



CURSED

*Her hunger brought a
curse upon them all.*



MERRIE DESTEFANO

A novella prequel to FEAST

PRAISE FOR MERRIE DESTEFANO'S BOOKS:

AFTERLIFE:

“Merrie Destefano storms the world of urban fantasy with AFTERLIFE, breathing new life into the vast genre of the undead. Gritty, poignant, in the tradition of *Bladerunner* with the nostalgia of New Orleans.”—Tosca Lee, New York Times best-selling author

“Life, death and AFTERLIFE—a haunting story that seamlessly blends the hard-boiled twists of cyberpunk with the noir flavor of a Southern Gothic thriller.”—Marc Giller, author of *Hammerjack*

“The fast pacing and skillfully eked out clues keep things moving, for a good read - and a strong first novel.” — *Locus Magazine*

“It’s rare when I’m so impressed by a debut. And this science fiction novel definitely took me by surprise...I finished the book with a smile, loving every bit of Destefano’s thought-provoking tale.”—Angela from SciFiChick.com.

LOST GIRLS:

“LOST GIRLS reminds me why I love escaping into the pages of a book. It’s full of mystery, meltable romance, and gritty magnetism. I seriously couldn’t put it down. Dishes were left unwashed, time forgotten, sleep lost. Merrie Destefano weaves magic.”—Rachel A. Marks, author of *Darkness Brutal*

FATHOM:

“Gripping and romantic, Fathom is a new twist on an ancient mythology.”—Kimberly Derting, author of *The Body Finder* series

FEAST:

“From page one, I was trapped in Ticonderoga Falls. I devoured chapters, rolling to my back when my elbows got tired, upsetting my cat who impatiently shifted around me as I turned this position to that. I barely even noticed the light fading outside until the sky grew too dark to see by, and I dared lower the book and rise—clutching it to me as if afraid it’d creep out and fly away if I put it down—to turn on the light.” — Karina Cooper, author of the *St. Croix Chronicles* and the *Dark Mission* series

Fangoria says, “Harper Voyager’s FEAST: HARVEST OF DREAMS, by Merrie Destefano, is a book you don’t want to finish. The story is fast-paced and the characters are likable, but more than anything else, the setting is a place you don’t wish to leave.”

Night Owl Reviews says, “Once again Merrie Destefano has put out an edgy urban romance that will attract both romance readers and fantasy ones. She’s developed creatures that have never been seen before and a world that seems only too possible.”

CURSED Synopsis:

Hunting has grown sparse in 1898, a result of the Industrial Revolution. In a desperate quest for survival, Ash and Lily—a husband and wife team of shape-shifting Darklings—break the rules and hunt in an uncharted, backwoods, mountain community. The danger is great, for here the wild Darklings band together to fight trespassers.

But Ash discovers an even greater danger lurking at the train station where the hunt begins—a delicious nine-year-old boy.

Up until now his wife, Lily, has always been able to follow the basic Darkling rule: Never hunt a human younger than twelve. But she hasn't eaten in weeks, and when a nine-year-old boy steps off the train, she can't hold her hunger in check. With an unspoken plea, she manages to convince her husband to join her on a lawless and deadly hunt—

A hunt that will bring an unholy curse upon them all.

Credits

Cover design by Merrie Destefano

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Cursed

A Novella Prequel to
Feast: Harvest of Dreams

By Merrie Destefano

Part One

Ash

1898

I walked, a shadow among shadows, dressed in a woolen coat and a silk vest, wearing a hat made of felt. From the moment the sun went down, I prowled the train station until finally I settled upon the wooden platform. There I waited, unable to hide the hunger in my gaze as I stared down the track, listening for the song of yet another locomotive.

“Can you see it?” I asked my wife.

“Not yet,” she answered.

She sighed, her skin paler than usual, her waist thinner than it had been a year ago. Hunger had driven us from our most recent hunting grounds, a New England manor where we had spent nearly a century masquerading as ghosts. And now we stood together, in the mountains of Southern California, a long way from home and nearly out of time.

Just then—as I was musing over our past—my wife lifted her head and grinned.

I could hear the train then, lumbering toward us, its iron belly filled with passengers. It was running behind schedule tonight, thundering into the station at ten minutes past the hour and finally slugging to a stop beside us.

And then just like a beast from another world, the train opened its maw and released the humans inside until they spilled across the platform.

The hunter and the hunted brushed shoulders.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath as each person slipped past, before they were enveloped in the billowing clouds of coal dust and steam. All the while, I held my hunger in check, remembering the foreign names humans had called my kind in the past.

Vampire. Werewolf. Ghost.

I smiled. They were wrong. Of course. We'd used many disguises over the centuries and humans had never been able to figure out who or what we truly were. It was a game I found fascinating at times, exhausting at others. "What was it they used to call us, my love?" I asked, leaning close enough to smell the moonlight in my wife's hair.

"Doppelgangers," she whispered, one gloved hand held delicately in front of her nose, shielding herself from the thick fumes of burning coal.

"Ah, yes. I had forgotten that one."

Instantly I remembered our years spent in Germany, hunting along the edge of the Black Forest. I could almost see the human disguise she wore then, her copper hair and ruddy complexion, so different from the translucent skin she wore today.

She turned to watch a family of four as they departed the train, her face transforming into a cameo silhouette when the mists cleared and the moon appeared behind her.

The moon.

Swollen. Commanding. Intoxicating.

It was all I could do to ignore it, to refrain from lifting my head to the sky and letting the pure song burst from my lips. But it wouldn't do to cast an enchantment here. Not yet. Not until we had chosen our prey. We were trespassing on forbidden territory tonight, crossing into boundaries where the wild ones dwelled.

Hunger will force you to do things like that.

It'll push you to break the rules.

I studied the humans, all dressed in their finest traveling clothes. Rumpled and weary from their journey, they would occasionally glance at me, wary, wondering if they knew me, wondering why my face looked so familiar. And in the meantime, I searched their thoughts, changing my features to fit what they were looking for. I knew that soon enough I would strike upon the right memory and one of them would look at me with a spark of recognition and trust.

Lily's face changed just as easily as mine, morphing at the moment when a head turned in her direction, when the smoke and steam cleared and she could be seen.

Just then a dapper gentleman stepped from the train, preceded by two servants and followed by a nanny, an exquisite nine-year-old boy somewhere in their midst.

Lily caught her breath.

I should have sensed what would happen next. I knew her dark preferences, how she loved to break the rules. And we were so far from the Elders even I wondered for a moment how they would ever find out if we transgressed.

"That one," she breathed, her voice husky, her eyes never leaving the child.

I nodded in agreement.

At that very moment the wind shifted and I caught a glimpse of the dreams that waited inside the lad; he possessed a world of wonder, exotic lands that stretched from the pyramids of Egypt to the jungles of Africa and beyond. I saw images of the deep blue Mediterranean Sea, the smoky incense of Tibet and the Great Wall of China.

He was a lovely child, his skin dusted with freckles, his long hair pulled back with a ribbon, his ruffled shirt open at the collar. His cheeks flushed and his eyes sparkled.

The boy would be delicious.

Even at this distance, the desire for the child was so great that I could barely contain myself. My gut rumbled, my blood rushed through my veins.

Then the child's father glanced at us, mistrust in his eyes. Fortunately, I was able to hold his gaze firm until his fear ebbed away, until the man finally saw exactly what I wanted him to see—that we were his closest neighbors, stranded at the station and in need of help.

“Mr. and Mrs. Brewster,” the father said, the accent of wealth in his voice.

“William!” I responded, knowing his name instantly. I moved close enough to clasp the man's hand and shake it with vigor. “So good to see a familiar face. Is your carriage nearby? I fear we've been forgotten here at the station.”

“Of course, man. You can ride back with us,” William Randolph Driscoll said.

“Avery can sit atop with the driver. A tight fit perhaps, but nothing we haven't endured before, eh?”

I nodded.

“Where’s your luggage?” Driscoll asked.

I sensed the man’s suspicion creeping back.

Just then Lily wrapped her arm around Driscoll’s.

“It was perfectly dreadful. They misplaced all our bags on the ship,” she said. She was guiding him toward the carriage now, through moonbeams and mist, the child following in her wake. She glanced at the boy, her voice sugar sweet. He drew even closer. “I may never see any of the treasures we purchased in the Orient again.”

She sighed and cast a wistful look, let a tear slide down her cheek.

I followed a step behind them. Watching how easily she mesmerized the humans, without even singing an Evenquest song, without a word of chanted poetry that could wrap about them like ropes of silk. Without even a bit of magic, she had them under her spell.

She was perfect.



The carriage rumbled along a curving road that led up the mountain. When the humans weren’t looking, Lily lifted her head, flicked her tongue and sniffed. I could smell it too—pine sap dripping on sticky needles, fog sifting between cypress and cedar, the rich musty odor of roots and bark and wet dirt. An everdeep forest covered these growing bluffs and cliffs, its song nearly as intoxicating as the moon.

There she was, nearly full and peeking down at us through black branches, teasing us to come out and play. We had one more day and night before we had to return home.

I hoped it would be long enough.

And I hoped that the surrounding forests were empty, that there were no bands of thieves hiding amongst the thick trees.

We needed to eat soon. Throughout the past year, the Great Clan War had continually cut back on our free hunting territories. During that time my family, the Blackmoors—a proud and noble house—had suffered the worst. Once a clan known for our finely crafted Evenquest enchantments, we were now beggars, humbly selling our songs and stories at court, amidst laughter and derision. There, we were given barely enough food to survive. The latest insult had come from Willow, one of the High Princes, himself, when he said that if we could not provide for ourselves, we would all be cast out of our homes and forced to become laborers in the field.

I had noticed the way Willow watched my younger sister, Sage, the whole time he spoke, a glimmer in his eye that made me long to meet him on the battlefield.

So, right now, I forced the anger from my mind and I smoothed my brow. The scent of the child, sitting beside us, calmed me, for his dreams wrestled close to the surface of his waking mind.

He wasn't sleeping, but his mind wandered as he stared out the window. I closed my eyes and listened to the many thoughts that rambled, helter skelter and pell mell, through the corridors of his mind...the child longed to see his own room again, to pull out his toy chest and explore, to create new stories and games. He wanted to see his friends, but even more than that he wanted to run through the forest, alone, to a hidden place by the creek.

The creek.

I slid my hand over my wife's. Her pulse raced. She must have seen it too—the place where the boy planned to go tomorrow. It was perfect.

And then I saw something else, just as wonderful. The boy held a secret wish in his heart, something he had never told anyone, not even his father. It was the reason why he always went alone to this hidden glen and this glistening brook.

He longed to see a faery.

Lately all the humans had been talking about them—apparently even the boy's father and his friends believed faeries were real. With a shift of my gaze, I listened to the rumbling thoughts that bandied about in William Randolph Driscoll's head. There I heard how he and his friends often discussed these creatures at length when they met over brandy and cigars in his back parlor.

Flying creatures with tiny bodies, slender arms, gossamer wings.

I turned and stared back out the window. It wasn't so different from the truth, although not exactly right, of course. No human fable had ever quite captured who my people were. But this modern-day tale of faeries was very close.

And it would be so easy to imitate.



The carriage shuddered to a stop, wheels rickety-clacking over a patch of cobblestone, the seductive perfume of wolfsbane and hemlock wafting through an open window. To the left, a villa crouched among leafy wood, imitating an Italian vista. I winced. These pale-skinned Americans knew nothing about the olive drenched hills of Rome or the

watery streets of Venice. It was all pretense here.

A white-washed stucco imitation.

The flavorless dreams of the rich wearied me. After a hundred years they had all started to taste the same—power and twisted financial schemes and the bread-and-butter fear of poverty. I longed for something different.

I sniffed brittle mountain air as the door opened, set a foot on solid ground, boots crunching on a patch of belladonna. I started to take my wife's gloved hand, then slid both hands about her waist instead and easily lifted her out of the carriage, skirts swinging in midnight gloom. She flashed me a grin, made my heart skip half a beat.

Then we both stood with our backs to the villa, pretending it belonged to us and that we were William Randolph Driscoll's closest neighbors.

"We're in your debt, Driscoll," I said.

"I hope you find your luggage," Driscoll answered.

"Sleep well, young William," Lily called then to the boy. The child glanced down at her through the glass, eyelids already growing heavy. "I hear fresh mountain air brings the sweetest dreams." She leaned closer, her voice changing to a dusky whisper. "I often dream of faeries myself when I leave my window open."

The boy grinned, revealing dimples that had been hiding in rosy cheeks. He lifted a hand and waved to her. Then the carriage jerked to a start, black horses snorting, hooves clattering and long tails swishing in the night air.

And overhead, sweet, beloved moon.

Dazzling, white silver light cascaded down through black branches.

Followed by a hushed whisper that swept through treetops, rustling leaves and shivering pine needles.

Yes, well done, it said.

And we both knew then that our Mistress of the Night was well pleased.



We waited a few moments, until the nearly-full moon was at her apex, then we followed the carriage—first dropping our garments of human flesh like worn-out cloaks, then changing into a pair of blue-black ravens, and finally swooping through velvet shadows. Following the scent of horses and humans. The only sound the flapping of our wings.

And two hearts that beat as one.

Thump.

The carriage rumbled and grumbled in the distance ahead of us, over roads of dirt and clay and sawdust.

Thu-thump.

A massive Victorian mansion appeared on the hillside, windows glowing like hot coals.

Thump.

The boy dashed out of the carriage and up the stairs, through the front door, a clamor and a clatter of feet on the staircase that led to the second floor.

Thu-thump.

A window flew open and the boy stared out, eyes wide and eager, chest filling with crisp, black mountain air.

Thump.

We landed in a tree just outside his window, dressed in black feathers, our black eyes blinking and watching, until my wife opened her beak and sang. It was a song that no bird had ever sung before, full of promise and delight, of an unfolding adventure that would begin tomorrow.

In the hidden glen.

In the everdeep wood.

When the moon would poise overhead, majestic and magnificent, in lavender sky.

Part Two

Ash

1898

The next day, the boy ran through the forest, galloping like a young horse. Full of energy and spirit and wild pride, head held high, shoulders back, chest out. The woods burst alive with the thrashing of arms and legs, the breaking of branches and ripping of leaves.

Together my wife and I crouched in indigo shadow, watching him as he raced toward the creek. In an instant we transformed from our true bodies to something he would find more pleasing.

“He’s lovely,” she said.

“Yes,” I answered, knowing that he would be perfect, despite any misgivings I may have had about breaking the rules earlier. What difference would it make that he was only nine years old? Overhead, a canopy of green pine sheltered us from the bright sun, surrounding us with a holy frontier of fragrance and sound.

We struggled against a common weakness—a gnawing ever-present hunger that was making enchantments difficult. Together we called to the child in an Evensong chant—a song created long ago to sing around the evening fires of home—and the

melody wrapped about the boy like a net of fine silk. He stopped running, held still for a moment, then turned and glanced in our direction. With his head slightly cocked, he took a few cautious steps in our direction.

Meanwhile, I continually watched the perimeter of the clearing. One of my wild cousins could be hiding nearby, ready to steal our harvest. They could attack the moment we were distracted. I hadn't seen them yet, but I had smelled them. Whenever the wind shifted and blew down the mountain from the east, I could smell the stench of unwashed flesh and the pungent odor of dreams harvested too fast. I hadn't said anything to my wife yet, I didn't want to worry her.

I didn't want her to know that we could be chased away from this hunting ground, just like the last.

Just then, the moon appeared on the horizon, full and swollen and pale as a ghost. And here we were, about to disobey one of her cardinal rules.

Never harvest a human below the age of twelve.

"Come, boy," my wife said. "Come closer."

And he did.

He paused before us like a mighty giant, then knelt in the dirt and carefully parted the purple and white violets with one hand. Mouth and eyes wide open, he stared down at us, silent for a long time.

"Faeries," he whispered at last.

"Yes," Lily said as she spread her wings and fluttered up to meet his gaze, her delicate body the length of one of his hands.

The boy laughed and opened his palm so she could land.

I nodded at Lily and she began to sing, the sweetest lullaby in the history of the world. Even I began to feel drowsy as she created a composition of free verse and song, as her voice echoed throughout the glade, like temple chimes in the wind.

The boy blinked, eyelids heavy, his head nodded forward. He sat with a soft thud in the dirt, yawned and stretched, then lay back in a bed of sage moss and maidenhead fern.

“Sleep, child,” I said as I soared above him, wings rustling. “Dream.”

Lily spun through the mid-day sky, dancing through sunbeams. Already my lips tingled as I thought of the marvelous tales we would sing when we sat before the fires of home, how the littlest ones would lean forward, eyes wide and attentive, some of them unable to eat their Evenquest meal as they listened.

Listen.

That was when I heard it. The wondrous deep silence of sleep.

Lily cocked her head ever so slightly, focusing her gaze on the young human boy. She dropped from the sky then, like a snowflake, to land whisper-soft on the boy's chest. We could both feel it coming. Could almost see it.

The boy's mouth opened and formed a small round "O," his hair in moist curls on his forehead. His breathing deepened, slowed to an almost imperceptible cadence. His hand twitched and his eyelids shifted.

Then a golden sphere rolled from his lips. It glistened, sticky wet and nearly invisible as it began to float away.

The dream.

She had to catch it and reached out with webbed fingers spread wide. The dream nearly slipped away. It almost broke.

But she caught it nonetheless. Then she glanced at me over her shoulder and grinned.

My wife never meant to lead us both astray. I know that now, nearly a century later. And she certainly hadn't meant to break my heart. She merely fell in love with a sweet young boy and came to crave his dreams above any others. In her own way, it was a natural hunger and her affection pure.

But what happened as a result, that was not natural.

And because of it, I shall bear a stain on my soul forever.



Whenever I think of her I hear music. Violins, bows sweeping across strings, melancholy and sweet. I hear her voice, keeping time with mine. I remember how we returned home after our first harvest with the boy, how we took a pouch filled with dreams with us. We shared our spoils with the rest of my family, passing the first dream around like a bowl of porridge as we all lounged before the Evenquest fires. We each took a sip and then sighed, drifting off into a world of night visions—a child's world that contained a laughing hippopotamus and an expedition through the jungles of Africa.

No one dared admonish us for what we had done.

For, because of us, they had enough food to survive the winter.

Together we followed the human boy through his dream, dressed in pith helmet

and jodhpurs, as he first tamed panthers and crocodiles, then scaled pyramids and swam in the Nile. We fought beside him as he rescued his best friend from a tribe of wily cannibals.

And when the first dream was finally consumed, a process that took nearly three days, we then analyzed it, dissecting it for deeper meaning. We catalogued it and wrote stories about it, made it our own.

At court, Lily and I soon became the Golden Pair, sought out for every song-filled soiree and every sugar-drenched picnic. All the High Princes, even Willow himself, wanted the latest installment in our on-going saga. Everywhere we went, we heard “the boy” spoken in hushed, almost reverent tones.

That summer we had the market on magic.

We dined beneath sapphire skies, glowing candles hanging in the trees. Sometimes my wife and I would act out scenes from the dreams, wearing the skin of earthly creatures. She would become a snarling tiger and I, a clumsy giraffe. Or she would loom overhead, imitating an oak tree, while I scampered through her branches, a gray squirrel with bushy tail and bright eyes.

We learned how to make our watchers laugh and sigh.

It was easy. Exciting. Intoxicating.

It was the summer when our every wish came true. Then the summer bled into autumn. And, as it always does, all good things came to an end.



The summer passed. She deserted us, our once golden friend favored us no more. The

forest that wore olive green and sage, citrine and jade, now took on a new look. Saffron and russet peeked through morning skies, falling leaves quickly filled empty spaces. The boy loved the darkening sky, loved to play in large piles of crackling leaves.

Even more than that he loved Lily. He loved to find her waiting for him in the clearing. During the full moon he would fill his pockets with my wife's favorite sweets—bits of cake and fruit, cookies with icing, thick slices of gingerbread dripping with honey, apple tarts and cinnamon candy. We love sweets, almost as much as dreams.

But we can live without brown sugar or molasses.

Without dreams, we will perish.

Autumn scorched its way across the tree line, coloring the horizon with the over-bright shades of death. Meanwhile, the boy continued to be our flame and we, his moths. He willingly gave us his dreams and in exchange, we gave him inspiration, gave him the ability to dream more.

But I was growing weary. Unlike my wife, I no longer wanted handwritten invitations from Darkling nobility, I didn't want to entertain at their indulgence. I hated sharing my harvest with those who had grown too fat or lazy to make the journey to the Land of Men, those who had set the great war in motion in the first place.

And even more than that, I began to have restless longings.

I now wanted a human of my own.



“The boy invited me to a party,” Lily said. Daylight played in her hair, casting sparks of

silver and gold about her rosy cheeks. The glade held the musty odor of crumbling leaves and wet moss.

“Did he now,” I answered.

In truth, I wasn’t paying attention. I was thinking about the town that lay down the road, about all the bedroom windows that would open tonight and the people inside who longed to sleep. I could hear their great collective sigh. Their weariness. Felt my own pulse race.

In the dusky blue shadows. Down the road.

A window opening, the glisten of glass, the silence of sleep.

I’d been there three times already by myself, had drifted in and out of the villagers’ Gilded Age imaginings, listened to the great machines whirring inside their minds, saw their linen white sheets stained with drops of laudanum. Then the corsets came undone and they let down their silver-dusted hair.

The Wimbledon sisters.

A pair of women in their sixties, they looked like spinsters at first. Until you walked into their dreams. Somewhere in their past they had battled over a young man, even possessed him for a time. Then he had died mysteriously. And now their story was unraveling, moon by desperate moon, beneath my patient webbed fingers. Together they were telling me a tale of the darkest sort.

They murdered him, I think. Though I wasn’t completely certain yet.

It was a story told in chapters, the pages out of order, the strongest emotions coming first—

“It’s going to be his birthday next month,” Lily interrupted my thoughts again, her voice as low as a conspirator. “And there will be a whole pack of children at his party.”

I stared at her.

“Imagine the harvest we could get in a single evening.” A grin lifted the corners of her petal pink lips, echoing the curve of the moon in a perfect arc. “We would have enough dreams to feed an army.”

“I don’t care,” I told her, frowning, impatience bubbling beneath my skin like hot wax. “My sweet, do you know what sort of dreams are out there, waiting to be taken?”

She blinked like a stray beam of sunlight had hit her in the eyes.

“This village is filled with twisted secrets and stories, every one of them darker than the next. There are mysteries here that could take years to unravel. These humans may look innocent in the daylight, but when the shades are drawn and their eyes are closed, the truth is revealed.” I told her all that, knowing that part of her had fallen in love with the boy and I had grown jealous. She had broken the rules and, in the process, found treasure.

But I had found something just as valuable.

I’d discovered the corruption that fueled them all and it made me hungry for more.

I couldn’t bear to play with the boy any longer.

I had to hear the end of the story over at the Wimbledon’s and I knew that there would be more tales in the other houses.

I needed to harvest on my own.

So I lied.

I told my wife that I would meet her at the party, that together we would cast a Veil upon the entire house and harvest all the children.



I examined her costume, the full skirt that billowed past her knees, the white stockings and black shiny shoes. It was quite convincing. I ran my fingers through her mass of carefully arranged curls, all the while wondering if she knew what I was thinking.

Then I leaned closer, kissed my wife on the forehead.

“I love you,” she said.

“And I will always love you, my sweet,” I told her.

“We will meet later. Together we will cast an enchantment on the whole lot of them.”

“Yes,” I answered.

It was such a small lie, barely worth remembering. But this one falsehood would change everything, it would shatter our unending arc of silver moon.

She stared into my eyes. “Til then, my love.”

I almost asked her to come with me, almost blotted out her words with a kiss.

Almost.

Instead, she laughed, turned and sauntered away, out of the forest, toward the gathering that awaited. I watched her disappear, wearing the garments of a human child, her image slowly dissolving into the green and golden foliage of autumn, a pale

silhouette etched against darkening sky.

It was the last time I would see her alive.

A part of me may have known, may have felt it twisting like a snake in my gut. But I thought it was nothing more than the ache of our separation, the knowledge that our desires were leading us down separate paths.

I was wrong.

In the end, I would never forgive myself for that final kiss. It should have been passionate, I should have held her in my arms, should have covered her with kisses.

But I didn't. And later I couldn't even remember our last real kiss.

It dissolved. Like the piles of fallen leaves. Like the summer.



The window hung open, the bungalow quiet, a gentle breeze sifted through lace curtains. Overhead the moon spun its October magic. Pumpkins guarded the porch and, in the distance, a spotted owl hooted a warning. It was time for small creatures to scamper to safe hiding places, the Hunt was on. Soon the night would come alive with the eerie howl of coyotes and the brittle crunch of bones in open jaws.

Somewhere in the shadowed glen, the wild Darklings prowled. Right now they were lifting their long faces, sniffing the moon-bright air. They were hungry too. I could sense them, like a sky filled with stars at midday. I couldn't see them, yet I could hear their soft panting, could imagine tongues licking lips, eyes glittering.

Hunger will drive you to do horrible things. I know that now.

The dance of life and death swirled at my back in the woodland shadows. Meanwhile, a symphony of forgotten dreams called to me from within the bungalow.

I leaned forward, listening for the slow breathing and the incantation of sleep. I caught a whiff of paint and linseed oil, the odor of damp cloth and canvas. A grin slid across my face and I pushed my way past fluttering curtains. There in the corner, I saw a painting propped up on an easel, a landscape of the forest with surrounding mountain village, a sprinkling of houses and narrow curving streets.

The picture was quite lovely, I admitted with pride, for this was inspiration that I had spawned. It had a plein air quality to it and yet, a total abandonment to the rules of the day, a fluidity of color and shape and light. It seemed to glow.

I sighed.

It was wonderful when a human responded like this, when their creativity was boosted by the presence of a Darkling. This is what we often bragged about back home over Evenquest fires—how the humans needed us to bring their greatest dreams to fruition.

We imagined that without us, they would still be primitive cave dwellers, rooting about with weapons of wood and stone.

Then, wearing the skin of a black cat, I padded across the room to the bed where Iris Wimbledon rested, her eyes closed, hair spread like a silver fan across her pillow. White on white, her skin was pale, as if all her pigment had been drained into the painting. Only her lips seemed to hold any color. A deep red, they began to move as she mumbled in her sleep.

“No. I can’t,” she lamented, tossing her head.

I drew closer, listening.

“It’s wrong. He’ll *die* if we give him more arsenic.”

Ah, this was it. The big confession. This was what I had been waiting for, the reason I had been visiting her for the past several months. But at that moment—when she was about to reveal her darkest secrets—a sudden pain shot through my gut.

I fell backward and sucked a shuddering breath through clenched teeth.

Something was wrong. Horribly wrong. I felt the warmth of blood as a wound began to form just below my ribs. I staggered from the pain, fell to the floor.

Lily. Knife sharp horrid agony.

I shouldn’t have let her go to the party alone; I should have known that something dreadful would happen. And now she was in danger, I could feel it, taste it—

Scream out loud and then gasp for breath, then scream again.

Death brushed against me; it knocked the air from my lungs.

Wounded and bleeding, she was crying for me.

I forced myself to rise. Limbs weak and limp, still wearing the skin of a cat, I leapt to the windowsill, lifted my head, then slumped to the ground on the bungalow porch. There, I changed back to my true Darkling shape. Leaving a trail of blood behind, I staggered away.



William Randolph Driscoll’s house stood before me, a great castle-like mansion with turret and widow’s walk, a monster of wood and shingle and glass. Its silhouette glistened

with light, proclaiming a meager testimony to human architectural achievements. I winced when I looked at it, pathetic and simple compared to the palaces of home, to the spires that reached to the heavens, the domes that glimmered with the light of a thousand stars. I knew the humans were inside, I could smell them, could see them as they passed the long narrow windows. They walked upright, heads held high, pride rolling off sweat-backed skin, their stench catching on the moonlight wind.

Moonlight.

It fell down, white bright; it sent shivers up my spine. But I didn't have time for obeisance now. Lily was here, somewhere. Trapped inside this board and nail nest made by humans.

Lily. Here.

Pain shot through my gut again, a knife of hot steel, twisting. I crumpled and fell to the ground, rolled in the grass.

Meanwhile, I heard footsteps approaching. Foul breath filled the night sky and in the near distance I saw puffs of air shining in a cloud around a man's head. Cold frost mingled with cold dark pain. I forced myself to stand, to walk past a hedge of purple nightshade. I watched the human as he approached the house, as he pulled a pocket watch from his waistcoat, then nodded.

Anger surged through me. Where was my wife and what was happening inside the house? I fought the dagger that wrenched silently, slicing through my stomach, ripping out my intestines. Fortunately, anger won over pain.

The human stuffed the watch back inside his pocket. He placed one foot on the front step, ready to knock on the door.

“Stop.”

The human paused, flicked his head to the side and glanced in my direction.

At the same time I retreated into the shadows, away from the door and the pool of dangerous light—for tonight I wore my true skin, dark gray flesh and broad wings that folded neatly against my back. Like he was on a tether, the human cautiously followed me, peering into the surrounding darkness.

“Come,” I called again, using a voice I knew the human couldn’t resist.

A frown fell across his brow when he saw me. We both stood in a small grove of poplars now, hidden from those inside the house. I ran a quick gaze over my prey’s features, studied the shape of his shoulders, the fabric of his clothes, caught it all in my memory and there I held it still.

“Sleep,” I said then. It was a command, not a request.

The human’s eyelids thudded, flickered. He was fighting the spell, probably trying to reason his way through the strange sensation flooding his body. His knees buckled and the human tumbled forward, landing with a heavy thump on the wet grass. Face down, he didn’t move, save a shallow breath that caused his coat to lift ever so slightly.

I towered over the human now and, in a moment, I became his mirror image. I now wore his flesh, his clothes, his face, his body. Even the curious gaze in his eyes. Now I was the expected guest, walking toward the house, standing on the steps, knocking on the door.

Waiting.

To find Lily. One hand covering the shallow hole in my side, the pain-sharp

wound that made it hard to breathe.

Waiting. For the door to open, to be invited inside. I had to be invited in, you see, or the magic of the Darklings would be useless. I needed to be strong to stop the murder of my wife.

Unless it was already too late.

Part Three

The Party

1898

The children ran through the house, down dark paneled halls and around a hand-carved staircase, laughing, yelling, singing. This was the one day out of the entire year that the boy, known to his friends as William Randolph Driscoll Jr., could play indoors. This was his birthday, the day he turned 10 years old.

This was the day his ever-bright future would shatter.

Six boys and four girls ran through the stately Queen Anne mansion, over exquisite English Minton tiles and exotic hardwoods, over hand-knotted Turkish rugs and past Japanesque screens.

Six boys, four girls. And one Darkling dressed in human skin.

Lily, William's guest of honor.

She skipped and giggled, ate cake and drank tea. She huddled with the girls, listened to whispered secrets. She played games and laughed when two boys arm-wrestled. She watched William as he sipped a glass of lemonade, smiled at him with her eyes. He looked happy, so happy that he seemed to glow from within, like a human firefly.

But somewhere in the house there was another gathering. The children didn't pay

attention to the Men that occasionally wandered through the front door. They came, all dressed in long coats and hats, looking much too important to be bothered by the band of laughing children. Excitement coursed their veins and colored their skin; they had found something new and fresh, as brilliant as that modern miracle, electricity. It sang in their eyes, dusted their brows with a soft hurried frown. The Men all rushed down a corridor, cloistered themselves behind one of the many paneled doors. They spoke in hushed tones and carried a strange fragrance in their clothes.

Lily lifted her head and drew in a deep breath. She sensed a forbidden odor, something broken and musty. But she didn't recognize the smell. None of the children did.

It was the stench of death and captivity.

The Men were going to their monthly meeting of the local Lepidopterist Club, a society that treasured creatures with delicate, brightly colored wings. They were already examining their latest acquisition, a papilio zalmoxis caught on an African safari. The Giant Blue Swallowtail looked as if someone had stolen the Congo sky and pinned it to a board.

Inside the study, the Men leaned over a low table, studying exquisite black and blue wings, colors as brilliant as stained glass, shading as delicate as a watercolor painting. Then in unison they all grunted and agreed to temporarily retreat to the back parlor for brandy and cigars.

That was when William and his guests began to play hide and seek.



The human children were nearly as fun as their sugar-drenched food. Lily giggled as she listened to the rules of a new game they were going to play. William was going to close his eyes—he promised he wouldn't peek—and they would each run and find the perfect place to hide.

“It's very important that you remain quiet,” he warned. “Or I will find you. And then you will be It.”

None of them wanted to be It. Most certainly not Lily.

As soon as William closed his eyes, she dashed away, feet barely touching the ground. She was so excited she almost flew down the hallway, glad that no one noticed and that her secret identity hadn't been found out.

She paused before a paneled door, hand resting on a brass knob. Carved in the shape of an elfin face, the doorknob reminded her of woodland magic, of chipmunks and scurrying soft-footed squirrels, of the shifting colors found beneath a forest canopy. It spoke to her of all things mysterious and beautiful.

She opened the door and stepped inside, forcing herself not to giggle as she backed across the room and then crouched in the shadows. The fragrance of smoke sifted in through a half-open door and she wrinkled her nose. Men's voices sounded in another room, then began to come closer. Their tongues were heavy with alcohol and something else. She sniffed, lifting her gaze. *Pride. Arrogance.* She knew those odors, smelled them often in the clan back home. The Elders at court smelled like this. She crouched lower, not wanting to lose the game just because a group of Elders walked in.

They were louder and more clumsy than she expected, entering and filling the room with their big feet and hands and sweaty brows. In an instant, they turned up the gas

lights and the walls of the room glowed a pale yellow.

The walls of the room.

Suddenly she was surrounded by fragile wings and dead things. All of them pinned to boards and covered with glass, surrounded by gilded frames. Everything exotic and beautiful, everything that should be free, that should be flying through the night sky—everything in the room was dead.

Lily gasped. She felt a cold shiver as she tried to turn invisible, longing to slip away unseen, but suddenly she couldn't remember how. All the magic she had mastered over the past centuries evaporated like a shallow puddle beneath the hot sun. Meanwhile, despite her efforts, her human skin began to fade, crumbling like dust.

Just then they all turned and looked at her. A compassionate gaze filled their Man-bright eyes at first, when they saw a little girl hiding beneath the table. But then as her disguise began to fall away, the expression on their faces changed. It turned to something monstrous and dark.

In desperation, Lily had changed to the shape she used when meeting the boy in the forest. She turned into a faery and then she darted away, high above them. She hoped to make it out the door and then to freedom. Once she had gotten away from them, surely she would remember how to change back.

Meanwhile, beneath her, the men shouted, eyes burning and eager.

“What is that?”

“Did you see it? Where did it go?”

“It's a faery!”

“Charlie, get the net. Quick! It just flew up in the corner. Over there by the lamp.”

One of them slammed the door closed with a loud thud and a click. Lily tumbled into the door—a second too late—bruising her shoulder and now she flew crooked and dazed.

All hands were trying to catch her. She slid through big rough fingers, wings fluttering, desperate and darting, she zigzagged across the room, screaming for the boy, for her husband, for anyone to come and save her.

But then something soft and gossamer fell around her, a cloud of netted fabric, big as the world. It pulled her down, sucked her into a glass jar filled with the stench of death. She flew and beat her wings against the glass, flittering back and forth, growing weaker and weaker. Her eyes closed, her breathing turned shallow. Yet she still tried to fight, to escape. She lifted one hand, tried to cast a spell of sleep, but her voice had vanished.

A black numbness fell over her and she realized that she was no longer flying.

She curled, motionless, at the bottom of the jar. The great Man faces were staring in at her. There was no more air in her lungs. Only blackness and the deep dark tar of death. With her last breath she cried out for her husband.

Then came silence and forever quiet.



The boy named William heard the cry, felt it pierce his soul, wanted to pry it from his mind, wanted it to stop. Fear circled and attacked. Tears filled his eyes. It was Lily. She was hurt. Somewhere in the house.

“Lily!” he screamed, forgetting the game, running down polished hallways, feet

sliding when he tried to go faster. “Where are you? Lily! Come out, come out now—”

The other children came out, startled and scared.

“Help me find her!” he ordered. At first they trembled, then they all began to run through the house, calling her name. All ten of them running and calling and searching.

Just then the maid opened the front door. She invited a man inside, one of the regular club members.

At that very moment, everything changed.

And, for the boy named William, it would never be the same.

Part Three

Ash

1898

I paused, both feet on the porch, watching the door open, listening to the desperate cries inside—a flock of children was calling my wife’s name. I wanted to pounce through the door, wearing the skin of a tiger, wanted to kill everyone and everything, to rip through wood and flesh until I found her.

But I had to wait. An eternity passed. A thousand moons circled the earth. Every clock stopped and time held still. It was a trick, I knew. I hadn’t used any magic. I couldn’t. Not until someone invited me in, not until they opened a window or door willingly. Until then, this was their safe haven.

Light pooled on my feet, spilled through the opening door—a mixture of gas and electric light, flickering flames in the fireplace. I saw the starched white smile on the face of a hireling human who stood in the slivered opening.

“Good evening, Mr. Milford,” she said, words cleaving the night air. Her eyes sparkled when she recognized my human doppelganger costume. “Come in. They are all waiting for you in the study.” She took a step to the side, head lowered slightly.

And then, my right foot crossed the threshold.

“Halt!” I cried. With one palm raised, I cast a Veil over the entire house, caused everyone and everything to slow down. They all froze in place like statues on a well-manicured lawn.

The powers the Darklings have come from human dreams, you see. Anything you can dream, we can do. And what you must remember—this is very important now—is that not all of your dreams are sweet.

Some of them are nightmares.

So I swept through the Driscoll mansion like a hot desert storm, black as a starless midnight, merciless as a prowling panther.

“Lily!” I roared her name as I moved through the magic filament of dreams, still wearing the borrowed human flesh, though I longed for the head of a Gorgon and a crown of Medusa snakes. I wanted all who saw me to tremble and fall to their knees. I wanted them to beg for forgiveness before I even knew their crime. I wanted to find my wife and leave this house in a tormented nightmare that would never end.

But she did not answer my call. Even though I had forced the world and everything in it to be still.

I was stalking through the house, room by room, when I glanced down at one of the pale frozen children and noticed the look of terror on her face. She had been afraid before I even entered the door. I realized then that they all seemed to sense something horrible. I could see it on their faces. And I could smell a strange odor, mixed with smoke. Potassium cyanide. Plaster of Paris. Hydrogen cyanide.

A killing jar.

“Boy!” The pain in my gut turned to suffocating nausea; it forced me to double over. “Boy, come here.” Poison. Lily was breathing poison, trapped in a jar. Someone had caught her.

I heard running feet, saw the boy at my side. The child seemed to recognize me immediately, even through the disguise. But there was something else in the lad’s eyes, something that had probably always been there.

The child was afraid of me.

I grimaced.

“Where is she?” I whispered, my strength failing. The Veil would snap soon.

These monsters would all be set free. I had to hurry.

“I don’t know.”

“Where is the killing jar? Where is the poisoned room?”

A light sparked in the lad’s eyes and he shook his head, no longer afraid of what I might do. The child turned and ran down the hall. “No, Father! No! Don’t hurt her—” His hand clutched a doorknob and a large paneled door began to swing open. I was beside him then, pushing him out of the way. We were both inside the room and we saw everything at the same time.

Lily sprawled on a white board, her wings stretched out and smoothed flat. *Pain. Sharp. Ripping.* They had pulled her wings too hard, tore one of them off her shoulder. Then came another pain, even stronger. A knife, a long slender pin, had slid through her belly. All the way until it had thudded to a board on the other side, holding her down.

I sank to my knees, overwhelmed by the pain and the awful smell, the poison still

fresh in the air. I was now too weak to fight or kill, though I longed to, with every drop of blood in my veins.

“You’re killing her!” The boy pummeled his father with small round fists. “Let her go!”

That was when my Veil snapped, while I was helpless on my knees and the boy was fighting his father. The Men awoke; they turned and looked about them as if surprised. The boy’s father grabbed him by the wrists, held him fast.

“William, settle down! What’s wrong with you, lad?”

The boy named William was crying. He pulled away and ran to stand over Lily. There, he stared at her for a long horrid moment. “She’s dead.” His words came out like a handful of stones and sank to the bottom of the ocean. “You’ve murdered her.”

“Milford, are you all right?”

They were looking at me now, crumpled on the floor. Lily and the boy meant nothing to them. I stood slowly. Held up one hand. “Don’t move,” I said. An enchantment was easier than casting a Veil and I was still weak. I stumbled over to the table, to the white board that held my wife, and I carefully pulled out the pins that held her fast. I wished she would awaken, that she would smile. That she would fly up to greet me. But she didn’t.

She had crossed over to the Land of Dreams, leaving me behind. Alone.

“Lily,” I whispered her name one last time. And then I felt the curse descend, even before I realized it was coming. I turned to face them, my human skin cracking and falling away, searing and turning black. I was no longer a beautiful mythical creature,

someone you would want to meet in a wooded glen.

I was the monster who slinks through darkened corridors, the one who haunts your dreams. I was the beast that hides in shadows, waiting for you to pass. I was transforming into my true skin—that of a Darkling—right before them.

I shrieked.

The unholy cry thundered across the mountaintop, made the trees shiver and the ground quake, it caused a great tempest in the heavens. Clouds swirled overhead, turned black as my soul. Lightning sparked and snarled and I raised one fist above my head.

They all watched, helpless. Unable to move or run, though they surely wanted to. Even the father had forgotten his son. I could see it in the old man's eyes. Every thought and every silent prayer was only for himself. Selfish creature.

Later, I would have only one regret when I looked back on that night. I would wish that I had spared one of them.

The boy.

The child had truly loved Lily. Almost as much as I did.

But I didn't think of the lad until it was too late. Instead, I threw my arm down with a thundering crash.

"I curse you! I curse this house," I said, reciting the chant of the fallen, those who have turned away and can never be restored, "and all within it. I curse you to a life without hope or future, a life where every dream will be stolen, where every wish will be destroyed.

"I curse this generation," I bellowed to the father, to the Great Murdering Beast,

“and the next and the one after that. This place you call home will belong to me, everything you own will be mine. Even your children!”

Then with another shriek I flew out of the room and down the hallway, no longer caring who could see me or what shape I took. I soared out the door and up to the rooftop. There, I planted both feet on the shingled roof and raised both arms above my head. I would live by the letter of my own curse.

This house and these people.

Though, over the years, I would expand my territory to include the town and its inhabitants. I would claim all the best hunting for myself.

So, then, on that night—when my wife lay in a poisonous vapor and her soul departed to roam unknown worlds and I bore the stain of her death in my own flesh—I lowered my arms and set the curse in motion with a final thundering crash. It happened instantly. The heavens darkened. The stars and moon disappeared, as if ashamed. The darkness descended until it covered everything, a heavy impenetrable cloak. It fell like a curtain on my final act, from the sky to the ground, a velvet black fog that smothered all light.

It didn't fade until the sun crept over the tree line the next morning.

Revealing me as the wild creature I now was. And would forever be.

Part Four

Ash

today

I crouch in silken shadow, knees tucked up to my chin, wings furled at my back. Invisible to the World of Men, I perch atop the roof, my skin blending perfectly with the ever-changing backdrop of cloud and sky. Around me the village of Ticonderoga Falls buzzes and murmurs like a nest of insects, each human busy with some meaningless task, each running off to do their good deed of the day.

But I am not running, nor am I busy.

I am listening.

To the constant drone of words that drip from the mouths of my humans.

Listening for a magic combination of syllables. *The Legend*. Most of the time the humans don't even realize what they are saying. To them it's merely a myth spun by backwoods storytellers, those with the gift of weaving together old tales with a bit of something new.

Rambling bits of story about me.

And my curse.

The humans twist it with each retelling. Only a few knew the truth and most of them have died long ago—even the creature who spawned the curse, the one who pulled it unwillingly from my lips—William Randolph Driscoll Sr., the boy's father. It is

Driscoll's house that I sit upon now, it and everything Driscoll once owned now belongs to me.

Yet, I would trade it all for a glimpse of home or a carriage ride through the Black Forests of Germany. Or for even one moment in her arms once again.

But the curse changed all that.

I have wed myself to a different life now. One human. One slightly mad human, Driscoll's grandson, whose dreams are always colored by a longing for freedom. As if he is the only one who wants to be set free.

Even now, I hear someone whisper part of the tale, perhaps a mother is tucking her child in for a nap, or a boy is trying to impress his friends:

They ran through the house, down dark paneled halls and around a hand-carved staircase, laughing, yelling, singing. This was the one day out of the entire year that the boy, known to his friends as William Randolph Driscoll Jr., could play indoors. This was his birthday, the day he turned 10 years old. This was the day his ever-bright future would shatter.

I curl my wings tight against my back and a shudder runs through my limbs. I know that I should stop listening to the Legend.

After all, to the humans, it is only a myth.

Just like me.



About the Author

Born in the Midwest, novelist and magazine editor Merrie Destefano currently lives in Southern California with her husband, two German shepherds, a Siamese cat, and the occasional wandering possum. Her favorite hobbies are reading speculative fiction and watching old *Star Trek* episodes, and her incurable addiction is writing. She loves to camp in the mountains, walk on the beach, watch old movies, and listen to alternative music—although rarely all at the same time. For more information, visit her website at www.merriedestefano.com

Other Books by Merrie Destefano

NEW: *Lost Girls: Release date: 1.3.17*

She's not the only girl to go missing within the past year, but she's the only to come back—and she's desperate to find out why. FIGHT CLUB meets BLACK SWAN in Merrie Destefano's new YA novel, LOST GIRLS. From Entangled Teen.

Feast: Harvest of Dreams

Maddie MacFadden, a troubled storyteller, returns to Ticonderoga Falls just prior to Halloween to find her life and her soul captivated by Ash, a cursed immortal and the Lord of the Hunt.

Afterlife: The Resurrection Chronicles

Bladerunner meets Jim Butcher in *Afterlife*, a thrilling urban fantasy set in a near-future New Orleans. Chaz Dominguez is a professional Babysitter who guides the recently deceased into their new and improved lives. Nine lives are all a person can get—still a powerful group of desperate, high-level Nine-Timers will stop at nothing to possess the keys to true immortality.

Fathom

Turning sixteen can be hell, especially if everyone in town thinks your mother killed herself and your sister. All Kira Callahan wants to do is swim, hang out with her best friend, Sean, and ignore the kids who torment her at school. That is, until one day when she gets invited to a party. For three minutes her life is wonderful.

Then somebody spikes her drink and some girls from out of town lure her into the ocean and hold her underwater. Kira soon discovers that the teenagers visiting Crescent Moon Bay are not as innocent as they seem. In fact, nothing is as it seems—not the mysterious deaths of her sister and mother, not her heritage, not even her best friend. And everything seems to hinge on the ancient Celtic legends that her mother used to tell her as a child.

Waiting for Midnight

Written to keep you reading all night long, this combination of short stories and flash fiction contains a ghost story, a werewolf story, and a science fiction story, as well as two stories that feature characters from Merrie Destefano's novels, *AFTERLIFE* and *FEAST*. This collection is approximately 70 pages long.

The Plague Carrier

Condemned as a runaway and sentenced to work as a Cleaner, fifteen-year-old Anna now spends her days searching for valuables in a field of dead warriors. Her life goes from bad to worse, however, when she stumbles upon a plague carrier, a boy her age who could kill her entire camp with a single drop from the flask he carries around his neck.

Approximately 26 pages long, *THE PLAGUE CARRIER* is the first story in Merrie Destefano's new series set in a post-apocalyptic United States, where survivors are still recovering from a Civil War. East of the Mississippi, peace reigns and the people are free. But west of the Mississippi is a different story. Here, the countryside is ravaged by erratic thunderstorms and tornadoes, and the inhabitants continue to battle one another using advanced forms of chemical warfare.