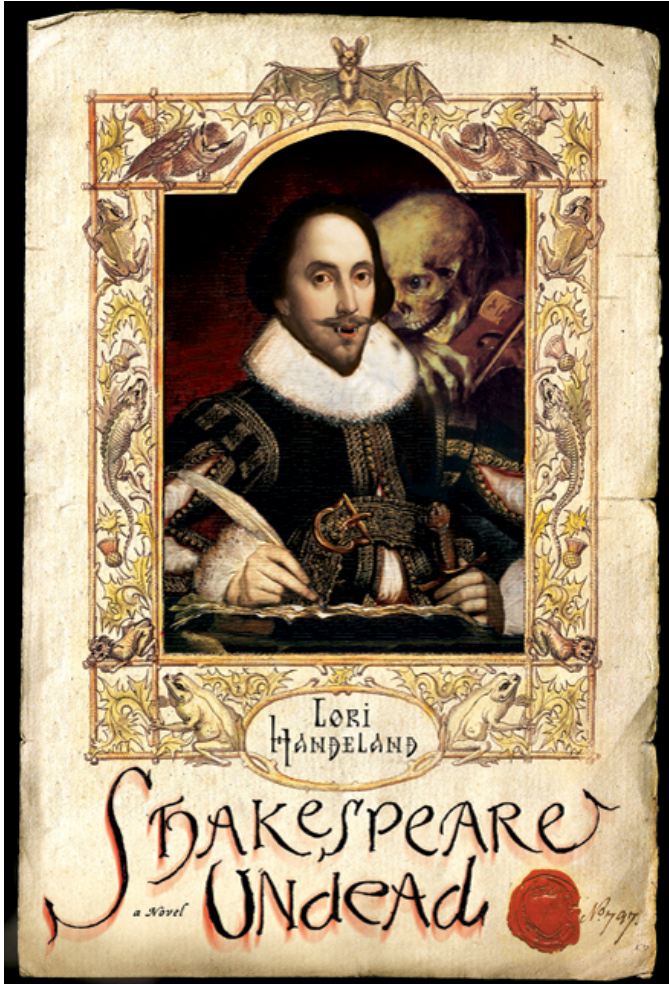


Shakespeare Undead

by Lori Handeland



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Shakespeare Undead



Lori Handeland



St. Martin's Griffin  New York

Author's Note

Who was the Dark Lady of Shakespeare's sonnets? Those works of exquisite beauty that portray tormented desire, temptation, betrayal, and eternal love for a woman with dark eyes, raven hair, dun skin—and a husband. Many have theorized, but no one knows the truth.

Until now . . .

Chapter One

“Though this be madness, yet there is method in ‘t.”

—*Hamlet*, (Act II, scene 2)

London, Autumn—1592

What was left of the man shambled into the dark alley, and I followed. I had little choice.

I am a *chasseur*, a hunter. What I hunt are those whose souls are controlled by another. I call them the *tibonage*.

You’d call them zombies.

Yes, they exist. All over the damn place.

Tonight, they existed in Southwark, and it was my job to make sure they didn’t crack open someone’s head and make a feast of their brains. The only way to do that was to kill them first.

The *tibonage* dragged his feet through the muck, intent on something in the distance. This is the nature of zombies. They are raised for a reason; they have a mission. Nothing will stop them from completing it.

Except me.

“Halt!” I shouted. The *tibonage* didn’t even glance my way.

Definitely on a mission. Weren't we all?

I hurried after, careful to remain far enough away that the zombie couldn't spin and grab me. Although they're the walking dead, the tibonage are faster than one might think, and if prevented from completing their assignments, they fight like baited bears.

As soon as I came within a sword's length, I planted my feet and drew my weapon, wincing when the slick slide sliced through the still air. The tibonage froze; then slowly he turned.

I should have cut off his head right then. If I had, I never would have seen his face in the silvery glow of the moon.

Instead, I whispered, "Chalmers?"

One of our servants. He'd died only last week.

Hair still well-groomed, nails too, skin a wee bit gray but not terribly so. There wasn't a hole in him anywhere there shouldn't be. I'd have thought him alive if it weren't for the smell. I wrinkled my nose.

He was dead all right.

The zombie yanked me close, his teeth clacking together inches from my nose. I dropped the sword and shoved against his chest. Beneath my palms, his skin squirmed. A maggot peeked past the collar of his dusty doublet and winked.

"Erk!" I shrieked, and jerked my hands away. This only allowed the tibonage to pull me ever closer.

"Br-br-br," he chanted, in between the clicking of teeth. "Mmmm," he growled low. "Mmmm."

He obviously hadn't had his daily supply of *br-br-br*—

"Brains," I snapped, annoyed at both myself for not killing him and him for being unable to articulate a simple

word. “If you could *say* brains, you might actually possess enough of them to get some.”

Talking to a zombie was almost as foolish as wrestling one. I’m strong, but zombies are stronger. I’m not sure why.

Perhaps there was something in the way they were raised that gave them certain powers. For instance, remaining unharmed through everything but decapitation and fire. That, combined with superior strength, meant the only advantage I had was that *my* brains could be used for something other than stuffing between my ears.

I lifted my knee, fast and hard. If his choked shriek was any indication, his balls now had an intimate acquaintance with his throat.

He let me go. He didn’t have much choice. He was on the ground, clutching his privates and keening. I rescued my sword, then I returned Chalmers to God.

The man had always been overly tall, so even on his knees his head was nearly level with mine. As a result, when he burst into ashes, I got a faceful. Then I couldn’t see.

Which was the only excuse for what happened next. When the shuffle that sounded behind me was followed by a touch on my shoulder, I reacted. Two hands on the hilt of my sword I swung, and I connected.

Blood washed the ashes from my face.

“Oh,” I whispered. “N-n-n-no.”

I sounded like a zombie. But I wasn’t, and neither was the man who tumbled to the muck-strewn cobblestones. If he had been, he’d be ashes, and I’d be on my way to dispatch the next murderous fiend.

Instead, *I* was the murderous fiend.

I fell to my knees as my victim’s eyes fluttered closed, and

I sat there until the blood from the slice in his neck stopped flowing. Then I laid my palm against his chest, but the heart beneath no longer beat; his skin had already cooled.

Should I search out the authorities and attempt to explain?

A half laugh, half sob escaped my throat. “Excuse me, there is a dead man in the alley. But I didn’t mean to slit his throat, sirrah. Oh no, I meant to cut off his head.”

I lifted trembling fingers, meaning to rub at the pain in the center of my forehead, but when I saw the blood I let my arm drop back to my side.

“Who would have thought he could have so much blood in him?” I whispered. “Will I ever be able to wash my hands clean?”

The stranger was dead. The only way to bring him back would be to ferret out someone who could raise him. But then he would be a zombie—his soul in thrall to another. I doubted this man, whoever he was, would thank me for that.

No, better to leave him where he lay. At least his soul was already with God.

Chapter Two

“Cry ‘Havoc,’ and let slip the dogs of war.”

—*Julius Caesar*, (Act III, scene 1)

The evening began the same as so many others. Will tried to write. He didn't have much luck.

Because his writing of late was not writing at all. Of late, his writing was mostly staring.

Which was why he'd begun staying at the Rose Theatre after his final curtain. Being alone in his living quarters from midnight to dawn, with only a full quill and an empty page for company, had nearly driven him mad. Though many would say he had been traveling that path for some time now.

“Master Shakespeare!”

Will glanced up from the table, happy for a diversion. Any diversion. “What is it, Edmond?”

A few people still milled about the theater, but many had left. Most of the candles had been blown out, and shadows reigned. Even if he hadn't already recognized the squat, fantastically round silhouette weaving toward him at an alarming pace, Will would have known the voice, which was high and childlike despite the man's bulk.

Will blinked as Edmond got closer. Was he attempting to run? Edmond never ran. When he did, church bells rang of their own accord, and small buildings tumbled down.

Something dreadful must have happened to cause Edmond not only to move faster than a three-legged mule but entice him to drink so much he could barely remain on his feet.

Not that Edmond didn't drink. On the contrary, he did so daily and to excess, but his most important responsibility was to remain at the Rose through the night, on guard against any who might harm it. Therefore, he usually waited to imbibe until midday.

As the man stumbled closer, and the floor beneath them wobbled, Will noticed something amiss. Edmond had a crack in his head, and blood poured down his face.

Will's stomach clenched sickeningly, and he had to look away for an instant or embarrass himself. But he was a strong man—if the term *man* was taken loosely enough—and he managed to keep himself under control.

“What has happened?” Will asked. “Did you take a fall?”

Instead of answering, Edmond weaved left, then right, then dropped straight forward like a downed tree. Will had no time to get out of the way, no time to do anything but grab Edmond, lift him bodily, then set him upright.

“Marry,” Will muttered, glancing around to make certain no one had seen him perform that inhuman feat. Edmond had to weigh nigh on twenty stone. By rights, the man should have crushed Will like a bug.

Praise the saints no one was about, and Edmond was too drunk to remember. Even now he swayed, eyes closed against the steady stream of blood that washed down his forehead and dripped off the end of his nose.

“Edmond!” Will gave him a sharp shake. Droplets flew, spattering against Will’s doublet. One struck his chin. The scent drifted upward, and suddenly Will’s teeth itched.

Right then he nearly broke the vow he’d made so long ago. Would have, if the man’s eyes had not snapped open and stared into his.

“Sir!” Edmond straightened and stepped back, tripping over his own feet and nearly falling again. However, when Will reached out to help, Edmond cringed.

“Beshrew me,” Will cursed. He was usually much better at acting human than this.

He thought about puppies and lambs, just-sprung flowers and saplings, blue skies, fluffy clouds, and the bright, blinding light of the sun—anything to make the scent and the sight of Edmond’s blood fade from his mind.

It didn’t work.

Will would never forget the smell, the texture, the ruby red sheen— Ah hell, be honest. No matter how often he drank wine, he would never forget the exquisite *flavor* of blood.

But he *could* control himself. Sometimes it just took a while.

Eventually, Will wiped that single droplet from his chin and made use of the strength he’d acquired over centuries of un-life to force the howling monster within him back down. The beast subsided at last, though there was grumbling and arguing and pain. There always was.

Will spun, and Edmond promptly fell on his arse. The floor gave with a sharp crack. “Sorry, sir,” Edmond murmured.

“Oh, get up!” Will ordered. Coddling the man wasn’t working. “Tell me what happened, and be quick.”

Edmond lumbered to his feet. Something in Will's eyes had frightened him, but he still took orders better than most. Edmond could no more refuse to do what he was told than he could give up his daily portion of ale.

Will expected the usual tale of woe. Edmond had played cards and lost. He had not broken his fast for two weeks, yet he'd gained two stone. A woman had scorned him. Such travesties happened quite often with Edmond, and usually resulted in just this type of behavior. But always *after* his duty to the Rose was complete.

"I saw a dead man walking, sir."

Will nearly fell over himself. "A what?"

"A dead man, he was."

"And—and—" Will cleared his throat, then tried to speak once more. "H-h-how did you know this?"

"The dead have a certain look."

Will ran his hand over his face. Some did.

"Hair grown long and—" Edmond wiggled his fat fingers by his head, giving the impression of worms instead of hair.

"Unkempt?" Will supplied.

Edmond clapped his hands together beneath his third chin. "My Lord, you always know the perfect word."

"Not lately," Will muttered. At Edmond's curious expression, he shook his head. "Go on," he urged, though he knew all too well what Edmond would say.

"His fingernails were—" Edmond frowned as he stared at his own, which were dirty and yellowed.

"Long?" Will asked.

"Some." Edmond continued to frown. "Others were broken and filthy, as if he'd clawed his way out of the grave. And his toes—" Edmond shuddered.

“Aye?” Will encouraged. “What about his toes?”

“His feet were bare, and the nails of his toes tapped against the stones of the street. The noise, sir, ’twas horrible.”

“I can imagine,” Will said, though he didn’t have to. He’d heard it himself, thousands of times before, with his own overly keen ears.

“The flesh was gray and pocked,” Edmond continued. “His eyes empty of life. What clothing remained on his person hung in tatters and was covered in dust and dirt. The parts of his—” Edmond paused, pursed his lips, then whispered conspiratorially, “Nakedness that could be seen had sores and—” Edmond winced. “Bugs. Nigh on to put me off my dinner, it did.”

“I’d like to see something that could put *you* off your dinner,” said a new voice. Laughter followed.

Will glanced over his shoulder. Several of the stage crew had become bored with their dice game and now listened with obvious amusement to Edmond’s account.

“Make yourself useful,” Will said. “Find the man a cloth to staunch his wound.”

Instead of scattering like the vultures they were, one of them held out a grimy handkerchief. Will snatched it up and set it against Edmond’s head, careful not to touch anything but the cloth. He had fantastic control, but there was no need to poke at the beast.

“How’d you get that knock on yer noggin’?” the nearest man, Arthur Cartwright, asked.

“I thought the gentleman was ill,” Edmond said. “I wanted to help.”

Will patted Edmond’s arm. He might be a drunk, but he was a sweet drunk. Will had known that even before he’d caught the scent of the man’s blood.

Sweeet.

Fie! Will scolded himself. *Focus on the problem and forget everything else!*

Easier thought than accomplished, especially with blood all over Edmond's face, neck, and now hands.

"'Twas a trap, weren't it? The Jack robbed ye, he did. After he slammed yer head—" Arthur paused. "Where did he slam yer head?"

"Against the wall of a church!" Edmond's voice was aghast. "He was obviously a fiend from hell."

"Obviously," Will murmured. "Pray continue. What then?"

"He smacked me again and again as if he were tryin' to open my skull, and all the while he gurgled a word I had some trouble makin' out."

"What word?" Will asked, but he knew.

"I could have sworn, sir," Edmond paused, lowering the cloth from his head so he could meet Will's eyes, "that he was chantin' 'brains.'"

Aye, Will thought, *he had been*.

"His teeth were snappin' together as if he'd eat his way right through my skull. Then he started makin' yummy sounds."

"Yummy sounds," Will repeated.

"Mmmm," Edmond said, rubbing his stomach for emphasis. "Mmmmmmm!"

Laughter erupted again, and Edmond flinched. His shoulders hunched as he lifted the now-red cloth and hid his face from their mirth.

"Why would anyone want to crack open yer head and eat yer brains?" Arthur asked. "Can't be much of a meal."

Everyone snickered. Except Edmond.

And Will.

Will wanted to put a stop to the harassment, but he needed the distraction. He soothed his conscience by assuring himself he would send a doctor to tend Edmond's head.

Just as soon as he found the zombie.

Will slipped backward as the onlookers tightened their circle around the bleeding man.

"Ye see a lot of dead folks?" Arthur asked.

Edmond frowned. "Never afore today."

Halleluia! Will thought. Maybe there was only one.

Except there was *never* only one.

"Ye didn't see one today either," Arthur continued. "Someone tried to rob ye, fool. They banged yer head against a building."

"Church!" Edmond insisted stubbornly.

"Church," Arthur agreed. "And when they found ye had nothing to offer but evil-smelling breath, they smacked ye again and left ye to bleed."

Confusion spread over Edmond's face. He was starting to doubt. "Pure evil I saw in his eyes. He was not human."

"Neither are you."

More laughter erupted, drowning out Edmond's response, as Will reached the front entrance and became one with the night.

He knew how things would progress whilst he was away. The others would attempt to convince Edmond that he had not seen what he had, and by morning, when the man awoke with a headache to rival the ones he received from too much ale, he would believe them.

Human beings were very good at rationalizing. Will

wished *he* still had the ability. Unfortunately, he was one of the things humans rationalized about.

He could attempt to explain Edmond's attack as being made by a sick man desperately needing coin. If it hadn't been for the word *brains*.

And the yummy sounds.

Simply put, what Edmond had seen on the streets of London was a zombie. Will should know. In times past, he was the one who had raised them.

His feet led him to the nearest church, where he checked the stone for traces of Edmond's blood but found none. Which meant there was none to be found. If Will was good at one other thing, besides writing and acting, it was catching the scent or the sight of blood.

He moved on. He very nearly passed right by Southwark Cathedral without pausing. In Will's mind, a cathedral and a church were two very different things, and Southwark Cathedral was very different indeed. The oldest place of worship in London, there had been some form of church on the site since A.D. 606. Rumor had it that there'd been a pagan Roman temple there before that. As Will had been here when the Romans came, he knew the rumor to be true.

However, as he hurried by, gaze flicking from alley to street and back again, searching for the telltale shamble that signaled zombie, he caught the scent of blood.

He found splashes of red all over the place—on the cornerstone, the cobblestones, then in a weaving trail toward the Rose.

Will checked the street again. He expected to find no one else about but him, perhaps a thief or two. Instead, the long shadow of a man spread across the road three buildings up.

He walked the way zombies walk, as though all of the out-houses in England were full, and he badly needed one empty.

Will hurried in that direction. The zombie was up to no good. They always were. Such creatures would mindlessly continue to follow the orders of the one who made them. Will could chop off their arms, their legs. Hell, he could chop them in half, and both halves would continue to drag themselves toward their ultimate goal. To stop a zombie with a sword, one had to lop off its head.

Not that Will had ever done so. The creatures *he'd* made had turned to dust on the battlefields of England, Rome, and Scotland for the Henries, Julius Caesar, and Macbeth. Will had raised them; they'd fought; he'd been paid. When the war was won, those left were dispatched, but not by him.

He was sorry for the raising now. So many had died. But when he'd been newly made, with a bright, endless future but no funds, the idea had seemed like a good one. It was only later that he saw how very bad an idea it was. Ideas were so often like that.

Will had an affinity for the dead. The talent was not something he'd gained upon becoming one of them, but something he'd had since he was born.

The first time.

Will had been labeled an insane child, a lunatic youth. Talking to empty air was not something one did in the years before the birth of Christ, or in the centuries thereafter either. Explaining that he saw dead people, could talk to them, and they talked back, had been a foolish choice on his part.

Will had managed to avoid being burned for a witch, but it had been a very close thing. Forsooth, joining the ranks of the undead when he was twenty-and-six had been a relief.

He no longer had to hide anything but himself from the light.

He was able to fit in amongst the living so much better now that he was dead. He need only behave “normally,” for the most part, during the darkest hours, and most humans were not at their best then. They were meant to walk in the light.

Add to this Will’s profession—being a player was the perfect occupation for one such as he. Actors were known to be strange. Amongst them, Will was no more odd than any other.

And if he spoke to empty rooms and deserted corners, those in his company believed the habit a quirk of his genius. He merely spoke to his characters, practiced dialogue, perfected stage movements before he wrote them down.

In such beliefs they were largely correct. Will *did* speak to his characters. However, sometimes his characters talked back.

He’d known Henry—all of them—along with Richard, Macbeth, and his insane wife too. Now that they were dead, each and every one wanted him to tell their stories.

He didn’t mind, but he had his own stories to set on the page, as well. He just hadn’t been able to do so of late. Not only had his muse gone silent, but his cursed ghosts too. He had begun to wonder if any of them—muse or ghosts—would ever come back and what he would do if they did not. Perhaps walk straight into the morning sun.

Despite the darkness, Will saw the zombie without any trouble. This was not the same creature that had tried to crack Edmond’s head like an egg but one so new it could have been taken for the living. Because of the shambling and

the moaning, the zombie could easily be labeled a plague victim, probably would be by most, but Will knew better.

As he hurried to catch up, a figure detached from the shadows. Will tensed, expecting it to move like a zombie, groan like a zombie, attempt murder like a zombie. Instead, the new arrival seemed to float, graceful as a swan on the royal pond, slim as one of the reeds that lined the shores.

Black cap, black doublet, black breeches, even black gloves—small wonder he hadn't detected the boy. The lad blended into the night better than Will did.

Will opened his mouth to call out, to stop the slight, slim figure from getting too close. But the telltale swish of a sword leaving its scabbard had Will snapping his mouth shut so quickly he narrowly missed eating his own tongue.

Reaching for his own sword as he stepped into the alley, Will cursed when he didn't find it. He'd left the weapon at the Rose.

Though most young men went out with both a sword *and* a dagger, especially in Southwark, Will did not. He had no need. Killing Will Shakespeare was beyond the capabilities of most humans.

Will did have his dagger on his belt, more for show than anything else, but he didn't bother to retrieve it. Beheading is much harder than one might think. To cleave a head from the shoulders, a dagger would be of little use.

But Will's bare hands were a deadly weapon. Though he was an actor and a writer by trade, and therefore did not *appear* strong, Will was almost as much of a monster as the one he'd followed here. Wresting free the head would be a simple enough task.

Hideous and disgusting. But simple.

However, upon entering the alley, Will discovered he needn't have worried. Ashes as thick as a locust plague floated through the air.

Will was so impressed that the boy had already dispatched the corpse, he strode forward and put his hand on the lad's shoulder. He should have known better. Anyone who'd been confronted by the walking dead would be understandably overwrought. The child was no exception.

He spun on nimble feet, slicing Will's neck from ear to ear.

Chapter Three

“I hold the world but as the world . . . A stage, where every man must play a part; And mine a sad one.

—*Merchant of Venice*, (Act I, scene 1)

I ran across the rooftop as if Cerebus nipped at my heels.

Dear God, I'd killed someone!

Many would say I'd killed before, but I did not believe that. When I beheaded a tibonage, I was *saving* them. Besides, how can you kill something that is already dead?

However, the stranger in the alley—

Him, I had killed.

If I was caught, I'd be hanged or worse, and I couldn't allow that to happen. Not just because I preferred my neck exactly the way it was, but I had a calling. There were only a chosen few with my knowledge and skills. If I stopped doing the duty I had been charged with, England was doomed.

I had been taught to hunt by my nurse, my nanny, my *nounou*. She had once been the greatest *chasseur* in Haiti.

After she was brought there from the depths of Africa when she was fifteen, Papa had bought Nounou as a gift for

my twelfth birthday to smooth over the loss of my mother in childbed a few months before.

Nounou had become my greatest friend. I missed her as deeply as I would miss the arm with which I wielded my sword.

She had been gone nigh on a year. Nevertheless, every time I left my room to hunt, I ached with her loss.

Despite her advancing age, Nounou had refused to allow me to hunt alone. Therefore, I had been close enough to see the blow that had killed her but too far away to do anything about it.

The zombies we had fought that night had been strong and well armed. Despite the clang of steel on steel, I'd heard her soft gasp, turned, and seen her fall, run through by the damned walking dead.

I slashed my way through those that were left; ashes became as thick as dust on a country road. But by the time I reached her, she was gone. Not a word of good-bye, no time to hold her hand as she slipped away, no chance to say I loved her.

For that, and so much more, I would spend my life ridding the earth of the fiends that had taken Nounou from me.

I reached the manor house and slid into the garden, then climbed the trellis to the balcony outside my room.

Who had the man I'd just killed been?

Distracted with thoughts of the handsome stranger—I hadn't seen much, but what I'd seen had been quite lovely—I allowed my boots to thump against the balcony as I landed.

A knock sounded on the door. "Katherine!"

"Odd's bodkins," I muttered. "Most days she cannot hear a word that I speak, yet one single tread of my foot awakens her."

I tugged off my cap, and my unfashionably dark hair tumbled past my waist. After kicking off the offending boots, I shoved them, along with the bloody sword, beneath the bed before I leaped beneath the sheets and coverlet. At almost the same instant the door opened, and my husband's old nurse strode in.

Thin as a crow and stupid as a sheep, Nurse appeared as ancient as some of the stones in the Tower of London. I no longer needed a nurse; I was of an age to need a lady's maid. But my husband needed a spy.

Hence the nurse.

At least she knew how to fashion my hair and could double as a lady's maid had I ever the need for one. As it was, I never went out. That she was aware of.

I had no idea why my husband trusted me so little. Reginald could not know that I left the house each night. I'd learned quite quickly that he responded to misbehavior immediately and cruelly. Therefore, if I was still allowed the freedom to get out of the house at all, he did not know that I had done so.

Perhaps his living in Virginia for a good portion of the year made him believe I needed watching over.

Or perhaps he was a lunatic.

Luckily for me and my calling, Reginald seemed unaware that Nurse was almost as deaf as she was dumb, and her age meant she slept often and well. Most nights, I was on the streets and hunting by nine.

"What was that noise?" Nurse hurried to the side of the bed.

While awake, she heard thuds better than words, so I'd taken great care not to make them. Until tonight. I must have

arrived as Nurse was returning from one of her frequent trips to the garderobe.

Sheets drawn to my chin, I behaved as if I'd been woken from sleep. "What say you? Noise? I heard nothing."

Nurse, whose face was as emaciated as the rest of her, widened her large, milky blue eyes in surprise. "That cannot be. Two thuds, I swear. One." She stomped a foot. "And two."

She stomped again as if I did not know what a thud sounded like, and beneath the bed, my sword rattled.

I pretended to have a coughing fit. I needn't have bothered; Nurse noticed nothing amiss. She could hear little over the sound of her own voice, which never quieted.

"Ach." She put her long, bony hands against her sunken cheeks. "I have heard tales of other nurse's charges sneaking out at night, getting into all sorts of mischief. But then those nurses have young ones to watch and I—" She smiled widely, revealing the six brown teeth she still possessed. "I have you. I am so fortunate. I thank the good Lord daily that my dear Master Dymond thought of me when he needed someone to wa—"

She broke off. I lifted a brow. "Yes, *dear* nurse? He needed someone to . . . ?"

Nurse let her hands fall to her sharply pointed hips. "How now? What is this? Ye have not braided yer hair. 'Twill be a tangle come the morn. Let me." She motioned for Kate to sit up. "Anon."

"I cannot, Good Nurse."

For if I do, you will see that I have been out hunting and tell Reginald since you have been sent to wa—me.

I loathed being spied upon, but since Nurse was a terrible spy, I managed. However, if Reginald discovered what I'd

been doing, he would send Nurse away and employ someone with more brains than the average village idiot.

“I am so tired of late.” I made my voice weak and wispy. If I said so myself, I was a very good actress. Quite fortunate since I had so many to fool.

As a lonely, only child, I’d often pretended to be who I wasn’t—King Henry back when he was the handsomest prince in the Christendom, Sir Thomas the martyr, the royal Tudor princesses, and eventually the Virgin Queen. Oh, how I wished I were her! Particularly the virgin part. Sometimes still, when I was alone and lonely, I pretended.

“Tired?” Nurse repeated. “Tired?”

The lamplight flashed off her kerchief, which resembled the sail of a midsized ship, while Nurse herself resembled the mast. When the woman went to market, her headdress was so large she knocked over the produce every time she turned.

To wit, she brought along a servant to pick up after her. The sight of Nurse and her boy bearing down sent merchants scurrying in all directions to hide their most expensive wares before they were ruined.

“Saints be praised!” Nurse cried, and when she cried, ears wept. “You are with child at last.”

Nausea rolled over me. God’s teeth, I hoped not. Thus far I’d managed to avoid that travesty.

Not that I didn’t care for children. What I didn’t care for was Reginald.

I had at first. He’d wooed and won me with pretty words and false promises. It wasn’t until the morning after our marriage that I realized he’d married me for my money.

Or rather, for Papa’s money.

My dear father had bought Reginald for me in the same way he'd bought Nounou. The distant relative of an earl, Reginald had "good blood." With his pedigree and Papa's funds, the two believed a title was in Reginald's future.

I had been furious to discover they had plotted the rest of my life behind my back without my knowledge or consent, as if I didn't have the intelligence to know what was good for me.

I knew now, and it definitely wasn't Reginald.

I had made my unhappiness known. That had been the first time Reginald locked me in my room.

It wasn't the last.

As a condition of our marriage contract, Reginald spent a majority of the year across the sea in Virginia attempting to make the tobacco plantation my father had bought there prosper. Once the plantation began to turn a tidy profit, Papa would do his best to secure Reginald a barony.

I was completely indifferent to becoming Lady Whoever. But I'd understood very quickly that despite what he'd said while "courting" me, Reginald cared only for himself. I was the means to his title and the mother of his heirs. Period.

Reginald had been gone several months, and I'd known I wasn't carrying soon after he'd left. That Nurse had conveniently forgotten this fact was not surprising. Sometimes she forgot the date.

As I'd never been regular in my courses, the lack of one since did not disturb me. I'd only have been disturbed if I hadn't had one at all.

Despite my knowledge of the lie, I murmured languidly, "Perhaps, I am, Good Nurse, perhaps."

Anything to make the woman go.

“At last!” Nurse shouted. “I feared ye’d never quicken. Not that it is completely your fault, mind you. What with the master in the wilderness most of the time.”

“Praise God,” I muttered. Not that “the master” didn’t do his best to make up for the nights he was away whenever he was at home.

I shuddered at the memory, and Nurse snatched a blanket from the chest at the foot of my bed, then tucked me in. “Best not to mention that,” she murmured.

Nurse might be slow-witted, but she had the instincts of the animals she resembled. She knew better than to poke a wild beast, which was what Reginald could become if he believed he was being blamed for anything at all.

“Still,” Nurse continued, “the master will be so pleased. May I be the one to tell him?” She took a quick, shallow breath—the better to keep talking with the least amount of silence. “No, that would not be proper. Perhaps you should write him.” She shook her head. “Not yet. Make sure you do not miscarry. He would be heartbroken. I would be. Not that such will happen. No. Be not afraid, child.” She clasped her birdlike claws beneath her weak but pointed chin. “Oh, to have a little one in the house once more.”

Would the woman never cease her prattle? My head would soon begin to ache. If I hadn’t been wearing black breeches and a man’s black shirt beneath the coverlet, I would have gotten up and led her to the door. Instead, I snapped, “Nurse!”

As if she hadn’t heard—she probably hadn’t—she continued to talk. “A boy or a girl? A boy methinks. For the barony. Might ye be carrying a boy? Hard to know until ye begin to carry high or low. I know a wisewoman who could come lay

on her hands.” She made the motion in front of her own nonexistent belly of palming the fullness. “She’d tell ye what she saw within.”

Since shouting had done no good, I resorted to pantomime, waving my free hand at the door, then laying its back against my forehead as if exhausted. I wasn’t even acting anymore.

“Of course, child. Ye need yer sleep. But oh!” Nurse clapped her palms against her pale, drawn cheeks. “Would it not be wonderful if the babe resembled his father?”

I stifled a wince. Reginald was not an attractive man. Certainly, he had fashionably fair hair, but precious little of it, and blue eyes. However, they squinted far too much and gave him the appearance of an overworked clerk. His nose was also unfortunate, and the idea of such a bulbous appendage appearing in the center of an innocent child’s face—along with the hairy mole at nose’s end—brought tears to my eyes.

Not that *I* was of the fashion, as Reginald took every opportunity to point out once we were married. Dark of hair and eye and even skin, when beauty was defined by how fair and blond and light-eyed one might be, I was also slim and boyish—a good thing for the hunt, but not so for a ball gown. To make mine fit correctly, my great-aunt Margaret had insisted I stuff the bodice with scraps from the makings of the dress itself.

When Reginald had taken off my clothes that first night, he had shaken in fury at what he found beneath. Or rather, what he *hadn’t* found.

I closed my eyes against the memory. I knew that doing my wifely duty was not supposed to be pleasant, but I’d still been stunned at how *unpleasant* it was.

Believing me nearly asleep—I should really go on the stage, would have if I were truly the boy I pretended to be—the nurse bustled toward the door. “That’s it, child, close yer eyes. ’Tis sleep ye need. Ye will feel better come the morn. Of that I am cert—”

The latch clicked, muffling Nurse’s voice midword, although I could still hear her talking to herself in the hall. The murmur faded as she moved farther and farther from my door.

I threw back the covers, leaped to my feet, and yanked my breeches down to my ankles. I nearly tripped and fell on my face when the door began to open.

“Would ye like something to eat? I’m sure that bairn in your belly must be hungry.” Nurse chuckled.

I was in such a great rush to get the covers over myself, I poked my thumb into my eye. Sometimes I swore Nurse wasn’t as dumb or as deaf as she appeared. Then there were the times I knew she was.

“Prithee, only sleep,” I shouted. Why had I even hinted at a child? Now I would hear of little else.

“All right,” Nurse grumbled, backing away. “Ye do not have t’ shout.” The door closed.

I waited. Then I waited a bit more, eyes fixed on the door, ears straining for the slightest footstep.

There were days I thought I would run mad. In this house I never found a single moment’s peace. The only thing that soothed my mind and kept me sane were the nights I spent hunting for zombies in the bowels of London.

At last, when I heard a sharp snore from beyond, I glanced at the balcony. I wouldn’t sleep tonight. Whenever I closed my eyes, all I would see was the face of the stranger I had

killed. The only way to make up for the life I had taken was to save other lives, and the only way to do that was to kill the tibonage. Lately, there were far too many of them out there.

Within minutes I'd slipped from the bed, cleaned off my sword, then gone over the balcony and into the night.

Chapter Four

“A man can die but once.”

—*Henry IV Part II*, (Act III, scene 2)

Will came back to the world slowly. First his hearing returned. Shouts and cries caused him to remember where he lay.

Southwark. He'd best be up and about before someone killed him. Again.

Next came his sense of smell. Blood. His own. Water. Stale and warm. Garbage. A rat.

The boy.

He was no longer there, but his scent remained, a strange mixture of sweet sweat and flowers. Perhaps the lad spent his days as an apprentice to a gardener.

Will opened his eyes. Darkness hovered all around, and for an instant he thought he might truly be dead. Then his sight sharpened; clouds had moved in, dimming both the moon and the stars. A hint of rain—this was England after all—blew in on the breeze.

Lastly, he felt the pain. He lay on the damp, hard, cold cobblestones. Not that his body wasn't harder and colder,

but try dying on them. Even though he'd come back to life as he always did, dying *hurt*.

Every damn time.

Will felt his neck. The only remnant of his throat being slit was a thin, almost healed line and blood all over the place.

The alley was empty; a chill breeze whistled through. Moisture glittered on the cobblestones. Autumn hovered at the edge of night.

A stealthy shuffle sounded from the street, and Will got slowly to his feet. If anyone saw him like this, there'd be more questions than he cared to answer. So he tore a strip of his linen shirt free and wound it around his neck like a bandage.

A covered wound and a lot of blood could be explained. No wound and a lot of blood would make people wonder just who, and how many, he'd killed.

Will moved forward, planning to exit the far side of the alley from the one he'd entered and ask about, try to discover if anyone were acquainted with the boy. But before he could reach the lighter gray of the opening, the form of a man blocked the distant sheen of the moon.

"Uurgh," he said.

"Zounds," Will muttered. How many of the cursed beings were out there?

The creature started toward him. Before Will could stop himself, he took a pace back and bumped into another.

"Glurk," it said.

Spinning, Will reached for his dagger. It wouldn't do a bit of good, but he had to have something.

The woman was large, probably thirteen stone and solid muscle. When still alive, she had likely been the wife of a

farmer or perhaps a stonemason's bride. Though her skin was gray—the grave has that effect—her face was unlined and had once been quite pretty.

Before her left eye rotted out.

Will stepped away, and once more bumped into someone. What this one had been before he'd become a zombie, besides alive, was difficult to determine. His clothes had fallen off. His body had holes where holes should never be. He still possessed most of his teeth, which only made the way he opened and shut, opened and shut his mouth more horrifying. Those teeth clicked together as if he were freezing to death. Perhaps he had.

He opened his arms for an embrace, but Will knew better. Zombies did not feel emotion. They only understood what they'd been ordered to do, and they certainly hadn't been ordered to hug Will Shakespeare.

Will ducked and stepped to the side. He could only assume that at the same moment, the female clapped her arms together in an attempt to catch, then kill, him. Instead, the two caught each other.

By the time Will had straightened, they were rolling on the slick cobblestones, growling and kicking, biting and hitting. Flesh flew, hair too, the thuds of body on body sickening. Because zombies felt no pain, this might go on for days.

Though he knew better, nevertheless Will shouted, "Stop!"

Since he had not made them, they did not listen. He attempted to reach in and snatch the man in one hand, the woman in the other, but they bit him!

It was a myth that the bite of a zombie would turn the bitten undead. Indeed, it turns them *dead*.

There is something in a zombie's rotted, rancid mouth

like poison that causes the bite to fester. Within days, the afflicted occupies his grave. But contrary to popular legend, he will not rise from it without help.

Such an infection would not bother Will, but still he did not care for being bitten. He'd only just recovered from being killed.

Will tried again to part the two before they separated each other's heads from their bodies. He didn't want them forever dead. He needed to know what their orders were and who had done the ordering. Since they couldn't speak beyond the constant chant for "br-br-br-" and a little gibberish, he must follow them, which would be damned difficult once their ashes twirled on the breeze.

Before Will got a good grasp, twin thumps from behind made him spin. Expecting more zombies, Will gaped at the sight of the boy. How had he gotten so close without Will detecting him? Will could hear the pulse of blood through veins. Yet this child had crept near enough that he could have swiped *Will's* head from his shoulders with the sword he now brandished.

The lad took one look at Will and gaped as well. And why wouldn't he? The last time the child had seen Will Shakespeare he'd been bleeding to death.

"Fool," Will muttered. He had not lived so many lifetimes by being stupid. But there was always a first time, and if he wasn't careful, a last time too. He was going to have to come up with an explanation for being alive and damn quickly.

The boy swung his sword in a forward arc.

Will opened his mouth to shout "No!" but it was too late. The blade clanged into the stones, shooting sparks, cleaving zombie head from zombie body once, then once more.

The lad spun through the ashes, a dancelike movement so graceful it took Will an instant to realize the blade was coming for him.

He might have been slow-witted this eve, but he was not slow-moving. Will ducked again. Forsooth, he could move faster than the human eye could see if he were of a mind to. With the blade but a wisp from his throat, Will was of a mind to.

The sword struck stone, this time against a building not the ground, and more sparks flew. The boy muttered something in what sounded very much like French. Interesting.

Living for centuries, traveling the globe, Will had learned several languages, French among them, Latin too, but it had always been English that fascinated him.

Though in truth the child might only know French curses, he did not speak with the lower-class accent so familiar in these parts. If Will didn't know better, he'd think him of the nobility.

But Will had no occasion to ponder further, as the boy twirled and twisted, then lunged. This time Will was ready, and he snatched the sword from an unsuspecting hand.

The edge was sharp; it cut Will's palm. Blood flowed, the scent upon the breeze enticing. Will gritted his teeth as his stomach clenched, and desire rushed over him like the tide.

The lad's head tilted downward, the brim of his hat shading his face. Will could not see anything beyond the perfection of one cheek and his smooth, dusky chin. Nevertheless, his stomach fluttered.

What was it about that cheek and chin that made Will want to knock the hat from the child's head and gaze upon every inch of his face? Will found himself captivated, and as

always when that happened, words and phrases flickered through his mind.

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Though art more lovely and—
“Go ahead.”

The words disappeared. Would they ever come back?

Will returned his attention to the boy, whose voice had not yet changed but remained high and lush, yet firm and unafraid.

“Do it!”

“You think I mean to kill you?”

A flicker of the child's dark eyes, up and then away. What eyelashes! How mortifying for the lad.

If I could write the beauty of your eyes. And in fresh numbers number all—

“You do not?”

“'Sblood,” Will muttered as the rest of the phrase flew from his mind.

The lad's shoulders stiffened. He held himself tense and wary, and Will sighed. “I am not a monster.” Will tossed the sword into the corner.

“What are you?” the child asked, gaze on the bloody bandage about Will's throat.

Clenching his palm to hide the just-healed skin, Will answered, “A man.”

The boy's chin went up. “I killed you.”

The moon came free of the clouds, canting across the lad's face, and Will's breath went sharp and hot in his chest. He was so damn beautiful.

Mine eye hath played the painter and hath stelled, Thy beauty's form in table of my heart; My body is—

Will forced himself to stop. If he continued to compose

sonnets in his head, the child would take up his sword and cleave that head from Will's shoulders. Such an injury would never heal.

"You did not hurt me as badly as you thought," Will managed, unable to stop staring at the fine bones, the smooth skin, the lashes that cast silky shadows against a pristine cheek.

Whatever was wrong with him? Though many of Will's kind took human lovers of both sexes, then discarded them like dried husks when they were through, Will had never been able to do so.

Others needed the thrill of the hunt. They made a game of death. They *liked* to kill. Will's interest in such games had never been high. Not that he hadn't played them.

Boredom sets in quickly when a man lives forever. Will had been able to stave it off with his writing. The writing was the reason he'd become what he had in the first place.

Perhaps there was something amiss within him because Will's stomach had always turned as much at the thought of murder as it did at the idea of sodomy. So why did the sight of this boy's eyes and cheek, his chin and lips, make Will's loins go heavy and his hands fair itch to touch him?

"I didn't hurt you?" the boy asked.

"You didn't kill me," Will corrected. It *had* hurt.

He could tell the child did not believe him, and his next words proved it.

"I felt no heart beating in your chest; you were as cold as the stones upon which you lay."

"I was senseless," Will explained. "You were upset. I have no doubt you could not hear the beat of my heart past the thunder of your own."

Doubt crept into the child's expression. "But—"

"And losing so much blood will cause the skin to feel cold to the touch." That was something Will had learned long, long ago. If a human's skin began to chill, it was time to stop feeding.

"Any wound about the head bleeds badly," Will continued.

The boy's gaze returned to Will's stained bandage. "No one could survive how badly you bled."

"Obviously, child, I *did*."

The lad opened his mouth, then snapped it closed. He could not deny the evidence. Will wasn't dead, as far as the boy knew, and since Will wasn't chanting "Br-br-br" whilst attempting to eat the boy's brains, he wasn't a zombie. Therefore, Will had to be alive.

Will found it interesting that the youth could know of zombies and how to kill them, yet be unaware of what creature possessed the ability to raise them.

However, Will didn't plan to enlighten him. Doing so would be a good way to get his throat slit twice in one night.

He had not raised these zombies. He certainly wasn't going to die for it. Or anything else if he had his way. Will Shakespeare had a lot of writing left to do.

If he could get past the cursed black hole in his head that seemed to have swallowed every last one of his words.

"You will bear a scar," the boy said softly.

Will wouldn't, but he shrugged, and said, "There are worse things."

The lad nodded. The ashes of "worse" swirled around them right now.

"How do you know of zombies?" Will asked.

"How do you?"

The child was too belligerent for his own good. One day his master would beat him, if he hadn't already.

The thought of anyone touching the boy in violence had a growl rumbling in Will's throat and his teeth itching again. If he ever found a mark on the lad—

"I am a *chasseur*," the youth said, pride evident in both the word and his stance.

"A hunter?"

Surprise flickered across the lad's far too pretty face. "You speak French?"

"So do you. Where did you learn?"

"France." The way he said it, *Will* did not believe *him*.

Will inched forward, and the mixture of sweet sweat and flowers washed over him. This close he recognized the scent of roses. Will's favorite.

"What lord?" Will murmured, his hand lifting in spite of himself. "What merchant, educates a gardener?"

Will heard blood swishing through veins, and he wanted it. He had not wanted anyone's blood this badly for a very long time.

His knuckles brushed a smooth, dusky cheek. The boy's breath caught, the sound pure arousal, and the tempo of his pulse quickened.

Lust flared, and Will couldn't help himself.

He kissed him.

Chapter Five

“Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall.”

—*Measure for Measure*, (Act II, scene 1)

The stranger kissed me, and I let him. I have no idea why. He thought me a boy, which made him . . .

I wasn't sure of the proper word. Ganymede? Sodomite? Such behavior was punishable by death though I'd never heard of the sentence actually being carried out.

Regardless of what such a person might be called, the dark stranger knew how to kiss and I—Well, I did not.

The only man who had ever touched me was Reginald, and he did not bother with kisses. I never would have thought the mere joining of lips could be so appealing.

Mouth gentle, he teased his tongue along the seam of my lips then swirled it within. Shocked, I gasped, and my bound breasts brushed his chest, catching fire despite how they itched from the bonds. I wanted him to touch them, though if he did, my secret would be out.

My secret!

I shoved; he fell back. But that one touch of my fingers against his chest, and I understood he had only moved because

he wished to. Beneath the dark wool of his doublet, he was as hard as stone. I had no doubt he was hard as stone everywhere.

My usual response to such a thought would be a shudder, then the bracing of myself against what was to come. Which was why the flush of heat, the tingling of my skin, and the heaviness deep within shocked me. Was I coming down with the plague?

I stared at the stranger, memorizing his face. After this, I would not, could not, ever see him again.

Dark hair, dark eyes, a short, dark beard shadowed his mouth and chin. Tangled in his wavy hair a single hoop adorned one ear. I wanted to take that hoop, that ear, into my mouth and suckle.

Perhaps he saw that madness in my eyes, for he took a step toward me, hand outstretched, gaze once again upon my lips. Before he could touch me, I snatched up my sword, and I ran.

He didn't call out, didn't follow, and for that I was grateful. I wasn't sure what I'd do if he came after me. Would I kiss him, or would I kill him?

I did not go directly home. Lord only knew what might follow me there.

Instead, though I wanted nothing more than to reach my bed and find blessed, dream-filled sleep, I spent an hour leaving a false and lonely trail through alleys, up this street and down that, around a corner, over a rooftop.

When at last I climbed the trellis to my room, I barely made it onto the balcony before collapsing.

I remained where I had fallen for a good long time, then

lifted trembling fingers to my still-tingling mouth and relived the only kiss I'd ever known.

I ordered a bath with the hope that the warm water might help me sleep. Unfortunately, the arrival of the water coincided with the arrival of Nurse, and the woman's chatter gave me a headache.

"Methinks you should not bathe. What if you take a chill and lose the babe?"

Since there was no babe, I wasn't concerned. I'd let Nurse believe what she would. The mythical condition would allow me to beg rest more often, and any time I could be alone was worth the lie that must eventually be revealed.

"I am far too warm to catch a chill, good nurse," I said loudly.

My face was flushed with thoughts of the stranger. I should have had the servants draw a cold bath, but that would certainly send the woman into fits.

"Ye are at that, child." She peered into my face. "Dear me! Ye have a fever."

"I do not," I snapped, and climbed into the water.

"If the master discovers ye were with child, and I did not take every care he will—" Nurse paused, and I shot her a sharp glance. The woman never stopped talking of her own accord.

"He will what?"

"Naught," Nurse said hurriedly. "But his disappointment will break my heart."

I wondered if his disappointment might break her arm.

Though Nurse's very presence made me want to shriek until I was senseless, I did not want the woman hurt. I would have to discover a way to make the imaginary child disappear without its being the fault of Nurse or anyone else.

"I just want to bathe and sleep," I said truthfully—and loudly.

"I'll wash yer hair quickly." Nurse lowered herself laboriously to the floor next to the tub.

"No!"

"No?" Her face creased in confusion. "I always wash yer hair."

The thought of having anyone's hands on me but the stranger's made my skin crawl. How . . . odd. I'd endured Reginald's touch for three years, though it hadn't been easy. Of course, that had been before I'd been well and truly kissed.

"Not tonight," I ordered.

"Ach. Of course." Nurse climbed to her feet. "So many things will change for ye now. I remember how it was."

She left the room, closing the door behind her, leaving me to stare after, wondering what on earth she had meant.

I lay back, but the heated water did little to calm me. Instead, the lap upon my belly and breasts, between my legs, brought back the handsome stranger's embrace.

He had smelled like danger—hot, spicy—yet his skin had been deliciously chilled beneath the cloth of his doublet and shirt. *How so?* I wondered. The heat blazing through me made me entertain the thought of pressing my lips to his exquisitely cool neck, running my cheek along every inch of his skin as I drew in the scent and the taste of him.

I jerked upright, sending water onto the floor. I'd been

running my palm over my breasts, stroking myself there, then much lower. As a result, my breath came in sharp spurts, and the hot water felt almost cool along my fiery skin.

“He is a sorcerer,” I muttered. It was evil to touch myself thus. Only one who was evil could make me.

But he hadn’t felt evil; he hadn’t smelled evil. He definitely hadn’t tasted evil.

What did evil taste like?

I splashed the now-cooling water over my flushed chest and neck. I’d allowed myself to be captivated once before, and look where that had gotten me

Trapped in marriage to a man I loathed, one who was bent on getting me with child and—

I trembled at the thought. I’d watched my mother die in childbirth. I wanted no part of it. Not that what I wanted ever came into play.

Unless I was stalking a tibonage through the darkest hours of the night.

With my body yet tingling, I climbed out of the bath, wrapping myself in a robe, before snatching a hairbrush and moving onto the balcony, where a balmy breeze blew.

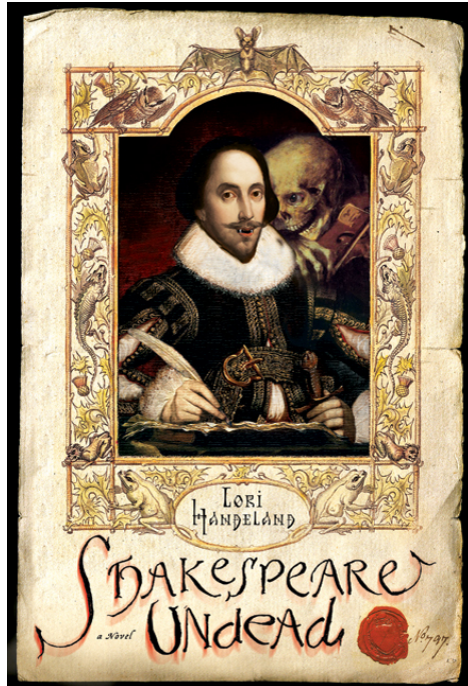
Once there, I untangled my hair, the air across the damp tresses and my moist flesh chilling me almost as much as the truth that governed my life.

Reginald had seduced me with pretty words and prettier promises. But once I’d believed his lies, nothing had been pretty anymore.

I doubted the dark stranger would be any different.

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