

VICTORY TALES PRESS
presents

A

Halloween Collection

ANTHOLOGY: *Stimulating*

Featuring Stories By:

**Karen Michelle Nutt, Cheryl Pierson,
Laura Shinn & Rebecca J. Vickery**

A Halloween Collection Anthology: Stimulating
Stories to satisfy your romantic cravings

Presented by Victory Tales Press

Authors:

Karen Michelle Nutt, Cheryl Pierson,
Laura Shinn, and Rebecca J. Vickery

A Halloween Collection Anthology: Stimulating
Stories to satisfy your romantic cravings

Copyright © 2010 by Rebecca J. Vickery of Victory Tales Press
Cover Art Copyright © 2010 by Laura Shinn

Edited and Produced by Rebecca J. Vickery
Cover Art and Production Consultation by Laura Shinn

Licensing Notes:

This ebook is copyright protected and all rights are reserved.
This ebook may not be copied, printed, or digitally mastered for re-sell or to be given away to other people. It is illegal to share this ebook on free sites without written permission of the author or publisher. If you would like to share this ebook with other people, please purchase an additional copy for each person.

Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

A Halloween Collection Anthology: Stimulating contains stories which are works of fiction.

Though some actual towns, cities, and locations may be mentioned, they are used in a fictitious manner and the events and occurrences were invented in the mind and imagination of the authors. Any similarities of characters or names used within to any person past, present, or future are coincidental.

Dedication

A Halloween Collection Anthology: Stimulating is dedicated to all the talented authors who have offered such unwavering support and agreed to be a part of Victory Tales Press.

We also want to dedicate this book to our loyal readers and fans who love romance and provide the motivation we need to create our stories.

May God Bless!

Other Books Available from Victory Tales Press

A Summer Collection Anthology

Bloodmaiden: a Fantasy Anthology

A Halloween Collection Anthology: Sweet

Victory Tales Press offers four sensual to stimulating tales of romance
to stir your heart and satisfy your craving for romance.

The Curse of Tempest Gate

Karen Michelle Nutt

Always and Forever

Cheryl Pierson

Conceived in Darkness

Laura Shinn

A Haunting Love

Rebecca J. Vickery

The Curse of Tempest Gate by Karen Michelle Nutt

Clarity Shaw, a reporter for *Unbelievable Finds*, seeks answers concerning the curse of Tempest Gate Cemetery. Warnings from the Bed and Breakfast's receptionist and an old man only make her more curious. Determined to get her story, Clarity ventures into the old cemetery.

Even though she is tied to the legends surrounding Tempest Gate through her ancestry, Clarity does not believe in the paranormal. She intends to collect the local versions of the stories, take some photos, and be on her way.

A beautiful sculpture in the cemetery, a stone angel warrior, draws her attention and her admiration. Could this be the Archangel Michael? Then she finds out more than she bargains for when she sits in the devil's chair on the eve of Halloween. Two entities need her for their own personal reasons, but only one will demand her heart.

Always and Forever by Cheryl Pierson

At a children's Halloween carnival, a Gypsy fortuneteller predicts a new love for both Cindy and Gage. When the two meet over a poorly carved pumpkin, love flickers to life and the stars begin to align.

But the odds of finding a new love later in life seem insurmountable and the prophecy seems too good to be true. After all, Gage has been burned before and Cindy doesn't believe in fortunes or second chances.

Will doubt overshadow their attraction or has love already been set in motion? Can the star-crossed pair put their faith in the love that was foretold? Can they believe in each other?

Conceived in Darkness by Laura Shinn

Prince Orekon is out of time and out of solutions. He must mate and he only has until sunrise in three days or he will lose his throne. The alternative would be disastrous for his people. The females from his world of Astovia are lovely and willing, but his heart remains cold. There is not even one among them who wants to discover the heart within the beast. And Orekon refuses to mate with just any female available. He wants a female who will join with his heart as well as his body.

Music is Kathryn Schaffer's life and passion. It's the only thing in her life that keeps her going, waiting for each performance. When a strange man in a corridor holds her captive from behind, Kathryn is momentarily terrified. Until his touch softens and he whispers words of passion and love in her ear. Knowing she will never experience those emotions in her entire life, Kathryn takes a chance and opens her heart to a stranger.

However, falling in love is never easy and trials and challenges await back on Astovia for the mated couple. Orekon is confident in his ability to maintain the throne, but Kathryn is in a world unlike her own. Will she find a way to win over the hearts of the Astovian people as she did with Orekon?

A Haunting Love by Rebecca J. Vickery

Trudy thinks she must have lost her mind by agreeing to house-sit a huge, old, Victorian mansion during Halloween week. Lights switching on and off along with odd noises lead her to meet a certain, handsome police officer named Simon. The attraction is mutual and undeniable. Maybe the scare was worth the chance to go out with this guy.

When odd things at the old house continue, Mina, Trudy's best friend and partner in a vintage clothing shop, teases her about having a poltergeist. Deciding she can deal with that better than an actual person out to do her harm, Trudy relaxes a bit—until the ghost takes over on Halloween, revealing a curse and an ancient, haunting love.

The Curse of Tempest Gate

by
Karen Michelle Nutt

Chapter One

The Tempest Gate Hotel wasn't a five star establishment, but a quaint Bed and Breakfast. Best of all, it stood within walking distance to the most haunted cemetery in Salem, New Hampshire.

Clarity Shaw signed the register and handed over her credit card to the receptionist, Hester Higgins. The woman had dark hair streaked with gray and stood eye level with Clarity, making her about five-foot four. Slender built and spindly, she looked like she would fly away with the next wind, but her voice was strong and sure when she spoke. "You look familiar." Hester's gaze swept over her. "Have you stayed with us before?"

"No, first time," Clarity assured her. She glanced at the oak furnishings in the lobby sitting area, which consisted of two high-back chairs by the window. Their plush cushions were a dark hunter's green with gold thread used to embroider the Celtic design on the headrest. A long, wood table stood against the wall with a coffee pot situated at one end of it with all the necessities to turn a cup of java into a coffee lover's delight. The fireplace stood as the focal point of the room. The mantle was carved with leaves and nuts, an intricate addition, giving the added flair to make the room homey.

"Hmm." Hester's brows furrowed, seemingly not satisfied with her answer of never visiting the fine establishment. "You remind me of someone—minus the eyebrow piercing of course."

"Of course." Californians didn't blink an eye, but in rural surroundings, piercings other than in the earlobe were probably an oddity.

Hester waved her hand. "I didn't mean it as a slight. Piercings don't bother me one way or the other. It's none of my business what you young people do to your bodies. Though, some of it looks mighty painful to me." She continued to stare as she thought out loud. "It's the eyes. Yes, your eyes are an unusual shade of blue, so light for dark hair. Is your hair color natural or do you dye it?"

"It's natural." *At least this month*, she thought.

Hester nodded as if she approved. The piercings she didn't care about, but dyeing her hair she'd take offence. She should have seen her when she had blue hair. That would have raised her brows clear to the hairline.

"Oh, well." Hester's slim shoulder lifted in a shrug. "It'll come to me. I'll remember whom you remind me of. If you're interested, we're not far from the American Stonehenge." She met her gaze. "It's a maze of man-made chambers, walls, and ceremonial meeting places. It's kind of like England's Stonehenge. You know with it being an astronomical calendar that can determine specific solar and lunar events."

"Sounds intriguing. If I have time, I'll check it out."

"No time to sightsee, huh? You here on business then?" She asked as she ran the credit card and waited for authorization.

"A little of both. I'm writing a piece about the Tempest Gate Cemetery."

Hester's gaze riveted to hers with a look of unease. "Are you a reporter?"

She nodded. "I work for *Unbelievable Finds*, a paranormal magazine."

"Mmm-hmm. You're looking for ghosts then."

Yeah, that would be nice, but not necessary to write my piece.

"Actually, I'm interested in the legend about the cemetery. I called a few weeks back and spoke with," she withdrew a piece of paper from her jean pocket, "a Mr. Donner." She looked at Hester expectantly.

Hester's dark brown eyes widened as one eyebrow arched in surprise. "Mr. Donner, spoke to you—directly?" She seemed ill at ease with the idea. Her gaze scanned the room as if she expected someone, or *something*, to jump out at her.

Clarity volunteered to cover the Tempest Gate Cemetery story since somewhere down the family tree, she was related to one of the families involved in the tragedy that started the urban legend. How much more fitting could it be to write the piece for the magazine? "Mr. Donner is the one who told me about the hotel," she explained. "Is there a problem?"

"Uh, no. It's just...no."

A beep indicated her credit card had been approved for the amount entered and a slip of paper printed out from the machine. Hester handed her the receipt to sign before placing the key card to her room on the counter.

"Do you have any stories about the cemetery?" Clarity prompted. Stories she picked up on the Internet stated a fog-like mist appeared in a blink of an eye. It was so thick that a person couldn't find their way out of the cemetery until dawn. Ghosts, strange unearthly whispers, and statues that came alive were some of the other accounts from witnesses. There

was even the legendary devil's chair. People were dared to sit in the chair on the evening of Halloween. Stories ranged from the outrageous to the mundane. One tale stated a hand emerged from the grave and dragged the person down to the underworld, while other stories stated the person couldn't recall what happened. They would wake up beside the devil's chair in the morning, damp from the morning dew and with no knowledge of what happened. Her guess: they had too much to drink and woke from their drunken stupor to find they never left the cemetery.

A devil's chair was nothing more than a marble or sandstone carved chair, probably placed for the grieving family to be able sit comfortably at the gravesite. The chairs weren't common and provided a topic for conversations. Small-town communities tended to have legends attached to the chairs, adding to the mystery of why the effigies had been carved. Tempest Gate Cemetery's legend proved the most curious since it was a focal point of an old legend dating back centuries. It regarded spurned lovers and a duel to the death.

"I know plenty of stories." Hester's voice wavered from high pitched to a low whisper, making it painfully obvious that she did, but was uncomfortable talking about them. "The ghosts need to be put to rest, but—"

Clarity waited for her to continue. "But what?" she coaxed.

"The curse," she whispered. "It's binding and it consumes. It's like it's needy and wants to add souls to its coffer."

It was Clarity's turn to lift a brow at the idea of something evil lurking in the graveyard ready to devour souls, but she refrained from commenting on it. Superstitions had a way of making people uneasy and adding a creepy story to enhance their fears and your urban legend was born. "Would you mind telling me about the curse?" All she knew was the conflicting accounts from the Internet and the ones her grandmother told her. It would be nice to know what the locals had to say.

Again Hester's eyes darted to the front door of the lobby, then to the back office that stood off to the left of them. She chewed on her lower lip before making the decision to tell her. With a sigh of resolve, she leaned forward, resting her elbows on the countertop. She lowered her voice to a low whisper so no one could overhear what she had to say, which seemed ridiculous since they were the only two present, but Clarity thought it wise not to point that fact out if she wanted to hear the story. "The curse involves two men who were in love with the same woman."

"Never a good combo."

Hester's gaze swept over her features before meeting her eyes directly. "No, it is not. Michael Davenport and Samael Fenton were in love with a young woman by the name of Mary Peabody."

This she had read herself on the Internet. She found it curious that the name Samael wasn't spelled in the traditional manner with *-uel* at the end but with *-ael*, the same spelling of the archangel in post-Talmudic lore. The angel was known as an accuser, seducer and destroyer and was regarded as both good and evil. The other man in Mary's life was Michael, a name that so happens to be an archangel's name. This angel was known as a warrior and protector. She had to wonder if the names were changed to enhance the story. *Archangels Duke It Out At The Stroke of Midnight*. The tagline did have a good ring to it. "Are you sure the names of her suitors are correct?"

"Yes, of course. It's all documented. Michael Davenport's home once stood where this hotel is now. Technically, if Michael Davenport were still alive, he'd own this place. He had no surviving relatives and the property is in the care of a trustee or something like that. I'm not up on all the legal jargon."

She wasn't either, but she would definitely look into it. "Please go on with the story. I didn't mean to interrupt."

"No worries. Hmm...where was I?" Her brows drew together in concentration. "Ah yes. Mary didn't intentionally lead the men on, but she found herself in a pickle all the same. She, being a kind woman, didn't want to hurt either suitor and decided not to choose either man, hoping to keep both men's friendship. You can imagine how that would fly."

"I can imagine. These men didn't seek Mary out for friendship. They wanted a wife."

Her head bobbed up and down in agreement. "Samael kept pushing her to make a choice. Michael, on the other hand, didn't like seeing her upset. He wanted Mary for his own, but he loved her enough that he respected her decision and didn't push the issue."

"Michael sounds like a good guy."

"So the stories say, but the relationship between the three became strained. Samael couldn't accept Mary's friendship with Michael and called the man out, intending to duel with him to the death."

Clarity leaned on the counter, too, thoroughly engrossed in the story. "Was that legal?"

Hester shook her head. "No, but out here, away from the authorities, who would stop them? Samael set up a meeting inside the Tempest Gate Cemetery on the evening of Halloween. It was his macabre sense of humor to think once he killed Michael, he could roll him into the grave."

“Nice man.” Her sarcasm wasn’t missed and Hester nodded her head in agreement.

“The two men hadn’t intended for Mary to find out what they were doing, but of course tongues do wag.”

“Of course.”

“Mary raced to the cemetery to stop her two friends from making this horrible mistake. Seeing the two facing each other with swords and—”

“Excuse me, did you say swords?” She’d always assumed it was guns.

“Why yes. This was 1767. Didn’t I say as much?”

“Uh...no, but go on. They were dueling with swords.”

“Mary didn’t think of her safety. She ran right into the foray, putting herself in danger. Samael didn’t see her until it was too late. He swung the sword, intending to end Michael’s life, but Mary jumped in the way and the sword pierced her heart.”

Clarity knew Mary died tragically, but hadn’t realized it had been by sword. “How terrible.”

“Oh, it was and rightly so. Now, Mary lived with her elderly aunt, Sophie Peabody. She was a woman known to practice the arts.”

“Do you mean witchcraft?” Now this part of the story she knew from the tales her grandmother had told her. *We’re related to a witch*. Her grandmother would say and tell the story of how the witch avenged her niece’s murder. As Clarity researched the story, she began to question the validity of the story, wondering what was truth, and what had been fabricated through the years to make the story more interesting.

“Yes, witchcraft. As soon as Sophie learned where Mary had gone, she went after her, hoping to stop her from putting herself in harms way, but she’d arrived too late. Mary already lay dead at the feet of her suitors. Sophie was so furious at the two men and their foolish pride she cursed them both. Samael in her mind was the devil and with his blind love, he murdered the woman he had adored. She cursed him with a wave of her hand, turning him into a stone effigy, a devil’s chair, so he may sit there through eternity and mourn the woman he lost.”

“And Michael?”

“She cast her spell and turned him to stone as the Archangel Michael. He was Mary’s avenging angel, but he failed to save her and for that he would pay with his life. For, if he had stepped away from the relationship completely, Mary would still be alive.”

“But didn’t you say he respected Mary’s wishes?”

“Yes, but he didn’t stop seeing her. If he truly loved her, he would have allowed Samael to cool down after his rejection, but Michael didn’t

do that. Michael kept rubbing it in Samael's nose, how his affections were still welcome at the Peabody's home."

Clarity couldn't help but feel sorry for Michael. Clearly, Samael was the one responsible for Mary's death. In her opinion, Michael also suffered at Samael's hand by witnessing the woman he loved slain in front of him. "Are the stone chair effigy and the angel statue still there in the cemetery?" She hoped they would be, but vandals had a way of destroying history and she didn't know what condition the cemetery may be in.

Hester nervously licked her lips. "They both still stand. If anyone sits upon the chair, Samael tries to keep them there."

"I read about this. There were a few people who claimed the devil's chair held them hostage."

"Hmm, yes. Stupid kids, thinking it's good fun on Halloween to sit in the chair. Samael's spirit or whatever he is now, tries to seep into their heads, wanting to know their dark secrets, feeding off the ominous deeds as if those thoughts made him stronger."

Clarity humored the receptionist. She was intrigued with the paranormal, but it didn't mean she believed every tale told to her. The story made for good entertainment and that was what she needed for the ultimate spin to the article. "What made them think the spirit fed off their thoughts?"

"They could feel the invasion like hot poker in their brains."

She cringed at the mental image this brought forth.

Hester picked up a paper and pen and scribbled on it, making a list of some sort. Then she handed the slip of paper to her.

"These are names. Who are they?" Clarity met her gaze confused why she'd given them to her.

"Those are the people who sat in the chair in the last few decades and didn't walk away unscathed. You can confirm what I say is true. Since their experience in the cemetery, their lives have not been the same. Two were institutionalized. One had nightmares for the rest of his life and the other refused to talk about it—ever. She just clammed up and never spoke again."

Clarity's brows drew together in a frown. This was news to her, but the locals tended to have the best information. "Thanks." She slipped the paper into her pants pocket. "So Samael tries to suck the life out of people and the angel statue...or Michael, what does he do?"

Hester sighed. "No one knows for sure what his purpose is. Some claim he comes alive and chases them and others claim he's trying to save them from the evil lurking on the grounds. I tend to believe the latter."

"Why's that?"

“It’s my theory that Michael was the better man, the man Mary truly loved. She stepped in front of him to save him.”

Clarity pursed her lips together. “Then Mary should have said so. Maybe then Samael wouldn’t have called Michael out. He would have known he lost.”

“Yes, it would seem it should be that simple. As we both know, life isn’t always so.”

“Um, yes.” Clarity tapped the key card on the counter top and stood up straight. “Thank you for sharing the legend. It does put a different spin on what I’ve read about it.” She leaned down and picked up her suitcase and camera cases.

Hester came around the counter to face her, worried lines creasing her brow. “If you plan on taking a stroll in the cemetery, remember to leave before the sun sets. Today’s Halloween.” As if that explained her warning.

She wasn’t careless and hadn’t planned on roaming the cemetery in the dead of night. The place was nestled in a wooded area with no lights. She had no desire to be lost out there in the dark. She gave the receptionist a smile, grateful for her concern. “I’m not after ghosts, but if I was, I’d have no interest in them chasing me around the cemetery.”

Satisfied with her answer, Hester gave her a nod and returned to her position behind the counter.

Clarity headed for the stairs. It was carpeted with a paisley design of red and gold. Since there was no one to help her to her room, she made due, juggling her cameras and camcorder on one shoulder and gripped the suitcase with her free hand.

Her room stood halfway down the corridor with only seven doors on each side. Her key card slid down easily. The little red light turned to green and she pushed the door open. The room was decorated in blue and brown. The wallpaper had thin stripes with the same colors to match. There was one queen size bed, centered on the far wall with a blue bedspread adorning it. On the opposite side of the room, there stood a nightstand and a dresser with a large mirror hanging on the wall behind it. The bathroom was to the right as she entered the room and a small closet was on the other side of the entryway.

She threw her things down on the bed and glanced at her watch. “Two o’clock.” She had a couple of hours before the sun would set to take some daytime pictures of the graveyard. She opened her suitcase, pulled out her windbreaker, and slipped it on over her sweater. She already had her walking boots on and her well-worn jeans would be fine for her afternoon hike.

With her digital camera in hand, she headed down the stairs again. As she neared the bottom she slowed her pace, noticing an old man standing there, staring up at her. His eyes were dark and his mouth sunk in as if he forgot to put in his dentures this morning.

“Miss Shaw?” he asked, looking directly at her.

Her right brow shot up and goose bumps rose on her forearm. She didn’t understand the reaction. The man seemed harmless enough. There wasn’t any reason for her to fear him and yet, a ping of caution erupted in her chest. “Yes?” She reached the bottom step, glancing toward the reception area. She noticed the sign stating the receptionist would be back in an hour. *Great*. They were alone in a virtually empty hotel.

“I’m Mr. Donner,” he introduced himself. “We spoke on the phone a few months ago about the cemetery,” he added.

Immediately relief flooded her senses. “Yes, of course. It’s nice to finally meet you.” Funny, she pictured a much younger man at the time. His voice had the same resonance to it, but there was a slight shake in the volume of his words. As if speech was difficult for any length of time.

“I’m glad you were able to make the arrangements to visit.”

She was too. This was her first assignment. She just started working at Unbelievable Finds. The home office was situated in Seattle. She knew the owners, Aubrey Jules and Loretta Sinclair, from college. Since the magazine was doing so well, they asked her to join the team.

On one of Aubrey Jules’ assignments about a *fairy magic box* and *soul mates*, she ran into an old boyfriend. They rekindled their romance and now it looked like Aubrey was going to relocate to California to be with him. Aubrey would cover the west coast and she was hired to cover the east. The Internet made it easy to pass the information along to Loretta who was a genius when it came to editing. She also designed the cover art for the magazine, which turned out to be a selling point in their favor. She went with the eerie, which screamed: *pick me up and find out what’s inside*.

“I was heading out to the cemetery right now,” she told Mr. Donner.

His frown proved troublesome. “The sun will set in a few hours and tonight’s Halloween, the anniversary of the duel.”

Yeah, she hadn’t forgotten what day it was, but for some reason she had a hunch she was missing something important. It was a good thing Mr. Donner decided to fill her in on the pagan beliefs of Samhain.

“The veil between the otherworld is thin on Halloween and you don’t know what will cross over. The Tempest Gate Cemetery is no longer on consecrated ground. If you’re not prepared, it’s not safe to be on the grounds after dark.”

She had to keep reminding herself there were people who truly believed in ghost stories and haunted places. They expected her to share their beliefs since she worked for a paranormal magazine. When she took this gig, she hadn't thought acting was a requirement. She had to keep a straight face and not crack a smile while she pretended the boogiemani was real and monsters lived in closets. "I'll be fine, but I appreciate your concern."

He shook his head. "I thought I'd have more time," he mumbled under his breath before his tired gaze met hers. "You look like the Peabodys."

"So I've been told."

"Are you a witch, too?"

She cleared her throat, thinking the conversation had taken a wrong turn somehow. "No. Remember, I told you that I worked for the paranormal magazine."

"I recall, but you're a blood relative of the Peabodys'. You have the power to lift the curse."

She opened her mouth then shut it again and tried not to smile. "Listen, my interests here are purely curiosity about my family's history and the chance to write an intriguing story for the magazine. I haven't a clue how to break a curse." She lifted her hands palms up in a shrug. "Really. I promise you I'm not a witch."

Mr. Donner seemed hard pressed to let this go. "You're of her blood—the witch's. The glamour is there. You must know how to break the curse."

"Okay," she said slowly, trying to think of a nice way to end this conversation. Funny, over the phone, she hadn't pictured Mr. Donner as a man who was a little touched in the head. Curses and witches—his serious expression proved he truly believed in them. She took a deep breath. "I'll keep what you said in mind, but I should really head out now. You know, before the sun sets."

He moved aside and she walked past him. Even though she didn't believe in ghosts, Mr. Donner's parting words chilled her all the same. "You must leave before the fog rolls in. If you don't, it will be too late."

About the Author:

Karen Michelle Nutt lives in California with her husband, three fascinating children, four dogs, three cats, and a guinea pig. Jack, her Chihuahua/Yorkshire terrier is her writing buddy and sits long hours with her at the computer.

Her book *Lost in the Mist of Time* was nominated for New Books Review Spotlight Best Fantasy Book of the Year Award. *A Twist of Fate* was a nominee for Best Time Travel P.E.A.R.L. Award for 2008. *Creighton Manor* won Honorable Mention P.E.A.R.L. Award 2009.

In her spare time, she reviews books for PNR—Paranormal Romance Reviews. An avid reader of history, romance, and the paranormal, she tends to combine the three in her writings. She enjoys travel, old movies, books, and the chance to weave a tale.

Visit the author at www.kmnbooks.com. Stop by her blog for Monday interviews, chats, and contests at kmnbooks.blogspot.com

Ms. Nutt specializes in Time Travel and Otherworldly Romances

Always and Forever

by
Cheryl Pierson

Chapter One

"I'm sorry, Jack." Cindy Taylor looked down at her six-year-old grandson, then glanced again at the sad excuse for a jack-o-lantern they were trying to carve together. Winning the school carnival pumpkin judging competition was going to be out of their reach tonight, Cindy thought ruefully. "I guess I'm out of practice. It's been a lot of years since I did this last."

Jack patted her arm seriously. "It's all right, Nana. It's been a long time since you had a kid. You'll do better next year." But Cindy could see the disappointment in her grandson's features—the deep brown eyes and square chin that reminded her so much of his father it hurt.

The school gymnasium had been transformed with colored lanterns and Halloween decorations in orange, black, and purple hues. Crepe paper streamers hung across the rafters and cutouts of witches, spiders, and black cats were attached at different heights.

The school principal, Mr. Jameson, and several of the teachers were in costume around the room, distributing candy, and hosting the activities and games. Cindy had even brought herself to enter the gypsy fortune teller's booth earlier, pushing aside the feeling of unreasoning trepidation. Thankfully, her "fortune" proved so ludicrous she'd barely managed to keep from laughing before she exited the small enclosure. Finding a second chance at love at her age was a miracle not even a real gypsy could arrange.

"Really," Jack said, fidgeting beside her now. "It looks...all right."

Jack's attempt at comforting her brought a lump to her throat. As much as she'd lost this past year, he had lost more. Her son and daughter-in-law had been killed in a car accident. Jack had lost his entire world. And now, he was trying to console her over the tacky job she'd done of pumpkin carving.

This was supposed to be fun. An alternative to going door-to-door for treats. A wave of nostalgia washed over her as she remembered past Halloween holidays. Her son, Brian, had always loved this holiday above all others. But for her, the noise of the crowded room suddenly seemed

overwhelming. She wanted it to be over, and she wanted to be someplace soothing. Someplace quiet.

“Nana? Is it all right if I go over there?”

A group of boys stood waiting their turn to go into the inflatable castle. Cindy smiled. “Sure. You go ahead, sweetie. I’ll see if I can’t make ol’ Snaggletooth, here, a bit more presentable.”

“Jack!”

He turned at the excited voice, a smile lighting his face. “Star!” He ran forward and grabbed his classmate by the hand. Jack pulled the girl toward her, and Cindy bent low as he introduced them.

“Nana, this is my very best friend, Star Ross. She’s the one I told you about that can play the wooden flute, and she makes up her own music, too!”

Cindy looked into the girl’s face. Her Indian heritage was evident in the high cheekbones, dark eyes, and her coal black hair.

“And she can *dance*!”

Cindy couldn’t help but laugh at Jack’s enthusiasm. “Hello, Star. I’m Jack’s grandmother.”

“Wow. You don’t seem like a *grandmother*!” The smile never left Star’s face. “You’re too young. And pretty!”

Before Cindy could reply, a male voice interrupted. “Hey, where’s my girl gotten off to?” Cindy looked up to see a tall, muscular man coming toward them. There was no doubt he was related to Star. His black eyes flashed with the same mischievous glint, his skin the same gorgeous olive color as Star’s.

“Hey, Jack!” He reached to shake Jack’s hand as he joined them.

“I’m Star’s dad, Gage Ross.” He gave Cindy a slow smile, extending his hand to her. She took it, mesmerized, barely remembering her manners at the last second.

“Cindy Taylor. I’m...uh, Jack’s—” She broke off, suddenly hating the word ‘grandmother.’ There was only one word worse in her book, and Jack chose that particular time to use it.

“This is my granny, Mr. Ross. I just call her Nana, though.”

Cindy couldn’t remember ever wanting a roll of duct tape as badly as she did right at the moment. She felt the flush burning her neck and face in record time.

Gage seemed to understand. He regarded her gravely, not glancing at Jack. “You have a lovely Nana, Jack. Thank you for the introduction.”

“Can we go now?” Jack asked. “I see Derek over there.”

“Sure,” Cindy answered softly. She glanced down to give Jack a reminder to be careful, only to find that he and Star were already halfway across the gym floor.

“I’ve been waiting a long time to meet you,” Gage said. “Seems like forever.”

Cindy gave him a questioning look, and he laughed. “I know, school’s only been in session for a little over two months now, but Jack and I have become fast friends. He talks about you a lot. He and Star are close, and I spend a lot of time here volunteering.”

A guilty pang shot through Cindy’s heart. There was no reason she couldn’t have spent more time volunteering here, herself. No reason other than the fact that she still hadn’t managed to get herself together after Brian’s death six months earlier. Jack seemed to be doing a better job of it than she was, she thought ruefully.

“What do you do? Here, I mean? When you volunteer—” The flurry of questions sounded silly. She stopped and bit her lip. It was always this way when she got nervous. She seemed to speak before she thought. But with Gage’s dark, all-seeing eyes pinning her, rooting her to the spot where she stood, it stood to reason she’d be flustered. On top of everything, she suddenly realized how totally ridiculous she must look, the plastic pumpkin scoop in one hand, and the evidence of her poor efforts at carving a jack-o-lantern on the makeshift plywood table beside her.

Gage’s lips quirked. “I do a lot of things, when I’m able to be here. School funding has been cut back so much they can always use an extra pair of hands. And I’m not picky. I do everything from fixing the floor buffer to test monitoring.”

“A man of many skills.” Cindy glanced down at the pumpkin self-consciously. “I don’t suppose, by any chance, that you’re also an expert pumpkin sculptor?”

Gage chuckled and stepped forward, bending to examine the pumpkin. He whistled low and heaved a sigh, turning the orange globe toward the light then picking it up to have a closer look. “Wow.”

Cindy had to laugh at his perplexed expression. “I know. It’s bad. I never was any good at that, even when Brian was—” Unexpected tears threatened and she turned away. Gage laid a strong hand on her shoulder. For some reason, it seemed right to turn back toward him, into the shelter of his arms.

“I’m sorry,” she muttered. His arms closed around her, holding her close to his body. She savored the feeling of being held. With a shock, she realized how she had missed that—the need for a simple touch. But there was nothing “simple” about it. Her entire body tingled as she became

aware of being enfolded by the powerful, tight-muscled embrace of the first man to touch her like this since her divorce eight years earlier.

He smelled good. All male. The scent of wood smoke and the outdoors seemed to be part of his very essence. For an instant, she wanted nothing so much as to melt into this stranger's hard chest. She began to pull away reluctantly, getting control of her emotions, stiffening her spine.

"Don't be sorry," he said in a quiet voice. "Jack told me about his mom and dad. Hey, I didn't mean to embarrass you, Cindy. It was a normal reaction on my part." He stepped back, his eyes warm with laughter again as he tried to lighten the moment. "Pretty dumb-looking, if you ask me. Hugging you with a pumpkin in my hand." He set it down on the table and picked up a carving tool. "No, ma'am, you do not have to supervise," he joked, his attention given once more to correcting her carving attempts. "I actually am pretty good at this, and believe me, I'm well past six years old."

Cindy gave a short laugh. He was giving her a chance to regain the composure that had crumbled and deserted her moments ago. If she allowed herself to think about his kindness, the tears would come again. She focused instead on the unfamiliar dawning sense of contentment she felt in his presence, and searched for a safe topic.

"Star is a beautiful girl. I know you're proud of her." She reached to hand him one of the tools which lay near the edge of the table.

He pulled a chunk of pumpkin out and threw it into a nearby trashcan. "I am. I try to help out here as much as I can since I work a lot of evenings." He glanced up at her, seeing the next question in her face. "Oklahoma City Fire Department. This is one of my nights off."

Cindy nodded. "I'm sure being a fire fighter is a thankless job. Lots of long hours—"

He gave her a quick grin. "I don't mind. Just want Star to have the best." He made another cut on the pumpkin. "What do you do?"

Cindy didn't answer immediately. *What do I do?* She felt as if she'd been living in a fog for the past six months since Brian's death. She'd been so focused on her own grief at losing her son that she'd forgotten how to live.

"After my son and daughter-in-law were killed—well, Jack had no one but me." She steadied her voice as Gage looked up at her from where he knelt on the floor. "He came to live with me last April, when—after the accident."

"That's tough, Cindy. I'm sorry."

She nodded and looked down. "Thank you." Mustering a smile, she met his eyes once more. "Anyhow, before that, I worked in the corporate office here for South Wind Media."

"Glamorous."

"Not really." She smiled at his assessment. "Stressful was more like it. I'm glad to be able to be here for Jack right now." She glanced at the inflatable castle just as Jack and his friends emerged and headed for the next station, a ring toss game.

Gage stood up, his gaze following hers to the children before he bent to put the final touches on the jack-o-lantern. "I know what you mean. When my ex-wife left, I had to take a leave of absence to stay home with Star. She was afraid I would disappear too." He shook his head in remembrance. "That was a hard time. But we made it."

Watching Star now, there was no evidence of uncertainty or insecurity. Gage had seemingly worked a miracle with his daughter. "How long ago has that been?"

"Two years. But emotionally, Tara'd already been gone from us a lot longer than that. To tell the truth, it was a relief when she finally said goodbye and moved in with her boyfriend. He was a lot younger than me. A lot younger than *her* too. But we got started late, having a family. Good thing, as it turned out, although I always thought—" He shrugged. "I always thought I'd like to have more than one. Star gets lonely sometimes." He shot a glance toward the front hall where the fortune teller's stall was located. "According to the gypsy, I'm not done yet." His lips quirked up. "Though, at forty-five, I think she may have gotten my future confused with someone else's."

Cindy grinned. "I think she's got a few good lines she uses on everyone."

"You went in?"

Cindy nodded, embarrassed. "Yeah. But once I got inside there I was sorry I went. She's...pretty realistic. Kinda scary."

Gage's lips thinned as he concentrated on redeeming the jack-o-lantern. After a moment, he looked up at Cindy. "Come on. You're not worried about your fortune, are you?"

"Heavens, no!" She gave a short laugh. "Supposedly, I'm to have a *second chance at love very soon*." She rolled her eyes.

Gage didn't laugh. His gaze remained intent upon her. "You don't believe in love, Cindy?"

She felt her cheeks begin to burn under his steady perusal. "I know it's out there. But...maybe it's second chances I don't believe in, Gage. At least, not for me."

He looked down, perplexed, and then raked a hand through his dark hair. "It's crazy in here. Do you want to go get some ice cream or something? After they get done with the games and judge the jack-o-lanterns? I mean..."

He looked as if he wanted to take back the invitation as soon as he spoke it.

Cindy smiled at him. "You look scared to death."

He laughed outright. "I am. I swore off women two years ago, when Tara walked out."

"You're safe with me. Remember, I'm Jack's *granny*." She pulled a face as she said it.

"Best looking *granny* I've ever seen," he teased. A look of peace settled in Gage's dark features as he sobered. "Just be gentle with me, Cindy. This ol' heart's still pretty bruised."

Unthinking, she reached out and laid a hand on his arm. It seemed as if it were the most natural thing to do. As she touched the soft cotton material, felt the tension in his muscles, then the relaxation seconds later, she knew it had been the *right* thing, too.

"It's okay, Gage. No matter what happens, it's okay."

He put his hand over hers and squeezed a tender thanks. "Would I be right in guessing you're a chocolate and caramel sundae kind of girl?"

* * * * *

Later as they sat in the hard plastic booths of the nearby Kone King, Gage watched Cindy delicately eat the caramel and hot fudge sundae.

"This is wonderful," she said, flashing him a smile. "I'm glad we came."

"Me too!" Jack added enthusiastically. "We don't eat ice cream much." He turned his attention back to the strawberry sundae.

Gage smiled at Cindy's sudden look of concern. Jack's offhand statement had hit home. "Well, maybe we can come down here once in a while. Get a little more ice cream into you in the future. They say boys need more of that than girls."

"Daddy, that isn't true!" Star declared, laughing.

"Girls have to be more careful or they can't get into their clothes," Cindy murmured quietly.

"Star'll dance off her calories," Gage replied.

Cindy laid her spoon down. "She takes dance lessons?"

"Of sorts. She's learning our dances." At her puzzled look, he added, "The Cherokee."

"Tribal dances. Wow, that's amazing."

Gage could see the fascination in Cindy's blue eyes. He tried to keep his tone neutral, but the interest she showed excited him. It wasn't often a woman like this came along—one who was so selfless, so caring—and who exhibited it in thousands of small ways that couldn't be numbered. A thoughtful hand on his daughter's shoulder, the way she encouraged Jack as he spoke, and the understanding between himself and her when she looked at him.

"She's a natural for it," he said, winking at Star.

"Daddy won't be dancing this time," Star said matter-of-factly. She took a red gummy bear off the top of her ice cream and popped it in her mouth.

"Really?" Cindy asked, shooting Gage a quick look. "Why not?"

"Star—"

But Star ignored him as she plucked another gummy bear from the side of the cup and held it up to examine it before eating it. "On account of his sore ribs. He got hurt at work, but he saved the puppies and their mama."

Gage sighed heavily, wondering when Star had become so talkative. She liked Cindy, or she wouldn't be telling her everything she knew. "Okay, my secret's out."

Cindy met his eyes, and he felt as if he were falling into those blue pools of concern. It had been a long, long time since a woman had worried for him.

"What puppies?" She held Gage's look as Star rattled on.

"In the burning house. They were trapped and my dad chopped through the door and got them all out." She beamed happily, and Gage looked down.

He was no hero, but Star made him sound like Superman or something. Which he wasn't. But when Cindy looked at him like she was right now, he damn sure felt like he wanted to be.

"What dance is your favorite, Star?" Cindy asked, a gentle note in her voice.

"The jingle dance—but the dress is really heavy."

"Oh, I wish I could see you!"

"Really?" Gage asked in a low voice. "If you're interested, you could go with us this weekend. We have a family powwow in Tahlequah." The invitation was out before he thought about it. And before he could say another word, Cindy reached across the table and took his hand in hers.

"I would love that." In her eyes, Gage saw she meant what she said. She truly was eager to see those old tribal dances he held sacred. And in

that moment, he realized Cindy Taylor was already more a part of who he was than Tara had been during their two years of marriage.

“You’re on, lady. I hope you like camping.”

“I do!” Jack interrupted.

Cindy laughed and ruffled his hair. She shrugged as she looked at Gage. “I’ve never been camping. But I know I’ll like it. There’s no doubt.”

He’d see to that. Suddenly, more than anything, he wanted Cindy Taylor to like everything about the experience. Most of all, he wanted her to love being with *him*. He needed to start trusting someone again sometime. It might as well be her.

About the Author:

Cheryl Pierson is a native of Oklahoma. She lives in the Oklahoma City metro area with her husband. The mother of two grown children, and pet-sitter on occasion, she is always busy. A romance author who loves to read, Cheryl also teaches novel writing classes and is co-owner of West Winds Media, an editing/teaching business for writers. She writes short stories that have been published by Adams Media, novel manuscripts, and has written a screenplay.

Her novel, *Fire Eyes*, was an Epic Award Finalist and Cheryl recently received the PNR PEARL Awards Honorable Mention as Best New Author of 2009. She also placed third in the San Antonio Romance Authors (SARA) Merritt Contest with her newest novel, *Gabriel’s Law*.

To learn more about Cheryl and her exciting books, visit her at www.cherylpierson.com.

Conceived in Darkness

The Darkness series: book 1

by
Laura Shinn

*“Love cannot survive in the heart if
it allows the idiocy of prejudice inside.”*
—Siena Kathryn, *Princess of Astovia*

Chapter One

Astovia – The Royal Palace

Prince Orekon stood straight as a board before his uncle, his face showing no emotion, though he seethed on the inside. Why again must he stand here and listen to the endless reasons why his uncle found it necessary that he find a mate. Orekon knew this already and still remained unmated, for good reason. All of the unattached females in his world wanted him for a mate, though only for his position and looks. Orekon wanted a mate who insisted on knowing the heart he kept buried. None existed on this planet and he'd grown tired of looking.

“Orekon, are you listening?”

He sighed wearily and turned his eyes toward his uncle. His expression said it all—no words were needed.

Piershin dropped his head, shaking it slowly. “I know well why you fight this constant search, Orekon.” He glanced up. “It cannot be avoided. You must find a female and physically mate before sunrise in three days or the crown will be issued to another. And we both know who would—”

Orekon stepped forward and Piershin met his eyes squarely. “No! Gammon has been eagerly awaiting me to refuse to mate. I will *not* give them this opportunity. Leadership under his rule would prove disastrous for our people.”

“I agree.” Piershin closed the distance to only a foot and placed a comforting hand on his nephew's shoulder. “Do what must be done, Orekon...no matter what troubles lay in your heart.”

Orekon looked away for only a moment. “I may choose my own mate, *whoever* she may be?”

A small smile touched Piershin's mouth. "You are the prince of Astovia and the current ruler of your people, since the tragic death of your parents. Who is to say you cannot choose your own mate?"

Piershin smiled wider and his heart felt a deep fondness for Orekon when his nephew returned the gesture.

The prince turned to leave and Piershin's voice rose after him. "Where are you going? It's nearly time for the night meal."

"I will eat later. I'm off to go find my mate." And he knew exactly where to begin.

That said, Orekon turned and walked from the room.

* * * * *

Fort Worth, Texas

October – Bass Hall

Kathryn Schaffer adjusted the weight she carried, a purse on her shoulder and her clarinet case in the opposite hand. The evening's program—Fall Festival Favorites—went beautifully and she felt satisfied with her performance. She'd only been playing with the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra for two years. She felt blessed to be hired as one of the performers in the Wind Section. She honestly believed nothing in her life would ever take the place of the joy she felt when she performed. The thrill of the music was not something easy to describe. When she played, she didn't simply play her part...she *became* the music. Each note, each measure ticked out a wealth of emotion. She loved music. It was her best and only friend. With no family to call her own, these performances were moments she lived for.

With only a few scattered people left in the Hall and Security Officers here and there, Kathryn gathered her belongings and walked toward the Hall's exit doors. Passing the elevator, she turned to go down a narrow corridor barely three feet wide which led to the side exit. From nowhere, strong hands took her upper shoulders in their grasp and pulled her back against a firm chest. The man wasn't rough, but he didn't let go. Kathryn opened her mouth to scream until warm breath fanned her ear, startling her speechless.

"I will not hurt you, female. I need only to speak with you. It is a matter of grave urgency and I fear you may be my final hope."

Even with fear pounding out a hard rhythm inside her chest, her brows wrinkled at his choice of words. *Female? Not lady? Final hope?*

"Ar-are you running from the police?"

"Po-lice?"

"The law? Have you committed a crime?"

“*Ahh*, I see. No, I have committed no crime. I’ve been on your p—in your city for three days, looking for...”

Curious more than afraid, she encouraged, “Yes?”

“I am looking for a female, a, *ugh*, woman. A very brave woman. I mean her no harm. I only wish to—”

By the powers in the universe, he could not think straight with the smell of her in his nostrils. She pulled on his senses and he felt his body quicken, preparing for the mating ritual. In all his years, he’d never experienced this feeling coming over him. This human female, this woman he held firmly against his chest had to be the one he’d spent the last three days searching to find. Longer, actually, if he included the time searching in his own world.

After searching for three days and nights on Earth, he found it difficult to believe that with a planet overrunning with females of the human race, he could not find one who pleased him. He’d spoken to many from areas of darkness so he wouldn’t be seen, some even offering him their bodies. He refused. He could not mate until he found the female chosen to be his mate. He would find her tonight. He must! Orekon felt certain he held the right woman in his arms.

“What?” Kathryn gasped, loving the warm breath he blew into her hair, over her ear and neck. “What is it you wish?”

He couldn’t allow her to see him, not yet. She would go mad with fear if she did. Although he was considered handsome on his world, the purplish cast to his skin signifying royalty would cause her to scream in fright. Of course, telling her his people had a bluish cast would not calm her panic either. He decided to keep her in the dark, for now, literally and figuratively.

Orekon breathed her in deeply. She smelled like a fragrant flower, like the sweetest fruit. Unable to resist, he lowered his head and gently kissed her neck, beneath her ear. Her gasp alarmed him at first that she might try to scream, but when her head tilted to the side to give him better access, he smiled against her warm skin.

Kissing a path down the side of her throat and up to her ear, he blew gently until her head fell back in surrender against his chest. He whispered quietly, for fear of being overheard. “My wish is to belong to you, mate with you. I have searched for a long time and never felt this joy in my body and heart as I do when pressed against you. I have found my *Siena*.”

Kathryn’s eyes popped open wide. *Siena? Is that like a wife?* Yes, she was still a virgin and felt no shame for waiting—but getting married was something else completely. She didn’t even know this man!

Kathryn tried to turn her head to look at him, but he placed his chin against the back of her head, forcing it down with great care. "Please, do not try to turn around. I do not wish to frighten you. I do not have the same appearance as the males you see every day."

She couldn't help it—her heart softened. "Scars aren't something to be ashamed of. And they wouldn't frighten me. What's your name?"

There was a slight pause.

"Orekon."

He rolled the 'r' and the name sounded beautiful and exotic coming from his lips. "That's it? Orekon? No last name?"

"No last name. Where I live, none is needed. Not in my position."

Noise sounded around the corner and the elevator doors opened. Orekon prepared to cover her mouth, but she didn't scream. She didn't move. Curious, he tilted his head slightly to the side to view her profile. She licked her lips and wore a tiny smile, a secret woman's smile. At that moment, he knew exactly what he would do to woo her.

A voice sounded from the group as they left the elevator and headed toward the side door, taking the wider path for visitors.

"Charles, is that the last of 'em?"

"Yeah, plus you and me. Your turn to lock up."

"Already done. This side door is the last one."

"Okay then. Have a good one."

"You too, Charles."

Less than a minute later, all became quiet—except for the accelerated breathing on her neck. It felt delicious. Kathryn had never once experience passion or the tender emotions associated with love. She decided spontaneously those were feelings she would experience tonight. This would probably be her only chance and the only experience. Once he got a good look at her face, it would most definitely be the last. She wasn't pretty, not even when she was younger. Her long, curly chestnut hair was her only and best feature. She took pride in it and pampered it the way someone might do with their nails. For this evening's performance she tucked it up with a silver clip, but she couldn't wait to show him what it looked like down.

"And you?" His deep voice made her jump. Orekon tried to soothe her by rubbing her upper arms gently, up then down. "What are you named?"

"Kathryn Schaffer, with a 'K' and 'y.' I performed the Fall Festival Favorites here this evening with the orchestra."

"I heard a portion of the music and am quite pleased. You possess great talent and beauty."

Kathryn nearly choked. Under her breath she mumbled, “You obviously haven’t had a good look at me yet.”

“I did earlier as you played and trust my words when I say, I am quite pleased,” he said quietly, trailing his lips down the side of her neck once more. Her soft groan urged him into action.

Reaching out a hand toward the elevator, fourteen feet away, it opened under his command. “Come,” he whispered urgently.

Kathryn set down her purse and clarinet and walked toward the elevator as it began to open. No one had pushed the button. “What on earth...?”

Unable to speak, Orekon ushered her inside. The inside doors were mirrored. A quick wave of his hand extinguished all lighting. The doors closed and Orekon waved his hand in order to keep the room immobile. Kathryn gasped, but he kept his hands firmly on her upper arms from behind.

“Do not be alarmed. I have done this so you will not see me and fear me. Darkness can be powerful. It can give courage where none existed before. Please, Kathryn, be courageous.”

“I’ll try.” Her voice sounded tiny and small in the large elevator.

Suddenly, he was gone. He no longer held her firmly by her upper arms. She tried not to scream in fear and bit her tongue to prevent it. *He must still be in the elevator. The door never opened.*

“Orekon?” She sighed in gratitude when her voice emerged strong and with confidence. “Are you still behind me?”

“Yes, Kathryn. I am here.”

Lightning shot down her limbs when he spoke her name so softly, with so much emotion. Orekon was right. The darkness gave her courage, an emotion she’d never experienced before to this degree. She felt powerful, confident, strong...and capable of anything.

Orekon watched as she reached behind her head and pulled the pin to release her dark brown hair. It bounced over her shoulders and down her back. Turning slowly, she faced him, searching the darkness. His private area stirred to full life, thrilling at the view she presented. She couldn’t know that he could see perfectly in the dark, as well as if day. Kathryn had been wrong about her beauty. Her lovely face astounded him and he felt rocked down to the core by the realization he’d finally found his mate and she would be his—tonight.

About the Author:

Laura Shinn has a wonderful husband (since 1986) and two boys, Josh (born 1991) and Nathan (born 1998). They currently live south of Fort Worth, Texas. They have four dogs, three which were rescued from the local pound and a miniature Schnauzer named Elsie May.

Laura loves to read and the desire to write comes to her daily. New ideas for novels pop into her head at the most inconvenient times, particularly while in the shower or driving.

An award-winning cover artist, Laura struggles to find time for completing professionally crafted book covers, writing new stories, and spending time with family.

Visit Laura to find out more about her busy world and all of her great projects at: www.laurashinn.com.

A Haunting Love

by
Rebecca J. Vickery

Chapter One

*Salem, South Carolina
2010*

Trudy paused at the top of the staircase. She leaned against the wall and tried to keep her breathing quiet. Shadows encased the lower floor of the old house. She couldn't see anything, but she knew she heard a strange noise. Not the ordinary creaks and groans of the house settling, which she became used to the last few nights, but a real, *bona fide* noise.

Uhhnnnn...

There—she heard it again. Pressing back against the wall, she tried to decide whether to look for the source of the sound or call the police. A weapon... If she just had a weapon, she would look for it. Wrapping the towel more securely around her wet hair, she tightened her robe and waited, thinking, trying to decide her best course of action.

Uhhnnnn...

Trudy hurried back along the hallway into the bedroom. She searched quickly and found an umbrella in an antique stand in the corner. She'd much prefer a baseball bat, but this would have to do. Grabbing her keychain with the penlight on it, she held the closed umbrella out in front of her. Thankfully, it wasn't one of those compact, fold-up things most women kept. This was a good solid, wood-handled bumbershoot.

As she heard the noise again, somewhat louder this time but still not clear enough to identify, Trudy returned to the staircase and crept down one at a time. Hiding in the shadowy darkness on the bottom step, she strained her ears, listening. No footsteps, but over the wild thumping of her heart, she heard a rustling noise outside.

Gasping, Trudy clutched the handle of the old umbrella tighter. *Why on earth did I agree to house-sit the week of Halloween, anyway? And in this spooky mausoleum? I sure wish Mr. and Mrs. Gambrell owned a huge German shepherd instead of two cats and a room full of birds.*

Trudy stepped off the remaining tread and tiptoed into the dark foyer. At the bank of switches on the wall by the door, she paused. Instead of wasting time trying to remember which was which, she flipped them all.

Nothing happened. No lights to fend off the gloomy shadows. *Oh Lord, what now?* Flipping the switches repeatedly did no good.

Uhhhhnnn...

There was that sound again. *Where is it coming from?* She tilted her head to the side and waited, hoping to identify it if she heard it again, which she hoped she didn't. Then a thud sounded from the side porch.

Well, that does it! Trudy raced to the ancient-looking telephone in the front parlor, tucked the umbrella under her arm, and dialed 9-1-1 with shaking hands.

"9-1-1, what is your emergency?"

"I..." Trudy swallowed and tried again. She fought back the urge to scream *HELP* at the top of her voice. "I think there's a prowler trying to get in. Please hurry..." she whispered urgently.

"What is your location?"

"Th... The Gambrell residence on Whitney Street. Number 1313."

"Are you alone, ma'am? Are you sure about the prowler?"

Trudy heard scraping noises at the door.

"Would you please send the police? Someone is trying to get in the house. I'm house-sitting. The Gambrell's are on a trip. Hurry!"

"We have a patrol car on the way. Stay on the line. Are you on a cordless phone?"

"No... There's no cordless phone. Why?" Trudy couldn't help wondering why this woman would ask dumb questions when she was about to be attacked by a burglar *OR WORSE*.

"You could take a cordless receiver into a secured room with you while waiting on the police, ma'am. Is there an extension in a room you can lock, a bedroom, or a bathroom?"

Well, that does make sense. Trudy tried to remain calm, but heard a louder thump against the door followed by the weird groaning sound again. She whispered into the phone, "I'm leaving the phone off the hook and locking myself in the bathroom. Tell the officers the prowler is on the porch at the side of the house away from the turret."

Not waiting for a response, Trudy laid the phone on the table and hurried to the powder room tucked beneath the stairs. She locked the door and waited in the dark, her penlight and keys clutched in one hand, the umbrella pointed like a sword.

Trudy soon grew tired of standing and dropped to sit on the *throne* lid. She couldn't hear anything from in here, which irritated her no end.

Deciding to do something useful, she rubbed her hair with the towel then tossed it in a corner before picking up her umbrella once more.

Twice, she almost unlocked the door, listening with her ear pressed tight to the wood. But at the last minute fear wouldn't allow her to open it. Trudy finally heard a loud pounding at the front door.

"Miss... Miss? It's the police. Are you all right in there?"

Trudy unlocked the door and raced from the bathroom. "I'm here. Don't leave, please!" She called out as she twisted the night-latches and opened the door, forgetting she wore only her robe.

"We're still here, Ma'am." The officer tipped his cap to her and smiled as his flashlight beam revealed her gaping, fluorescent pink robe and damp, stringy hair. "We found your prowler. We called animal control to come pick him up."

"Animal control? I don't understand." As Trudy spoke, every light in the front section of the house and around the veranda suddenly flashed on. She blinked owlishly up at the man, momentarily blinded by the bright lights.

"Uhm... May I?"

At her suspicious nod, the policeman reached past her and turned off several of the switches, leaving one light glowing on the porch and one in the foyer. She caught the faint scent of Old Spice. *No one wears that anymore, do they? But, on him, it sure smells...mm-hmm, scrumptious.*

"Thank you," Trudy sighed, attempting to pull her mind away from his sexy scent. "Now what was that about animal control?"

"There's a large injured dog on the side porch. Looks like it may have been hit by a car and crawled over here. My partner is waiting with it until the truck comes."

"Will it be all right?" Trudy felt embarrassed not to have checked out what was there before calling the emergency number. *What would an average house-sitter have done?* "I'm so sorry I bothered you. I..." She put a hand to her chest, clutching her robe closer, and stared toward their feet as she felt a warm flush crawl up her neck to her cheeks.

"You did exactly right, ma'am. I wouldn't want my mom or my sis to go to the door to check out a noise if she were alone either."

Trudy looked up then, taking in the officer's handsome appearance in his dark blue uniform. She remembered seeing this guy around town and he was a hottie. His blond hair beneath his cap was clean-cut over his ears, his chin freshly-shaven, and his shoulders broad and strong. He stood well over a head taller and she craned her head back to see the color of his eyes. *Blue...* A clear, cerulean blue, like the sky—her favorite color. *And the scent? Definitely Old Spice.*

“What’s your name?”

“What?” Trudy tore her gaze away from his beautiful eyes and saw he held a pad and a pen. “Are you giving me a ticket?” Her voice rose at the end. That would be par for the course, but hardly seemed fair.

He chuckled as he answered, “No, ma’am, no ticket. I have to fill out a report about the 9-1-1 call. It’s procedure. May I have your name?”

“Oh, okay. Trudy, er... Gertrude Simpleton. And don’t you dare laugh.”

“Uhm...” He barely held it in check, but it was due to her tone which reminded him of his spinster aunt. “No ma’am, I won’t. And the address here is 1313 Whitney Street?”

“That’s right.” Trudy saw the truck bearing the city pound logo stop in front of the house and two men emerge. “They won’t hurt it will they?”

“No, Miss Simpleton, they handle injured animals all the time. They’ll take it to the shelter where a vet will take a look at it. Hopefully, they can locate the owner.”

“Oh, good. I wouldn’t want anything else to happen to the poor thing.”

After a slight commotion on the side porch, the men carried the now muzzled, large, white dog between them and placed it in a cage on the back of the truck. Another policeman walked over to join Trudy and the officer in the front doorway.

He tipped his cap to Trudy and smiled. “Sorry he gave you a scare, Miss. He was just trying to find a place to lick his wounds or get some help. He knocked over a large potted plant around there.”

“That must have been the loud noise I heard. Will he be okay, do you think?” Trudy wanted to know.

“Sure, I think so. He’s got a bum leg, but looks like he’ll get over it just fine. You almost done here, Simon?”

Trudy’s green eyes sparkled up at the cute policeman. “Simon?” *Simple Simon* flashed through her mind for some idiotic reason.

“Yes’m, Simon Gunn.” He grinned down at her, liking her perkiness and odd sense of humor. She smelled like something he couldn’t quite place, but it made him hungry and also made him want to lean closer for a better sniff.

She sensed there was more to his name by the way he grinned. “Oh, no... Let me guess, your middle name is Peter?” *Peter Gunn, like the old detective show, is even better than Simple Simon.*

“Ma’am, please don’t ever breathe a word of it.” He winked and whispered confidentially, “I’d never live it down.” Then in a more business-like tone, he continued, “I’ll get the time of the call and the other

stuff from the dispatcher. Since we resolved your problem, we'll be on our way." He reached to close the screen door at the same time she did.

As their hands brushed, they both looked up, their eyes met and held. The shared laughter lingered, and something more. A sudden interest, a flare of...

She didn't know a flare of what—maybe recognition of kindred spirits? Surely nothing else on such short acquaintance, but it sure *felt* like something else. Trudy securely locked the door as the officers returned to their patrol car. *Well, definitely enough excitement for one night. But it was almost worth being scared witless to meet Officer Simon Peter Gunn. His parents must have a wicked sense of humor.*

"Yeah, you come out now, Harvey," she told the large, yellow tomcat as he prowled across to rub against her legs. "What if there really was a prowler and he'd gotten me? Who would feed you then?" His black female companion meowed from the doorway where she sat delicately washing a paw. "And you're a lot of help, Mittens."

Remembering to place the telephone receiver back on the hook, Trudy checked to be sure the cat bowl held dry nibbles. Then she turned off the lights and climbed the stairs to return to her room. She needed to be up early to go to work. Tomorrow should be a busy day.

About the Author:

Rebecca J. Vickery writes contemporary romance with a twist of the paranormal (special gifts), adventure, mystery, or suspense along the way to a happy ever after ending. She also added speculative fiction and suspense short stories to her list and is enjoying the new challenge. Most recently Rebecca founded Victory Tales Press, a small independent press for a select group of authors. She also began an Indie-Publishing Press to help other authors self-publish, simply called Publishing by Rebecca J. Vickery

Married to the same extremely patient man since 1975, Rebecca has one son and three wonderful grandchildren plus a neurotic toy poodle. She is the primary caregiver for her mother and a firm believer in the saving grace of God.

To keep up with Rebecca's latest projects visit www.romancewithatwist.com.

About the Publisher:

Victory Tales Press, a product of brainstorming by Rebecca J. Vickery and Laura Shinn, was founded in March, 2010, as a small independent publisher of romance anthologies.

In an enthusiastic response, a select group of invited authors have joined together to provide quality, romance-based stories. With entertainment and value in mind, an average of five stories by five different authors will be published per book at various times throughout the year.

Sweet, sensual, stimulating, and spicy tales of romance beginning in the days of old and traveling far into the future will be offered. These books will include every romance sub-genre from fantasy/paranormal, western and suspense, and historical, but will not include erotica or other than traditional male/female relationships. Each anthology will clearly state the content rating to avoid disappointing or surprising their readers.

If you enjoyed this preview please find the links to their many distributors here:

<http://victorytalespress.yolasite.com/online-store.php>

Please watch for future releases from Victory Tales Press by joining them at:

<http://victorytalespress.yolasite.com>

or at their public forum:

<http://victorytalespress.lefora.com>

Four fantastic books, A Christmas Collection Anthologies, will be released in mid-November 2010 featuring up to twenty talented authors and their sweet to spicy romance novelettes and novellas. Please join them as they celebrate Christmas and the holidays in their own unique, but entertaining style.