

# Six Scents

BY LISA MANTCHEV

ILLUSTRATED BY STAR ST. GERMAIN

IN WHICH WE DO  
NOT GO SO MUCH  
INTO THE WOODS  
AS OVER THE EDGE

## I. Numb

**I**ce Princess. December Queen. Abominable Snow Woman. They call me by many names, but there's only one truth:

It was a mistake to move to Los Angeles.

My people told me that I needed an agent. I needed an endorsement deal. I needed to appear on the nightly talk-show circuit.

"You'll be a star!" they said. "Our people will call their people and our people will get big bucks from their people and you'll end up rich and famous!"

Everything is said with exclamation points in Hollywood.



Banished are the sledges pulled by polar bears in favor of air-conditioned limousines while I try to get cold again. My ice castle is gone, so I frequent the malls and skating rinks and movie theaters. My face tilts up at the silver screen while I wait for the crystal-studded cell phone to ring.

"Report to the studio. You're wanted in make-up!"

It takes hours to rouge my cheeks and give the illusion of an operating circulatory system, so I leave the theater. Outside, the sidewalks shimmer. Passers-by sweat. I, however, melt.

I reach for my vial of perfume; cold coats the crystal and I remove the stopper with a sigh. It's a concoction of ice-rimmed mint, arctic frost and vodka-in-snow. I dab a little at the dent between my collar bones, the inside of each wrist, behind each bare knee.

Just a little. I have to make it last.

The numbness spreads from the points of contact along my limbs and down my throat. When I exhale, a drift of snow coats the sidewalks and pedestrians slip in the slush.

My laughter is vanilla ice cream, each word an ice cube as I duck into the welcome chill of the limo.

"To the studio, please."

I put the ice in a silver shaker and reach for the olives.

## II. *Wicked*

"Mirror, mirror, on the wall, tell me how great my ass looks in these jeans."

"Your posterior, m'lady, is splendid. Pert and round. Fairer than any other backside in this town."

"That didn't rhyme very well, mirror."

"Sorry, m'lady! I promise to do better next time."

In the highest tower of the tallest apartment building downtown, she studies the empty bags and boxes that litter the floor: supplies acquired.

A velvet corset and thigh high boots.

Liquid eyeliner, false eyelashes, burgundy lipstick, pale foundation.

No spinning wheels or spindles. No apples from Fruit-of-the-Month. No brooms and cinders.

Just a deep, brooding malice.



An aura of majesty.

The sheen on the blade of a very sharp knife.

At the stroke of midnight, the spell will be complete. She sits at the dressing table and runs an ivory comb through her ebony hair. She dips the comb in liquid malevolence—

*Myrrh and jasmine . . .*

—And smoothes it through the ravens' wings that frame her face—

Draped in the subtlest rose.

The perfume contains the magic; the power soaks deep inside her and takes root. Thorns and briars again, but on the inside. She can feel the pinpricks in her heart and welcomes the pain.

Vengeance is on the menu tonight. She's been slighted. She's been cheated. She's been tricked by simpering females singing over wells and princes with plastic swords.

But no more.

The crown will be hers. The fortune will be hers. The prince will grovel at her feet this time around. And woes befall the courtier that doesn't fork over the glass slipper.

This time, the happily-ever-after will be hers.

## III. *Zombi*

Men find it hard to fall in love with a dead girl. They tell her it's a turn-off that they take her hand at the movies and a finger lands in the popcorn. They say her kisses are nice, but it's disconcerting that the occasional worm crawls out of her mouth. And don't even get them started on her appetite for brains (although she thinks it's fair to point out that most men only have enough for a light snack.)

At least she smells nice. All zombie girls know they have to compensate for the tattered clothes and the moaning thing. They all wear the same perfume, steeped in a coffin for a dozen decades



and decanted into vials that the undead girls buy with stolen quarters.

*Close the eyes of the dead with silver!*

Sitting in the restaurant, she watches the candlelight flicker in the watery blue eyes of an investment banker while she butters another slice of bread. She won't eat it, but it gives her something to do with her hands. He's talktalktalking about himself, his career, his goals, his plans.

She analyzes his receding hairline and guesses he's packing approximately three pounds of meat between his ears. Probably a bit stringy, considering his profession, but she's had a dry spell and she is famished.

She crumbles the bread into her plate and takes another sip of wine. The left side of her jaw starts to slide into the glass and she catches it just in time. He's halfway through his salad and there's spinach stuck in his teeth.

She reaches in her pocket and uncorks the vial:

Dried roses.

Spanish moss.

Deep brown earth.

The scent of lady-in-graving drifts across the white linen and silverware to wrap skeletal arms around Mr. Moneybags. Before he realizes what's happening, he's paid the check and they're heading back to his place.

For dessert.



#### IV. Bliss

The copper tub sits with purpose in the center of the rug; candle- and firelight dance over warm metal.

She doesn't have to check the lock on the door; the children are in exile and the master of the house is ensorcelled by the football game.

She empties a vial of treasured scent into the contents of the tub. She twists Grecian curls into a

knot atop her head. She smiles as she tugs the satin sash of her bathrobe. Creamy fabric puddles around her ankles and she steps into the tub and sinks chin-deep . . .

In chocolate.

The serotonin-slathered scent of cacao slides down her throat in hazelnut handfuls as she lets it idle up her neck. No mere bubble bath for her; only chocolate will do. Chocolate to tease the tension from her muscles and chocolate to pluck the terrors of the day from her mind like rotten fruits from a tired vine.

Self-indulgent, yes.

Hedonistic certainly. The minister would faint if he could see.

She cringes when distant voices crack the candy-coating that covers her chest.

"You are so gonna be in trouble! Mom!"

"No, I'm telling on you! MOM!"

No. The chocolate is still warm and the wood on the fire burns yet bright.

"Honey!" Now the prince joins the summons.

No. She slides down until chocolate sloshes over her cheeks and fills her ears. The voices cannot reach through confectionary armor and she basks in the sweet, sweet silence.

Perhaps they pound on the door, but she only feels the darling lovely pull of a kiss from Côte d'Or.

#### V. Lurid

There's no drama here; just rows of metal filing cabinets, crappy fluorescent lighting and a never-ending heap of paperwork.

It's just a job.

It pays the rent.

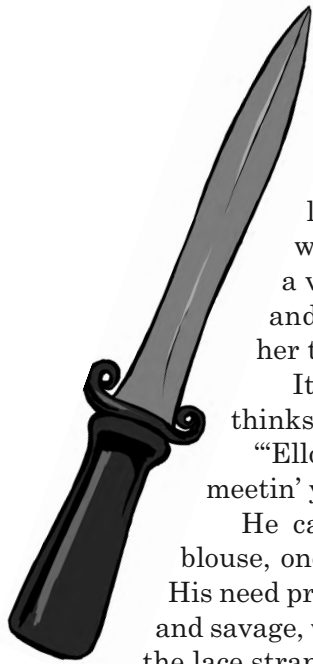
It bores her to death with a jagged Jack-the-Ripper knife to the jugular.

She files her life away in this dreary subterranean corner of the world. Moldering papers coat her fingers with dust and suck the moisture from her skin. She hates it, but she's saving her pennies for a vacation in London.

She hefts another dossier and the weight of a thousand ailments drags at her arm. She files it under "Bullshit", reaches for another—

And touches glass instead.

Her fingers recoil from lead crystal and then amethyst angles lure her back. The gold-flecked



vial is everything her life is not: luminous and rich. Lovely and unique.

She uncorks the unexpected gift and inhales: black currant, Bulgarian lavender and white musk with a dollop of thick resin and a voltaic charge of ozone notes, and he's there. Hands around her throat, blade at the ready.

It's nice to be shocked, she thinks, after all the tedium.

"Ello, me lovely," he says. "Fancy meetin' you 'ere."

He carves the buttons from her blouse, one by one and with precision. His need presses against her back, fierce and savage, when he slips the knife under the lace strap of her bra.

She's shocked. Horrified. Pulled backwards against her will into him and his ferocity.

"Don't —"

But he's an oily splash of crimson on her black and white canvas when the knife kisses her throat, and there's no one to hear her scream.

## VI. Shattered

"You don't smell like an opera rat." He appeared without warning and gazed at me over the wreckage. Bits of chandelier sparked in the light from my candle.

I inhaled sharply. Ours together was a scent as sharp as glass shards, as brittle as a broken heart: my peppermint and lotus, his white champagne notes and crystalline aquatic blossoms.

*So, flowers bloom even in the underground lake.*

I thought he'd gone. But I'd also thought she'd stay with him. Wrong on both counts and glad for it.

"And what do the opera rats smell like?" I asked.

He didn't hesitate. "Debauchery and grease paint."

"I'm no opera rat. I'm a dancer," I said and raised my hand to the level of my eyes. Just as a precaution.

His laughter was short and without humor. "You are a woman and therefore just another whore."

I wasn't taking that, even from a masked psychotic.

"I'm not Christine, monsieur. I loved her dearly, but she was a fool."

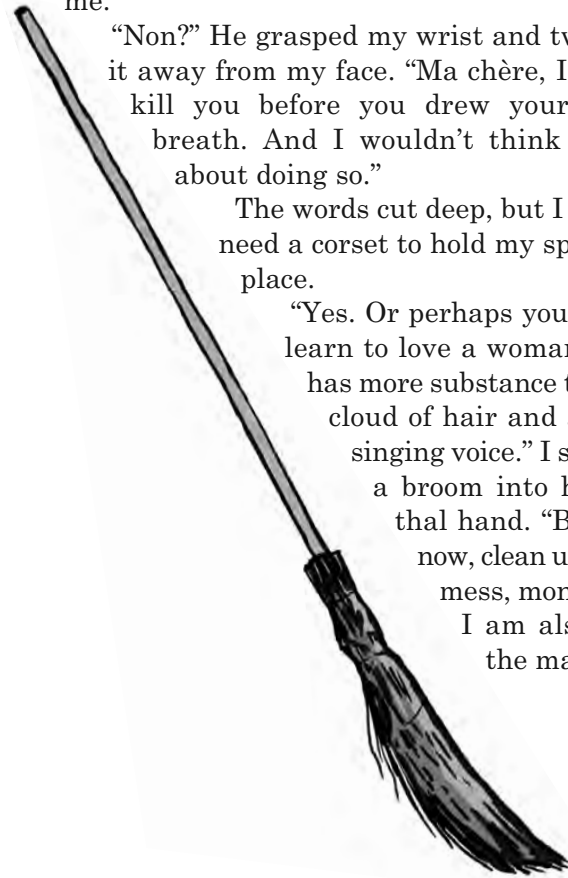
"Really?" He took one step into the broken glass, and then another; leather over crystal. "And are you any smarter, little dancer? Here. Alone. With me."

"I don't sing." I managed a shrug, but my hands were shaking. "I don't see how you can break me."

"Non?" He grasped my wrist and twisted it away from my face. "Ma chère, I could kill you before you drew your next breath. And I wouldn't think twice about doing so."

The words cut deep, but I didn't need a corset to hold my spine in place.

"Yes. Or perhaps you could learn to love a woman that has more substance than a cloud of hair and a nice singing voice." I shoved a broom into his lethal hand. "But for now, clean up your mess, monsieur. I am also not the maid."



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*The six scents featured in this story were inspired by fragrances from Black Phoenix Alchemy Laboratory ([www.blackphoenixalchemy.com](http://www.blackphoenixalchemy.com))*

*When not scribbling, Lisa Mantchev can be found on the beach, up a tree, making jam or repairing things with her trusty glue gun. Her stories have appeared in Strange Horizons, Fantasy Magazine, Aeon, Abyss & Apex, and the SFWA anthology New Voices in Science Fiction — and more will be appearing soon in Japanese Dreams and Electric Velocipede. She recently completed her first novel, Scrimshaw. More info online at [www.lisamantchev.com](http://www.lisamantchev.com).*