

CRIMSON VENGEANCE

by

Sheri Lewis Wohl



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Meriel floated into the room and Catherine's heart fluttered. Lady Meriel Danson was tall enough to meet the gaze of most of the men, with full breasts and eyes as green as emeralds. Her golden hair fell across her shoulders in lush curls and the crimson velvet dress flowed as she walked, her pale, flawless skin beautiful. She was the most stunning woman in the room and Catherine wasn't the only one who noticed. Tonight, all eyes followed her.

Like the precious jewel she was, Meriel smiled and flirted with adoring gentlemen as she crossed the room. They vied for her attention, some subtly, some with unabashed boldness most unbecoming. No one wished to be left out. The men wanted her. The women envied her. Catherine just smiled. Little did they know, Meriel's heart was already taken by a love as secret as it was forbidden.

Tonight, as every night, their secret would stay buried. It was more important to be pretty. To be seen. To dance. Neither of the young women would disappoint their families or their suitors. Indeed, Catherine and Meriel danced and smiled until late into the night, when the stars sparkled like diamonds in a jet black sky and the air outside was filled with the heavy scent of smoke.

It seemed an eternity before they were at last alone in the elegant carriage summoned to take them back into the city and to the

world that demanded their unquestioned obedience. For two blessed hours they'd be alone, with darkness as their friend and protector. No prying eyes to spy on them or men with sweaty hands guiding them to the dance floor where they could subtly brush against their breasts and pretend it was unintentional.

Meriel's body pressed against Catherine's and everything else drifted away. Outside, the winter wind slapped against the carriage, the night sky a pitch black cover sprinkled with the twinkling light of a thousand stars. The wheels of the carriage bumped along the rutted and muddy road, but inside the carriage cushions were soft.

It was their time, their special world. Catherine lifted her arms to pull her precious love close. She kissed Meriel, her tongue darting between her lips, exploring, tasting. A fire began in Catherine's body, racing through her like the most powerful conflagration. How she treasured every moment, every kiss, every touch.

Meriel moaned and gathered her close as her hands moved to unlace the bodice of Catherine's fine wool dress. The supple fabric parted and her breast was bared, eager for the touch of Meriel's lips. Catherine sighed when Meriel took a nipple into her moist, hot mouth.

Catherine needed to feel the softness of Meriel's breasts and she pushed the velvet dress off Meriel's shoulders until she held them in her hands, brushing her thumbs across each nipple. She pinched them and smiled when Meriel groaned. In the darkness, they touched each other, skin to skin.

They made love inside the small black carriage as the storm outside rumbled and growled, growing ever louder as it raged. Catherine took no notice of the storm, her body alive with wondrous sensations. She cried out as Meriel's tongue brought her to a roaring climax.

She didn't want the night to end. How glorious it would be to stay here wrapped in Meriel's arms. Alas, too soon they would reach the city and once again become proper ladies to be dressed up like perfect little dolls. Their families expected obedience, if not enthusiasm, for events such as tonight's ball, all for the purpose of securing the highest bidders. Their fathers would sell them off in

the name of socially acceptable marriages. In reality it was little different than the sale of prized livestock.

Catherine wouldn't be surprised to discover the deal for her own hand in marriage had already been made. Her father would like nothing better than to send her to the home of some rich and titled old man. Since the day of her mother's death one year earlier, it was as if her father could no longer stand the sight of her. Catherine would not think of that now. In this moment, she could share her love and her body with the one person who made her feel alive.

Catherine drifted into sleep despite the bumps and sways of the carriage. Her body was sated and her heart soaring. She rested her head against Meriel's velvet-covered shoulder and floated dreamily on the scent of jasmine perfume. She loved that smell.

Sometime later, Catherine awoke with a start. Disoriented, she slowly remembered where she was. She straightened and peered into the darkness of the empty carriage. Could they be home already? Her heart sank. The trip was too quick and she'd wasted so much of her time with Meriel asleep.

Catherine tidied her gown, patted her hair, and pulled the thick black cloak tight around her body. She opened the small door, stepped outside, and faltered, nearly losing her footing in the thick mud of the road. In the air wafted a hint of jasmine, but now it was mixed with something else: bitter, rancid. Catherine pulled her cloak tighter.

Silence hung oddly in the air, broken only by the soft snorts of horses nervously pawing the ground. Catherine turned her head, letting her gaze drift from the night sky to the landscape surrounding the stalled carriage. She pushed her hand against her lips at the same time a gust of wind ripped through the air, sending a spray of icy rain to slash across her face.

Their driver lay sprawled in the middle of the muddy road, his eyes sightless. Blood trickled from the wound that had almost separated his head from his body. Catherine spun away from the sight, her heart pounding.

As she stumbled from the carriage, her gaze was drawn to the sodden earth and what should not have been. Meriel lay in a

pool of moonlight, dark streaks marring her perfect, white skin like shattered red silk tossed across a snow-covered meadow. Raindrops fell onto Meriel's pale cheeks. Mixed with the rain, blood slid down her face and neck, pooling on the ground beneath her tangled golden hair. Her head lay at an odd angle, and when Catherine realized why, her screams echoed through the darkness.

They can conquer
who believe
they can.

Virgil
70 BC–19 BC

CHAPTER ONE

Moses Lake, Washington
Present Day

Early spring usually arrived with blooming daffodils. This year it arrived with dead bodies. After all these years, Coroner Ivy Hernandez would have thought she'd be accustomed to death. She'd been at this game a long time and had seen everything from car accidents to suicides to drive-by shootings. Lately, a lot of drive-by shootings—thank you, twenty-first-century culture. Still, experience didn't make it any easier. Death was ugly, period.

With her hands stuck in the pockets of her light jacket, Ivy watched a deputy fish the latest unfortunate out of the drink. The lake was still cold as an iceberg, and no one had wanted that particular job.

The water, though clean compared to most in the country, was murky and didn't give up its secrets willingly. They'd found this guy, like the last one, only because the motion of the water pushed him toward the shore and a watchful neighbor had seen him bobbing in shallow water. Today, the morning air had a bite to it and the sky hung gray with a hint of moisture. If they were lucky they'd get the body loaded before the rain hit.

Dressed in a black wetsuit from neck to ankles, Deputy Daryl Wilson looked like something out of a horror movie as he waded

in from the waist-deep water, pulling the body behind him. He was huffing and puffing by the time he had the dead man on dry land.

Sodden slacks stuck to long legs, and what was once a nice jacket hung on one arm, misshapen and ruined. A cotton dress shirt, open almost to the waist, had fallen back to reveal a smooth chest and a pale expanse of neck. His face held no expression, his eyes a pale, red-rimmed blue. Two puncture wounds at the base of his neck looked a bit like he'd lost the battle with a really big rattlesnake. It wasn't the wounds that made Ivy's heart race, or the blue of his eyes; it was the touch of color in his cheeks.

Ivy crouched and very gently touched the base of his neck. Icy flesh met her warm fingertips. Not even a whisper of a pulse. He was dead all right. Dead with just an ever-so-faint touch of pink in his cheeks.

"Shit," she muttered as she stood and pulled her cell phone from her pocket. Putting some distance between herself and the body, she turned her back to Daryl and the rest of the first responders who surrounded the inert form. "Riah," she said, after she heard the beep that put her into Riah's voice mail. "It's Ivy. I've got another one and I'll be heading your way late this afternoon. Give me a call as soon as you can."

Ivy flipped the phone shut, stuffed it into her pocket, and turned once more to face the dead man. It would be hours before she heard back from Riah. No problem. She didn't need confirmation on the cause of death. No, she needed a different kind of help from her old and trusted friend.

Daryl looked up from where he knelt next to the body. "Hey, Ivy, looks like we got us another one."

He tipped the dead man's head to the side revealing, for all of them to see, small raised punctures marring the expanse of white neck. The lake had stripped away any traces of blood from the wounds. Not that there would be any. There never was.

"Yes." Frowning, she stepped back to allow the newly arrived EMT to do his part. That took all of about thirty seconds, and then she received custody of the body.

Ivy went through the motions. She made notes and diagrams, photographed the body and the landing from every possible angle. Collected potential evidence, checked the body for personal property, and found nothing. No surprise there either.

By the time she finished, her cheeks were raw from the chill wind coming off the lake. Though the day was no longer young, the sky above was about the same as when they'd arrived. Gray and overcast seemed to be the agenda for today. If not for the latex gloves she now peeled off and stuffed into her pocket, her hands would be as cold as her face.

The deputies loaded the body, secure in the labeled and initialed black bag, into the back of her van. Certain things had to be done, both inside the guidelines and out. Time, at least for the moment, was on her side.

Despite the futility of the effort, Ivy walked through the typical steps for a homicide. She had to maintain appearances, after all. Grant County wasn't accustomed to this kind of evil, or even aware of it. If Ivy had her way, it never would be. Some things were best left unexplained. Let the fine folks of the county worry about gangbangers, drugs, and teenage violence. In other words, the regular stuff. She'd take care of the preternatural.

Ivy was the last to leave the park where the boat launch was now empty of both the living and the dead. For a long minute, she sat behind the wheel of the van and looked out over the park. Such a lovely place with trees and the gentle waves of the lake lapping against the swaying dock. It wouldn't be long before recreational boaters and the happy sounds of children playing on the beach filled the air. Every year a few lost their lives, yet the unmarred beauty of the natural setting still brought visitors who didn't fear the power of the water to take away life.

This was different. The man in the back of her van wasn't a drunken sportsman who fell out of his boat. He wasn't a recreational boater out for an evening cruise on the lake. No, more than likely this man's only sin was to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was a victim of pure circumstance, a lamb picked for the slaughter.

And he wasn't the first one.

Each time she hoped it was the last. Until recently, the victims she'd seen were in other places. At least here in Moses Lake, she really thought she'd be out of the loop. These types of victims were most often culled from the ranks of the large cities. In Washington, it was cities like Seattle, Tacoma, or Spokane. Moses Lake was too small and intimate to draw interest. Low and flat, the desert-like landscape didn't beckon to those who needed to hide. It was a place where too many questions would be asked.

When the first victim surfaced, Ivy speculated it was pure chance. A night creature passing through that would continue to bigger and greener fields. She handled the death with as much speed and diplomacy as she could. Questions were kept to a minimum, the press held off, and people quickly forgot the unusual demise of a troubled young man from an equally troubled family.

It was different now. One death could be an accident. Two was deliberate. It wasn't a fluke, and her town was no longer safe.

As Ivy pulled in at the rear of the coroner's office, she turned in her seat, looked over her shoulder, and backed the van up to the double doors. She didn't wait for anyone to come and help her unload. Instead, she opened the van's rear doors and slid the gurney out. She pushed it into the building and down the hall. Once through another set of double doors, she stopped and pulled a set of keys from her pocket. Ten years ago it never would have occurred to her to lock the cold room.



Colin Jamison waited behind a clump of bushes for hours until what he'd swear was the entire Moses Lake police department and emergency-response personnel left the park. Once the van, the cruisers, and emergency vehicles drove away, he walked down to the boat launch. It was quiet now and he narrowed his eyes as he studied the deserted park. Why did he feel like he was very late for a grim game that started without him?

A blast of icy wind hit, and he stuffed his hands into his jacket pockets. He was tired, cold, and, most of all, cranky. He hated this

town smack in the middle of the state of Washington. No Pacific Ocean here. No soaring mountains or endless forests. Here, there were too many tumbleweeds, too much sagebrush, and not enough trees. Not to mention way too many dead bodies with twin holes in the carotid. He'd be relieved when he'd completed the final task and could go home. He kept reminding himself how close he was and how soon it would all be over.

Now, if he could figure out this latest wrinkle.

Standing on the end of the gently swaying dock, Colin did a three-sixty. Not much to see. On the far shore, expensive homes spilled down to the edge of the water, their state-of-the-art docks bobbing slightly. On either side, water stretched as far as he could see. A few ducks paddled about, oblivious to the chilly water temperature.

Behind him were acres of park flowing down to the lake where groomed beaches awaited the sunshine-loving crowds. This early in the year the park was empty. It was, he had to admit, a good place to dump a body in the middle of the night.

With his eyes closed, Colin breathed deeply and listened. He hoped something would come to him—a scent, a sound—anything that might bring him closer to a killer. Nothing. He opened his eyes and pushed the hair off his forehead.

Like the last dump site, this one seemed to be little more than a convenient location. Right off I-90, it would be an easy on and off the interstate. Suck a little blood, drop a body in the lake, and be back on the road in a matter of minutes. Quick and easy for a blood-sucking creature on the move.

He left the beach behind and walked to where his car was parked in a nearby neighborhood. Fortunately no one seemed to have taken notice of or cared that he'd been parked there for a few hours. Once inside, Colin pulled a map from the black duffel on the backseat. The map spread out, he used a pen from the console to make a red *X* where the body was found. The circle was growing smaller as it moved in the direction of what Colin felt certain was the apex.

A little over a hundred miles to the east was the city of Spokane, and it was there the vampire appeared to be heading. Colin would be right behind her before the sun set.

It was five o'clock by the time he'd stopped for something to eat and then revisited the other drop sites for one last look around. He kept hoping something would come to him but it didn't. He still wasn't sure why this place. The day didn't have enough hours left to figure it out either.

Colin got back into his car and, after checking his navigator, had the address of the coroner's office in the center of the town. He put the car in gear and started to drive away from the park. He'd need to get into the place before dark to make sure the locals didn't get a nasty surprise.

Just a few blocks down Stratford Road, he made a U-turn to head back in the direction of the freeway. He almost missed it, then caught it out of the corner of his eye—the coroner's van heading south toward the on-ramp of I-90. When he closed the gap, he could see the driver was the same woman who'd been down on the dock earlier. The same one who secured the body bag. The van pulled onto the freeway headed east. He followed, keeping enough distance between the van and his car to avoid arousing suspicion. Not easy, considering the driver of the van wasn't exactly keeping to the speed limit. Getting pulled over wouldn't be good. It also wouldn't be good if he lost sight of the van. He pressed the accelerator.

"Slow down, will ya," he muttered.

There was always a chance the body from the lake was back at the morgue in Moses Lake and he was now in the process of chasing his tail, although he really didn't think so. His gut told him the two things he sought were right in front of him: one, in the back of the van, and the other, somewhere in the heart of the city ahead. He kept his speed up and the van in sight.

Colin yawned and rubbed his eyes with the back of one hand. Man, he was tired, and much more than just physically. His neck ached, his eyes burned, and his arms were leaden.

His spirit was weary as well. He was tired...mind, heart, and soul weary. The journey had been long and, thank God, was now about done. Truthfully, he'd be both relieved and lost. His entire life had been about the hunt, but what would he do once he completed it? He didn't have the answer. He wasn't sure how to live in a normal

world where creatures that hunted in the night didn't exist. His reality was shrouded in mist and mystery, blood and fangs, death and undeath. It was almost impossible to even try to remember what life was like before.

It didn't matter. He'd worry about it later. First, he needed to finish what he'd started when barely in his teens. It was all he really knew how to do anyway. So, he kept his eyes on the van ahead and followed it toward the mountains, the pine trees, and the mighty Spokane River.



Folk legends were simply that: legends. They had little to do with reality. Or, so most people wanted to believe. Doctor Riah Preston was both a folk legend and a reality. She was a creature of the night and over five hundred years old.

Riah was a vampire.

She didn't like it—not that she'd had a choice. She was turned without so much as a word on a gray, foggy winter night many centuries ago, just as she was offered under a veil of secrecy to satisfy a gambling debt when she was a newborn. Life had never given her choices, and it didn't give her one now. That was the one constant in her life.

Ivy's call today wasn't completely unexpected. For some time now she'd feared that more would come to leave their discarded victims like trash throughout the county. She could almost hear the whispers on the night air, the sounds of discontent in the fabric of her reality.

And, there were the calls from those who were not part of the darkness but were touched by it nonetheless. People with knowledge they should never have needed to possess, like Ivy Hernandez. It hurt that innocents, like Ivy, got drawn into her shadowy world. It just couldn't be helped. If there was another way, she'd be the first to grab it.

The darkness clouding this world for thousands of years was growing thin and weak, and not by accident. It was past time for

change. Together, Riah and friends like Ivy worked to destroy the darkness until, one day, it would be Riah's turn to find the light. They would banish the darkness forever.

It would be easy to take the coward's way out. To simply lie down and allow a hunter to pierce her tired heart. Her life was lonely and, many times, like now, she wondered why she kept going. Nothing had been the same since the death of her beloved. Not her life, not her heart, not her very existence. The ache in her heart never seemed to go away and she grew tired of the pain. She longed for the peace a simple wooden stake could bring her.

People had a tendency to throw around terms like *soul mate* as easily as they tossed back cans of soda. They didn't really know what it meant. Only those whose lives became eternal could truly understand. Only those of that dark good-night fully grasped the complete meaning. True love, the kind that consumes the very soul, comes once, and when it's gone, that's it.

For Riah, it had been gone a very long time.

She shook her head and walked to her desk. *Enough with the soul searching and self-pity.* It was a waste of time because it changed nothing. She was alone and would be for eternity. This was her destiny. She'd earned it and she'd live it. The best she could do was try to make amends.

When Ivy's van pulled into the driveway, Riah hit the button to automatically open the doors to the loading dock. The sun was almost down and time was at a premium. They needed to move fast or their problems would multiply quickly.

Riah was an old vampire and, contrary to the legends, didn't go up in a puff of smoke when daylight touched her skin. While it was true she preferred the shadows night afforded, she could move in the light if need be. It was uncomfortable but far from deadly. Riah didn't race against the clock, but what awaited them in the back of Ivy's van did.

Jumping out of the open driver's side door, Ivy came around to the back of the van. She was a bit taller than Riah, maybe five feet five or so, with thick black hair that curled around a beautiful face. Ivy reminded Riah more of a favorite Spanish teacher than an

investigator who dealt with death daily. She'd trained under Riah before taking the head job in her hometown of Moses Lake. Without a doubt, Ivy had been one of her best and brightest students. She was a natural and Riah always felt Ivy could go anywhere. Over the years they became much more than friends.

"*Hola, chica,*" Ivy said as she threw open the rear doors of the van. "We best get on this guy pronto. He started twitching just about the time I hit the Maple Street Bridge. We're wasting moonlight, sister."

"Everything's ready and Adriana's on her way." Riah eyed the black bag. It was still and smooth. Contrary to Ivy's proclamation, nothing twitched now.

"*Bueno.*" Ivy snapped the doors of the van shut and pushed the gurney to the double doors Riah held open. The wheels squeaked softly as it rolled down the brightly lit hallway.

The slight rustle of movement inside the black bag made Riah glance back at the gurney. "Damn," she muttered as she hurried ahead of Ivy down toward the autopsy suite.

"I told you," Ivy said. "He's a feisty one. Never would have guessed it from the boring business suit he was wearing when we pulled him out of the lake."

Inside the morgue, Riah moved fast. The window in which to do her work was small, and seconds were ticking away in what seemed like double-time.