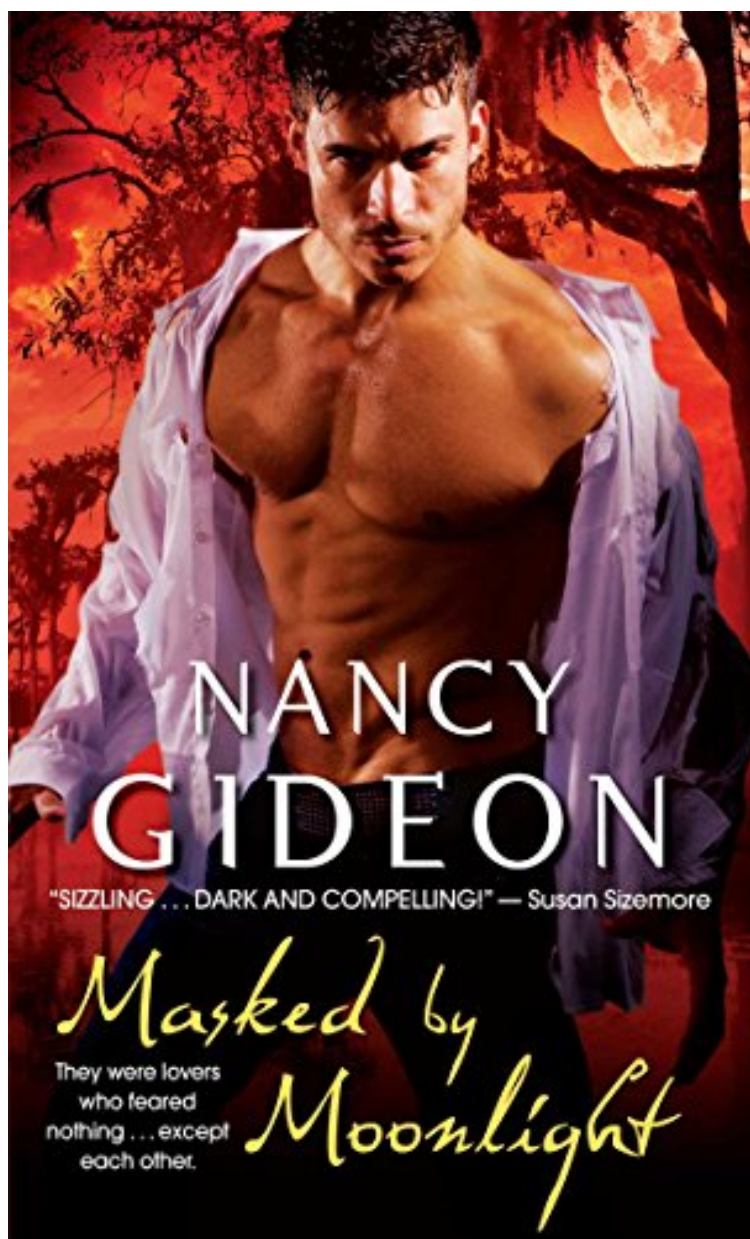


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Masked by Moonlight



*Par Nancy Gideon
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIN THIS STUNNING FIRST BOOK FROM NANCY GIDEONS SIZZLING NEW SERIES, A TENACIOUS COP AND HER SHAPE-SHIFTING ENEMY SACRIFICE EVERYTHING FOR FORBIDDEN DESIRE. ALL SHE WANTS IS REVENGE. New Orleans homicide detective Charlotte Caissie is dedicated to bringing down the crime boss responsible for her fathers murder. Using Jimmy Legeres mysterious and irresistible right-hand man is a dangerous gamble, and not only due to his reputation as more monster than man. Because her feelings for Max Savoie are . . . complicated. THEN HE RISKS HIS

LIFE TO SAVE HERS. Rescued from the swamps as a child, Max exists silently in Legeres shadow, heeding only his voice until Charlotte Caissie awakens his emotions and tests his loyalties. Stepping outside his cautious rules threatens more than just his heart. He could expose his darkest secret. NOW THEYRE BOTH IN OVER THEIR HEADS. Testing boundaries they werent meant to cross means facing the truth about who and what they are and what they need from each other. If Max is the murderer she seeks, Charlotte could be his next victim. She cant afford to trust any man. Good thing Max isnt one. ExtraitOne

GLADIDONT have to clean up this mess. Detective Charlotte Caissie examined an unidentifiable piece of the victim on the bottom of her stiletto-heeled boot before scraping it off on the wet cobblestones. A grimace of distaste shaped her boldly exotic features. Ive never known you to clean up anything, Cee Cee, darlin, Alain Babineau said from the other side of the vehicle. If youd wear practical shoes to work, you wouldnt be picking up our evidence like a litter sticker and carrying it all over the place. She studied her stylish footgear, then scowled at her partner. At least my wardrobe doesnt come straight outta my high school yearbook. No, you get yours from the Fredericks of Hollywood catalog. And you wonder why my wife thought you were a hooker the first time you met. Youre just jealous cause your wife prefers to dress like Doris Day. She smoothed the short leather skirt that was several inches from a working girls advertisement. It wasnt her fault she had legs as long as an NBA stars. Nor would she apologize for her in-your-face looks. The exaggerated bristle of short dark hair, dramatically rimmed kohl-black eyes, the slash of crimson lips, and model-sharp angles under café au lait skin complemented her aggressive no-nonsense attitude. A wardrobe that was more Xena the Warrior Princess than Suzie Homemaker flaunted her strong, curvy build and emphasized what she was inside: tough, confident, and capable. All cop. All the time. Theres more of him over here. Not exactly sure what, though. Her partner straightened, observing the remains of T-Bob Gautreaux with a sigh. A weary grimace about his eyes toughened the all-American looks that were more suited to a country club than a grisly murder scene. The ole boy sure did get around. Cant decide whether to call in the coroner or the city sanitation crew. What do you make of it, Babs? Cee Cees gaze tracked the last frantic moments of the Caddys ride by the devastation left in its wake. Skid marks, dents, glass, and blood. Lots of blood. He was in a helluva hurry to get away from something. Dont look like the poor bastard had much luck. He had luck, all right. All bad. Cee Cee activated her radio. Boucher, whatchu come up with over there at the house? More of the same, detective. The youthful voice thinned with strain. Im almost through taking pictures here. I dont think Ill be needing any wallet-size prints. She took a bracing breath before asking, Any sign of the wife and kid? No, maam. Quieter. Thank God. Then a puzzled tone. You making the wife for this? I dont think so, Joey. A woman on her worst PMS day couldnt come up with this kind of pissed off. Ive never seen anything like it. The rookie officers whisper was laced with horror. Cee Cee glanced about the gore-strewn street. I have. In all her years on the force, the last four of them carrying a shield, Charlotte Caissie had seen all sorts of inhumanity dealt out by her fellow man. Shootings, stabbings, punitive maimings nothing surprised her any more. But this, this carnage theyd come across now and again, was different in a way that made her scalp prickle viscerally. This wasnt an act of anger or revenge or even ritual. The savagery of it was unthinkable on this side of sanity. The way the victims were torn apart went beyond mutilation, requiring a power and single-minded purpose that was more beast than man. But no animal she knew possessed the kind of foresight and cunning to kill, then lie in wait to kill again. To stalk and pursue with intelligent discrimination. It was a thinking beast who hunted the dark city streets. One with specific targets. One who left a merciless message underlined in entrails. A message meant to be taken seriously. She took it very seriously. Finish up, Joey, and get on over here before the rain washes away whats left of Mr. Gautreaux. She switched off the radio and returned to the unmarked car where her partner sat inside to protect his suede varsity jacket as he ran names through their database. She leaned against the door frame, her relaxed posture belying the sharp-edged expectation winding through her. Find what we both knew wed find? Babineau looked up, a feral smile on his aftershave-ad-smooth face. Gautreaux and Surette, both low-level gamblers in over their heads to guess who? Anticipation had her teeth grinding. Jimmy Legere. How come his name pops up every time we find ourselves looking down into an empty chest cavity? Nothing says I own you like mortal fear. Shall we go pay him a visit and see what hes been up to? Cee Cee checked the crime scene. The tape was up, holding back the swarm of press who managed to scent out the dead like flies. Their people were in control, if any control could be had at the site of such depravity. The forensic team was busy unloading their high-tech gizmos in a focused rapture, making her and Babineaus presence obsolete. Lets go. She dropped behind the wheel with a fierce smile. Lets just stop by uninvited. THERE WAS NO way to drop in unexpectedly on Jimmy Legere. The eight-foot walls surrounding his

sprawling estate were studded with surveillance cameras that could summon a crew of armed men in an instant. But as they approached, the wrought-iron gates stood open, almost as if to welcome guests at four in the morning. As if theyd been expected. She followed the long drive beneath a heavy lace of live oaks, through the formal gardens where statuary stood like cold, nude ghosts under the waning moonlight. In the daytime, the place had a faded elegance to it. At night, it gave her the creeps. She parked so their vehicle blocked the front steps and hesitated within its safety for a minute. There was enough of the old ways steeped in her heritage to get her nape bristling in uncomfortable wariness a kind of walking-over-graves nervousness, making her wonder if there were more ghosts roaming behind the pale stucco walls. The ghosts of those Legere had killed. Shaking off the superstitious shivers, she got out of the car. The sound of the door slamming echoed back off the mist. She didnt bother giving the grand home an admiring glance; shed been there before. With Babineau following, she marched up the marble steps, surprised that no one had arrived to intercept them. No one ever caught Jimmy napping, which was why he was still alive. The wide porch was darkly shadowed, smelling of verbena and musty wood. She strode across it toward the massive front door. Kinda early to be making house calls, isnt it, detective? The low voice came out of the blackness, so close that she felt warm breath against her cheek. It took Cee Cee a moment to swallow the heart that had catapulted into her throat. Shed nearly leapt out of her fancy new T-Bob Gautreaux-stained boots. But not too early for you to be up and around, she countered in a gruff tone to cover her start of alarm. She could sense rather than see him, standing right at her elbow, a forceful presence cloaked in stillness. No wonder no alert had been spread at their arrival. Jimmy had his big dog out on the porch. Thats a new perfume youre wearing. I like it. Your hairs different, too. All just for you, Max. Now step back or Im going to have to pat you down. Would you? A flash of white teeth. Id like that. But he did glide to a less invasive distance, to where his eyes gleamed from the shadows. She took a breath, letting the jitters settle, then nodded back toward the road. Expecting company? I could tell it was you the minute you turned onto River Road. Max Savoie had a way of saying strange, impossible things like that as if they were true. Gonna ask us in, or keep us out here in the rain like we were trying to sell you something you didnt need? His voice was deep and smooth with just a subtle ripple, like rich cognac in a warm glass. Where are my manners? You know its always a pleasure to see you, no matter what youre selling. Because she was still simmering over Babineaus earlier comment, she asked, You ever mistake me for a hooker, Max? Another glint of strong white teeth. If I had, Ida been counting out twenties. When he crossed between her and the front door, she got a clear look at Savoie. Dark, tall, and bold. Jimmy Legeres right hand. His silent enforcer. An always-frustrating enigma. No one knew anything about him other than the name he used, a name that led to nothing but dead ends in any of their databases. No birth certificate, no Social Security number, no drivers license, health insurance, tax records nothing. His past was as inaccessible as the expression on his face when he turned toward her with the door held wide. Aprs vous. She and Babineau entered the dark, cavernous foyer, Savoie bringing up the rear. She heard him say soft and low to someone unseen, Wake up, Jimmy. The police are here. Then he preceded them into one of the high-ceilinged parlors and turned up the lights, unmasking himself from the shadows with a dramatic flare. Cee Cee didnt spend a lot of time admiring men for their looks, but something about Max Savoies face arrested her each time she saw him. He wasnt handsome, not even attractive in the traditional sense. He was rugged strength cut into sharp planes and rough angles. Confident without being cocky, powerful without aggression, he exuded complete control over what he allowed the world to see, which was usually damned little. The fact that he could seem so forceful behind such a calm, immobile front impressed her. Not much did. Max was a man who wasted no unnecessary words or movements, his unblinking stare taking in everything without revealing anything through eyes the color of wet verdigris, beneath lids heavy with guarded disdain. Or amusement. She often got the feeling that he was laughing at her on some private level, which irritated her. But the odd way he sensed things not apparent to others made her nervous. Sounds, smells, movements. He was alert to them like a mastiff on a short chain. And he missed nothing when it came to her not the slightest nuance, every tiny alteration, in a way that shed find alarmingly obsessive if he ever acted on it with more than slightly flirtatious words. Who the hell noticed a new perfume applied modestly to pulse points almost a full day ago? Wondering made those pulse points flutter. Coffee? he asked as they moved toward the center of the big room. That would be nice. Babineau spoke up to assert his presence, aware of the way his partner and Legeres bodyguard were attuned to each other, and not liking it. A slight smile touched Savoies lips. I was wondering if you brought any. We werent exactly expecting company. This isnt exactly a social call, Cee Cee corrected. That cool stare held hers. Too bad. Without glancing down, he asked, Whos that on your shoes? Anyone I know? She held on to

her surprise, drawling, You tell me. DNA isnt exactly my specialty. What is, Max? The smile remained. He didnt answer. He was probably a killer. He was probably one of the most dangerous and deadly men she knew, which was why Jimmy Legere kept him so close at hand. Is our unnamed friend the reason for your visit? This time she didnt answer. She was noting the way he was dressed: quite nicely for almost four in the morning, in a crisp white shirt and black pants. And his inevitable red Converse gym shoes. All fresh and spotless. Mind telling me what has you up so early? Still up. Playing games of chance. Here in the house? Upstairs. Witnesses? Id rather not give her name, unless you need to know it. A pause; then he leaned in close. Id rather it was you. Her insides tightened up unexpectedly, and she was about to tell him off when the shock of his nearness hit home. Hed intruded into the personal space she held as strictly off-limits, sometimes even with excessive physical force. She didnt like being crowded or handled and wasnt shy about letting that be known. Most didnt need to be told more than once. But for some reason, Savoie never seemed to get the message. Maybe because she let him get away with it. He was the only man she allowed to move in on her without snapping to immediate back-the-fuck-off defensiveness. She didnt know why shed never felt threatened by him, this big man who was most likely a ruthless murderer. She could feel his heat without actual contact, and though it was unsettling, it didnt set off the expected alarm bells. Because it wasnt alarm that unsettled her. It was something elsesomething quiet, something deep, like a secret her soul knew but wouldnt share with her mind. What was it about him that tugged a blanket of calm over instinctive agitation? He never touched her, not even a casual brush of his hand or unintentional bump of his body. Sometimes she perversely found herself wondering what it would be like, that contact he withheld so purposefully. Id rather it was you. Though her heart slammed against her ribs, her reply was defensively cold. Thats not going to happen, Max. He eased back, moving with startling grace for a man his size. I can dream, cant I? She doubted that she was the stuff of his dreams, but her pulse didnt slow down until the arrival of Jimmy Legere. As the crime lords wheelchair rolled into the room, Max retreated to become a silent, motionless sentinel at his back. Detectives. To what do I owe this early-morning wake-up call? A slight stroke hadnt slowed Jimmy Legere down or made his stranglehold on the docks of New Orleans any less powerful. If something even slightly unsavory was going on, Jimmy had his hand in it or his hand out to accept a payoff from it. He was a gregarious old man somewhere between sixty and dead, fragile and white haired. He had tons of money but lived in a house as old and broken down as he was getting to be. He donated generously to a variety of humanitarian causes, including, ironically, the fund for families of police officers slain in the line of duty. Probably because the stroke got him thinking about paving his way into Heaven sooner rather than later. Or as a macabre joke. As long as his people were loyal, he was generous to them as well. But cross him and thats when the legendary Legere surfaced, the man who once threw a lavish wedding for his cousin, then shot him in the eye during the reception because hed been skimming from that pot of plenty. It was never proven, of course. Few unpleasanties ever got close to Jimmy. One, because he was smart. Two, because Max Savoie was standing behind him, and everyone with a lick of sense was scared to the marrow of Max. T-Bob Gautreaux and Telest Surette. Names mean anything to you, Jimmy? Babineau jumped right in. Thats Mr. Legere to you, Max said in an inflectionless tone that somehow implied a world of menace. Mr. Legere, the detective corrected. Be nice to our guests, Max, the old man chided. Im sure theyve had a long night and are tired and wanting to go home to their families. Jimmy is fine. Since when are we guests, Jimmy? Cee Cee prodded. Since youre not here to arrest me. Or are you? She gave the old fellow a once-over, noting the striped pajamas over pencil-thin legs peeping out from his silk robe. He wore powder blue terry-cloth slippers. What kind of mobster wore powder blue terry cloth? But she wasnt fooled by his apparent helplessness. She smiled. You know everything about everything, Jimmy. What do you know about these two small-timers? Why would someone want to scramble their insides like an omelet and spill them all over my district? There was nothing wrong with Legeres ledgerlike mind. T-Bob was in for twenty large. A crude, rather stupid man who used to slap his wife around. Telest, a nobody who bet only when he could pay the interest. Not model citizens, detective, but they paid on their accountsfrom what I understand, that is. Dead men dont pay markers. But when they die really ugly, they can be an inspiration to those who might consider letting a payment slide. A rusty chuckle. Very true, young lady. But these days, considering my health, I search for inspiration at St. Phillips. How . . . admirable. She let her cool, professional facade slip just long enough for him to see what was behind it: fury, packed in frustration and to-the-ends-of-the-earth determination. She wouldnt rest until she brought him down, until her hand slammed the prison door behind him. He read that promise without taking offense, but without amusement, either. He took her seriously, which was exactly what she wanted. For him to know who was going to lock him away for whatever forever

he had left. Was there anything else, detective? I should like to get back to my rest. Im sure youll have no trouble sleeping, Jimmy. Never do. Must be all that clean living and prayer. Youll let us know if you hear anything? Of course. Ill send Max. Her gaze flickered to the rough-hewn features, meeting his steady stare. A phone call will be fine. Sorry to have disturbed you. Always a pleasant disruption for an old man like me. Max, see them out. WHEN MAX SAVOIE returned from that duty, he was met with a no-nonsense stare. Max, what have you been up to? WHAT DO YOU think, Ceece? Cee Cee started the car and pulled away from the house. She was always glad to have the spooky old place in her rearview mirror. I think the old man has enough skeletons to supply a medical school, but I dont think our vics are among them. Though she didnt think Jimmy Legere had any blood on him this time, she was wondering about Max Savoie. For a man whod been up all night, his clothes had just-pulled-off-the-tag creases still in them. If hed been romping with a woman, why was he sporting an unwrinkled shirt and smelling of a really nice soap instead of Eau de Sex? He wasnt the only one who had a discriminating nose. Why would he be so well dressed unless what hed been wearing earlier was covered in T-Bob and Telest? But a gut feeling wasnt enough for a warrant, and she had no desire to be cornered by Legeres slick lawyer before she had her morning coffee. She made a call to Devlin Dovion, who by now was probably at the scene and up to his elbows in one of the corpses. The medical examiner had been a friend of her fathers and always gave her the inside scoop when he could. Charlotte, he grumbled, Im trying to work here. Let me do my job. I can do my job better if you tell me what youve discovered so far. Any idea who killed them, Dev? Who? No. What would be the better question. What? She exchanged a puzzled glance with Babineau. You mean what was used to kill them? Oh, thats easy. Surette had his throat and heart torn out by bare hands. Through the rib cage? Is that possible? Im not saying how it was done, only that thats the way it was done. Cee Cee swallowed. And Gautreaux? Thats a bit more interesting. To Devlin, everything gruesome was interesting. And he liked talking to Charlotte because she seemed to think so, too. They were two of a kind, walking on the dark side of the night. Interesting how so? His body was ripped apart by fangs and claws. Fangs and . . . claws? Are we talking animal, here? Like some big dog or something? Ive got a pretty good bite impression, but off the top of my head, I couldnt tell you what made it. Something big enough to chase and catch a Cadillac going roughly fifty miles an hour, knock down a man weighing more than two hundred pounds, and have enough strength left to tear off his arms. Damn. So were not talking your run-of-the-mill house pet here. Not in my house. Then, to her disappointment, he shut her down. Im not doing any more talking until I finish running tests. Every time we get one of these the results come back contaminated by some damn thing or another. This time I want to be extra careful. And keep this just between the two of us for now. Stuff like this always gets the crazies coming out of the woodwork to bay at the next full moon, and I dont need to be that busy cleaning up after you. She signed off and drove in silence for several blocks. So, Babineau began casually, watching her expression as she processed the disturbing information. Where do we look for this animal? At the pound? Somehow I doubt it. Well, Im out of ideas for the moment and out of energy. What say we call it a night and get started fresh in the morning? Out of ideas, maybe. But energy? She doubted it. Her partner had a new bride at home and always seemed in a hurry to punch out. Maybe shes waiting up for you wearing something in basic black rubber. He didnt comment, but the gleam in his eye said that kind of surprise wouldnt be unwelcome. But just because he had something to go home to didnt mean she was ready to trade their hot lead for her cold sheets. Her mind was full of questions that needed to be asked and she had a pretty good idea of where to start looking for answers. 2010 Nancy Gideon Presentation de l'diteur IN THIS STUNNING FIRST BOOK FROM NANCY GIDEONS SIZZLING NEW SERIES, A TENACIOUS COP AND HER SHAPE-SHIFTING ENEMY SACRIFICE EVERYTHING FOR FORBIDDEN DESIRE. ALL SHE WANTS IS REVENGE. New Orleans homicide detective Charlotte Caissie is dedicated to bringing down the crime boss responsible for her fathers murder. Using Jimmy Legeres mysterious and irresistible right-hand man is a dangerous gamble, and not only due to his reputation as more monster than man. Because her feelings for Max Savoie are . . . complicated. 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