

EXCERPT – “It’s Not My Favorite” (The Lake Effect Series, Book 1)

“Why Jeff, I had no idea you were a necromancer.” Gwenn saw the confusion cloud Jeff’s face. “Sorry, bad joke. She’s a ghost. I mean literally, sheet with holes, etc. Good luck finding her.” Gwen pretended to see someone in the crowd and smiled at Jeff as she rushed away. She turned the corner just in time to see Rachel climbing up on the buffet. “Oh, you gotta be frickin’ kidding me.” Gwenn made it to the bathroom before Rachel hit the chorus of *Let’s Go Crazy*.

Hiding in the bathroom, Gwenn remembered a far more embarrassing Halloween. She was barely ten and had just started fifth grade at a new school, several weeks late in keeping with the Hutchinson family annual relocation tradition.

“Hi, I’m Gwenn.” No one at the lunch table acknowledged her existence. “Um, sorry, I didn’t want to bug you. I was just wondering if any of you wanted to come to my big Halloween party?” Gwenn smoothly lied.

All heads turned.

“Cool!” Came from several directions.

“Yeah, totally,” chimed in a few guys.

“Awesome. What’s your costume, Jen?” Sarah Beth asked.

“Oh, it’s Gwenn, and my costume is Catwoman.” Gwenn embellished.

“Wow. My mom is making me dress like Alice in Wonderland. I can’t wait to come to your party.” Sarah Beth made room for Gwenn at the table, “Here, sit by me.”

Gwenn had rushed home, filled with the excitement of acceptance—finally.

“Hey Trixie, yer home early.” Pastor Ed patted Gwenn patronizingly on the head. “Take a seat in the living room. We are havin’ a family meeting.”

Gwenn felt her stomach churn. Oh crap they were moving again. She just made an actual friend. Why were Ed and Shirley so dead set against her having friends?

“Hi Gwenny!” Rachel beamed.

“Shut up, twerp.” Gwenn stuck her tongue out at Rachel.

Shirley took the reins, “Girls the Lord has spoken to us and He has shown us that Halloween is Satan’s night. As good Christians we cannot sin against the Lord by paying tribute to the Devil.” She closed her eyes and folded her hands in prayer.

“What’d that mean mommy?” Rachel innocently asked.

“Halloween’s canceled idiot! No costumes. No candy.” Gwenn stormed out of the room.

Big wet tears rolled down Rachel’s chubby cheeks. “No candy!” She wailed.

But the torment was much greater for Gwenn.

Ed and Shirley didn't have the decency to cancel Halloween at the Hutchinson house. Instead, they carved up some pumpkins and turned on the porch lights to lure the unsuspecting children. Gwenn hid on the stairs and watched through the banister as innocent trick-or-treaters came to the door and Shirley shoved little orange tracts in their treat bags and told them Jesus died for their sins.

Sarah Beth did not make room for Gwenn—ever again.

That's when the emotional deformities started. The inability to trust completely, the gnawing nameless guilt and finally that unsettling feeling that someone was judging her every action—and Gwenn always came up short.

She kept telling herself it would change, that someday she would find the key that would unlock the door to her invisible prison and she would be free.

Gwenn jumped when the music stopped. She wiped an unexplained tear from her cheek, exhaled the *yuck* and marched out of the bathroom.

The party was winding down and Rachel had crossed the line between life of the party and annoying drunk; landing clumsily on the pain-in-the-ass side of that line. Gwenn shepherded her sister through the maze of glass and steel skyway corridors connecting the buildings of Duluth's downtown.

They emerged into the bitter cold wind knifing across the harbor and Gwenn tried to hurry the procession to her car. Rachel was already quite numb from the alcohol, so the cold had little effect.

"Rache, come on. I'm freezing. I'll take you back to my place."

"No...home," slurred Rachel, insistently.

"But..."

"Gotta work..."

"You have to open the bakery tomorrow? Rache, how the hell are you gonna—"

"No worries, mate," Rachel spouted off in her best Australian accent.

"Oh, crikey!" Gwenn was keenly aware that in the order of Rachel's sorrow-drowning inebriation, accents preceded vomiting and passing out was just around the corner.

"Fine. I'll take you home, but you have to hurry." Gwenn steered zig-zaggy Rachel to the Jeep and fishtailed out of the icy parking lot in a hasty attempt to arrive at Rachel's loft before phase vomit emerged.

Gwenn beat the odds and managed to get Rachel into her own bed without further incident. She removed the alcohol-stained costume and placed it on Rachel's dry cleaning pile. Gwenn kissed her sister on the forehead, tucked the comforter under Rachel's chin and quietly flicked off the light as she left the loft.