rain and sun. Earth symbols. I tried to open the viewers' minds. And my own.

A big personal problem I had with the Millennium Revelation was that the vampires it had shaken out of the topsoil were a pretty debased breed. Where was Count Dracula in white tie and tails when you needed him? The real vamps were no better than human wastrels, for the most part: druggies, partiers, and cheap criminals. Even the few who rose to white-collar jobs sported a sleazy rusty ring-around-the-collar from the one-nighters they pulled with doped-out prostitutes to get a little blood on the hoof.

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And I took that personally. Let's just say that, as a pale-skinned young human female, I was always a top target for vampire lust and late-night snacking.

I tuned out the TV. I'd seen enough of my own news reports to forego another self-image fix. That vertical legless version of me, mike in hand, is old hat by now . . . unless I'm shown horizontal and naked, as on *CSI* just moments ago. I didn't have much time to brood on this weird coincidence. I had to stay up way past the news anyway. That's what happens when you date an anchorman.

I observed the opening "Eye on Kansas," news show hype with half an eye tonight. Rapid cuts between sweeping helicopter film of downtown Wichita. Yippee. Then Ted Brinkman, the anchorman, unleashed his studied baritone and the games began. His name was perfect for the job. He had the anchorman trifecta: razor-cut helmet of dark hair, flashing bleach-white teeth, and red power tie.

His slightly bloodshot eye-whites and the way his prominent canine teeth dented his lower lip at times was the just-right extra touch. Vampires were still a novelty on evening TV in Kansas.

Ted had to take injections so he could come in early enough to do the six o'clock show before the sun had set. He used a George Hamilton product that pumped melatonin into his skin, giving him that golden glow. The extra effort gave him a ratings edge. A lot of vampires were selling out their heritage to "blend in" nowadays, though not all of them were out of the closet, or the coffin.

Ted was coming over after the news to take me out to midnight supper. I insisted on all the old-fashioned time-consuming date moves because I was wary of vamps. Oh, not the literally oral sex thing. It was what women have had trouble with since Eve: the sincerity thing.

Whoever my parents, whatever my missing background, I was one thing for sure: what they call black Irish. No fiery hair and freckles for me. My hair was drop-dead black, my eyes sky-blue, my skin wedding-invitation-white. I'd been vamp bait since I was twelve.

My natural pallor was catnip to them. That just-drained and ready-for-more look. I even shared their allergy to direct sunlight, though I could overcome mine with sunscreen. I cracked my first smile of

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the evening to imagine Ted Brinkman slathered in sunscreen. All anchormen, vampires or not, are a little full of themselves.

So why even bother? Because I didn't have a life, at least a dating one. I kept hoping that someday I'd meet an exceptional vamp who grooved on my Ivory Snow skin and still treated me like a human being. Ironic goal, right?

I'd brooded myself through twenty minutes of droning stories and screaming ads, so Sheena Coleman was already doing her nightly bump-and-grind against the studio blue screen. Of course she had to compete with the weather maps the viewers really wanted to see.

Sheena was a weather witch. That meant she could control meteorological conditions to some degree, as well as report them. Actually, I found it admirable that she had a regular job. A lot of weather witches went into blackmail. You know, pay me or I drop a firestorm of hail on your harvest-ready crop. It was a crime to use weather witching for personal gain, but there were only so many government and corporate positions around for them. Sheena was tall, blond, and anorexic. She liked the limelight the way bolt lightning likes trees and power lines.

"There's a storm front moving across rural Sedgwick County," she explained, taloned fingers pointing to an orange crescent on the lurid green background. (I may be Irish but I don't like green; clashes with my baby blues.) "But it will take a quick swing north and miss the wheat fields." She gave her right hip a little bump and the crescent obediently moved over the blue of a water treatment plant.

Weather witches weren't all equally adept. It sucked a lot of their energy to produce major weather changes, so Sheena's little quasi-news/entertainment position was tailor-made.

"Guess it won't rain on Ted and me when we go out to dinner," I told Achilles, whose perky ears immediately took a dive.

Achilles didn't like Ted. I wasn't sure I did either, but every once in a while I had to take a stab at a social life.

So, I hustled around the doll-house rooms of my small rented house. No apartments for me. I craved roots. I wanted a front door that opened on fresh air. A back stoop. A too-tiny kitchen with no

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garbage disposal. Achilles trailed me, a canine dust mop, sensing my excitement. Company coming.

Maybe it was time to give up the ghost. I'd always attracted a certain type of man. Well, not man. Ted had a great job for a vamp in the heartland. He was a pioneer for his, um, race. He was attractive, well-educated, apparently long ago. He loved my looks, which was more than I did.

What was not to like?

Well, maybe that Vampire Lunge, for one thing. Vamps always made me feel like the smorgasbord at the local pancake house on Sunday morning.

I rushed into my bedroom to survey the clothes in the square old-fashioned closet. I'd been dithering about what to wear all evening; seeing myself totally unclothed on national TV hadn't helped.

I pulled out a seventies miniskirt dress. Weird era. The skirt barely covered my rear but the sleeves were choirgirl wrist-length and the top had a prim little mandarin collar that would convince any vamp to hold off on his neck lunge until the after-dinner mints. Of course tights were the required legwear for this truncated dress, and I had several pair as well as flat-heeled baby-doll shoes. All vintage. Born before I had been. I loved that sense of connection to times past.

But I also felt like an overage baby doll. Not ready for prime time. As a dedicated reporter, yeah, I was ready for a jump to a major market. As vamp bait, I hoped I'd only get a wee midnight nibble. I needed . . . I don't know what I needed, except a little patience and a lot of love. Or maybe the opposite.

If I were Cinderella I'd have lost a slipper by the time Ted finally showed up. He should have been here by 11:30, not after midnight.

I saw why he was late the minute I answered the door.

"You've been drinking."

"Just a mellow-outer after the show." He flashed the glass hip flask in his back pocket. Sterling silver was a no-no for vamps and werewolves, almost as bad as a sunburn. I doubted the "quick one" he'd stopped for had been alcohol. He knew I was not an easy bite.

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He also pulled a bouquet from behind his back, white roses and gardenias bursting with heady scent. The gesture did sweep away my in-bred suspicion. Growing up in an orphanage, even if it was called a “temporary housing facility” for social services, will do that.

“Ted, these are gorgeous. Thank you.”

“Gonna ask me in?”

“I forgot. Sure.”

He couldn't cross thresholds without an okay. His eyes were only a little bloodshot. Could be the hot studio lights. Sure.

“I'll put these in water and then we can go.”

This was starting to feel almost old-fashioned. Maybe Ted really was willing to put some effort into me, instead of the usual mesmerizing gaze and knee-jerk snap for the carotid artery.

I found a frosted crystal Victorian celery jar in the cupboard that made a perfect vase. No family ties? Buy 'em at estate sales. Plus I'd earned full tuition to college, but not a cent of spending money. I'd had to buy recycled to save every penny for so long that I came to love having . . . saving . . . the odds and ends of other people's family lives. These objects with their aura of some else's history were adoptees, as I had never been.

I could visualize some Barbie-waisted corseted Victorian miss plunging this glorious bouquet of pure white dazzle and scent into this very celery jar as a makeshift vase. . . .

“Ouch!”

Rose stems have thorns and one had torn a jagged slash on my forefinger. I automatically lifted it to my mouth. But Ted seized my finger with its Sleeping Beauty drop of welling blood and sucked like a leech. While I was trying to decide if this was deeply erotic, as the vamp tramps claimed, or just plain rude, the bouquet dropped to the carpet. Achilles came barking and running around our feet.

“Excuse me.” I extracted my finger, which had painted Ted's lips a glossy girly red that was a bit of a turn-off, and bent to retrieve the flowers.

The enveloping tissue had fallen away. Something sharp and silver glittered among the green rose stems. I stood up, bringing the phenomenon into the light. Not silver. Steel.

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“You bastard.”

Ted was too busy licking his lips to notice what I’d found. “What is it, Delilah? Don’t tell me a little love-nip on the finger is too much? You must be frigid.”

Achilles’ barks and growls had turned into worrying Ted’s ankles just in time. Ted did a two-step away from my dog, and me.

“X-acto knife razor blades,” I said. “Duct-taped to the rose stems? You couldn’t wait for a tender moment before fanging me? You couldn’t so much as feed me dinner before tapping my veins? Frigid! I’ll show you hot!”

I picked up the bouquet in its tissue paper and thrust the angle-cut rose stems at his chest. He shrieked and backed away. Rose stems are “woody,” you know. And, by the way, never date a man who shrieks. Meanwhile, Achilles took a good Tibetan-staple-gun chomp out of his right ankle.

I backed off, laughing. “Not a man-bites-dog story, but a dog-bites-vamp story! I’m gonna call this in to the rival station, Ted. Oughta get a few chuckles.”

“You are everything I’ve heard! Uppity. Frigid. Bitchy. I should have never given you a chance. If it weren’t for your damn white skin, I wouldn’t have.”

“Date a Royal Dalton porcelain figurine next time, Ted! Probably lively enough for you,” I yelled as he retreated through the door.

Damn white skin. That’s the way I felt about it too.

Especially now that I’d seen a lancet pierce that skin on TV. Skin that had parted cleanly, bloodlessly. So my double was dead. Or had been filmed to look that way, more likely. People would kill to land the bit part of corpse on any *CSI* show in the country but I didn’t think they’d literally die for it.

I locked the door behind Ted. My house was on the outskirts of town, a nineteen-twenties wood-frame bungalow. It felt like a phantom family home where an aproned grandma lurked just out of sight around the corner, baking blueberry muffins. Some days I could almost smell them.

Achilles quit barking and came twining around my ankles like a cat.

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I shook my head, angry at myself. I'd put up with the Snow White thing since the orphanage. Even spray-on tans didn't help much. That crystal coffin in the woods was a real turn-on for the vamp set and every one of them I'd met had panted to picture me in it.

Now I'd seen myself laid out and dissected on TV. So I had a whole country full of eager watchers. *CSI* was still number one on the Niensens, with spin-offs galore. Or gore. I bet my Dead Celebrity Q popularity number was sky high compared to my Q rating for being an ace investigative reporter for *WTCH-TV*. It's true. Some dead celebrities are more recognizable and popular than living ones. Lucille Ball over Madonna. John Wayne over Kevin Costner. Now dead Delilah Street over . . . live Delilah Street. Bummer.

That's when I realized that the worst day of my life had morphed into the worst night of my life. And here I thought my recently but not dearly departed suitor Undead Ted had won that title . . . cold. Worst Knight in Shining Fangs. Ever.

Chapter Four

I woke up at midnight, sitting upright in bed, wondering what my subconscious mind had heard.

The vampire's pale face hung over me like a diseased moon, so close that I was forced I fall back. He wasn't anything pretty from an old vampire movie, a wistful Brad Pitt or even a ferociously life-hungry Tom Cruise. His dead white skin hosted a raging case of psoriasis and his oily dishwater brown hair was long enough for its rat-tailed ends to twitch at my face and throat like barbs.

Suddenly I was up against a wall, pinned there by him. Vamps can do that, move faster than human perception. And he wasn't alone. He played lead bloodsucker with a backup trio, all as nauseating as their leader.

They were teen vamps who'd been bitten young. Someone had left them buried and forgotten a bit too long. That had made them ugly and mean.

Lead boy ran his fingernail down my cheek. It was ragged, with black oil and dirt obscuring any moon at the jagged tip. It was like being caressed by a jigsaw blade.

"Cool and white," he said. Then he said my name. "Delilah."

"Looks good in red, I bet," a backup boy cackled.

Suddenly I knew where I was, and it wasn't my bedroom on Moody Avenue.

I was back in the social services group home, and the boys were daylight vampires who were older, bigger, and way stronger than I. They knew just when to waylay me, when no one was around to stop them.

Only I could stop them and I weighed ninety pounds at age twelve.

It was so clear. So real. It would be gang rape and then a group blood-tasting. I'd be tainted two unrecoverable ways, even worse than I was now as an unwanted orphan.

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I reached into my jeans pocket. *Jeans? I'd been accosted in bed. Since when was I wearing jeans?*

I was wearing jeans, and the pocket held a cheap plastic handle with a pointed steel blade dusted with diamonds. I'd been ready for this moment all my life and knew what to do.

I lifted my left hand, and then wound it tight in those repellent greasy strands of the lead vamp's hair.

The trio wolf-whistled. "Oh, she *likes* you, Hacker. Come on, Snow White, time to donate a little blood and a lot of booty."

My right hand snaked up to press the long-missing nail file I'd stolen from Miss Whitcomb, the supervisor, hard into the outer socket of Hacker's left eye.

Bleeding doesn't bother vamps. It can even be a turn-on. But the threat of having their eyes popped out "like a pair of pearls from an oyster shell," as I put it in my best Long John Silver gone-girly voice, did turn their dead-white complexions greener than crème de menthe.

They wouldn't have known what crème de menthe was, since they all had the reading level of a gerbil.

The quartet melted away as I sat up. In bed. I was sweating from my hair to my feet, and my right hand was coiled into such a tight fist that I turned on the bedside lamp to inspect the damage: half-moon fingernail indentations weeping blood.

I took a deep breath. In my own bed.

Alone.

Someone whimpered.

Achilles, looking worried, paced the floor beside my bed. Shorted-legged Lhasas aren't great jumpers. When I lifted him up beside me, he set about licking my face with a hot, loving tongue. He brought the warmth back into me and banished the dream. The nightmare. The trouble was, it was true to life.

My life. I'd been there, done that.

So much for the everyday adventures of an underage ward of the guardian state of Kansas after the Millennium Revelation.

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CAROLE NELSON DOUGLAS

I'd always considered myself the orphan's orphan.

After all, no one had ever adopted me, or tried to. No one had fostered me. I just stayed at the Sedgwick County Home as kids younger and older came and went.

Maybe it was my funky name. Delilah Street. I'd supposedly been found there as an abandoned three-day-old infant, wrapped in one of those storm shelter Army-green blankets.

No dainty pastels for baby me.

But, see, there wasn't a Delilah Street in Wichita. Or Kansas. Or surrounding states. I'd looked. At least I hadn't been found on Lavender Lane. I'd have really developed a chip on my shoulder with that sappy name.

When Y2K and the Millennium Revelation came along, it was exciting that all the bogeymen were coming out of the closet and out from under the bed of night-time stories. Vampires and weres and ghouls, storybook stuff. I still wanted to read about *The Little Princess*, and Cinderella with those cool glass slippers, and Little Orphan Annie, who'd had a good dog and a sugar daddy, born before the age that recognized child molestation. Then, suddenly, the vamp boys came out of the woodwork and circled, flooding the social service agencies, as unclaimed as rabid dogs. Half-breeds, some of them. All predators. That's when they zeroed in on me.

Luckily, a couple years after the Millennium Revelation, some anonymous benefactor, likely a faceless charity, had sponsored my going to a girls' high school, and, later, to college. When I say sponsored, I mean paid the tuition. Period. Oh, sure, room and board at Our Lady of the Lake Convent School was covered, but nothing beyond that. College was coed and public. I earned some extra scholarship money and worked my way through it in the usual "fries with that?" student mode. No time for foolishness, including much dating.

I brooded about all this the rest of that long nonworking weekend. I'd trashed the roses and gardenias, but their sickly sweet odor lingered like the subtle breath of a funeral home.

Sometimes I had nightmares I didn't remember much of, almost alien abduction dreams. Compared to the remembered shards of

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my nightmares, a needle in the navel would have been child's play. I glimpsed something like a silver turkey baster and it was pushing between my legs. Made it hard to think of a penis as anything other than a blunt instrument after that. So maybe Undead Ted was right. I was frigid. Cold. In one sense, silver scared the hell out of me, yet called to me in all its more elegant forms.

Sometimes I thought I was a ghoul, gathering dead people's clothes and fragments of their lives from resale shops and estate sales. Compelled to buy weird Victorian sterling serving pieces at fire-sale prices; they were so tiny, so mysterious, so precious. A set of fairy-size forks for some forgotten kind of seafood appetizer. An opium pipe set into a lady's finger ring. Taxco Mexican jewelry with welts of bright blue glass dewing it.

I was born to be odd. Whenever I tried not to be, it went wrong. Like with Ted.

I moped through the weekend, sharing a sip of Bailey's Irish Cream with Achilles. He seemed downcast himself that idle Saturday. We sat together all afternoon watching old movies on cable TV, I stroking his long, soft hair. Saturday night, he collapsed in front of his water dish, panting. I gathered him up, looking into licorice-black eyes that had dulled to the point of not recognizing me. After frantically rifling the Yellow Pages, I raced in my vintage Caddie for the nearest 24-hour vet's offices. On the passenger side, Achilles lay inert. I stroked him the whole way, only one hand on the wheel, but he wasn't even responding to his name now.

The vet took him in with vague guesses and promises of intravenous fluids and constant care and a phone call if anything changed.

Sunday night I stood in a fluorescent light-glared room and they told me he was terminal.

"Never seen anything like it," the weary-faced vet said. "So fast. Blood poisoning."

I pictured small defensive teeth sunk into a bony undead ankle, and sobbed. Achilles lay dead to the world on a steel table, a beautiful dust mop of pale hair just barely breathing. My own breath came raggedly. Getting Achilles had been the first thing I'd done after leaving college

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and getting a job. He was the first and only creature to ever give me joy and affection. We'd been together for three years. I felt like I was strangling on poisoned cotton candy.

What did I want to do? they asked. Leave the body with them, like a CSI corpse? Or send it to Smokerise Farm for incineration? Rotting in a common grave, or reduced to ashes on my mantle?

What I wanted to do was leave with my dog.

Not . . . possible. I asked for a lock of his albino-white hair and opted for Smokerise Farm, where, I was assured, the ashes I received were guaranteed to be really his. I could select a suitable . . . vessel from a book of photographs. I chose one of an Asian shape, with a five-toed Imperial dragon on it. Achilles had been royalty.

Imagine, some people might pass off any old ashes on a bereaved companion.

Monday I had to go to work again. I felt like the walking dead. In fact, it would be a miracle if I didn't stake Undead Ted on the six o'clock news.

Chapter 5

I hadn't expected life at work to be pleasant after kicking out anchorman Ted, but it seemed he'd been busy over the weekend while I'd been losing my dog.

For one thing, when I entered the studio Undead Ted the Splitting Toad was canoodling with Sheena Coleman by the blue screen. For another, the news director, Fred Fogelmann, called me into his tiny windowless office for a little two-person conference.

"Sit down, Delilah. What's the matter?" He must have just noticed my maroon eye-circles (a problem with tissue-thin pale skin), so this conference was about something else. "You look like hell."

I tried to dredge up a patina of perky. Looking bad was a mortal sin in the TV biz.

He rolled right on before I could defend myself and my raccoon eyes. "Never mind, it doesn't matter."

That was even worse news, but I still couldn't gather any words or gestures to fight my way into a good mood.

"Er, there're some changes in the hopper." Fred was formerly a newspaper City Editor and he still talked like someone with a dwindling pint of rotgut whiskey in his bottom desk drawer.

"Ted's eager to get out in the streets." I bet. "To use his reporter skills again." Again? Really? As if he'd ever had them. "You've done a great job with the ritual crimes beat, but he'll be taking that over. And Sheena wants some street cred too. She'll be doing that 'pornanormal' spot you thought up. Fresh face, you know."

"You mean 'blond and anorexic,'" I said, finally peeved enough to growl a little.

"Ann or Rex who?" He shrugged. What a with-it guy on women's issues!

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I saw the strategy. Ted had grabbed the juicy beats I'd made mine. What's better to cover than sex and violence? Especially exotic sex and violence. Who did Ted think he was, his journalistic idol, that sob-soul brother Geraldo Rivera? Really! Vampires and Geraldo are so over! And what did I get in exchange?

"I have something new for you," Fred said.

It was a good thing I was still feeling too down to pretend to be up, because his next words would have crashed me even if I'd won the lottery the night before.

"We've got a vital demographic that isn't being served and you're just the one to put them in the spotlight. I'm calling the feature 'Good Living After Death.' A lot of influential Baby Boomers underwrite those Sunset City retirement communities all over the country and they have a heck of a lot of interesting stories."

When you have to use "heck of a lot" as a news peg, you're in trouble.

"This old doll, for instance." He handed a black-and-white glamour photo from the Ice Age of film history across the desk. "Right here in Wichita at Sunset City. Quite a looker once. I bet she has tales to tell."

The name under the classic forties' face with its carefully arched eyebrows made my pulse blip once: Caressa Teagarden, a major star who'd vanished from screen and media as thoroughly as Garbo had a decade before her.

This would be a fun one-time change of pace, maybe, but a whole beat based on dredging up the almost dead? I knew what the problem was. The "whole group of senior citizens out there now" just won't die. Rumor had it that the North Koreans, banned from nuclear experiments, had gone to the cellular level, even getting into cloning. Through their various experiments, they'd invented a method of replacing death with a "twilight awake" state. A thing like that would rake in billions. Think Donald Trump paying to be preserved in amber and comb-over. Forever.

"It's set up for tomorrow," Fred said, totally co-opting me. "Slo-mo Eddie is the videographer. Cheer up, Del. A spin out to Sunset City should be real scenic. Some fresh air would put roses in your cheeks.

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You've been too deep into all that sicko murder stuff. You look like a zombie yourself. Do something to make the old dear happy. A little attention should do wonders for her latest face lift."

I sleepwalked out of there, living up to my new rep, Zombie Reporter. So that was my new beat, Death Warmed Over? Kinda like my career at the moment.

Slo-mo Eddie was one of those lanky, laid-back guys, instead of hyper nutso like most videographers. Deadlines, dead bodies in rapid rotation, it can make you crazy. He chewed Butternut gum while I explained about tomorrow's assignment at Sunset City.

"What's the deal with this Sunset City dame?" Eddie asked. Videographers never paid any attention to the news, the culture, and the wider world. It was all inside the box with them. The camera box.

I explained. "If you have the money, you can retire in clover. Every resident gets the quarters from his or her favorite time of life. There are rumors that they live on only there, like a Virtual Reality personality."

Eddie shrugged. "Weird world."

"Yeah, the Retread Retreat. She probably won't look a day over this," I said, waving the photo.

"Sexy."

"That was then. We can't expect a woman living, er, residing, in a lakeside cottage at Sunset City to resemble any available photos of her salad days. She was a real star once, though, back in the days of the Silver Screen."

"So were we all, kiddo." Eddie snapped his gum and rolled his eyes back toward the TV studio. "Didya hear the latest on Undead Ted? He's had his incisors artificially lengthened. You know what they say about vamps: not enough fang, no wang."

Suddenly, I felt better.

Eddie loved gossip. Or maybe he just hated Ted. "I see Ready Teddy is getting into Witch Twitch. What a bimbo! So what's got you down?"

"It's personal."

"What? You got a life away from WTCH?"

• • •

CAROLE NELSON DOUGLAS

At home that night, I thought about Fast Eddie's mocking comment on having a life beyond WTCH. I stared into my faint reflection on the glass-topped coffee table. Achilles used to stretch out underneath it, dog under glass: safe, sleeping, and elegant in his wavy-haired, short-legged, sharp-toothed way.

The sight of myself on Dead TV still haunted me. I picked up my cell phone to dial one of my few female friends, a street-producer for *CSI Bismarck*.

"Hey! It's Del. Listen, Annie, I need a copy of the latest *Vegas CSI V* episode. Yeah, it was a live feed here in Wichita." Or a dead feed, to be precise. "No tapes available. I need the addresses of the producers and writers. Oh, just for a piece I'm working on. You know, always chasing the latest 'in' thing.

"You have a digital recording? Really? Fabulous! Sure. Just Fed Ex it. Overnight? Thanks, you're a doll."

Once I had the names and titles, my reporter self could call and find out what the hell was going on.

Figuring out what was going on in my dreams was another matter.

I didn't wake up the next morning with the usual nasty fragments floating around in my head. Instead, I had a vivid scene right out *The Wizard of Oz* movie.

I saw Achilles standing, wagging and waiting for me, on the yellow brick road. Only he was white instead of black like Toto, and the whole scene was black and white and gray, like the early opening part of the film, not wildly Technicolor like the "merry old land of Oz" sections.

I looked down to sparkly sequined pumps on my feet. Black and to die for. Maybe I was going somewhere unexpected. Soon. But not into Dorothy's Oz. Someplace darker, a Wonderland all my own. And Achilles was waiting for me somewhere out there.

Chapter Six

“Can that piece.” Fuck-up Freddy was standing by my desk at work, in blowsy mode with *The Front Page* shirtsleeves from the classic forties newspaper movie, a caricature in the flesh. The only thing missing was the green eyeshade and a garter on his flabby biceps.

“The old dame is dead,” he said. “Pulled the plug on herself this morning. Cancelled the contract..”

Oddly enough, I was sorry to hear that.. “Maybe her death, the reason for it, is a story.”

“Nah. The feature’s name is ‘Good Living After Death,’ not ‘Death After Death.’ I need someone downtown to do a stand-up for a Cub Scout camp-out in the main park.”

“That’s about as exciting as filming an anthill.”

“A good reporter can make a great story out of anything. Jeez, are you losing it, Street, or what?”

I drove home from the station that night with a dopey new assignment sked riding shotgun on the passenger seat of the Caddy, just as Achilles’ “documents” had accompanied me away from the vet’s office.

It was beginning to feel like loss was my middle name. I had no other, anyway.

What more could go wrong?

I had not counted on the Revenge of the Weather Witch.

I had some trouble finding my bungalow on Moody Road. Because it wasn’t there anymore.

I got out of the car, slammed the heavy door shut, and stared at the empty, aching socket of dirt where my house had been. All that was left was my refrigerator, lying on its massive metal side, looking like a heavy-metal porcupine.

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I approached it over the lumpy ground strewn with toothpicks splintered from the wood and spine of my rental bungalow. It wasn't merely a rental. It was my first real home. It was a lost relative, and it was totally gone, sucked up into some passing tornado funnel.

Other houses of that era stood whole and sturdy on either side of it. My house was the only molar that had been pulled. Freak tornadoes, they were called. Unpredictable.

This one wasn't.

When you piss off a weather witch, she can make her wrath known.

My refrigerator lay there like a beached steel whale. Barnacled to its side was my metal clothes cabinet crammed with vintage duds and every last freaking piece of sterling silver I had ever collected at an estate or garage sale. Victorian fork tines bristled like WWII underwater mine prongs. Mexican jewelry draped the handles. Nineteen-twenties marcasite batted its steel eyelashes in the clear sunlight. The sky was blue, like my eyes; the clouds were white, like my skin. No black thunderclouds, like my wild Irish hair, appeared.

This was a very specific tornado.

At that moment a Fed Ex truck pulled up, white and gleaming in the sunlight. The tiny woman behind the wheel hopped down.

"Street residence?" she asked.

"What's left of it."

"Too bad! Was this house a tear-down?"

"Kinda."

"Sign here."

I did. She handed me a box stamped "Smokerise Farm" and a padded envelop large enough to hold a videotape and a newsy letter about Nightwine Productions from Annie in Bismarck.

I stood there, on the wind-blown prairie, contemplating my losses.

The fact was, my cup was overturned, but I wasn't. We were both half-full, and maybe the half-empty part wasn't worth keeping.

I had Achilles' ashes. I had Dolly Parton, a running vintage car with only 28,000 miles on it, mean-looking fins, and chrome bumper bullets the size of—Well, you know Dolly: talent, guts, and up-front plastic

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surgery. I had some money in the bank. I had a smattering of borrowed glitz and an empty refrigerator. And I had a shockingly large number of pretty, prickly Victorian sterling flatware sharp enough to function as martial arts throwing stars.

I was taking them all to Las Vegas, where they carved up way-too-familiar corpses on CSI and where a writer-producer named Hector Nightwine had a lot of explaining to do. Never trust a man with hyphenated job title. Or artificially extended fangs. Or both.

And I wasn't leaving Sin City until I knew . . . who I am. Or who I am not.

What happens next?

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