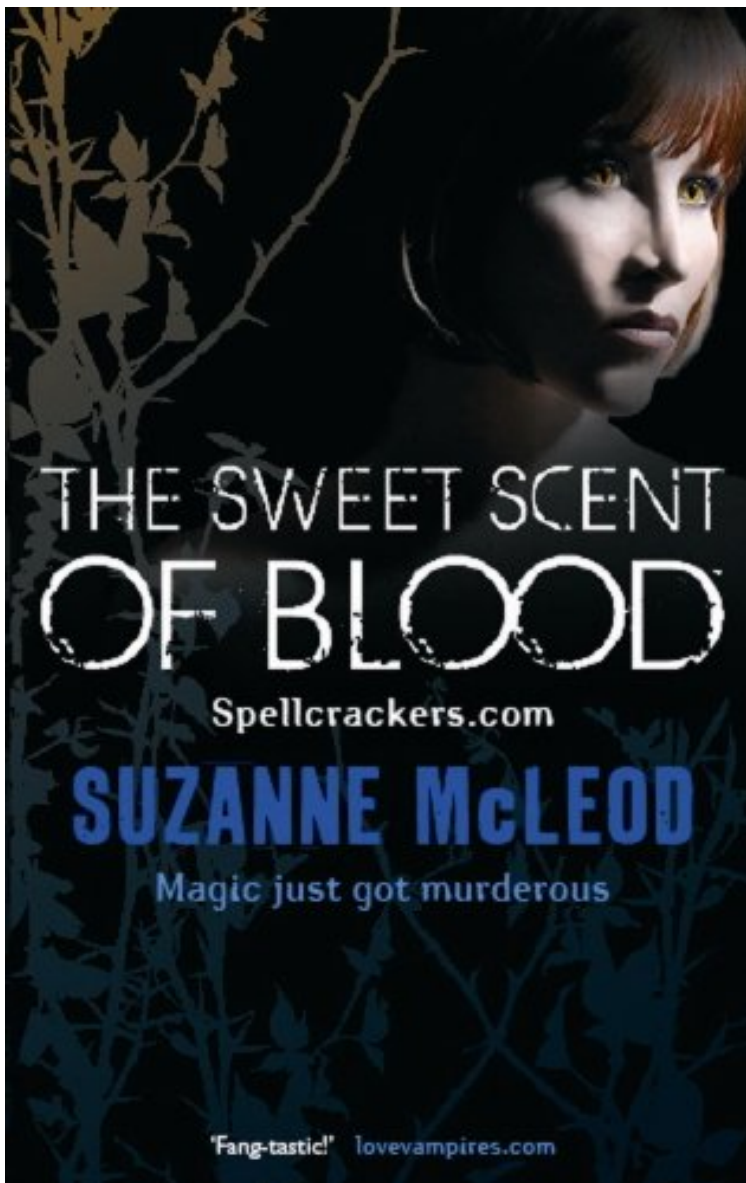


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The Sweet Scent of Blood



*Par Suzanne McLeod
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurGenny is a rising star at spellcrackers.com: she finds the 'M' in magic - and that invariably means Mischief, Malice and Murder!|Genevieve Taylor is a Sidhe, one of the noble fae, and she's unusual, even in present-day London where celebrity vampires, eccentric goblins and scheming lesser fae mix freely with the human population. Genny is a rising star at Spellcrackers.com, where she finds the M' in magic - and that invariably leads to mischief, malice and - too often - murder. Spellcrackers.com is affiliated to the Witch Council, whose ancient tenets prohibit any contact with vampires. Genny also works as a volunteer at a clinic which treats victims of vampire attacks. Then there's her extra-curricular activity,

extracting vulnerable fae lured by the local fang gangs. Genny certainly doesn't want any closer involvement with the vampire community. But when Mr October, one of the hot calendar pin-up vamps, is accused of violently murdering his girlfriend, Genny's called on to repay an old debt and prove his innocence. And that means consorting with some of the sexiest vamps in London! **THE SWEET SCENT OF BLOOD** is the first book of **SPELLCRACKERS.COM**, a sexy, sassy new series guaranteed to spice up your reading life! Suzanne McLeod has been a cocktail waitress, dance group promoter and barmaid at Coventry City Football Club (the last despite having no love for the beautiful game; she had to pay the rent somehow!)

After years in retail management, she started writing. **THE SWEET SCENT OF BLOOD**, the first of the **SPELLCRACKERS.COM** series, is her first novel. She lives with her husband and rescue dogs in Bournemouth. [A British Kim Harrison: a debut writer who will take the paranormal romance field by storm!]

A debut novel with action, wit, sex and humour: perfect for fans of Kim Harrison, Laurell K. Hamilton, Charlaine Harris and Kelley Armstrong A female to rival Mike Carey and Jim Butcher: a female magical practitioner in London offers just the angle to attract British readers The paranormal romance field is the fastest-growing category in America, and Britain is not far behind: Suzanne McLeod is at the forefront of a new genre. Suzanne has a whole series featuring Genny Taylor, the hottest new investigator in town!

Extrait

Chapter One

The vampire looked a beautiful, dangerous cliché. Jet-black hair tied back in a French plait emphasised the pale angles of his face. Shadowed grey eyes stared out with moody promise. Black silk clung to hard abdominals while soft leather stretched down long, lean legs. An ankle-length coat pooled across the stone steps on which he sat so it seemed he existed in his own well of seductive darkness. Behind him, the ferris-wheel silhouette of the London Eye, backlit by exploding fireworks, added a less than subtle suggestion to the scene. The picture was splashed across the front page of every national newspaper: a celebrity story made more sensational than the norm thanks to the mix of murder and vampires. Other than providing a few moments of idle interest, the news had nothing to do with me. Or so I thought. London was in the middle of a late September heat-wave and the bright sunshine blistered hot into the city as I sat at my usual corner table in the Rosy Lea café, staring at the vampire's picture. Outside the tourists that normally thronged Covent Garden huddled in the shade under the stone canopy of St Paul's Church. Even the street entertainers had succumbed to the heat, leaving the expanse of cobbled paving deserted. Inside the empty café was no better. There was no air-conditioning and even with the doors wide open, the hot, heavy air pressed against me as if it were something solid. If nothing else it was peaceful. I work for Spellcrackers.com Making magic safe! and I'd spent a long, frustrating morning chasing pixies through a crowded Trafalgar Square. A pack of them had been attempting to animate the huge bronze lions. The magic was way out of their league of course, but this was their fifth attempt in a month and I had to give them points for persistence if nothing else. Thanks to the pixies, I'd missed lunch, and I'd been hoping for a quick bite before my next job. But Katie, the waitress, had other ideas. She pulled more papers in front of me. 'Check these out, Genny!' I cast a long-suffering look over the headlines. **CELEBRITY VAMPIRE ARRESTED IN GIRLFRIEND'S MURDER** screamed one. **TIME RUNS OUT FOR MR OCTOBER'S DATE** was another. And the very snappy, **ONE BITE WAS ENOUGH!** None of them likely to win any prizes for headline of the year, but they were definitely eye-catching, if only for the font size. Katie pointed to the picture of the vampire and sighed. 'It's so tragic.' Her fingers stroked her blue heart pendant, the one she always wore. 'Mr October . . . isn't he gorgeous? That's the pic they used in the calendar, y'know.' 'Uh-huh,' I muttered. Katie's teenage obsession with vamps was one I didn't participate in. 'The calendar showing all the touristy places?' She nudged me for emphasis. 'Y'know, the vamps dressed up all historical? There was this fab shot of this handsome Cavalier standing in front of Buck House ooh, and Mr April, the Roman centurion, now he's hot, but not as hot as! 'Talking of hot,' I interrupted, 'you couldn't get me my orange juice, could you, Katie? I'm dying of thirst here.' 'Ha, Ha. Very funny, Genny.' She swung away to the counter, looking cool in her floaty skirt and strappy top. Briefly, I closed my eyes. Then, concentrating on that part of me that sees the magic, I focused on Katie as she disappeared into the kitchen. A deep cobalt blue shimmered around her in the place I imagined her aura would be if I could actually see it. Relief settled in me. The protective warding spell I'd bought and attached to Katie's heart pendant was as strong as ever. Covent Garden Market is London's Witch Central; you can buy anything, from a bad-hair-day remedy to a noisy neighbour muffler to an anti-Congestion Charge charm even if the last is illegal. And working there has its advantages, but it still pays to be careful. Upset a witch and they don't just shout at you . . . angry red boils is never a good look. 'Isn't this weather just too much?' Katie's voice drifted out into the empty café as she chatted to Freddie, the cook. 'They were saying on the telly it hasn't been this hot for at least ten years, y'know.' I fanned myself with the menu,

the slight breeze disturbing my hair where the short ends stuck to the back of my neck. The cream linen waistcoat I wore was cool enough, but the black trousers had been a mistake. Trouble is, I've never been much for skirts, and shorts just don't have the right professional image. I scanned the caf interior, checking for any other stray spells that might be lurking. It took a whole chapter of coven witches all thirteen of them to produce a warding complex enough for business premises, and that was way too rich for Freddie's pockets, so, in return for the occasional bacon sandwich, I tidied up on a regular basis instead. The caf was clear of magic, but I glanced down and caught a faint glow coming from my phone. Crap. I snatched up the phone and with a sense of resigned inevitability peered at the thumbnail-sized crystal on the back. A fracture like a black splinter lodged in the crystal's centre. Damn pixies. Even being careful, I'd still managed to crack the phone's protection spell when I'd cleared up all their dust. Now I'd risk frying the phone next time I defused a spell if I didn't buy another crystal, and they weren't cheap. Could my day get any worse? I dumped the phone on the table and gave the newspapers an irritated look. It wasn't the crystal, although that was bad enough London is expensive, even with the rent subsidy I got with my job. And it wasn't the weather, my clothes or even the pixies that had me on edge. It was the vampires. They'd deviated from their self-imposed 'politically correct' script. And I hadn't a clue why. Over the last few years, the vampires had crawled out of their coffins (not that I'd ever known one to actually sleep in a coffin) and brushed the dirt from their public image. They'd poured new blood into British Tourism and transformed the more presentable among themselves into A-list celebs. It's amazing what a collection of glossy pictures and a no expense-spared marketing campaign can do. With a steady diet of tourists and infatuated youngsters like Katie satisfying both their physical and financial needs, the vampires pretty much had it all dished up on a plate. Even the current feeding frenzy about the murder had less to do with the accused being a vamp and everything to do with him being a hot property among London's nightlife. I sighed. At least the newest round of government legislation meant sixteen-year-old Katie had another two years before reality could legally sink its fangs into her media-induced crush. I'd been fourteen when it had happened to me. I rubbed the phantom throb at the curve of my neck, then dug my fingers into the smooth skin, trying to ease the annoying sensation that the memory had raised. Fourteen was ten years and a different lifetime ago, and the law and the vamps had never been overly concerned when it came to the likes of me. 'Here you go, Genny.' Katie plonked my juice down and lifted another paper. The juice slipped down my throat and spread a chill through my body instead of the warmth I craved. I'd have to wait until later for that. I flicked a finger at the paper Katie was reading. 'Don't suppose there's any news of my bacon sandwich, is there?' 'Uh-huh,' she muttered, half ignoring me, 'in a sec.' 'Hope you're not expecting a tip,' I added. 'Freddie's doing it.' She gave me a superior look from around the edge of the paper. 'And anyway, Freddie says I'm a much better waitress than you ever were, so there.' 'Means nothing,' I grinned. 'He says that to all the girls.' Katie sniffed and snapped the paper back up between us. A quiver of awareness crept across my shoulders. A tall gangly youth not much older than Katie stood in the kitchen doorway, watching. I stared back. He jerked as if I'd burnt him before ducking out of sight. I shrugged. It's my eyes that do it: amber-coloured, with oval pupils, rather like a cat's. And my hair doesn't help it's the same odd shade. London has its fair share of fae and others living in the city, but even so, my eyes still freak people out. They're the only part of me that doesn't look human. 'Who's the new guy?' I asked. 'Gazza, he's the pot-washer the agency sent. He started yesterday.' She lowered the paper. 'He's a bit of a drip, really. Keeps asking me what sort of stuff I like, y'know, movies, tunes ...' 'I wonder why?' I opened my eyes wide in mock surprise. 'Ha. Ha. Anyway, like I'd so go out with him.' She wrinkled her nose. 'Course you wouldn't,' I agreed, matter of fact. 'He's not old, hasn't got pointy teeth, and isn't interested in your blood. He's . . . nice.' 'Well, I don't think he's nice.' She bent closer. 'He said he's never seen a faerie before. 'Course, I told him you were sidhe fae, not a faerie.' She threw a baleful look behind her, then carried on, 'And Freddie doesn't think he's nice either, I heard him telling Gazza he'd wash his mouth out with soap, it was so dirty. So he's not gonna be here long, anyway.' I didn't need to ask what else Gazza had been saying. Witches are human, vampires had been human once. But the fae are a different species, like the trolls and the goblins. The humans just lump us together as 'Other'. The less polite call us Freaks or Subs, a nice little abbreviation for sub-human. And we fae are a minority, we're not always pretty, and we're often dangerous. I say we, but even amongst the city's fae community, I'm in a minority of one: the only sidhe living in the whole of London. And if Gazza's mouth wasn't polluted with prejudice, there was always the other option. The fae are rumoured for their Glamour or in more prurient terms, faerie sex. Either way, Gazza wasn't worth the energy it took to notice him. Freddie would sort him out soon enough and Katie wasn't a pushover; I'd seen her dump hot coffee in more than one idiot's lap when he didn't take the hint.

Katie pointed at the newspaper on the top of the pile. A picture of a pretty, smiling brunette covered half the front page. The headline read VAMPIRE ROBERTO KILLS HIS 'JULIET'. 'What does that one say about him?' I unfolded the broadsheet and read snippets from the text. 'It's got some quotes from the undead Lord, the Earl: crime of passion, regrets the dreadful waste of two such young and promising lives . . . wants to reassure the public that becoming a vampire is safe . . . condolences to both their families . . . full support for the police' I looked up at her. 'That sort of thing. Same as all the rest.' 'It's so romantic, isn't it?' she sighed. 'They loved each other so much, y'know, they wanted to be together forever. Only the Gift didn't work and now he's probably gonna die too.' I snorted. 'Don't be daft, Katie. She probably wasn't his girlfriend at all. He just lost control and then tried to give her the Gift as a cover-up. It's just a PR pitch to make sure the other vamps don't catch any grief over it.' I tapped my finger on the paper. 'Look, she only died yesterday. Last night is too quick for the police to have caught him. I expect the other vamps had him all trussed up ready to go.' 'He didn't try to run. Roberto didn't even know she was dead, Ms Taylor.' Katie and I both looked up in surprise. A man was standing between us and the entrance. The afternoon sunshine slanting behind him threw him into shadow and for a moment his face appeared a twin for the vampire staring out of the newspaper. My heart skipped a beat and fear prickled down my spine. Katie gasped, her hand fluttering to my shoulder. Then sense kicked in. No vamps until after sunset. I relaxed slightly as the man stepped forward, his hands clenched at his sides. The navy suit he wore was rumpled, his shirt collar undone and his tie loosened. Grey salted his short dark hair and the lines fanning from his eyes and mouth etched deep into his skin, making him look older than the forty-eight years the papers claimed. Even so, it was obvious where Mr October had inherited his good looks from. Katie let out a soft breath next to my ear and straightened up. I looked up at the man, considering he might be a human but his son was a vampire it made me want to tell him to go away, to leave me alone, but my father taught me that threats are better dealt with in more practical ways. So instead I asked, 'What do you want, Mr Hinkley?' His lips thinned briefly, then he took a deep breath. 'I want to hire you, Ms Taylor.' 'Because of this?' I laid my palm on the pile of newspapers. He nodded. 'You're wasting your time. I work for Spellcrackers.com. It's a witch company. Witch Council rules are clear about jobs involving vampires. We don't accept them.' 'I know,' he said, voice quiet and controlled. 'I've already spoken with Stella Raynham. Your boss told me you would be here.' 'I'm surprised she told you where I was?' I made it a question. 'Stella and I know each other,' he said, then paused, letting that statement hang in the air. 'Can I talk to you? Please?' I shrugged and pushed the newspapers to one side. 'Take a seat. Stella's name means I'll listen, nothing else.' Katie hovered behind me. 'Tea or coffee?' He sat down. 'Coffee. Black. Please,' he added belatedly. She bustled away but not before widening her eyes and silently mouthing an excited ooh! behind the man's back. 'You're not a witch, Ms Taylor.' That's obvious. 'No. I'm not.' 'I know you've worked for Spellcrackers for just over a year, Stella employed you, even though you've never had any known affiliation with the Covens.' He reached out and pushed the salt cellar neatly in line with the pepper pot. 'You're not bound by Witch Council rules.' 'Did Stella tell you that?' 'Not in so many words.' 'Why don't you tell me exactly what Stella did say to you, Mr Hinkley?' 'Alan. Please.' He fished in his jacket pocket as he spoke. 'I'm a financial journalist. I did an article on Spellcrackers a couple of months ago, about the proposal to franchise the business.' He laid a newspaper cutting on the table with his by-line under the headline SPELLCRACKERS.COM CRACK THE MAGIC MARKET. The penny dropped, plugging a large deficit in Stella's publicity budget. 'Okay, I begin to see the picture now. I'm amazed Stella didn't come with you.' 'I asked her not to. I didn't want to put any pressure on you.' Yeah, right. 'So, Alan, what is it you want me to do?' He indicated the newspaper picture of the smiling victim. 'I want you to come and see Melissa.' I frowned, surprised. 'I'm not clear how that's going to help.' 'Not when Melissa was already dead. Roberto and Melissa . . .' He shook his head and spoke quietly, almost to himself. 'No, I won't call him that. My son's name is Bobby. Roberto isn't even his given name, it's just the one he took with the Gift.' Moisture glistened in his bloodshot eyes and he blinked it away. 'Bobby and Melissa were going to be married.' So maybe Katie's romantic notions weren't so far off the mark. 'That's one of the reasons why we want to hire you,' he rushed on. 'Bobby didn't kill Melissa, he couldn't, he loved her, she . . . She was a great girl.' He tapped the pepper pot. 'Someone else killed her. We think it's another vampire, but we can't prove it.' 'Who is we?' 'Bobby and me.' He grimaced. 'Everyone else is sticking to this ridiculous doomed lovers story.' 'What about Bobby's blood family? What do they think?' The vinegar sloshed as he almost knocked it over. The acrid smell rose between us. 'You're right about that, Ms Taylor. The only aspect of Bobby's current predicament that concerns the vampires is the PR angle.' I narrowed my eyes. 'Doesn't Bobby have a solicitor looking out for him?' Alan's lips thinned again. 'I didn't feel confident in the first solicitor. He's a vampire, and I'm not

sure he has Bobby's best interests at heart. The one I've hired hasn't dealt with vamps before. Ms Taylor, we need as much help as we can get.' I didn't disagree, but I didn't want to get involved and so far I'd heard nothing that would make me. 'That still doesn't tell me why you think I can help you?' Alan dropped his gaze to the table. 'My wife died six years ago of a rare blood disease.' 'I'm sorry.' I offered inadequate sympathy. 'Bobby was a teenager when she died, and he went through a rough patch afterwards.' He looked up. 'Now, Bobby is was training to be a doctor. He thought if he had enough time he could help find a cure, so he accepted the Gift three years ago.' His fingers clamped around the pepper pot. 'I might not agree with his lifestyle choice, Ms Taylor, but he is still my son. He's the only family I have left.' I looked at him for a moment, then said softly, 'Mr Hinkley Alan I'm sorry, but I really can't help you. Even if another vamp did kill Melissa . . . I find spells, then break or neutralise them. That's all I do.' I didn't like to say but there is nothing magical about a vampire sucking you to death. He rolled the pepper pot on its edge. 'That's it, though: we want you to look at Melissa and check for magic. The coroner says that the evidence points to just one vampire partner, Bobby, but we think that the other vamp has covered up his bites with a spell.' Straws and grasping came to mind. He placed the pepper pot back next to the salt. 'Not only that, you work for the Human, Other and Preternatural Ethics Society at their vampire clinic' I interrupted him. 'The clinic's not just for vampire victims. HOPE treats all types of magical attacks.' 'Yes, but you're used to seeing vampire bites, more than the coroner.' Except the victims I saw were usually still alive. Alan twirled the vinegar bottle. 'We thought that once you've uncovered the bite, you might be able to identify the other vampire.' My stomach tightened into a hard knot. 'Mr Hinkley, even if there is another bite hidden by magic, and even if I managed to find it, there is no way I could pinpoint the biter. I doubt even the coroner could do it, not without an actual sample bite to compare it against. And even then, vamp DNA only points to the bloodline, not the individual vampire.' He looked straight at me. 'But we thought you could do it with magic.' My pulse sped up. I didn't like where he was heading: vampires thinking I could use magic to identify their bites? That along with everything else would not be beneficial for my health. 'Then you thought wrong, Mr Hinkley. I can't use magic like that, and I doubt that it's even possible.' His face fell. Then he tapped his thumbnail against the vinegar bottle, making a tiny tinkling sound, and his mouth twisted into a hard line. 'I can pay you whatever you want.' I sighed. Not that I couldn't do with the money, but the answer was still no, even with his association to Stella. She might have pointed him in my direction, but Stella wasn't about to let one of her employees work for a vampire, even once removed. The witches and vamps 'live-and-let-live' thing started in the fifteenth century it was one of the more gruesome and sensational parts of history lessons, what with the witch hunts, the inquisition and everything and anyone who'd been to school could've told Alan Hinkley I wasn't about to say yes to his job. So why was he being so persistent? And why hadn't Stella come with him? Something about that didn't add up. Unless she was leaving it to me to turn him down just so she wasn't made out to be the wicked witch in this sad little scenario. If that was the case, Stella was going to find out I didn't appreciate being cast as the bad-tempered faerie, and soon. 'It's not about money,' I said slowly. 'I don't want any involvement with the vampires. It's one of the main reasons I work for Spellcrackers.com, so I don't have to. Vamps don't give the fae the same respect as they do humans.' 'I'd heard that, but I wanted to talk to you anyway. I'm sure it wouldn't cause you a problem just to look, Ms Taylor. It wouldn't take long.' I kept my eyes on his, a suspicion forming in my mind. 'What happens if I say no?' His forehead creased in puzzlement. 'I don't understand.' 'C'mon, Alan: you've waited all day so you can speak to me away from the office. You persuade my boss to let you talk to me, but you don't want to put any pressure on me by having her here while we chat. We've been down the sympathy route.' I leaned forward, took the vinegar bottle from his fingers and lowered my voice. 'Your only son, a vampire, is accused of murder. If he's found guilty, he's not going to sit in jail for the next twenty-odd years. They'll send him to the guillotine, burn his remains and scatter them over running water.' I slammed the vinegar bottle down on the table. 'Why don't you tell me the real reason you think I'm going to help you?' He flinched and sat back, crossing his arms. 'I'm not the bad guy here, Ms Taylor. I'm just trying to save my son.' I didn't bother to say anything, just waited for the rest of it. 'Okay,' Alan's shoulders hunched, 'Bobby said to give you a message, but only if you said no. He wouldn't tell me what it meant. He said it was better if I didn't know.' Desperation filled his eyes as he went through some internal struggle, then he spoke again, his voice hard and flat. 'My son wouldn't do anything wrong.' 'Then you'd better give me the message, since I'm supposed to be the one that understands it.' He glanced round the caf, but it was still empty. Even Katie hadn't returned with his coffee yet. 'Siobhan's brother sends his regards,' he said quietly. Adrenalin rushed through me. The hairs on my arms lifted. Siobhan's brother. Fuck, I should've known. What was the bastard playing at this time? Alan

was watching me, a horrified expression on his face. 'It is blackmail,' he murmured, almost to himself. 'Bloody hell, what a mess' I swallowed, trying to ease the tension in my jaw. 'No, it's not blackmail. Not exactly.' It might not be blackmail, but I still didn't have a choice. I'd made a bargain, and the fae don't make or break bargains lightly; the magic demands too great a price. But it had never entered my mind that this particular debt would be called in for a vampire, rather than one of their victims.

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