

THE TRUE BLOOD OF MARTYRS

an original short story by Rachel Caine

The invitation to Jinx's funeral came in the mail on Saturday before Halloween. It arrived in a gold-lined envelope the color of heavy cream, but the sheet of paper inside was black printed with silver ink.

You are invited to join
Mr. Ivan Jenks
for a celebration of his death
beginning at Midnight, October 31
in this Year of Our Lord 1997
and ending promptly at dawn
All Saint's Day.

The address below was that of a very old graveyard, one so old it had long ago been abandoned by those who thought cemeteries should resemble suburban back yards. The Elysian was an overgrown tangle of leaning headstones, memory heavy as jasmine in the air.

I thought in sheer disgust, *oh, not again*. I picked up the telephone and dialed his number, listened to the hollow rings. After three of them the receiver lifted with a click, and Jinx's cool, faintly English voice said, "Helen, I've been expecting your call."

"It's not funny," I said. "I'm not coming."

"It's not meant to be funny, and of course you will. You always do, Helen. Don't feel obliged to bring anything. I can't take it with me."

And he hung up, a gentle, definite disconnection that left me standing in the middle of my kitchen with the telephone in my hand. I should have been angry with him, or at the very least annoyed. I was afraid.

I had known him for more than five hundred years.

The blurring growl of the engine soothed my anger. I drove out to one of the freeways, a marvelous wide stretch of blacktop where I could fly in peace.

Why? There was no answer to the question. The Jinx I knew was a creature of air and fire, full of impenetrable hungers. He was subject to bizarre fits of melancholia and spasms of drama, and his humor could only be called twisted.

Few, if any of the others, understood that Jinx's little funerals were not jokes.

I left behind the glaring amusement-park brilliance of the city doing a smooth, purring 90 miles an hour. My mind emptied. The night closed around me, softened by the stars, and it seemed at this hour that I was indeed flying, through a space that held no other life.

I closed my eyes and allowed my flesh to begin to mist. I went weightless. I heard the growl of an oncoming engine and kept my eyes closed, squeezed them shut until tears leaked from under the lids and

whipped back cool on my cheeks, driven by the wind through the open window.

A truck horn blared. I felt the hot wash of headlights and heard the indignant squeal of tires as the oncoming truck locked its brakes and swerved to avoid me.

Perhaps I would hit it. My eyelids trembled, my hand spasmed on the hot softness of the steering wheel, but I held my eyes tight shut.

I heard the trucker screaming curses as I floated away into the night, the smell of burning oil and rubber hot in my nose. I opened my eyes and saw an unbroken silent roadway ahead, the stark white stare of the moon, and I laughed.

I laughed until it frightened me.

I stopped at an all-night gas station. Spoiled child that I am, I long for the days of uniformed servants and smiling Texaco men wiping dust from my windshield. I bore the self-service pump in silence, presented my card to the teenaged clerk, and turned away to stare into the darkness. Moths fluttered like tattered leaves in the lights. I closed my eyes and listened to the whisper of their wings.

"Ma'am?" The boy interrupted the music with his harsh Texas drawl. "Herey' go . Signri ' chere ."

He pushed the slip across the counter toward me. I signed it and looked up at the video camera that jutted its arrogant chin from the wall.

It was a simple matter to erase it. They'd find nothing but black when they attempted to play it tomorrow, or the next day, when the county sheriffs finished their pitiful investigation and the boy was buried. I kept both copies of the gas receipt and put them in my purse.

"Ma'am? Ah needth ' white copy—"

"No you don't," I soothed him, reached across the counter and put two fingers precisely at the pulse on his neck. He froze, staring at me; he'd be thinking wild thoughts of pornographic fantasies, *Penthouse Letters* come to life. "You don't need anything at all."

I pulled him across the counter and bit. His soul flowed over my tongue, hot and red and tasting of the oil under his fingernails. His name was Clarence, and his brother had always called him Clare before his brother was hit by a train and his mother got so tired all the time, her fingers shaking as she sewed little pieces of needlepoint to sell and his friend Mary Ellen pregnant and crying on his shoulder asking him to marry her but he couldn't he wouldn't and Mary Ellen gone on a bus to California and no goodbyes, ever again.

He faded out of me like a whisper. I swallowed the last of Clarence and let his flesh slip out of my hands. His chin hit the counter hard enough to crack bone but it didn't matter and would never matter to Clarence again.

The night of October 31 dawned cloudy, the air icy as it whipped around corners to surprise. Children avoided the houses of strangers. A brave few skipped and giggled in darkness, trailed by cloaks made of folded sheets and comet-sprinkles of glitter.

I was determined that I wouldn't pander to Jinx's insanity this time. I would not be a witness. But as the

hours slipped by, as the night grew quiet outside my door and hunger made me restless, I was seized by a need to see him. What if it was the last time? What if I failed him, after all these years?

I reached the Elysium Cemetery less than an hour from sunrise, shading my car under a huge oak tree from the fitful moonlight. As I walked the little distance to the creaking iron gates – padlocked still – I heard the sounds of a party in progress.

I misted through the bars with little thought, and shrugged off the inevitable discomfort as I joined the solid world again. I took the chalk-white, overgrown path under looming branches and past damp, empty-faced angels hovering over darkness. I hated cemeteries. How very like Jinx to find the one thing I could not abide.

There were about ten gathered in a small clearing toward the back of the graveyard; they'd spread out blankets, like hungry picnickers at midday. I knew them all, of course; there were not so many of us that we were strangers. Charity McCollum gave me a quick glance and nod, no more greeting than that; we had never been close. Luther rose from where he sat at her side, came to me and took both hands to kiss. He was an old-fashioned gentleman, was Luther, impeccable in Regency dress and old world manners. I wondered where the devil he'd found the costume he wore tonight – fantastic silver and blue.

There was blood smeared over his face and down the side of his coat. They had, indeed, been dining, though not productively – no mortals about. The more perverse among us – like Luther – fed upon other vampires merely for the entertainment value. It had the same value as a thirty mortal drinking seawater.

"Helen, my dearest love, where have you been? It's simply been ages." Luther's forced cooing reminded me of bad melodramas put on in the prisons in France, where aristos like Luther had waited for the kiss of *Madame la guillotine*. "I wish you'd keep in touch. I never know what you're doing."

"I've been busy," I said, kissed his cold, marble-blue cheek and tasted the scent of his last kill rising like perfume from his skin. A boy, about twelve. If I concentrated, I knew that I'd be able to unroll that life like a carpet into the darkness. "Where is he?"

"Jinx?" Luther made an elaborate gesture with one lace-frothed hand. "Over there. Preparing." He rolled his eyes, and I had to agree with him; this was worse than a joke, it was pointless. There was no death for us. No end.

There never had been. Jinx knew that better than anyone.

I saw that the picnickers, in the fashion of vampires who grew bored, had begun to turn on each other. That was no doubt where the blood on Luther's face came from. We danced this little dance, our kind, out of the lazy cruelty of boredom; death was a party game, no more or less intriguing than charades. There was even an air of seduction to it – it was the only way we had to connect, as predator and prey.

One or two of those who'd come were young, far younger than I – they had the studied *ennui* of children who'd grown up knowing how a vampire should act. They were also far more solid than I, or any of the others; they were closer to mortality, their flesh heavy on them. One of them was frightened enough to tremble as Charity rose with ethereal grace and trailed ghostly fingers over her neck.

I dismissed the spectacle of the youngster's death, because someone was approaching out of the mists behind her.

Jinx.

He had come dressed for a funeral – a simple, elegant black suit, a white shirt, a tie. None of Luther's overdone fancy dress, though Jinx would have looked more at home in it. There was something essentially *antique* about him that even Luther could never hope to attain.

He was a small man, really, but he'd been born to a time when men did not grow so large. Slender, broader in the shoulders than was immediately apparent. His soft blonde hair feathered across his forehead a shade too long for neatness and too short to please current tastes.

I had always loved the lazy elegance of his eyes. The sad humor.

He came around the vampire-child and Charity, who were locked in a silent, desperate embrace of pain, and held out his hand to me. I took it, not knowing quite what to say; this was a different greeting from an old friend, almost formal.

"What do you want most in the world, Helen?" he asked me. Unexpected question. I struggled for the proper tone of sarcasm in my reply.

"Eternal peace at last? Do I get a prize?"

He smiled. Sadness in his pretty eyes.

"Perhaps you will," he said. "Come with me."

We walked off from the party a bit, into a white whisper of fog. Jinx perched on the elaborate marble arm of a cross, and I leaned on the shoulder of a blind angel. He looked up at the fitful sky and shook his head.

"It's never quiet anymore," he said. "That's what I miss most, I suppose. The quiet. When I was breathing you could lie in the fields and listen to the wind and be so alone in the world."

He was talking about the constant, grinding whisper of life; even here, in this tangled garden of the dead, we could hear the bustle of all those mortals *moving*. *Heartspounding*. So many of them now. So few of us.

"There's no point in dwelling on it. You'll become like –" I didn't have to finish, he knew who, or *what*, I referred to. We had no name for them, officially, but Jinx and I called them the Frozen. They were so old they were worn smooth by the currents of time. Over time, though their features did not change, they acquired an eerie sameness, like eroded statues, and they were so faint in moonlight we saw shadows through them, as if they were made of milky glass.

They terrified all of us, because we knew they were our future.

"I spoke to one," Jinx said. He looked down at the ground, poked an idle toe into the dirt of the grave. "They do remember words, some of them. He didn't remember his name."

The thought of going up to one of the Frozen and striking up a conversation was so ludicrous, so unsettling, that I laughed. He glanced up at me, eyebrows up, and resumed his excavation of the final resting place of Charles Wallace Debbs.

"I'm sure it was a fascinating conversation," I said. "Once you get them started, I'm sure they just ramble

on and on about the good old days. Jinx, for pity's sake, the Frozen don't talk. They stare. You're delusional."

"This one spoke." Jinx's voice was so soft I had difficulty separating it from the wind. "He's old, Helen, he knows things we've forgotten. He told me how to die."

I had heard him say it before, more times than I could safely remember. I'd been told before I'd ever met him that Jinx had died by his own hand in mortal life; what a cruel joke, to be resurrected into this existence for eternity. How very *discerning* of God. As if in retaliation for that cosmic jest, death had been Jinx's continuing passion ever since.

He had, before this same appreciative audience, had himself drowned, burned, dismembered, and on one extremely memorable occasion served himself as a funeral entree. He had been buried with his head removed and the Host inserted where his heart had been cut away. He had been staked through the chest, in the grand old Hammer Films tradition.

I did not think I could bear to watch it again, most especially to watch him rise again the next night, whole and untouched and tragically disappointed. And yet, with all of eternity stretching out in front of me, what choice did I have? One could only spend so much time with mortals before time began to drag like insistent hands, wearing you away, scouring you smooth. Within our demented ranks, we could pretend, for a time, to be alive yet – and pretend that a future among the Frozen did not loom ever closer.

"So what is it this time?" I forced sarcasm into my tone; he would expect it from me. We'd ever been flint and stone. "You know, I haven't seen a really good Crucifixion in a long time. You'd make such a lovely suffering Christ. Or how about acid? *Very* entertaining. And I'm sure you haven't tried drawing and quartering in a few hundred years, though I'm not sure where we'd get the horses –"

"I'm serious," he said. I shook my head and sighed.

"You always are, with me. You know they think you're a clown, don't you? All of *them*? They come here to laugh at you." *And I can't bear that*, I wanted to tell him, but that was a confession that went too deep. Jinx did not encourage that kind of intimacy, and for that matter, neither did I.

Jinx smiled that charming, slightly odd smile of his, eyes wickedly amused. "They come here because there's nothing else to do but think about eternity. And kill. I don't mind it that they laugh; at least they still can. You don't laugh enough, Helen."

"Ha," I said, "ha. I have nothing to laugh about, now, do I?"

Jinx didn't reply. His eyes gestured behind me. I turned to see – nothing. Trees shifting uneasily in the wind. Dead leaves fluttering. Marble angels staring.

Not an angel.

A Frozen.

He was naked, the palest tinge of blue in the white of his skin, and there was no more sense of life from him than from the marble I leaned against. I shivered as I moved closer to Jinx. I hadn't sensed even a hint of the Frozen's approach.

There was no smell on him, either. No sense of a kill, either recent or fading. It was as if he had never lived at all.

"Want to laugh now?" Jinx asked. I shushed him with chilled fingers on his arm.

"What does he want?"

Jinx shrugged in reply. He seemed perfectly at ease. After what felt like a cobwebbed eternity, the Frozen's head might have moved a fraction. Or not. I never saw his eyes move, but by some slow process he began to look at me. It was the most uncomfortable stare I had ever endured, like the unblinking attention of a god.

He wasn't the only one who'd come. No sense of their arrival, no sound, but there were more Frozen in the shadows. One was a woman, her body thinly covered by a torn gauzy robe, her tangled hair fluttering in the wind. I almost recognized her, and was afraid to follow that train of thought. It was so hard to focus on their faces, eroded into sameness by time.

Jinx, looking on this chilling and remarkable sight, checked his wristwatch and said, "We still have a little while. I wonder if—"

He hesitated. Jinx, who never hesitated. The strangeness of it drew me even from my unnerved study of the Frozen.

He couldn't meet my eyes. "I wonder if you'd do me the honor of a dance?"

"A dance?" I blurted. "Here? Now?"

"We never did dance before," he said, and still without meeting my eyes, he pushed himself to his feet and held out his hand to me. "Please."

No music. No room to dance, and why in the hell did he think I'd want to dance at a moment like this? I was exasperated and off balance, and could think of nothing in the world I wanted less to do.

Until he raised his eyes and looked at me.

I was all elbows and angles, unused to this kind of closeness; I felt it in Jinx too, a different stiffness of his body where it touched mine. His hands around my waist held me at a precise, almost religious distance. I rested my arms awkwardly on his shoulders as we began to slowly move, no rhythm at all, both painfully aware of the ridiculous truth.

Jinx began to move more confidently, drawing me with him; his hands relaxed on me and pulled me just a shade closer. I didn't remember the last time I'd danced — surely never danced like this — but all the same he led me into a slow, delicate waltz around tombstones. Around us the world turned like an unwinding clock, the faces of the Frozen reflecting moonlight and emptiness. I closed my eyes to them and, without any conscious thought, rested my head on Jinx's shoulder.

He was humming, music so faint I felt it rather than heard it; a tune I remembered from centuries ago. I smiled and turned my face into the hollow of his neck. Our bodies melted together, and we danced slower now, slower, until we were standing still, clasped together like lovers under the moonlight.

I raised my head. Jinx's lips met mine in one gentle, sweet, empty kiss. I tasted memories on his tongue,

but they weren't his own. He had fed on a woman, and for a blinding instant I hated her enough to kill her again.

"It's nearly dawn," he said.

"No." I held on to him when he tried to let me go. "Jinx, tell me what you're doing. *Tell me.*"

His eyes met mine, and centuries passed between us. Thousands of deaths. Blood flowing in rivers. What were we? Devils? Damned? We'd never found an answer to the question. But Jinx had continued to ask. His courage, at least, had never failed.

"I'm going to sit down," he said slowly, "and I'm going to wait for dawn. It's that simple."

I laughed. Threw his hands away from me with contempt. *The fool.* I should have stayed home.

"Wait for dawn?" I repeated. "Jinx, you're madder than Luther. It isn't possible. We've all tried it. If it was as simple as that, there'd be nothing but ashes left of any of us!"

We were not able to abide the sun, that much was true. Either we sought out shelter and darkness, or we suffered an intense, maddening agony for the instant of the sun's touch, and then we misted away.

And at sunset, we misted back. Whole. Untouched.

Jinx knew that.

"Have you tried?" he asked. Jinx, who never raised his voice, was almost sharp with me. "No, Helen, have you *tried*? Because I have. For the last two years, I have tried and I have failed, *but I've been burned.* You simply have to refuse to mist. You have to will yourself to burn, and you have to do it until you are gone."

"It's impossible."

"No. I've stayed in the sun for as much as three hours, but it wasn't enough. But this time – this time I will do it. I will stay in the sun the full turning of the earth, until the sun goes down, and I will die." Jinx searched my face. "You believe me?"

No one could do it. No one ever had.

"Yes," I said in a whisper. There was something in his eyes that forced me to believe it. "You don't have to do this. Wait a little. One more dance. What's another year or two?"

He regarded me quite seriously. Touched my cheek with fingers that were too gentle for someone who'd spent centuries killing.

"I lose time, Helen. Hours. Sometimes days. I realize suddenly that the world has moved on and left me behind, and I know that one time I will sink into that sleep and I'll be like them. If I don't die, I will be Frozen." Jinx raised my fingers to his lips. "Help me."

The party was ending. Some of the picnickers had already misted away, bored with deathplay; a few lay tumbled in various stages of disarray on the lawn. Luther was still there; his laughter guided us through the tangled trees, into the clearing already taking on the colors of the day world. Dawn was coming.

"Charming party," Luther said. He checked the drape of the lace at his cuffs, flicked drops of blood from his fingers. Charity lay still embraced with the vampire child at his feet. They were both dead, their throats torn. "Really must be going, my dears – places to go, people to eat. Do let me know if you manage to die, won't you? Rap on a table. Send me a spirit message."

From behind me, Jinx said, "Luther." He received Luther's complete attention, the pale blue eyes suddenly very serious.

"Have you ever thought," Luther said, "that this is God's will? What did *you* do to deserve this, Jinx? *You*, Helen? I know what I did, and I can tell you, I'm not so very eager to face a God who made me."

His seriousness dropped away like a shed cloak, and he made a kissing sound toward me. "Helen, dearest, do keep in touch. My door is always open, et cetera, et cetera. We might have quite a lot of fun, you and I. Like the old days."

He misted away in a showman's puff of fog before the words were even complete, a ghost among ghosts, and when I closed my eyes I felt his chill pass through me.

Good bye, Luther. I was done with him. With all of them. Was this how Jinx had survived for the past five hundred years, with this curious aching emptiness? No wonder he was peculiar.

They were all gone. The sun was coming, like a pressure against my chest, pushing me away. One by one, the bodies of the dead faded like smoke, some into the ground, some into the air.

But not the Frozen. There were five I could see, more I half-glimpsed in the trees. They waited silently, growing ever fainter as the light rose, but never quite gone. They had found shelter, and they were waiting.

Jinx took my hand and sat down on a headstone big enough for two; we perched there together, companionably silent, as birds began to wake and sing, the air to grow warm on our faces.

"Helen," he said as the first crescent of the sun appeared in the distance. "I don't believe I ever said that I love you."

Fire. Fire poured through my veins, into my flesh, eating me alive from within – a pain beyond any mortal pain, beyond death, a pain that had no ending.

I endured it for as long as I could, holding Jinx's trembling hand. Our skin was blackening, crisping away from us. Tears boiled unshed in my eyes. I felt myself being stripped away, layer by layer, a cruelty that was beyond anything I had ever known.

I do not know how long it was before I let go. Not so long. Perhaps ten minutes. I heard Jinx cry out in despair as he felt me slip away – he reached for me with burning arms but I couldn't stay, I spread myself wide on the air and felt, if not peace, then at least an end to pain.

My last sight, before I faded entirely, was of Jinx, a burning torch, his eyes the only thing of him still recognizable. And around him, bearing silent witness, the milky shadows of the Frozen.

I misted back at nightfall, within touching distance of where I had vanished. Cool moonlight. Silence.

Around me, the unmoving white glimmer of the Frozen. None of the others had bothered to come back.

He'd failed, of course. No one could bear that agony, no matter how pure their desire. I saw him sitting exactly where I'd left him, on top of a weathered old tombstone large enough for two.

"Jinx," I said. He looked whole again, though the experience had left him looking oddly –

I took a step forward as he turned his head toward me, and smiled. Really smiled. The joy in his eyes was heartbreaking.

"Jinx," I whispered. I closed my eyes and tasted him on my tongue, ripe with life, heavy with blood.

Not dead.

Mortal.

I almost fainted when he touched me; the ecstasy of that was more than I could stand. He was every need I'd ever had fulfilled, every desire consummated. I wanted him in ways I could not begin to comprehend.

I wanted to drink him down like a flood. I knew how his life would taste, so rich and delicate; the rarest of wines. The food of God.

His warm, warm hands brushed my cold face. I turned blindly into his touch, breathed deep of his pulse point, heard his heart laboring in my ears. *Oh, Jinx. You magnificent fool.*

"You see?" he said. "I waited for you. I knew you'd come back."

I couldn't answer. He guided my lips to his wrist, and as I kissed the thin skin I felt him shudder against me, as transported as I. We were one, Jinx and I. We had always been one.

"Drink," he whispered.

I did.

The blur of his life gathered me in its embrace, whirled me into the blaze that was Jinx, brilliance and compassion and hunger and need, the cold fire of a love he could neither have or forget. My face was the only light in his darkness. And at this moment, when our souls merged and flowed together, we were at peace.

His heart fluttered. I would have pulled away, but his warm hand held me in place, and I couldn't stop myself, drawing him into me further and further, consuming him whole.

Dead weight in my hands. I cried out, but it was only a shadow of the anguish I felt; I had not meant to –
--to kill him –

Oh, Jinx. I had been a knife aimed at his heart by his own hand.

I held him in my arms, rocked his limp body through the long, long night as cold stars watched.

Just before dawn, a cold hand brushed my cheek, and I looked up to see the moonstruck face of a Frozen. With slow, deliberate care, he reached down for Jinx.

"No," I said. His face was completely unmoving, but I thought I saw a flicker of compassion in those dead eyes. "Not yet."

I cradled the body close. He had cooled during the night, as flesh does, but under my own skin I still knew warmth, and sunlight, and joy. In my veins, I was Jinx.

"The sun's coming," I said to Jinx. He was so heavy. So very real to me, more real than anything had been in the world for hundreds of years. "You didn't tell me how long it would take."

His blood told me it would be a long death. I was prepared for it this time. Jinx had endured. How could I do less?

As the sun's corrosive light touched me, I kissed Jinx's cool lips one last time, and gave myself up. I braced myself for the fire, but instead –

--instead, my skin tingled with the touch of clean warmth. Pale skin shading to palest pink.

In the utter silence, I heard my heart begin to beat. The clock of life, counting down.

Jinx's gift of blood and life. *I was mortal.*

I kissed Jinx again in silent gratitude, tears streaming down my cheeks to glitter on his cheeks. I closed my eyes to the brilliant dazzle of morning and listened, rapt, to the beating of my heart.

Forgiven.

And now I know my path. I will sit here, like Jinx before me, in the full warm embrace of the sun. With nightfall the Frozen will return, and I will offer my blood, and with my blood, the gift Jinx brought us at such great cost.

Death.

As I listen to the beating of my heart whisper his name, I know, without any shadow of doubt, that he is waiting for me beyond the sun.

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