

Fashionably FIERCE



Book 18

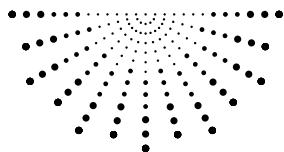
THE HOT DAMNED SERIES

NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ROBYN PETERMAN

FASHIONABLY FIERCE

HOT DAMNED, BOOK 18



ROBYN PETERMAN

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This book contains content that may not be suitable for young readers 17 and under.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Hot Damned series is the series of my heart. It was time for Juliet's story. It's a doozy and made me so happy.

As always, writing may be a solitary sport, but it takes a bunch of terrific people to get a book out into the world.

Renee — Thank you for being the best badass critique partner in the world.
TMB. LOL

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My Readers — Thank you for loving the stories that come from my warped mind. It thrills me.

Steve, Henry and Audrey — Your love and support makes all of this so much more fun. I love you people endlessly.

DEDICATION

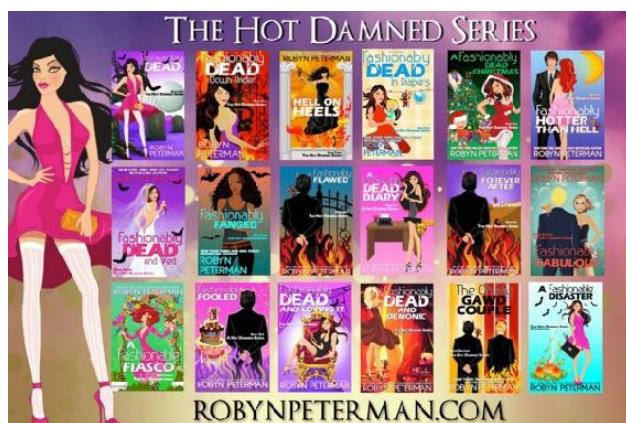
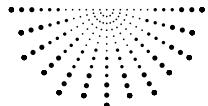
For Caroline. You absolutely rock.

Uproariously witty, deliciously provocative, and just plain fun! No one delivers side-splitting humor and mouth-watering sensuality like Robyn Peterman.

This is entertainment at its absolute finest!

~ Darynda Jones, NY Times Bestselling Author of the *Charley Davidson Series*

MORE IN THE HOT DAMNED SERIES



CHECK OUT THE WHOLE SERIES!

BOOK DESCRIPTION

FASHIONABLY FIERCE

The twenty-first century is quite the horrifying eye-opener for a Vampyre warrior whose been in a magical coma for a thousand years.

The Vampyre in question would be me. I'm so damned confused by the modern world, and getting electrocuted for being misogynistic — whatever that means — is getting old.

It's insanity. Apparently, there's a species called Karens running in the wild. The Tube of You and the Book of the Faces are alarming. From what I understand, the Karens gather there. I much prefer homing pigeons to the small rectangular metal box the undead of today seem to favor. Although, I am enamored with the horseless metal chariots.

The good old days of skin peeling and ripping out entrails are over. So be it. I'll fit in. Getting set aflame sucks.

Plus, there's a beautiful blonde who's in my every waking thought. She might not know it yet, but we're destined to be. Although, every time I cop a feel, I get my nards kneed up into my esophagus. My wooing skills might be a little rusty...

Armed with the magic word, *please*, and the challenge of using my words instead of my sword, I shall succeed.

I'm fierce. I'm fabulous. And I'm in love.

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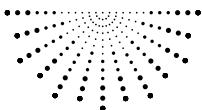
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JULIET



“I ALWAYS FIND A NICE WORD VOMIT TO BE CLEANSING TO THE SOUL, JULIET!” the woman announced as she hustled about trying to wrangle the monkeys who were completely out of control. “Try it, darling!”

The chaos was real—both in my mind and in reality.

“Okay,” I said, twisting my blonde hair nervously in my fingers. It was all I could do to keep my fangs from popping out in distress. That would be rude and possibly life-ending. I was working on being a better me, rude was no longer in the repertoire. Normally, in situations that made me feel ill at ease, I would simply resort to bloodshed, decapitation or dismemberment. According to my old therapist, that was bad. The new and improved me would not do that. Plus, if the rumors were accurate, my host was more deranged than I was...

The shiny stripper pole dominating the outdoor garden/office was alarming. Possibly more alarming than the woman now in charge of shrinking my head... in a metaphorical way, hopefully. One could never tell with the powerful gal waiting for me to spew out my issues. “Not sure where to start.”

I was uncomfortable and way out of my league. I’d never spilled my secrets on a stump covered in purple clematis to someone who could end me on a whim with a crook of her well-manicured finger. My instinct was to stand up and haul ass. However, there was nowhere in the Universe I could safely go. Them was the breaks when you’d tried to kill everyone you knew on multiple occasions.

“Darling, just speak!” the therapist, for lack of a more accurate term, insisted. “Release the Kraken and all that jazz! Reach deeply into your

psyche, all the way down to your no-no, and let the rhythm of your inner goddess sing your story! And you mustn't worry about trying to explain yourself to dumbasses. You are not the fuckface whisperer." She paused then wrinkled her perfect nose. "Actually, I'm not a dumbass, but the rest of what I said stands!"

"My no-no?" I asked, bewildered.

"Nickname for a vagina," she clarified with an expression that clearly implied I was nuts for not knowing what a no-no was.

My mouth fell open, and I just stared at the whack job. She was dressed from head to toe in gossamer peach silk. She literally shimmered and sparkled. Her fiery red hair blew around her perfectly proportioned face. The blue of her eyes was the clearest I'd ever seen and her skin was a lovely porcelain. The True Immortal was surrounded by a troop of monkeys who hung on her every word and move.

It was better than the poop throwing I'd observed when I'd been dropped off in Nirvana by the Vampyres, Martha and Jane. The entire plane seemed to be filled with natural beauty hyped up on steroids. Nirvana's definition was a state of perfect happiness or an idyllic place. I had no clue if it was happy since I'd never experienced the emotion, but it was definitely picturesque.

"Not following," I whispered. I'd considered adding Mother Nature to my statement, but she wasn't my mother. She also went by Gaia and my sister called her Gigi, but the names seemed too familiar. Since I wasn't sure of the protocol, I'd just avoid calling her anything.

Pissing off Mother Nature was sure to end badly... for me. As much as I liked the old, violent and horribly dressed Vamps, Martha and Jane, this decision had been a bad one. It wasn't that I was opposed to therapy. I'd been doing therapy for years—five times a week at the insistence of my sister, Astrid. She was the only one who hadn't given up on me even though she'd had every right to have me beheaded.

I'd tried to kill her several times—savagely. Technically speaking, I *had* killed her. I'd turned her into a Vampyre against her will at the behest of the sorry woman who'd given birth to us. Not to mention, I made an incredibly stupid attempt to kidnap her beloved son. To say that didn't go over well would be a bloody understatement. Honestly, I wasn't sure why I was here. There was no coming back from the heinous crimes I'd committed.

Mother Nature tsked and waved her hands in the air. Brightly colored flowers burst from the ground and danced in the rain and earth-scented

breeze. “Where is the Vampyre who tried to off every single blood relation she has? Where is the batshit crazy bloodsucker who kept showing up time and time again to bludgeon her family? Where is the insane Immortal who made a deal with the revolting Trolls?”

I winced in shame. I was trying to put all of that behind me—a monumental task that was most likely impossible. After almost a decade in solitary confinement in the dungeon of the Cressida House and a regimen of therapy that made my head spin, I wanted to change.

I *had* changed. I’d helped Astrid save her love, Ethan. In a confusing twist of fate, Ethan was also my brother. However, he and Astrid were not related. My sister and I shared a shitty mother and Ethan and I shared a not-shitty father. I’d been willing to die to save my brother so I could do at least one thing right in my centuries-long pathetic life. I thought if I perished for a noble cause, maybe those who I’d tried to destroy might think a little bit kindly of me.

Real forgiveness wasn’t going to happen. I couldn’t forgive myself and didn’t expect it from others. Astrid was the True Immortal known as Compassion. I was humbled that she’d found it in her non-beating heart to give me another chance.

I don’t think I would have.

I know I wouldn’t have.

“I’m... umm... kind of trying to move on from that,” I replied warily. As much as I deserved to be repeatedly electrocuted for eons, I wasn’t looking forward to being set aflame by Mother Nature. She was the original badass.

“Oh my!” Mother Nature said with a giggle, which sent the garden around her into overdrive. The trees were now swaying and depositing hot-pink and neon-orange petals all over the place. “You misunderstood, Juliet,” she told me. “I meant, where are your balls?”

We’d gone from my no-no to the fuckface whisperer then to my balls. This wasn’t how therapy had worked in the past.

“Umm...”

“Not to worry,” she assured me. “We shall find them.”

I nodded politely and hoped she wasn’t being literal.

“Shall we start with discussing your mother?”

My skin felt clammy and my stomach cramped. Vampyres didn’t have bodily functions other than tears, but my symptoms felt very real. Talking about the woman who had damaged me verbally, physically and emotionally

for most of my life made me feel faint and shaky. She was dead, but lived on in my nightmares on the regular. “I’d rather not.”

“Interesting,” Mother Nature said, slapping away one of the randy monkeys who tried to cop a feel. “Mothers are such a touchy subject. Satan positively hates talking about me. Although, God has lovely things to say. He’s such a charmer.”

Even though I’d been undead for hundreds of years and nothing should throw me, the fact that Mother Nature’s sons were God and Satan always did. If she was going to continue to press for an exchange about my mother, I might do something I’d regret. I regretted my entire life. I didn’t want to start my potentially new life by attacking Mother Nature.

If she wanted me to talk, talk I would. Just not about the woman who’d physically beaten me into bloody submission for hundreds of years.

Inhaling deeply, I went for it. “As already discussed, I’ve made attempts on lots of lives. Thankfully, I failed. A lot. My positive qualities are a mystery to me and everyone I’ve ever met. I have no friends.” I paused and took back my last statement. “Well, I kind of have two friends.”

“Wonderful!” Mother Nature squealed, clapping her hands. “And who might they be?”

“Martha and Jane,” I replied.

Her eyes grew large and she choked. My inclination was to give her a solid slap on the back, but she recovered before I could. That was good since any move on my part could be misconstrued as deadly aggression. The reality of the thought was depressing. However, track records didn’t lie.

I wasn’t sure if Mother Nature had swallowed wrong or if bile had risen in her throat. I was very aware that Martha and Jane leaned to the side of socially unacceptable and dressed like geriatric hookers, but after threatening to embed grenades in my ass, they’d decided I was their project. No explosives came near my backside. The nutty women were petitioning to adopt me. The thought was absurd since I was hundreds of years older than them, but secretly it warmed my cold dead heart.

For the first time in my life, I felt a little lovable... or I thought that was what it was. It was hard to tell since I’d never experienced it, but it felt nice to be wanted by the old coots. I’d fought for my mother’s love my entire life. I’d never gotten it. The fact that Martha and Jane just wanted to give me love without a deadly price tag on it was strange.

“Martha and Jane are quite certifiable,” Mother Nature announced with a

nod of approval. “We pole dance together every Wednesday. They suck. It’s glorious. Love them!”

The thought of the old gals pole dancing was disturbing. Moving on was the best course of action. Being polite was seriously hard. “Yes, well, Astrid believes I’m redeemable. I don’t,” I admitted. The truth hurt. “However, I’d like to make amends with my family before I go.”

“Go where?” Mother Nature demanded, slapping her hands onto her slim hips and giving me the stink eye.

I shrugged. “My guess would be the Basement of Hell.”

“Pity parties are a bore,” she stated. “Everyone is redeemable if they want to be. The question is, do you want to be redeemed?”

Did I want it? Yes.

Would I get it? The chances were slim to none.

“Not sure it matters what I want,” I told her, absently petting a monkey who’d loped over and sat down beside me. If he tried to touch my boob, I’d shove his hairy hand up his ass. I figured as long as I didn’t actually kill him that would be okay. Understanding good violence as opposed to bad violence was challenging. Vampyres were a vicious breed. I’d just taken the violence part three hundred and sixty degrees too far... repeatedly. “That’s up to others.”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re a hot mess, Juliet,” she informed me. “I’d suggest being more of a hot mess like me. You know, a fun hot mess. Like a tsunami filled with glitter, fireworks and cupcakes. Much more appealing.”

I was pretty darn sure Mother Nature was not a trained therapist.

This wasn’t helping. I wasn’t fun and I would never be filled with cupcakes. I was dead. I drank blood. “I don’t think you understand. I did my best to kill most of my family.”

“And I blew up Mount Vesuvius because my cooking was insulted,” she countered grandly. “I sent God and Satan on a road trip together with no powers... to *Indiana*. I poisoned everyone in the Immortal Lady’s Club with my cake. And to make matters worse, I’ve considered dismembering Satan multiple times. Of course, I wouldn’t, but it’s amusing to think about. He’s such a naughty shit.”

Badass wasn’t accurate. Batshit was more applicable. However, when one lived in a glass house as rickety as mine, one should not throw stones.

“While all of that is... umm... impressive, you didn’t go insane and try to brutally end your family,” I pointed out.

"Not yet," she agreed. "Although, Satan has tempted me many a time."

I knew the next question might cause an explosion, but I couldn't seem to help myself. Plus, if I lost my head to a Mother Nature tantrum, it would make everything easier. "Are you a real therapist?"

She smiled. It was terrifying. "I am a mother! And I'm perfect."

It was a non-answer, but what did I expect?

"Anyhoo," she went on. "An outstanding lesson in life is that everyone is an asshole except for me. And if you doubt my wisdom, try it out. Next time you're at the big boxy place that sells food..." Her brow wrinkled in confusion. "What is the big boxy food place called?"

"A grocery store?" I guessed. Since I didn't eat, I didn't spend much time in businesses that sold food.

"Yes! A grocery store! Next time you're in a grocery store, yell 'hey asshole'. Everyone in the vicinity will turn around and look. It proves my point."

"What is your point?" I asked, perplexed.

"Honestly, I'm not sure," she replied with a giggle that sent the monkeys into hysterics.

I was slightly worried they'd start flinging feces again, but didn't say a word. For the most part, they were nice.

"Maybe, we should call it a day," I suggested in a careful tone. Mother Nature was well known for her off-the-wall fits. I didn't want to offend. However, this was a waste of time.

"Oh no," she said with a wink. "I'm just getting started. Do you have a plan to seek this redemption you so desire?"

It was a great question and one I'd mulled over. "I was thinking about offering body parts in retribution. Mutilating myself and gifting the spoils to those I've wronged."

She gasped and paled. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

The grand dame of the Immortal world wasn't expecting that answer. It had been the only thing I could come up with that might show true remorse. Granted, body parts on Vamps grew back, but it was a start. My half-assed plan included dismembering myself in front of those I'd committed the most heinous crimes against and offering up my arms and legs as tokens of regret. I'd even considered borrowing a few grenades from Martha and Jane and blowing off my lower half to show I was sorry but thought that might be a little too gross, since I'd have to shove the explosives up my rear end.

“An eye for an eye kind of gesture,” I mumbled, realizing how unappetizing my plan sounded.

Mother Nature gazed at me. Her expression was one of sorrow. It made me itchy. I didn’t deserve anyone’s pity. I was an abomination. She knew it and I knew it. Everyone knew it. This conversation was an exercise in futility.

“I need to go,” I said, getting to my feet.

I did have a temporary home with Astrid and Ethan at the Cressida House. Most of the undead in residence were not happy with the arrangement. I didn’t blame them. They, like myself, were concerned I’d go off the rails again. However, my sister was as terrifying as Mother Nature and would take out anyone who defied her decree. Ethan had been iffy about me staying on as a guest, but we’d had some long and difficult talks. We were working toward a truce of sorts. It wasn’t as if I expected anyone to welcome me with open arms, but I was desperate for a chance. I’d been given the job of Immortal Historian. I’d been an expert in all things magical before I’d gone on a few-centuries-long bloody rampage. Astrid believed my knowledge made me useful.

I didn’t know what to think, but I wanted to make her proud.

The list of those I’d harmed was long.

“Not time to go yet,” Mother Nature said in a tone that dared me to defy her. “Who or what do you love?”

I sat back down. Closing my eyes, I wanted to cry. Since I’d borrowed an outfit from Astrid, I did my best to suck it back. Vamps cried blood. Ruining my sister’s Prada mini dress didn’t seem like a good plan.

“Love is a fallacy,” I stated flatly.

If I was being honest, which was dangerous, I’d admit I had a small inkling of feeling for the misogynistic Vampyre jackass named Rhys. However, that was only sexual. Love didn’t exist.

Again, she stared at me with pity. Mother Nature sighed dramatically then seated herself next to me on the stump. “Do you know Buddha?”

I squinted at her. “You mean like know who he is or know him?”

“Either,” she replied with a giggle.

“Only know of him,” I told her.

“Such a shame,” she said, patting my back. “He’s quite lovely. We’ll have to remedy that after your mission.”

To say I was confused would be an understatement.

“Anyhoo,” she went on. “Buddha said, ‘You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire Universe, deserve your love and affection.’”

I laughed. She didn’t.

“That wasn’t a joke?” I asked.

“Not a joke, Juliet.” She raised a brow. “Here’s another. Once you embrace your heinous shittiness, no one can use it against you.”

“Buddha said that?”

Mother Nature grinned wide. “Oh no, darling, that’s one of mine! I also say, each person should make the choice to absolve oneself. While you and all others, aside from me, are flawed, everyone deserves love.”

I shook my head. Words were simply words, meaningless unless action went with them. Loving myself was not in my future. The concept didn’t make any sense and I refused to make the time to understand. What was needed was to offer the ones I’d hurt an apology and the chance to get retribution on me. It was the least I could do.

If they wanted to end me, so be it. It was no secret I’d tried to end *them*.

“With all due respect and the knowledge that you might want to decapitate me, I disagree,” I said, peeking over at the legend sitting next to me. “I appreciate that you want to help, but it won’t work.”

Mother Nature just smiled. I was unsure if she’d heard what I’d said or if she smiled before she sent people to Hell. It didn’t matter. I was weary to the bone. If now was my time to burn for eternity, I’d accept it. Living was overrated.

“I say we put the self-dismemberment on hold for a bit,” she suggested.

“Do you have a better plan?” I asked.

“But of course,” she assured me. “I’m Mother Nature. I’m brilliant!”

I was now terrified.

The crazy woman hopped to her stiletto-clad feet and began to pace. Her monkeys imitated her every move. As she walked, clusters of flowers pushed out of the ground in full bloom. The air smelled glorious. The hairy little primates picked the flowers and created stunning bouquets for their leader. I was shocked to silence when several flower arrangements were offered to me.

“Monkeys are excellent determiners of character,” she commented. “They have no time or patience for evil.”

“Maybe they’re drunk,” I said.

She giggled. “Not before five!”

I gave her a weak smile, not knowing if she was joking or serious.

“I have a grand idea,” Mother Nature went on. “It’s quite sure to be a success. I’m never wrong except on Mondays.”

I swallowed my scream. It was Monday.

The insane woman began to levitate. The glow around her was so bright I had to shield my eyes.

“You shall go on a mission and find the Sacred Clock! Yes! That’s the answer,” she squealed.

My guess was that she drank before five o’clock even if her monkeys didn’t. “What’s a Sacred Clock?” I figured I’d play along until our session was over.

“It’s a clock that’s sacred,” she replied.

“Okay... and what does it do? Turn back time?” Actually, that wasn’t a bad idea. If I could undo all the harm I’d caused, I might be able to live out my life without looking over my shoulder for the rest of it.

“Of course not, silly child,” she said with an eye roll. “The past is what it is and I prefer leaving it there. It’s the future you must concern yourself with. The Sacred Clock will give you the time and knowledge you need to rectify the wrongs you’ve committed.”

“Seriously?” I wanted to believe her, but she was nuts.

“Very,” she replied, floating back down to the ground and landing right in front of me. She leaned in and whispered. “The Sacred Clock is a thousand years old. You must find another who was alive during that time and take them with you on the search. I’d suggest someone who is outstanding at warfare and somewhat psychotic. There will be danger along the way. A few others who lean on the batshit nutty side would be helpful as well.”

What had started out as sounding good was now making my bullshit meter ding. Loudly. However, I wasn’t going to rule it out just yet. Martha and Jane were psychotic, but were only in their nineties. They were batshit nutty though. I wasn’t sure I knew anyone who was in their thousands who I could ask for help. I wasn’t exactly popular with my kind...

“So, am I to assume that this clock will help me reform my reputation?”

“Never assume,” Mother Nature warned. “It makes an ass out of you and me. Well, not me... just you. And nothing can reform you but yourself, child. Hear me now and heed me later... there is always more to a picture than meets the eye. Remember this or it will bite you in the ass.”

“Literally?” I questioned. The woman was crazy, but I made a mental note of her ramblings.

She nodded in all seriousness. Her red curls bobbed along. “Quite possibly. When something is broken it must be fixed, so to speak. When the strong put right the broken it’s very nice. However, when the broken heal the broken it’s beautiful. Life changing. Keep that nugget in mind, Juliet. Might come in handy. One never knows...”

She was all over the map with her advice. I wasn’t sure what was important and what wasn’t.

“Where is this Sacred Clock located?” I asked.

“Darling! Don’t be nonsensical. If I told you where it was all the fun would be taken out of the journey.”

“Can I have a hint?”

She pursed her lips in thought. “You must be a friend to get a friend. Money doesn’t buy happiness. Always get a second opinion. April showers bring May flowers. And size does indeed matter.”

She’d just word vomited a bunch of ridiculous truisms. I sat on my hands so I didn’t electrocute her. The payback was sure to be harsh.

“Kidding!” she squealed. “However, size does matter. The hints will come from your heart. Listen to it.”

I groaned. My heart was one of the organs in my body that didn’t work. I was undead.

“Is that all?” I asked.

“Listen carefully,” she said with a naughty sparkle in her eyes. “Toad Suck. Hooker. Belchertown. Assawoman.”

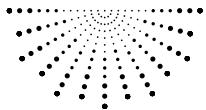
Pressing my lips together so I didn’t call her out on her insanity, I just nodded. She was beyond crazy. I wouldn’t be back for another therapy session, no matter how much Martha and Jane wanted me to. “Got it. Thank you.”

“Actually, you don’t,” she said with a giggle. “But you will, dear Juliet. Find the Sacred Clock. Go on the mission. I promise it will change everything for the better. To heal thine self, one must do right by others. Oh! And you must keep the Sacred Clock a secret until it is found.”

I’d been lied to and used my entire existence. While I wanted to believe her, I didn’t. Standing up, I curtseyed to Mother Nature. She’d tried to help. She hadn’t but it was the thought that counted.

It was time to start ripping off my limbs.

R H Y S



“VINNIE,” I WHISPERED FROM THE CLOSET IN THE OPULENT QUARTERS I’D been assigned. “I need to converse with you immediately. It’s of utmost importance.”

The closet was strange. Twisted wire held up fabric on a wooden rail. The number of garments I’d been gifted was staggering. Back in the good old days, a man had one outfit only. The bloodier it got in battle, the better. It was our badge of honor. My clothes had been so crusted in the blood of my enemies they crunched when I walked. I hadn’t smelled great, but I’d looked outstanding.

The clothing the more current Vampyres wore was appalling. I much preferred a plain cotton tunic and a loose pair of pants. Strangling my jewels wasn’t my idea of a good time. My hostess, the terrifying Astrid, who also happened to be the Chosen One, had insisted I try jeans and a t-shirt to get hip with the times. While I looked dapper in the ensemble, my rod wasn’t happy being trapped in the stiff material.

Whatever. It was a small price to pay to say thank you to the woman who had saved me and my men from a dreadful fate. Granted, I was still puzzled and a tad bit horrified that a *woman* was the Vampyres’ Chosen One, but a lot had obviously changed during the time I’d been incapacitated. I’d sworn my fealty to both Astrid and her mate, Prince Ethan. I didn’t regret it. Although, taking orders from a woman was fang-grindingly difficult.

“Vinnie,” I hissed, peeking out through the keyhole. “I’m over here.”

The small, pale and bizarre Vamp glanced around in confusion. I did not blame the diminutive warrior. However, I couldn’t risk being overheard. Vampyres had excellent aural skills. It had been a painful few weeks at the

Cressida House amongst the undead of the twenty-first century. Being electrocuted for speaking my mind was ridiculous. The customs and behaviors of this time period made me long for a thousand years ago, when I'd been put into a dastardly magical coma along with the men from my army. The beeping metal contraptions used to communicate were shocking. I was used to sending a homing pigeon to deliver messages. I had to admit that metal was faster, but I was fond of pigeons. They were cute.

My men seemed to be acclimating far better than me. That was emasculating and tempted me to dismember them. Jonah and Jackoby had discovered something called the Book of Faces and had many followers already without having to challenge them to a duel. Unheard of. Sven—my second in command—had tried to make me view the Tube of You, but I simply couldn't grasp the concept of a Karen. My men found that hilarious. I did not. When Sibcock called me a Karen, I removed his legs.

Astrid—who also went by other names, like Globes LaSweatermeat and Hooties McNubbins—admonished me for dismembering my warriors. She'd also electrocuted me until I tasted metal for calling her Globes LaSweatermeat. That one I didn't think was fair. I'd heard her sparsely haired, profane subjects, Martha and Jane, call her the very same name without being set on fire. The rules here were impossible.

Only yesterday, Sven—the simpering asshole—had received high praise from Astrid, aka Nugas Badoinkies, for making a vow not to drain a human while eating. The rest of my shite army had cheered like madmen. Apparently, it had been discovered that a Vampyre need not drain a human down to the last drop to feed. Who knew? Old habits were hard to break. Since I hadn't taken the no-human-killing vow, I'd been grounded to my quarters like a fucking child. I had no intention of killing innocents. Ever. I never had and never would. Even back in the good old days, I'd only fed from the dregs of human society.

Bottom line... I was in timeout for no other reason than the size of my ego. It chapped my ass that my men were following orders given to them by someone other than me. My only ally at this point wore a velvet cape and had skin so translucent I could see his veins. Whatever. An ally was an ally, no matter how ashen.

"I'm in the closet," I explained quietly.

"Nothing wrong with that," Vinnie assured me. "Many of our kind are gay."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, confused. I wasn't a happy guy. I prided myself on being a badass warrior. Killing machines like me were not joyful. Ever.

Well, I could be joyful if a certain tall, gorgeous blonde would quit kicking my nuts up into my esophagus. However, if Juliet refrained from maiming me, an entire other can of worms might be exposed. I wasn't exactly suave with the ladies. Sadly, I'd been unsuccessful from banishing the fetching wench from my dreams. It didn't help matters that she was residing in the Cressida House as well.

Vinnie giggled. "I mean that it isn't a problem that you like men."

I rolled my eyes. What was the idiot babbling on about? "I'm coming out of the closet," I snapped.

"Good for you!" he said, clapping his hands.

The tiny man was missing brain cells. I wasn't surprised. He'd invented flavored bottled blood. It was insulting. Vampyres were predators. It appeared that everyone had turned into weenies over the centuries. Although, I had to admit I was partial to the peach-flavored blood. Peaches were one of the few foods that I could recall the taste of from my scant years as a human.

"Vinnie," I said, draping a quilt over our heads to soundproof the exchange. "I'm having a few problems."

"Such as?" he inquired kindly.

The little guy was an anomaly to me. He was fierce in battle, but a wimp in real life. It didn't matter. He'd been one of the only people who hadn't electrocuted me since I'd arrived. That was greatly appreciated. I'd teach the miniature bastard to man up. One good deed deserved another.

"I don't think anyone likes me," I admitted.

"Interesting," the Vamp replied. "And why so?"

I shrugged. Expressing emotions wasn't in my wheelhouse, but since I wasn't allowed to remove people's limbs for pleasure anymore, I had too much time to think. "I don't know. I'm fabulous."

"Well," my only buddy said, scratching his head in thought. "I will agree that your warrior skills are unparalleled. Your prowess with decapitation, dismemberment and torture is impressive. Your gift for seeing scent-related visions about the past is stellar!"

I preened at the accurate compliments. "Thank you, Vinnie."

"Welcome." Vinnie held up a finger. "However, your feeling of being ostracized might stem from your blatant disrespect for women. Or possibly,

your horrifying manners. Or perhaps, it's that you threatened to decapitate fifty of your men yesterday."

"It can't be any of that," I assured him with a dismissive wave of my hand. "Normal Vampyre behavior."

I'd threatened to rip the heads off my men with my bare hands because I'd caught them staring at Juliet. That was unacceptable. If I couldn't have her, then no one could.

"Actually, friend, it's not normal anymore," Vinnie said, patting my arm. "We've advanced quite a bit."

I shook my head. "This is very confusing."

"I can imagine," he said with a kind smile. "I think we should get you some etiquette lessons, Rhys."

"Not following," I replied. It sounded painful. I wasn't a weenie, but I'd been set on fire so many times in the last week, I wasn't up for anything excruciating.

"Manners," he replied with a giggle. "And I know just the person to teach you civility. If you want to survive this new and strange world, you must adapt, my friend."

I groaned. While I was delighted that I wasn't dead in the real sense of the word, fitting in felt beyond the realm of possibility. But... if I conquered the etiquette, which I would because I never failed, maybe Juliet would not be so quick to knee me in the nards.

I eyed my friend. "Why can't you teach me this mysterious etiquette?"

Vinnie tilted his head to the side and smiled. "I do believe we need someone more powerful than me to succeed. You have quite a lot of etiquette to learn."

I had no clue what etiquette entailed, but I wasn't going to advertise my ignorance. I would fake it until I made it. "Is it a woman or a man who shall teach me?"

"A woman," he said with a wide grin. "A very powerful woman."

Shite.



"YOU'VE GOT TO BE KIDDING ME," I MUTTERED UNDER MY BREATH.

Vinnie had transported us, dropped me off on a plane called Nirvana and

then left me to fend for myself. I'd thought Nirvana to be a myth. It was not. Flowering plants and trees of every color, shape and size blanketed the landscape. The floral smells were abundant. My head ached from sensing snippets of stories behind the smells. My gift of seeing visions from scents could be an asset or a detriment. Right now, it sucked.

Visions of greased people sliding on poles and crashing to the ground were disturbing. Sometimes the pictures were blurry. Unfortunately, this one was not. The loud-mouthed and scantily clad Martha and Jane starred in the scene, along with a terrifying red-haired woman. All three of the women swore, laughed and crashed multiple times. I wasn't sure if I was seeing a form of torture or if they enjoyed concussing themselves. Pushing the unappetizing vision away, along with a pink unicorn who appeared to want to gore me, I explored the strange new place.

Flocks of lime-green birds with razor-sharp fangs soared high in the purple and scarlet sky. Monkeys wearing black pants and black jackets swung from the trees and mocked me with their high-pitched chatter. In my day, monkeys didn't wear clothes. I was sorely tempted to rip their heads off, but decided to wait. There was a chance one of them was the etiquette teacher. However, the feces tossing made that guess iffy.

"Are you a good boy or a bad boy?" a feminine voice bellowed, causing me to scream.

Diving for cover behind a boulder, I peeked out. I saw no one. Hopefully, I'd imagined it. My scream was not what I would call manly.

I had not imagined it.

In a blinding flash of golden glitter, a red-headed woman appeared. She was a picture to behold in a shiny peach gown and was positively frightening. Her eyes were narrowed to slits. I'd fought Trolls who'd seemed less dangerous than her. She was the same one from the greased-up pole-sliding vision. Her power was evident, and I hoped to Hell and back she wasn't the etiquette instructor. I'd much prefer a shit-flinging primate. Vinnie hadn't been very forthcoming about the schooling. Even though I considered the tiny man an ally, I'd beat him senseless if I had to straddle a pole while greased up.

"Who are you, woman?" I demanded, standing up and pretending I hadn't hidden behind a rock. My instinct was to attack, but I thought better of it. My instincts had not been my friend lately. What worked a thousand years ago, got one electrocuted nowadays.

Her eye roll was epic. The fiery ball of magic she shot at me was heinous. Vinnie would lose body parts for this.

“My *name* is Mother Nature,” she hissed as her eyes narrowed further. “I’d suggest you use it.”

Shite. I’d thought Mother Nature was a myth, too. I despised being wrong.

She wiggled her fingers and punctuated her statement with another fireball that I’d remember for centuries. As I dropped and rolled to put out the flames, I was doused in gallons of water by the monkeys. At least it wasn’t feces...

“Take a seat,” Mother Nature commanded, pointing to a stump covered in purple flowers. “We have some work to do, bloodsucker.”

I warily made my way to the stump, feeling like a chastised child. Getting incinerated by a third fireball wasn’t on my to-do list. What I needed to do was leave. That was going to be tricky. Since I wasn’t sure how to get back to the Cressida House so I could dismember Vinnie, I was stuck for the time being.

There was a possibility I could bluff my way out... I’d done it before during battles to buy time. While Mother Nature was powerful, she was still just a woman.

Puffing out my impressive chest and flexing my muscles, I gave the insane Immortal a curt nod then batted my lashes. Repeatedly. More was always better. I blinked until I felt slightly dizzy. I wasn’t very polished in the pick-up department, since I’d spent most of my life decapitating the enemy and sporting blood-encrusted garments. I’d just copy what I’d seen Sven do in the past at the pub.

“Do you have something in your eye?” Mother Nature asked, concerned. “A bug? Or perhaps you’re having a seizure of some sort?”

“Umm... no.” Damn Sven to Hell. Copying the ass was a mistake. The eye-batting thing wasn’t good. Screw that. I’d give her my come-hither smile. Sucking in my cheeks, I bared my teeth. I let my fangs drop for good measure. I had big ones.

“Oh my!” she said with a giggle. “Are you constipated?”

“Shite,” I muttered. “No. I’m a Vampyre. I’m dead. I have no bodily functions. I was trying to seduce you into letting me leave.”

“Interesting,” she said, suppressing a smile and failing miserably. “That was embarrassingly dreadful for you. We can work on that as well. It’s not a

surprise that you're single. Shall we start with you telling me about your mother?"

I squinted at her. "My mother?"

"Yes."

I shook my head. My gut sank. The memories I had from my long-ago childhood were steeped in horrific tragedy. My pain was no one's business, not even a woman who could most likely end me with a snap of her fingers. "I don't speak of my mother. She died when I was young."

"That's tragic and explains so much," she said, walking over and patting my head. "Not to worry. I'm a boy mom. I shall adopt you! You remind me of one of my sons."

If I had the mythology correct—which was turning out not to be mythological at all—she was the mother of God and Satan. "I remind you of God?"

She threw her head back and laughed. "No, darling child. You remind me of the other one!"

"And that's a good thing?" I questioned, confused and appalled.

"Absolutely not," she said with a wink. "However, we'll straighten you out."

That didn't sound good. The sooner I left the better. "Yes, well, I'm here to learn some survival skills for the twenty-first century. If you have a booklet, preferably written in Latin or Sanskrit, I would be most honored to take it and be on my way."

"Not how it works, young man," she said. "Lessons are learned far better by living them rather than reading them. Fireballs also help make them stick!"

She was diabolical. It didn't look like there was a choice. The goal was to appease the woman until the tutorial was over. "Of course," I said, clapping my hands and producing a pad of paper, a quill pen and a bottle of ink. "I shall take notes."

She raised a brow. I quickly dropped the paper, pen and ink.

"You learn fast! Much quicker than Satan!"

A compliment was a compliment, even if one was being compared to the Devil. "Electrocution can do that to a fella," I replied, feeling my face heat up with pleasure at her approval.

The monkeys cheered and the unicorn didn't appear to want to gore me anymore. I took it as a win. This was easier than I'd originally thought.

“Let’s start with hearing how you would handle mundane situations,” Mother Nature suggested, handing me a cookie and a glass of milk.

I didn’t eat or drink as a Vampyre, but feared for my undead life if I reminded her.

“Sounds like a plan,” I replied, covertly handing off the treat to one of the primates.

I watched in horror as the hairy little freak ate the cookie and proceeded to vomit as if poisoned. Not being able to eat had never been so advantageous.

Mother Nature levitated and began to sparkle. “Rhys, what do you do if someone says something slightly insulting to you?”

I chuckled with relief. It was a no-brainer. “I would camouflage myself and attack when the offender is least suspecting. I’d then immediately remove his head followed by the ripping out of his innards. For good measure, I would shove the entrails into the mouth of the decapitated bastard. After that’s complete, I’d move on to the removal of appendages, which would most definitely be used to flog the asshole. Peeling the skin off would show I meant business.”

My instructor’s mouth formed a perfect O. I wasn’t sure if I’d passed the test or fucked up. The massive fireball sent my way answered the question.

“NO,” she shouted. “That is not what you do!”

“For the love of everything ridiculous,” I yelled as I smacked out the flames. “I thought that was a good answer.”

Mother Nature wiggled her fingers and doused the fire that engulfed me. As she approached with outstretched arms, I screamed. When she hugged me and patted my back like I was a child, I felt cared about for the first time in a very long time. It was strange... and nice.

She stepped back and smiled. “Shall we try that again?”

I winced. “I’d rather not.”

“Too bad, so sad,” she sang, holding her hands high in preparation to shoot another fireball.

“Fine,” I shouted. “I shall endeavor to get the answer correct.”

“There’s more than one correct answer,” she informed me.

I didn’t see how that was fair, but soldiered on. I wasn’t a quitter. “So maybe instead of decapitation, I’d start with dismemberment?”

She hissed. I blanched and tried a different angle.

“Since you seem opposed to my ripping off body parts with my bare

hands, would it be more polite to use a sword to lop off appendages?"

"Oh my," she said, shaking her head. "You might be a lost cause."

I didn't like that one bit. I was fabulous. "Can you give me a fucking hint?"

Her brows shot up. I had no clue what I'd done now.

"The F-bomb is not necessary when in the presence of your newly adopted mommy. Am I clear?" she snapped.

"My bad," I said quickly. While I was very sure I didn't want to be in Nirvana, I was also positive that I didn't want to be adopted. At twelve hundred years old, that ship had sailed. "Can I have a hint?"

"What's the magic word?" she inquired.

"Is it just one word?" I asked, wildly confused.

Mother Nature just tapped her toe and waited.

I shrugged and tried once more. "Is it... I'll tear your head off?"

That earned a fireball.

"Shite," I shouted, which earned me another.

"PLEASE," she bellowed. "The magic word is please."

Going back into a magical coma for another thousand years was starting to sound like a fine plan. "Can I have a hint, *please*?"

She smiled. The insane woman's approval made me feel great. "If someone insults you, you use your words."

"I've got it!" I yelled. "Instead of actually decapitating, dismembering and peeling, I shall simply threaten it. Right?"

"Wrong," she said with a groan. "Repeat after me. You hurt my feelings. Please don't say mean things to me."

"Are you fucking serious?" I demanded.

Again with the fireballs. I repeated the wimpy words as I slapped out the fire.

"Excellent!" she squealed.

I disagreed but wasn't about to let that be known. "Are we done?"

"We are not," she announced as the monkeys danced around her in excitement. "Next is a game."

"With a prize?"

"Depends," she replied. "I'll ask a question and you will answer truthfully. If you lie, I'll know and you'll be electrocuted."

"That sounds dangerous," I pointed out. Although, it was nice of her to lay it all out.

“Danger is the spice of life, son. We need to get you sorted out quickly so you can go on a mission.”

I perked up. Missions usually involved bloodshed. “I’m game for the game.”

“Wonderful!” she shouted. “Tell the truth. Why are you here?”

I shrugged. “Because Vinnie made me come.”

She electrocuted me.

“Shite,” I shouted. “To learn some fucking manners.”

Again, Mother Nature let a fireball fly.

“Why are you here?” she demanded.

“Because no one likes me,” I roared. “It sucks and I don’t know what to do.”

“Much better,” she said. “Why do you think no one likes you?”

I scratched my head in thought. “I don’t know. I’m stupendous.”

“Debatable,” she muttered. “From what I understand, you take issue with women.”

I knew agreeing with her would be a stupid move. However, if I lied it would be even more painful. “I might be a bit old-fashioned,” I offered, trying to lighten what she believed was my offense.

It didn’t work. The lightning bolt was horrendous.

“What do you have against women?” she demanded, tossing yet another fireball my way.

The monkeys thought it was hilarious. I, on the other hand, did not.

“Answer me!” Mother Nature demanded.

“Nothing,” I lied.

“Wrong answer, son,” she said with her hands raised high.

Mother Nature lowered her hands and sighed dramatically. It was more terrifying than her fireballs.

“Umm... shall I try again?” I asked. I didn’t like her disappointment. The fact that it bothered me was absurd.

“No, son,” she said, eyeing me like I was some kind of noxious experiment. “Have you ever had a relationship with a woman?”

“Of course, I have,” I bellowed, insulted.

She raised a brow. “And what is your idea of a nice outing with a woman?”

I shrugged and puffed out my chest. “Back in the day, I’d put on my most blood-encrusted warrior-wear and go to the pub. If I saw a lass I fancied, I

threw her over my shoulder and left with her. Occasionally, it worked. However, Vampyre women have very sharp fangs and accurate right hooks. I lost many a limb in my quest to get laid.”

“Heaven help me,” Mother Nature muttered, fanning herself with a large leaf. “That’s unacceptably appalling.”

I was shocked. “It is?”

She nodded. “It is.” She began to pace. The monkeys raised their middle fingers to me and followed their whack job of a leader. “Women are equal to men,” she stated flatly. “Get that through your fat head right now, sonny boy. And in most instances, they’re superior.”

The news was surprising. The fireball wasn’t.

“From this day forward, you will use your words to solve problems or I’ll remove your appendages,” she warned.

I raised my hand. “Wait! What if someone tries to kill me or one in my army?”

“Destroy them,” she replied with an eye roll. “My boys are not weenies. I simply expect them to have good manners. God is winning in that department. Satan is dreadful and you’re way behind the Devil. I’m not speaking of using your words with true enemies. I’m talking about all the people who you want to like you.”

“Oh, okay. I can see how that might work.”

She giggled and shook her head. “You’re a walking, talking disaster, Rhys. Your people skills suck and your prowess with the fairer sex is rank.”

I groaned. She was correct. I wasn’t suave with the ladies. “I’d like to be more appealing to the lesser species,” I admitted, pouring my heart out. Using my words wasn’t all that bad... until it was.

My heartfelt admission earned me an electrocution that made my eyes cross and my head spin. Literally.

“Rephrase that,” Mother Nature hissed.

I quickly went over the words I’d used to see where I might have gone wrong. I wasn’t entirely sure. “I should say woman instead of species?”

Her eyes narrowed to slits and she glowed so brightly, I thought I’d gone blind. Clearly, that was the wrong answer. Shite. I was at a loss.

The sparkling woman rolled her eyes. “Replace the word lesser with superior and you might live to see tomorrow.”

“Got it!” I shouted, wildly relieved she corrected me. I’d never have come up with that. “I would like to be more appealing to the superior species.

Better?”

“Much!” she replied, gracing me with a smile and toning down the glare. “I have the answer to solve all of your issues!”

“Shite,” I mumbled.

Thankfully, my new mom ignored me.

“You will go on a mission to find the Sacred Cock! It will aid you in your quest not to be an asshat with the ladies and teach you some manners! Along the way, you’ll experience many trials. How you handle them will determine your fate. Just remember... the dildo of consequences rarely comes with lubrication.”

I was so fucking confused. “You want me to find an unlubed hallowed pecker?”

“I do,” she confirmed, as if speaking of a consecrated rod was a normal mother and son conversation. “Sometimes what you seek isn’t the prize, it’s the journey that’s the gift. If you’re successful in finding the Sacred Cock, you might even find your True Mate.”

I didn’t believe her. I wanted to with every fiber of my mannerless being, but if I hadn’t found *the one* after this long, she didn’t exist. Although... I did find one gorgeous blonde very intriguing. Conversation with her had been difficult. My penchant for trying to shove my tongue down her throat and hers for kneeing my nards into my esophagus didn’t make for a good time.

My newly adopted mother still had more to say. “When something is broken it must be fixed, so to speak. When the strong put it right it’s very nice. However, when the broken heal the broken it’s beautiful. Life changing. Keep that little nugget in mind, Rhys. Might come in handy.”

I scratched my head. There was entirely too much information being doled out by a crazy woman. “Am I the strong?”

She smiled at me. “No, my darling. You are quite broken... maybe just bent, but we shall see.” She paused for a moment then got back to it. “The Sacred Cock is a million years old. To find it, I’d suggest taking someone with you who is deadly, beautiful and has very little to lose. It would be helpful if the person had great knowledge of Immortal history—a historian of sorts.”

I tingled all over and felt a little squishy. It was alarming, unmanly and unfamiliar. I knew someone who embodied all the requirements. Getting her to come on a mission so I could find a holy Johnson would be tricky.

“A few others who are batshit nutty would be helpful on your quest as

well,” she added.

I had half a mind to ask Mother Nature if she wanted to come, but letting her know I thought she was batshit crazy was not a good idea. Even I knew that.

“Oh!” she said as she began to float away. “Keep this meeting between us and keep the Sacred Cock a secret until you find it. Trust me on that!”

Confused didn’t begin to cover my state of mind. More information would be helpful. I racked my brain to remember the magic word. Shite... was it Karen or Tube of You? I just wasn’t sure. There was too much to recall in the twenty-first century. “Umm... might there be any other information? You know, like where in the fuck I’m supposed to find the precious pecker?”

“What’s the magic word, sonny boy?” she demanded.

I stared at the flower-covered ground and prepared to be set on fire. “I can’t remember.”

The insane woman clearly took pity on me. “It’s please. And I shall give you one final hint, child. Toad Suck. Hooker. Belchertown. Assawoman.”

Blowing me a kiss, Mother Nature wiggled her fingers and sent me away.

The nonsense she’d just spouted was useless. I wasn’t sure I’d conquered etiquette, but it seemed that the key to being successful at etiquette was using the magic word. I enjoyed rules. They made sense. I would speak the magic word in all of my future conversations... multiple times. It was best to play it safe. Getting electrocuted was getting old.

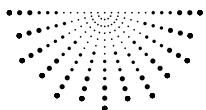
I had a mission. That, I understood. Granted, I’d never gone in search of a million-year-old hallowed wiener, but things had clearly changed.

New world.

New rules.

New me... hopefully.

JULIET



“GOOD PLEASE AFTERNOON EVERYONE PLEASE!” RHYS ANNOUNCED IN HIS outdoor voice as he entered my brother’s office in the Cressida House with Vinnie trailing behind him. “It is with great pleasure that I’m gracing everyone with my pleasing demeanor and presence. There will be no need to electrocute me since I have fucking conquered the etiquette bullshit. I’m still unsure what a Karen is and believe the Tube of You to be dangerous, but I’m a fabulous work in progress. So please enjoy yourselves. Please and... please.”

Scrunching my nose, I peeked over at my sister from my spot on the sumptuous brown leather couch. Astrid was trying not to laugh. She failed. I, on the other hand, just rolled my eyes and made an audible raspberry sound when Rhys seated himself next to his sidekick Vinnie on the far side of the room. I liked Vinnie, purple velvet robe and all. I did not like Rhys. If the idiot thought that saying please would erase his misogynistic ways, he was sorely mistaken. The Vamp brought out the absolute worst in me. In my quest not to be a violent murdering asshole, he wasn’t helping.

“If it would be enjoyable, I can add a few more pleases,” Rhys volunteered.

“Got it,” Astrid said, shaking her head. “No more pleases necessary.”

“As you please wish,” he said with a bow of respect.

I was surprised that the meeting included anyone other than Martha, Jane and me. I’d assumed it was a planning session with my sister so I could follow the batshit crazy orders of Mother Nature I’d gotten a few days ago. I wasn’t sure where to start and was hoping Astrid might have some ideas. The Sacred Clock could be my salvation.

Never assume... Although, the only ass in the room at the moment was Rhys.

Ignoring Rhys, I took a good look around. I'd spent many hours in the office with Ethan recently, but my focus had been on my sibling and begging his forgiveness, not my surroundings. He'd accepted my apologies, but couldn't bring himself to forgive me for the horrid things I'd done. That was fair. I would never be able to forgive myself. I didn't expect anyone to grant me absolution. The opportunity to say I was sorry was more than I ever thought I would get.

My brother's office was large and ornate—fitting for the Vampyre Prince of the North American Dominion. All of my brothers and sisters, except for me, were in charge of the Vampyres in the different territories of the world. Our father, who may or may not want to lay eyes on me ever again since I'd aided my mother in trying to end him, was the King. Many centuries ago, I'd been granted the dominion of Europe by my father. That hadn't worked out. I'd screwed it up the same way I'd destroyed everything in my life. Whatever. I didn't want to rule a bunch of bloodsuckers anyway. The most I could hope for was not being hunted for the rest of eternity.

Glancing around the majestic office, I wanted to leave. As spacious as it was, right now it felt like I was stuck in a tiny box.

The space was divided into two camps. Mine and the idiot's.

Rhys was quite smug, and Vinnie kept congratulating him on his improved manners. The dummy kept looking over at me. I studiously pretended to be fascinated with my manicure. If I gave him attention, there was a good chance he'd grab my ass... again. That would end in bloodshed and I was doing my best to avoid maiming people.

Was I physically attracted to Rhys? Yes.

Did his scent make me slightly dizzy? Unfortunately, it did.

Did I want to get into a tryst with a misogynistic jackass? No.

I had a Sacred Clock to find and a whole lot of people to beg forgiveness from. Banging an idiot wasn't on the agenda for the next few centuries, or ever. Although... Mother Nature had insisted I needed an unhinged and violent warrior to reach my goal of finding the clock. The obnoxious Vampyre fit the bill perfectly.

Shit.

Pretending Rhys was invisible and figuring out why my sister had called a meeting with everyone was the plan. I'd deal with the particulars soon

enough. Surely there were others who were over a thousand years old, outstanding at warfare and somewhat psychotic. As for the rest of my posse, I planned on taking Martha and Jane on the search. They'd been thrilled to be asked and were currently sitting to my left on an antique love seat. The old gals insisted they had a surprise for me. I was terrified. Hopefully, it wasn't black socks and sandals or booty shorts. That would be a hard no.

I knew everyone in the room except for one scary and very odd-looking Demon who stood on my side of the office next to Martha and Jane. I wasn't sure if the man was a full Demon. There was some other species I couldn't quite pinpoint. I just knew I didn't want to get on his bad side. His eyes were a little too close together and he seemed to define batshit nuts.

The Immortal wore an ill-fitted teal tracksuit, paired with sandals and an orange beret. It wasn't a good look. He smacked on gum and carried a baseball bat that wasn't for show. It had dried blood on it.

Why he was here? I had no clue. No one else in the room appeared uncomfortable with his presence. Fine. I'd just avoid eye contact. Getting beaned with a bat didn't sit well with me.

"Okay," Astrid said, rubbing her hands together with glee. "I've chatted with Juliet's therapist and Rhys' etiquette instructor." She paused and giggled. I had no idea why. "I believe we can kill two birds with one stone."

Vinnie raised his hand. "My dearest Astrid, I am not in favor of killing birds."

Astrid bit down on her lips. I tried not to laugh. Vinnie was the strangest and sweetest little Vampyre I'd ever come across. While I'd seen him go all badass in battle, he wasn't a killer of innocents. He was also very literal.

"Me neither," the baseball bat man added, slapping his wooden weapon on his hand. "Birdies are cute and harmless creatures. Unless you're dealing with a fucking cassowary." He shook his head and chuckled. "Worst are the double-wattled sons of bitches—bright blue heads, red wattles and black feathers. Don't ever fucking crouch or lay down around one of those feathered bastards. You're a goner if you do—human or Immortal." He eyed his rapt and confused audience. "Now, here's what you really don't wanna do... DO NOT get drunk and think it's a fine plan to sneak up on a sleeping cassowary and shave its ass. Shit won't end well. Take my word on that. Can't forget those ugly fucks are dinosaurs. You wouldn't dick around with a velociraptor. Would ya?"

He scanned the open-mouthed group, clearly waiting for an answer to his

absurd question. We all shook our heads. He was already disturbed. Provoking him could end in bloodshed... or a shaved ass.

“Are you done, Lizard?” Astrid inquired.

“I am not,” he replied.

“Didn’t think so,” she muttered, pressing her temples. “Is there a reason that you’re here?”

Lizard grinned and motioned to Martha and Jane, who were humping the very expensive antique love seat with gusto. “Have to satisfy my women,” he replied, flexing his muscles.

Martha and Jane humped the love seat to death. It cracked and caved in. They laughed like loons. Lizard joined his gal pals.

If I could have puked in my mouth I would have. Vamps weren’t afforded that luxury.

Astrid to the rescue. She wiggled her fingers and zapped Martha and Jane. The sound was impressive. The ensuing fire even more so. It made the old freaks and Lizard laugh harder. I seriously reconsidered taking them on the mission. While it was nice to have friends in an academic way, in reality, it was disturbing.

“If you fornicate with any more furniture, I’ll zap you bald and twist your boney butts into pretzels that will take you a decade to undo,” Astrid threatened. “If that doesn’t work, I’ll be forced to remove appendages until you can control your nasty asses.”

Rhys raised his hand. Astrid nodded at him. The massive and stupidly handsome Vamp stood and cleared his throat. I winced preemptively. It was bound to go wrong.

I was so right.

“Hooters McBiggies, your threat of violence is outstanding—although I think you should have added disembowelment and skin peeling to the list. However, I do believe there’s a better way to handle the situation,” Rhys, who clearly had a death wish, shared.

Astrid’s eyes grew huge. I was floored that he’d just called her Hooters McBiggies. She was too. Idiot was far too mild of a description for the man.

Unfortunately, Rhys wasn’t done. He had no clue how to read a room. To be fair, he’d been in a magical coma for a thousand years...

“Using words is far better than resorting to violence, Melons LaJugsnipples,” he imparted to a furiously glowing Astrid. “I have learned from my incredibly frightening and violent etiquette instructor that saying

something ridiculous and inane—like, ‘You have hurt my feelings.’ Or, ‘Please don’t hurt my feelings’—is better than flogging someone with their detached arms and legs. I have yet to try this bullshit, but I thought I would offer up my newly found prowess with etiquette. In closing, I would simply like to add please try out the word crap so I can see how that ends. Please and please, please.”

He seated himself and patted his own back right before Astrid electrocuted the living daylights out of him. I giggled at his shocked expression.

“What was wrong with that?” he shouted as he smacked out the flames. “I used my words. I thought about it.”

“Don’t think,” Astrid shot back. “It’s dangerous.”

Rhys nodded. “Noted.”

My sister pressed the bridge of her nose and groaned. “Can we get back to business?”

“Not yet,” Lizard said, walking over to me and bowing. “I have some things I’d like to say.”

I was no one to be bowed to. Technically, I was the daughter of a king, but I was no princess. I was an abomination.

Lizard stood and motioned to Martha and Jane. They waddled right on over. Their electrical punishment from Astrid had left the old biddies with no eyebrows and even less hair on their already sparsely haired heads. With the singed sequined boob tubes and fried booty shorts, they were a hot mess.

“Welp,” Jane said, reaching into the back of her spandex shorts and pulling out a crumpled piece of paper. “Here’s the surprise!”

I squinted at her. If she expected me to take the paper she’d just pulled out of her crack, she needed to think again.

I decided to use my words. Maybe Rhys was onto something... Dismembering my only friends was bad. “Is there a reason you want to give me ass paper?”

Jane punched Martha in the head. “I told ya you shouldn’t have stored them papers near your bunghole, asshat! If you’d put ’em down my cleavage like I told ya to, they wouldn’t stink.”

“My ass don’t work no more now that I’m dead—smells like roses,” Martha pointed out, returning the punch with a left jab. “Plus, you ain’t got no cleavage. Them hooters look like torpedoes.”

“Oh yeah?” Jane shouted with a wide grin. “Doc told me you went in for

a lump in your titty. He told you not to worry about it. It was just your dang kneecap!"

Martha cackled as she kicked Jane's feet out from underneath her. "What do you have between your saggy knobs that no one else has?"

"Don't know," Jane retorted with glee as she pulled Martha to the ground and headbutted her.

"A belly button," Martha bellowed, putting Jane into a headlock.

"Maybe so, sphincter face," Jane yelled, trapped in Martha's armpit. "But your skanky jugs told me a secret the other day."

Martha was shocked. "My melons don't fuckin' talk."

"Wrong, ass-munch!" Jane bellowed as she twisted out of the headlock and tackled her undead buddy. "They told me they need some support, 'cause everyone thinks they're nuts!"

Both women screamed with laughter and rolled around on the floor. Lizard looked on with great fondness and love. It was crazy.

Rhys applauded. "I find it heartening to observe words and violence coupled together without anyone dying! It was an excellent display. I feel that if you at some point say something about hurt feelings and liberally sprinkle in the word 'please,' you would pass the etiquette test with flying colors!"

"Oh my God," Astrid said, sitting down behind Ethan's desk and letting her head hit the mahogany wood with a thud. "I don't get paid enough for this shit."

I agreed with my sister and strangely I agreed with Rhys. It was good to see that violence didn't have to end in a bloody death or dismemberment. Martha and Jane were friends who let out steam by whaling on each other. I made a mental note to ask them if I could participate in the non-deadly smackdowns, giving them full permission to decapitate me if I got out of hand.

"Welp," Lizard announced, taking his gum out of his mouth and sticking the chewed-up wad to the end of his bat. "I'm gonna need to skedaddle back to Hell in a few, so I'd like to offer up my pappyship to Juliet."

Rhys growled like an animal and jumped to his feet. He was glowing with fury. "No!" he shouted at Lizard. "While I will freely admit, I have no fucking idea what a pappyship is, I refuse to allow this. If Juliet wants a ship, I will get her a ship. Granted, I don't have money at the moment, but I'm excellent at purloining." He paused, glanced over at Vinnie and lowered his voice. "Can I borrow money from you for a pappyship?"

Vinnie's mouth was wide open and he mutely nodded.

"Done!" Rhys announced with obnoxious satisfaction. "I will have my men go on the Book of Faces to determine what a pappyship is. Once the intel is gathered, I will steal it for Juliet."

"I thought you were going to borrow money from Vinnie," Astrid pointed out with an amused expression.

"I see nothing funny about this," Rhys hissed. "I was under the impression that Lizard was in a fornicative relationship with Martha and Jane. He will not be giving Juliet a pappyship. Period. I forbid it."

First off, fornicative wasn't a word. Secondly, Rhys didn't own me. Thirdly, I had no clue what a pappyship was, but was pretty darn sure I didn't want one. Not from Lizard and definitely not from Rhys.

"Cakehole," I ground out at Rhys. "Shut it or I'll shut it for you. And trust me, it will not be pleasant."

The occupants of the room watched the showdown with great interest and what I thought might be amusement. I wasn't amused.

"I see no cake with a hole," he told me, still fuming. Rhys, still wildly unable to read a room, kept going. "If it would stop you from kneeing my balls into my throat, I will consult the Tube of You and possibly a Karen to snatch you a cake with a hole."

I didn't have a response for that. He was a loose idiot-cannon. Unfortunately, he took my silence as a prod to keep spewing nonsense.

"So, as I was saying, if Lizard insists on pilfering a pappyship for Juliet, I shall be forced to shove his wooden stick up his ass. What I would *like* to do, which I *won't* because the etiquette teacher would be pissed, is camouflage myself and attack when the offender is least suspecting. I'd then immediately remove his head followed by the ripping out of his innards. For good measure, I'd shove the entrails into the mouth of the decapitated bastard. After that's complete, I'd move onto the removal of appendages, which would most definitely be used to flog him. Peeling his skin off would show I meant business."

"Hell to the no," I snapped. "Sit your arrogant and stupid ass down right now. You will not be thieving a pappyship or getting into a fight with Lizard. If I want a pappyship, whatever the hell it is, I can loot my own. I don't need an idiot blowhard Vamp stealing a ship for me. I don't even like the water, jackhole."

"You tell him, Juliet," Martha said with an enormous grin.

Lizard threw his head back and laughed so hard I thought the man might choke to death. That was impossible since he was Immortal. Jane and Martha joined him. Even Astrid and Vinnie were smiling.

I didn't get the joke. Rhys didn't either. The Vampyre looked like he was about to lose it. That wouldn't end well. Lizard was a badass. It was obvious. However, Rhys was a psychotic warrior. I wasn't sure how that would end and I didn't want to find out.

I walked over to Rhys and put my hand on his shoulder. It calmed him. And if I was honest, which was overrated, it calmed me as well. I didn't want to dissect that, so I didn't.

Glaring at a still-grinning Lizard, I raised a brow. "Lizard, could you please define pappyship?"

"Please is good," Rhys whispered in my ear. "Your etiquette is outstanding. Much better than mine."

I turned and squinted at him. "It would be awesome if you didn't speak."

"Roger that," he replied.

"Well, now," Lizard said with a chuckle. "That paper that my beloved Jane pulled out of her sexy ass is your adoption letter, signed and sealed by Satan himself. And seeing as how I'm the mate of the hot-as-fuck Martha and Jane, that makes me your pappy. Pappyship is simply a formal way to say it."

"Pretty sure pappyship isn't actually a word," Astrid pointed out.

"Wait," Rhys said in confusion. "It's not an actual ship?"

"Quiet," I told him. It was slightly concerning that the Devil had signed the papers, but Lizard was a Demon.

"Not a ship and might not be a real word," Lizard conceded. "But I thought it sounded real nice." The horribly dressed Demon winked at me. "I'd be damned honored to have you as my daughter, Juliet."

A rush of something unfamiliar came over me and I wanted to cry. Being wanted as a daughter was foreign to me. I wasn't sure what to say or do, but there was no way I deserved it. Nice things were not for people like me.

"I'm a terrible person," I whispered.

"So am I," Lizard said with a grin.

I doubted that. Astrid wouldn't allow a terrible person in her home. Well, except for me. And I could tell she was fond of the Demon.

"Not just terrible," I corrected myself. "I'm an abomination."

The crazy man just grinned. "Been called worse."

"People might come after you because they despise me," I said, trying to

find something that would make him get it.

He smacked his bat on his hand. “Let ‘em try.”

I shook my head. He didn’t understand. “I... umm... kind of have a father,” I choked out, realizing how true and sad the statement was. “He doesn’t want to see me because of all the pain and suffering I’ve caused, but he’s technically still my father.”

“A daddy is a daddy and love is love,” Lizard stated. “A daddy loves his child even when it might not make sense.”

I didn’t say anything. There was nothing to say. Lizard was delusional.

“How ‘bout this,” he suggested. “I’ll be your step-pappy. That way you get two for the price of one. I ain’t gonna take no for an answer, little gal.”

My bloody tears fell and I knew I was ruining my pretty dress. I couldn’t help it. I didn’t understand why they were being so kind to me. Having Martha, Jane and Lizard as adoptive moms and a step-pappy was appallingly beautiful. They were rude, crude and socially unacceptable. I didn’t care. But bad people didn’t deserve good things.

Or maybe, they did. If I was going to truly change, having a small screwed-up chosen family might be healing. I could start over with people who wanted me even with knowing my past.

Slowly, I nodded and swiped at my tears.

“I’m gonna say that’s a fuck yes!” Martha shouted.

Jane slapped Martha on the back and sent her flying. “Yeppers! We got us a little girl and didn’t even have to blow her out of our cooters. Win-win.”

“You got that right, mother humper! I like my va-jay-jay nice and tight,” Martha added getting back to her feet and smacking Jane up the side of her head.

“TMI,” Astrid warned. “Talking about your no-no is a no-no.”

“Chesticals LeHooterknockers,” Jane said with a naughty grin. “I’m guessin’ you can call me Mammy now, being that you and Juliet are sisters. Jane too.”

“Not happening,” Astrid shot back. “And if you bring it up again, I’ll remove your tongue and make you wear a turtleneck, long pants and orthopedic shoes for a century.”

“That’s fuckin’ uncalled for,” Jane mumbled. “Depriving the world of my cleavage is a sin.”

“Nice threat,” Rhys congratulated my sister. “I would have started with, ‘You hurt my feelings’ and then you should have said, ‘I’ll rip out your

tongue with my bare hands and embed it in your left nostril.’ Of course, just to be safe, I’d add a please at the tail end.”

I rolled my eyes. “What did I tell you about speaking?”

He was perplexed for a brief moment. “Oh! You said it would be awesome if I didn’t.”

“Right. Let’s stick to that… please.”

The nutjob saluted me then looked at Vinnie to check in. Vinnie smiled and patted the dummy on the back.

“I gotta get back to Hell,” Lizard said, giving me a sweet hug. He pulled the chewing gum off the end of his bat and put it back into his mouth. He held the wooden weapon out to me. “I’d be real honored if you’d take my bat and use it for protection.”

I was moved—truly moved, but I really didn’t want a bloody piece of wood with gum residue even if it was a gift from my new step-pappy. “I can’t take it,” I told him. “But just so you don’t worry, I know how to fight.”

“She does,” Astrid added with only a tiny wince.

“Yep, I know that,” Lizard said, still offering me the bat. “You see that blood on it?”

I wasn’t sure where this was going, but nodded.

“It’s mine,” he stated. “Whacked my own head before I got here so it would have a piece of me on it. There was a little bit of skull on the end, but it fell off.”

“Okay, gross, but… wow,” I said.

“You betcha,” he said with a grin. “My fucking head still hurts, but it was worth it. You take this with you on your journey. I want you to know that I’ll always be with you. Ain’t never gonna give up on you no matter what.”

My tears had a mind of their own. I was a bloody mess. Literally. “Thank you, umm… Pappy,” I whispered as I took the bat with a piece of the man who called me daughter. “I’ll take very good care of it.”

Martha and Jane waddled over and we had our first dysfunctional family group hug. It was a little off since both of the gals were grabbing Lizard’s ass, but it was the thought that counted.

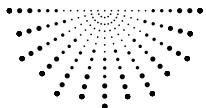
“I’m out of here,” Lizard announced. “Kick ass, daughter of mine.”

I smiled at the Demon and waved as he disappeared in a blast of sparkling black mist.

Slowly turning back to my sister, who had a shit-eating grin on her pretty face, I shrugged and matched her grin. “Shall we get back to business?”

“Yep. Time is ticking,” she replied.
It was, and I needed the damned clock.

R H Y S



“TITY WHOPPERBAZOONGAS,” JANE GRUNTED, TUCKING THE ADOPTION papers back into her frighteningly short and stretchy pants. “I’m kinda confused. Are we actually here for a reason?”

“Yep, Baldy TorpedoHooters,” Astrid replied dryly. “We are.”

Martha and Jane cackled. Vinnie chuckled. If I had breath to hold—which I didn’t because I was technically dead—I would have held it in anticipation of Jane getting electrocuted.

She didn’t. It was shocking. Maybe my nicknames for Astrid weren’t creative enough. I’d do better in the future.

“We’re here because I have to plan something and want advice from my sister,” Juliet said, giving me side-eye. “What I don’t understand is why Rhys and Vinnie are here.”

Hearing my name on her lips was glorious. Juliet usually called me something combined with the word ass. I puffed out my chest. I almost batted my eyelashes at her, but remembered how shitty that had gone with Mother Nature. Today was going well. I’d only been electrocuted once.

“There’s a reason,” Astrid said cryptically. “Trust me.”

Juliet didn’t look pleased. Her kissable lips turned down in a frown. I’d kissed those lips and had almost ended up a soprano. My prowess with the ladies was not good. My bedding ability had never been complained about, but I wasn’t adept at getting the ladies to the boudoir. My wooing skills were lacking. I needed to find the Blessed Pecker immediately.

Even though I knew my chances with Juliet were slim, I stared at her with great curiosity. The blonde beauty had a tragic story. I’d felt a little squishy and strange when she’d shed tears and was tempted to remove my pants to

dry her lovely eyes. I didn't. I'd been maimed enough this week.

If I wanted to learn her past secrets, I needed to sniff her. I'd tried, but had come up with nothing yet. Trying harder was the plan. Understanding why she thought she was an abomination was my new goal, along with finding the unlubed Revered Rod. Of course, sniffing people was most likely bad etiquette. Plus, I was sure the delightfully violent Vampyre would do violence against my balls.

I liked my nuts and wanted to keep them. I'd lost many an appendage over the twelve hundred years I'd been undead, but I'd never been castrated. I preferred to keep it that way.

"Mmkay," Astrid said, checking her watch. "I've got about fifteen minutes before I have to lock down all the electronics in the compound."

"Oh dear," Vinnie said with a giggle. "Satan's coming for a visit?"

"That sexy-assed mother humper has sticky fingers," Jane commented with a nod of approval and a laugh.

"He is and he does," Astrid said with a roll of her eyes. "He won't be leaving with any office supplies, laptops or TV remotes this time."

"Good luck with that, friend," Vinnie said, busting out an even more robust giggle.

The fact that they found a visit from the Devil amusing meant they were all crazier than I'd initially believed. Vinnie's giggle wasn't manly at all, but I observed how everyone looked upon him with great fondness and admiration. Maybe, just maybe... if I added an unmanly giggle the next time I spoke, I might become as popular as my only friend. The thought made my testicles shrivel, but I was doing my damnedest to get with the times and fit in. It was fucking difficult.

Apparently, in the twenty-first century, Vamps were celebrated for being weenies. Whatever. It was possible if I found the Sacred Cock, I might become a weenie too. I wondered if Juliet liked weenies... Dammit, I wasn't a weenie no matter how hard I tried. Plus, the woman didn't fancy me. Her knee in my nards had made that abundantly clear.

However, I needed Juliet to aid me on my mission since she was a historian. Would pretending to be a weenie help my cause?

Shite. The old days were so much less complicated.

"Okay, as I was saying earlier in a *metaphorical* way, I think we can kill two birds with one stone—no actual birds will be killed," Astrid continued, glancing over at Vinnie, who gave her what I'd come to recognize as the

thumbs of up. “Juliet has a mission and so does Rhys. From what I’ve been told, my sister needs a batshit crazy, violent warrior over a thousand years old to aid her, and Rhys needs an Immortal Historian to help him. So... you guys will go on the missions together and help each other out.”

While I enjoyed being called violent, I wasn’t delighted with the batshit crazy part. It was bad enough that I was seriously considering becoming a weenie. My men would shite their pants if they knew—especially Sven.

“Nope. No way,” Juliet said firmly, holding up her hand. “I’m sure there are plenty of batshit-crazy warriors who are over a thousand years old.”

Astrid shrugged. “Not sure they come close to being as batshit crazy as Rhys.”

Juliet ran her fingers through her hair in frustration. “While you make a fine point, I’m trying to cut down on maiming people. If I take the batshit-crazy jackass with me, I can’t promise that he won’t lose most of his body parts.”

Astrid nodded. “I hear what you’re saying,” she conceded. “But time is of the essence for both of you. I’d suggest you take the most readily available batshit-crazy warrior.”

I leaned over and whispered in Vinnie’s ear. “I’m thinking it would be poor etiquette if I electrocuted them. Correct?”

“Correct,” he whispered back. “Try using your words, friend.”

Manners were ridiculous. “Please excuse me, please and please.” I added a thumbs of up to come across as a pleasant gent. “Is it really fucking necessary to keep repeating batshit crazy when referring to me?”

“Yes,” they answered in unison.

I swallowed my man card, sat on my sparking hands and used the bullshit advice Mother Nature had imparted. “Tatas DuMammaryboobs, you and Juliet have hurt my feelings that I’ve only recently discovered I have. I’m not a hundred percent sure they’re actually feelings, but they’re something unfamiliar and annoying.”

The admission was killing me and I was certain my balls had retracted into my stomach, never to show themselves again. However, I had everyone’s attention and no one had electrocuted me... yet.

“That’s not nice, according to my violent and insane etiquette teacher. Normally I would bludgeon someone who insulted me, but I’ve been told with multiple fucking fireballs that doesn’t work nowadays. My instructor might be tempted to grease me up and force me to concuss myself while

using a metal pole if I fuck up.” They were extremely impressed with my words if their open-mouthed expressions were anything to go by. I added a quick giggle that sounded more like a diseased burp and soldiered on.

“Are you okay? Did you just choke?” Juliet asked, concerned.

“No, I didn’t choke,” I said, offended. “I giggled.”

“I’m sorry, you what?” she asked, trying not to smile.

I wasn’t sure, but I thought she might be amused. Giggling had worked! I giggled again. It wasn’t as good as Vinnie’s—it sounded more like a dying bird—but I was new to the giggling business.

Juliet laughed. Her emerald-green eyes sparkled and I felt magnificent. Being a weenie had its benefits.

I giggled one more time for good measure—it was a little better and didn’t resemble a dying animal. I took a quick bow then finished using my words. “Therefore, to keep me from perishing from my newly realized hurt feelings, Juliet must accompany me on my mission as my historian.”

“Wow,” Astrid said. “That was... well, it was...”

“Wonderful, since no one was dismembered or tortured,” Vinnie said, giving me a pat on the back.

“That’s one way to put it,” Astrid said. She walked over to Juliet and stood in front of her. “Can you tell me what your mission is?”

She shook her head. “Not exactly, but I’m in search of something sacred.”

“I too am in search of something sacred,” I announced. Shite. If we were in search of the same thing that would be a problem. The dry Spiritual Schlong was mine. I needed it to find my True Mate.

Juliet’s eyes narrowed to slits. “What are you in search of?”

“I’m not allowed to tell,” I shot back. “What are you in search of?”

“It’s a secret,” she snapped.

The crazy female was glowing. I was about to get electrocuted.

“Rein it in,” Astrid warned her sister.

Juliet blanched and stopped glowing. I didn’t like that. I’d much prefer being electrocuted to seeing her sad. What in the hell was happening to me? Was I becoming a weenie? I was both delighted and appalled. However, I had a mission to complete.

I raised my hand as I’d seen Vinnie do.

“Yes?” Astrid said.

“I feel, please, that since I am the man—meaning I’m far superior—my mission should please come first. Please. After I’ve retrieved the sacred...

thing, I shall aid Juliet even though she is only a woman,” I stated and then added an outstanding giggle for insurance.

I was electrocuted by everyone in the room.

“What the fuck?” I bellowed as I stopped, dropped and rolled the flames out. “I said please and I giggled like a damned idiot.”

“Dude,” Astrid snapped. “Not the way it works. Men and women are equal. Period. The sooner you figure that out, the less you’ll get set on fire.”

I had no clue what I’d said wrong. My guess was the superior part. Leaving that out in the future would be safer.

“Do either of you know where you need to go?” Astrid inquired.

“No,” Juliet said.

“Nor do I,” I answered, slapping out the last of the fire. “I was given some bullshit clues.”

“Like?” Astrid pressed. “Nothing Mother Nature says is bullshit. It’s often confusing, but it always means something.”

“Kind of like word spaghetti?” Vinnie asked.

“Exactly like word spaghetti,” Astrid said with a grin. “Mother Nature’s a little nutty, but she’s a good noodle.”

“Oh my god,” I shouted. “You know Mother Nature? My insane and mentally unsound etiquette instructor?”

“She’s my grandmother,” Astrid replied.

“I’m so sorry,” I told her with great sincerity.

She threw her head back and laughed. I didn’t get the joke. It was bad enough that Mother Nature wanted to be my adopted mother. To truly be related to her was terrifying.

“Hang on a second,” Juliet snapped, glaring at me. “Mother Nature is my therapist.”

“Impossible,” I said, not having any clue what the fuck a therapist was. “The fireball-throwing fiend is an etiquette teacher.”

“Is not,” Juliet insisted.

“Is,” I shot back. “And I have the scars to prove it.”

Juliet raised her hands to shock me to Hell and back. I raised mine too. One good electrocution deserved another.

“Enough,” Astrid ground out before the entire Cressida House went up in smoke. “Mother Nature isn’t a therapist or an etiquette instructor. She’s a nosy busybody who wants to be in the middle of every shitshow she can find. That being said, she gives sound advice and, other than her penchant for pole

dancing, she has impeachable manners.”

“So we were duped?” I demanded.

“Yes and no,” Astrid explained with her fingers sparking dangerously. “Did you learn any manners?”

I shrugged. Being hoodwinked was insulting, but getting set on fire sucked. “Maybe,” I conceded.

“And you, Juliet,” Astrid went on. “Did the crazy old woman have any solid advice?”

Juliet nodded.

“Fine,” Astrid announced. “I’ve learned that very little in the Immortal world happens without reason. The fact that she’s guiding both of you means something.”

“What in tarnation does it mean, Globes LeBouncyMelons?” Martha asked, scratching her mostly bald head.

“While that’s a good question, the delivery sucked ass,” Astrid told her. She turned and faced Juliet and me. “Tell me some of the clues and we can try to figure it out.”

Juliet sank lower into the brown sofa. She looked small and melancholy. It made my non-beating heart hurt. I was tempted to throw her over my shoulder and whisk her away from this mess. Clearly, I was losing my marbles. The giggling might have scrambled my brain and self-preservation instincts. I made a mental note to go with the thumbs up instead of the embarrassing giggles.

Juliet fidgeted with her hair and then dug her fingernails into her palms. When the blood from her hands ran down her wrists, I felt as if I’d been struck.

She spoke softly. “Mother Nature said when something is broken it must be fixed. And that it’s beautiful when the broken fix the broken... life-changing.”

I narrowed my eyes and wondered if Juliet could read minds. Was she messing with me? “Impossible. The petrifying woman said that to me.”

“Not impossible,” Astrid corrected me. “It apparently applies to both of you.”

While I enjoyed having something in common with Juliet, it was insulting that I was considered broken. Juliet was most definitely not broken. She was damned near perfect except for her violent tendencies in regard to my nards.

“More,” Astrid insisted.

Juliet obliged. "She said the hints will come from my heart. However, since Vampyres don't have hearts, I'm rejecting that."

"Oh my dear," Vinnie cried out, hopping up, sprinting across the room and giving her a hug. "We all have hearts even if they don't beat."

Juliet shook her head. "I don't."

"You do," Astrid shot back. "If I didn't believe that, you wouldn't be sitting here right now."

I was insanely jealous that Vinnie didn't get dismembered by Juliet. If I'd hugged her, I'd be missing my arms. "Juliet's advice was much less invasive than mine," I huffed. "I was told that the dildo of consequences rarely comes with lubrication."

The occupants in the room laughed. Hard. I didn't think it was funny. I'd commanded Sven to google a dildo on the square metal Tube of You contraption after my session and was horrified with the result. The vibrating false pecker was appalling and confusing. Did male Immortals of the twenty-first century not have man rods anymore?

"You people are ill in the head," I muttered. However, Juliet's smile made me feel squishy. While I didn't find a counterfeit penis humorous, she did. I made a mental note to make more rod jokes. I'd have Sven gather more cock quips from the metal machine.

Juliet, with a large grin on her face, continued. "Mother Nature also said that once one embraces their heinous shittyness, no one can use it against you."

"Solid advice," I said, wondering why she got the good stuff and I was warned about a rubber rod.

"I agree," she said. "My therapist—who isn't a therapist at all—also added that there's always more to the picture than meets the eye. I need to remember that or it will bite me in the ass."

"Literally?" I inquired.

Juliet's mouth fell open. "Oh my God, I asked the same question. And the answer is yes."

That wasn't good news. I was the only one allowed to bite her ass. Although, if I tried, she'd most likely kick my fangs up into my eye sockets. Pushing away the thought of sinking my fangs into her delectable bottom, I focused on the now. It was time to figure out the damned clues. I went with the most bizarre of them all. "Toad Suck. Hooker. Belchertown. Assawoman." I was a bit concerned that putting the word *ass* with the word

woman together was going to end in me going up in an inferno, but the intel was the intel.

Astrid pressed her temples. “What in the Hell does that mean?”

“I don’t know,” Juliet said. “But Mother Nature said the very same words to me.”

Vinnie levitated in excitement and squealed. It was wildly unmanly, but I took note. Shrieking like that would probably make my balls fall off, but Vinnie was loved by all.

I wanted to be loved by all... or at least a few people... truthfully only one.

“I know what that means, friends!” Vinnie announced, pumping his little fists over his head in victory.

“Spit it out, my anemic comrade,” I insisted.

“They’re the names of cities in the United States,” Vinnie said, wringing his hands in delight.

“Where is the United States and how long will it take us to get there?” I shouted. It irked me not knowing the answers to riddles, but the entire world was new to me. I was sure the Tube of You or the Book of Faces could tell me, but there wasn’t time to command Sven to investigate.

“We’re in the United States, Hot Pants McBitablebutt,” Martha informed me.

I did not want her fangs in my ass, but I was grateful for the information.

“That’s correct,” Vinnie assured me. “The United States is the country we’re in and it’s divided into territories called states. The states are divided into cities.”

“Keep talking,” I ordered my man.

“Toad Suck is in the state of Arkansas. Hooker is in the state of Oklahoma. Belchertown is in the state of Massachusetts and Assawoman is in the state of Maryland! I have lived in all of these places!”

“Seriously?” Juliet asked, squinting at the tiny Vamp.

“Oh yes,” he said with a giggle. “It’s a hobby of mine to live in terribly named cities. I own Airbnbs in all of them.”

“Of course, you do,” Astrid said with a laugh. “I believe you now have the itinerary for the mission. I’d suggest hitting the cities in the order that Mother Nature reeled them off.”

I was incredibly lost, but the others seemed excited. It was frustrating to feel stupid. “I would like to know what the fuck an Airbnb is.”

“It’s a vacation rental,” Vinnie explained.

“A vacation rental?” I asked.

Oh dear,” he said with a kind smile. “This must be confusing, friend. You could also call it a retreat that one can go to.”

I shook my head. Vinnie had lost his little mind. “If you retreat, you go away, not toward something.”

“The motherfucker is literal,” Jane pointed out. “An Airbnb is a bullshit house that people pay to stay at. There are fees up the asshole and you have to clean up your mess, take out the dang trash and make your fuckin’ bed. Sucks.”

“The old cooter is right,” Martha agreed. “Where can you find the lowest priced Airbnb for your vacation?”

“I know the answer, dingleberry!” Jane shouted. “Bed Bugs and Beyond.”

Astrid and Vinnie chuckled. Juliet looked as confused as I did. It was comforting not to be the only one in the dark.

Vinnie bounced on his toes. “Oh, I have one! Where can ghosts find vacation rentals?”

“Don’t know, shithead,” Martha said with a wide grin.

“Scare bnb!” Vinnie shrieked.

“Good one, tiny dude,” Jane said, slapping him on the back and sending him flying. “If you want, you can do a standup comedy set as our warmup act when we hit the road with our rock concerts.”

Vinnie looked horrified and like he might pass out. He quickly covered his sour expression with a kind smile as he got up off the ground. “Thank you, but I’m busy.”

“You don’t even know the fuckin’ dates,” Martha pointed out, narrowing her eyes at my friend.

I didn’t like that.

I had no clue what a standup or a rock concert was, but my pale man wanted none of it. I would save him. He’d been a loyal comrade. One never leaves a mate on the battlefield to defend himself.

“Vinnie can’t go to your concert of rocks. It sounds far too dangerous for someone his size,” I announced, using my warrior voice. “He’s unable to stand up for long periods of time due to his tiny stature and see-through skin.” That was absurd since I’d witnessed the man go apeshit in battle, but I’d found that talking at full volume made people believe you even if the information you spewed was bullshit.

And now for the kicker... I knew that a Karen was a bad and very scary thing. I didn't know what it was, but I decided to use it as a weapon.

Everyone seemed appalled by it. "If you persist, I shall unleash a hoard of gobshite Karens and bludgeon you with them on the Tube of You. Under normal circumstances, I would have you do the greased pole torture, but one of my visions informed me that you take great pleasure in concussing yourselves. So, we shall go with the vicious and deadly gobshite Karens. Plus, Vinnie will be busy learning how to be less of a weenie and I will be teaching him because he's my best friend."

"Oh my Hell," Astrid choked out in hysterics.

Martha and Jane fell to the floor and rolled around laughing their fool heads off. Vinnie was smiling from ear to ear and gave me a thumbs up. Juliet groaned and let her head fall to her hands. Her body shook. I wasn't sure if she was laughing or upset that I'd talked of the dread Karens.

I'd tell her privately that I would protect her from the gobshite Karens. Right now, there were more plans to be made. "Vinnie, will we be able to reside at your bug-infested abodes?"

"Yes," he replied with a giggle. "They're not bug infested, though." He checked his tiny metal contraption that I was told had replaced pigeons. "All are vacant except one. But not to worry. Dear friends of mine are there who might be able to aid us."

"Excellent work, my man," I said as I began to pace. "The plan as it stands is to go to Toad Suck, Hooker, Belchertown and Assawoman, in that order."

"And then what?" Jane asked.

"I have no fucking idea," I admitted.

"We'll pull it out of our asses," Juliet suggested.

"Always works for me," Astrid commented.

"Cantaloupe LaJiggleJoggers," I said in my outdoor voice. Shite was getting serious. "What did you mean when you said time was of the essence? The deranged red-haired shrew didn't give a specific time frame. That might be because she's a certifiable and insane knobcheese-cockwomble."

"Did someone call?" Mother Nature asked as she appeared in a blast of peach and golden mist.

I screamed.

It was not manly.

Not only did I scream, I dove behind the couch and pulled Juliet to safety

with me. She landed on top of me and my little Rhys—who wasn't little at all. He was very happy to see her.

"Nope," she hissed, rolling off of me and punching me in the head.

"Don't go out there," I whispered frantically. "The woman is dangerous."

"Umm... she already saw us," Juliet pointed out.

She made a fine observation. Shite.

"Fine," I whispered. "Stay behind me in case the nutjob throws a fireball. They fucking hurt."

Juliet's mouth formed a perfect O. I wasn't sure if I was about to get electrocuted or thanked. Didn't matter. As long as she didn't get set aflame, I was good.

"Sonny boy," Mother Nature called out. "Is that any way to greet your mommy?"

"His mommy?" Astrid asked with a burst of laughter.

"Yes," the crazy woman purred. "I'm adopting him. He reminds me of Satan, but sweeter."

"I am *not* sweet," I shouted as I got to my feet. "I'm a fucking badass warrior."

"Aren't we all?" Mother Nature commented.

The woman was glowing. It wasn't a good sign.

"I might have please spoken some untruths... please," I said, wanting to avoid a fireball at all costs.

Mother Nature raised her brow and crossed her arms over her chest. It was terrifying.

"What I meant to say was... the delightfully dandy red-haired stunner didn't give a specific time frame. That might be because she is a consummate and inspiring purveyor of word spaghetti."

She grinned. "You are so full of shit your eyes are brown."

"Thank you," I replied with a bow.

"Wasn't a compliment," she said. "However, I'm here because I left out a few pertinent details."

"Such as?" Juliet inquired.

Mother Nature observed Juliet standing next to me too long for my comfort. I quickly shoved Juliet behind me to protect her, only to receive a knee in my ass and a zap on my bum that would definitely leave a mark.

"Don't ever shove me behind you, jackass," she snapped after she was done maiming me.

“As you wish,” I huffed. “But I would like to point out that you are a woman.”

It wasn’t until everyone in the room gasped in horror that I realized I might have said something wrong. The blonde hooligan went straight for my family jewels. Her aim was outstanding.

“You’re a misogynistic butt plug,” she hissed.

The butt plug didn’t sound pleasant. I had no clue what the other word meant.

“Don’t come crying to me when you get blasted with a fireball,” I informed her, covering my blistered nuts with my hands.

“I won’t,” she snapped.

“Fine,” I shouted.

“Fine,” she barked back.

My new mommy watched the exchange with great interest.

“Just as I’d thought,” Mother Nature said with a sigh of delight. “I love being right!”

“About what?” I demanded.

“You’ll soon find out, sonny boy,” she said with a wink. “Anyhoo, I have a cooking lesson with Gordon Ramsey shortly and I wanted to set you up correctly! You have five days to complete both missions.”

“Five?” Juliet asked, alarmed.

“Correct,” she replied. “Four days.”

I squinted at her. “You said five.”

“My bad. I meant three... I think.”

Thankfully, Astrid chimed in. “Gigi, that’s bullshit. How many days do they have?”

Mother Nature looked bewildered then snapped her fingers. One of her clothed monkeys appeared and whispered in her ear. “Four!” she announced. “And you may share what you are searching for with one person. Might make finding it a little simpler. BUT, remember the goal may not be what you are searching for at all.”

“What the fuck?” I muttered.

“This is a disaster,” Juliet said with a groan.

“Isn’t it?” Mother Nature said with a giggle. “So much fun! The clock starts now. Good luck and don’t lose sight of the journey. Occasionally the journey teaches you more than your destruction.”

The monkey screeched then whispered in the insane woman’s ear once

again.

“Whoopsiedoodle,” she said, slapping her forehead. “I meant occasionally the journey teaches you more than your destination.”

“Could you be a little more specific?” Juliet asked, sounding desperate.

I agreed, but kept my mouth shut in case I said something that would get my nuts blown off.

“I suppose I could add a few more little clues,” she said with a naughty grin. “All the ding-dongs will sparkle. That goes for both of you. And deal with what’s in front of you always. It’s the very thing that will shed light on the bigger picture.”

Was I now searching for an unlubed sparkling rod?

“Is that all?” Juliet asked, looking as confused as me.

“It is,” Mother Nature said. She checked her watch. “It’s ten until noon. Gordon gets mouthy when I’m late for my cooking lessons. I must run.”

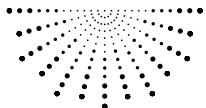
In a peach and golden mist, the whack job disappeared. The directions were shite, but at the very least we had an itinerary and bug-infested lodging. I’d won battles with far less.

“Are we ready to go?” I asked, using my big voice. “I shall be in charge.”

Juliet rolled her eyes and lifted her middle finger to me in respect. I returned the gesture and got electrocuted. Clearly, the middle finger was not the same as the thumbs up.

It was going to be an interesting and probably painful few days.

JULIET



VINNIE LED THE TRIP SINCE HE KNEW WHERE WE WERE GOING.

We'd transported together from the Cressida House to Arkansas in a blast of sparkling magic. I was pretty sure Rhys' hand was on my ass the entire time. In the future I'd transport alone. Sadly, I enjoyed having the dumbass cop a feel, but I wasn't in the market for a relationship or even a situationship. If the man knew who I really was he wouldn't be so touchy feely. I was an abomination. His scent might make me dizzy with lust, but I was above that kind of nonsense. My plans didn't involve anyone who thought a gobshite Karen was a weapon.

"Welcome to my Airbnb, friends!" Vinnie said as we stood outside on the lawn. He zipped joyously around the yard with his purple velvet cape flying behind him.

I couldn't help but smile. He was such a happy person. My life goal was to be more like Vinnie. However, I needed the Sacred Clock to make that happen.

Toad Suck, Arkansas, wasn't exactly a city. It was more of a tiny community and Vinnie's Airbnb was on the far outskirts. It sat isolated and alone on acres of beautiful land. The exterior was charming—a quaint log cabin with lush and colorful landscaping. Flowering trees and bushes surrounded the home. Trellises of fragrant pink and lavender roses flanked the entryway. The noon sun was high in the cloudless sky and shone down on the cabin, making it look enchanted.

The interior was lovely as well—an open floor plan with comfortable furniture done in peach, green and cream. The simple beauty calmed my soul.

Well, it did until three strange beings crawled out from under the heavy

oak kitchen table babbling a mile a minute.

The occupants of the Airbnb were frighteningly bizarre. They were ghostly pale and wore their snowy white hair in mullets. The three males had no teeth other than their fangs and their eyes glistened a watery pink. The Vamps wore overalls and no shirts or shoes. When they smiled and waved it was terrifying.

“What the fuck?” Martha yelled, slamming herself against the wall.

“Holy hell,” Jane cried out. “Are they ghosts? Is that shit contagious?”

“They must be gobshite Karens,” Rhys shouted. “I will save everyone.”

I just stood in shocked silence with my mouth open. In all my years, I’d never seen an undead person like these Vampyres.

We’d made an awful first impression. After their initial horrible greeting, Martha and Jane screamed and pulled out weapons. Of course, Rhys joined them while going on and on about gobshite Karens. I’d had to electrocute the idiots five times before they begrudgingly agreed not to decapitate the three odd Vamps. Granted, my first instinct was to eliminate the milky-skinned men as well, but the look of horror and disappointment on Vinnie’s face stopped me dead in my tracks.

“FRIENDS!” Vinnie bellowed in a voice that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. For such a mild-mannered sweetheart, he was a badass. “Your behavior is unacceptable. You will apologize at once.”

Vinnie was correct. We were being heinous.

Rhys stepped forward to go first. The problem was that he had no freaking clue how to apologize.

“Yes, yes,” he said, rocking back and forth on his feet. “My only friend Vinnie has made an interesting observation. While your appearance is unappetizing and might induce nightmares, that’s not the best reason to decapitate you. I shall save dismemberment for an aggrievance more appropriate. Do any of your names happen to be Gobshite Karen?”

“Oh my God,” I muttered, shoving him out of the way. I approached the men with an apologetic smile. I knew good and well what it was like to be despised. Granted, I was despised for my horrid actions. I’d earned it. These poor people couldn’t help the way they looked. I felt lower than low. “I am so sorry. We were way out of line. It’s no excuse, but we were caught a little off guard by your... umm... unusual appearance.”

“Fuck yeah we were,” Martha agreed. “But it don’t matter that ya’ll look like fuckin’ freaks. Some people say that Jane here looks like a freak and that

don't make me love her no less.”

Jane walloped Martha and sent her flying across the living room. “Martha's right, not about me, but the other shit. It's shallow and crappy to judge people just 'cause they look like a poop stain.”

She ended with a curtsy of respect. It looked like she was taking a dump. I wasn't sure that would make up for what she'd just said, but the Vamps bowed in response.

“Don't matter, darlin',” the one in the middle said. “We're pretty dang used to it by now. My name's Clemit.”

Rhys narrowed his eyes. “It's not Gobshite Karen?”

I set him on fire. He sprinted around the room bitching and moaning while slapping out the flames. I didn't feel bad.

“And this here is Ebby and Hoppy,” Clemit said, pointing to the others. “We're right pleased to meet friends of Vinnie's. He's just the dang best! If we weren't all undead, I would've baked a cake.” He slapped his overall-covered thigh and laughed. Ebby and Hoppy joined him.

I wanted to crawl under the table that Clemit, Ebby and Hoppy had crawled out from. They were nice people. I wasn't used to being welcomed anywhere—especially by Vampyres.

“I'm Juliet,” I said. “Martha and Jane are in the booty shorts and Rhys is the big dumbass. His nickname is Gobshite,” I added with a wicked grin.

“Nice to meetcha,” Hoppy said. “We mainly stay in hidin' and don't mix with many of our kind other than Vinnie.”

“Darn tootin',” Ebby said. “Used to be six of us. Now only three.”

Vinnie had a group hug with his friends as they all had a quick and bloody cry.

“May I ask what happened? Why are there only three of you?” I inquired after they'd finished.

“It ain't a pretty story,” Clemit said, shaking his head. “We was born back in the 1920s. Our mamma didn't want us because we was kinda ugly. Used to beat us hard on the daily with a switch thinking it might pinken up our skin.”

“True that,” Ebby added. “All six of us came into this world without no color at all.”

Vinnie shook his head adamantly. “I heartily disagree. You boys are some of the most delightfully colorful people I have the pleasure to call friends.”

Hoppy chuckled. “Vinnie boy, ya must be color blind, but I sure am

grateful for your kindness.”

“Hang on a dang second,” Martha said, scratching her head in confusion. “Where are the other pale fuckers?”

Clemit swiped at a lone bloody tear. “Dead. We’ve been hunted for sport for decades. Ya see, our mamma sold us off to the circus when we was youngins,” he explained. “We got the tar knocked out of us so many times that we made a pact that we was gonna kill ourselves all together.”

Ebby patted his brother’s back and continued. “Yep. I reckon that was the plan, but then a nice, sweet little gal from the circus named Paris told us we didn’t have to die. Ever. She found us after we’d been beat up but good. Said everyone was worth somethin’. Told us we were good boys and deserved to be happy. Paris promised to help us be strong. Also said we could kick some dang good ass if we wanted her to turn us into Vampyres.”

“Paris Hilton?” I asked, shocked. It did ring a bell in my memory that Paris had been in a circus freak show when she was human and had been brutally assaulted. Ethan had found her on the brink of death and given her a choice. He offered to kill her humanely so she suffered no more or to turn her. He vowed to help her get revenge on those who had harmed her to the point of human death. She’d taken him up on his offer and was eternally loyal to my brother and Astrid. She’d been kind to me as well. It seemed like Paris had a soft spot for misfits.

“Yeppers!” Hoppy said. “Do ya know that fine little lady?”

I nodded. My guilt consumed me. Paris had found compassion for Clemit, Ebby, Hoppy and their brothers. She had found compassion for me. Who the hell did I think I was to judge these Vamps... even for a moment. They were far better people than me.

“Just think that gal’s the bee’s knees,” Clemit said. “Paris was a whole lot younger than us, but was more like a mamma than our own mamma. Anyhoo, Fergus, Stanley and Homer got picked off by a Demon hunting club ’bout a decade ago. Vinnie’s been letting us rotate livin’ at his Airbnbs since then. We’ve pretty much visited all of them.”

“Is your mother’s name Gobshite Karen?” Rhys asked, fuming at the injustice shown to the sweet men. “I’d be more than happy to camouflage myself and attack when the gobshite Karen is least suspecting. I’d then immediately remove her head followed by the ripping out of her innards. For good measure, I would shove the entrails into the mouth of the decapitated cockwomble. After that’s complete, I’d move onto the removal of

appendages, which would most definitely be used to flog the gobshite. Peeling her skin off would show I meant business.”

Clemitt, Ebby and Hoppy were very impressed. I rolled my eyes. Old Rhys needed to get a handle on his skin peeling.

“Well now, that’s right kind of you,” Hoppy said. “But she’s long dead. Funny thing is, her name was Karen.”

“I knew it!” Rhys yelled. “My sincerest apologies for not being able to kill her for you.”

“Thanks,” Hoppy said. “Is there a reason y’all have graced us with your company in Toad Suck?”

I glanced over at Martha and Jane in warning. Mother Nature had said I could tell one person what I was searching for. I’d told Martha it was a Sacred Clock. She’d told Jane. I had my fingers crossed that since I hadn’t technically broken the rules, I wasn’t screwed. However, I didn’t want them blabbing to our new friends... or Rhys.

“We’re on a mission,” I explained. “I’m looking for something secret and sacred.”

“As am I,” Rhys added. “Of course, if it happens to be the same thing, I’ll win it since I’m the man.”

I groaned. Martha and Jane called him a few choice words and tossed throwing stars at his head. They missed. Their aim was terrible. Vinnie shook his head in disappointment.

However, it was our new pasty friends who got through to the numbskull. Their method was bizarre, but that wasn’t surprising.

“Lemme tell you a little somethin’, boy,” Clemitt said, wagging his pale finger at a clueless Rhys. “That kinda talk is only fittin’ for a gobshite Karen. Guess I was wrong ’bout you. Thought ya were a badass Vampyre, but you’re just a Karen.”

“What?” Rhys demanded, appalled. “I am *not* a gobshite Karen.”

“Lookin’ to me like ya are,” Hoppy chimed in. “Ain’t no one but a gobshite Karen talks about women that way. We was saved because of a wonderful and powerful gal. I’d die for her any day of the week.”

“Righty on that,” Ebby said. “From what Vinnie told us, the Chosen One is a woman. That right there shows you who’s the boss. You’d best be gettin’ rid of that pissy attitude or you’re gonna get your ass whooped until ya turn to dust.”

The thought of Rhys not being alive made my stomach cramp. I didn’t

like him, but it would be boring if the idiot wasn't around. I decided not to examine my thoughts too deeply.

Unfortunately, my mouth worked before my brain had time to stop it. "In all fairness, Rhys has been in a magical coma for a thousand years until recently. He comes by his misogynistic asshole ways due to his backwardass upbringing. He can't help himself."

Slapping my hand over my mouth, I wanted to disappear. Why was I defending the jackass?

Martha and Jane were wide-eyed. Vinnie giggled like he knew a secret. Rhys was preening.

"So I am not disgusting to you, fair Juliet? You don't actually have a vendetta against my nards?" he demanded, still grinning like a fool.

I did what any self-respecting Immortal girl would do. I electrocuted him.

"Hoowee!" Clemit said with a laugh. "This is better than the Housewives show."

"Got that right," Hoppy agreed, then pointed at Rhys. "You best get that crap under control, boy. Women are equal to men and in lots of cases, smarter."

Rhys nodded, still grinning.

I found myself smiling. I was a bigger idiot than he was.

It was time for a change of subject. Mother Nature had said that I should gather some crazy people for the mission. I had a few. I could use a few more. She also said to deal with what was in front of me. I could do both.

"Where is this Demon hunting club?" I asked. While I was working on controlling my violent tendencies, if I could use them for good it might not be so bad...

"In Toad Suck proper right now," Clemit said with a shudder.

"How many?" Rhys demanded, speaking in his outdoor voice. He was clearly ready for some skin peeling.

"Ten," Hoppy confirmed. "It's always been the same ten Demons. I see 'em in my sleep."

"Do you know where in Toad Suck they are?" I asked, feeling seriously itchy.

"Usually they hang out at Hooters," Ebby told us.

"What is a hooter?" Rhys asked.

"It's a boob," Jane answered.

"I am so fucking confused," he shouted. "There's a boob large enough to

house ten Demons?”

Vinnie chimed in before Rhys imploded. “Hooters, in this case, is a restaurant.”

Rhys squinted at the little man. “And restaurant is another name for boob?”

“No,” I said, doing my best not to laugh. Waking up after a thousand years had to be difficult. The world had changed. Hell, even I was clueless about a lot since I’d been in a dungeon for a decade. “Hooters is the name of a building where humans go to eat food.”

“Boobs?” he asked with a wince.

“Nope, not boobs,” I said, pressing my temples.

“That’s certainly a relief,” he muttered. “It would be alarming to think that humans ate roasted bosom.”

“Right. Moving on,” I said, pulling out the bat from my scabbard that my newly adopted pappy had given me. I swung it for good measure. Clemit, Hoppy and Ebby gasped and clapped. The wooden weapon was loaded with magic. My hands and arms tingled. “Maybe we should pay a visit to Hooters and have a chat with a few Demons.”

“Now you’re talkin’,” Martha shouted. “Your pappy will be so fuckin’ proud!”

“Would you boys like to come?” I asked Clemit, Ebby and Hoppy. “I’m planning to knock a few Demon heads together.”

“Or off,” Rhys added.

“Or off,” I agreed.

The Vamps exchanged worried glances then huddled together.

I glanced over at Vinnie. Had I overstepped? He held up a hand and indicated I should wait.

Clemit finally spoke for the group. “We’re gonna join ya. It’s far past time that we live a life that ain’t consumed with fear. Better to go down fightin’ in the names of Homer, Stanley and Fergus than to hide out for the rest of eternity in Airbnbs, watchin’ reality TV.”

“Brave men!” Rhys said, saluting them. “I would be honored to have you in my army.”

“Quite high praise,” Vinnie said, giving him a thumbs up. “Rhys is a great warrior.”

“Yes, I am,” Rhys said.

I tilted my head. The idiot needed to learn some humility. It irked me that

I found it amusing. Whatever. At Hooters, I'd show him who was boss.

"Hang on a hot sec," Martha said. "While I'm all for kickin' ass and wiping the floor with some Demon mops, we have a mission to accomplish."

Never in my wildest dreams did I expect Martha to be a logical voice of reason.

"True," I agreed. "But Mother Nature said to deal with what was in front of us and that it would lead us to the bigger picture."

"Outstanding point!" Rhys said, clearly itching to have a smackdown in the name of justice as much as I was. "Our alarmingly pale friends need us. Clemit, Ebby and Hoppy are now part of my army. I never leave a man on the field. Today will be no different. Follow me!"

I grabbed his arm and stopped him. "Nope. Follow me."

I watched as the handsome dolt struggled with the command. If I wasn't fully aware that Vampyres didn't have bodily functions, I would have pegged him for severe constipation. He glanced around the room looking for validation. All he got was raised brows and middle fingers.

Rhys groaned and appeared to want to throw a tantrum. It wasn't until Clemit mouthed the words "gobshite Karen" that Rhys gave in.

"Although my balls have shriveled into raisins, I accept that I am second-in-command... this time," he conceded. "Juliet is the commander even though it renders me ball-less."

It was funny, cute, pathetic and charming in a profane way. I knew his balls were just fine. It was his monster ego that took a hit. But if he learned how to treat women on this mission, he'd be a lot better off in the long run.

"Let's go," I said, tucking the bat back into my scabbard.

"Do we know where Hooters is?" Jane asked an excellent question.

"Umm... actually, no," I admitted with a laugh. "Boys, can you drive?"

"We're not transporting?" Rhys asked, perplexed.

"Nope, that would give us away," I told him. "Plan is to drive over, draw the Demons out of Hooters so no humans are harmed, then let them know there's a new sheriff in town."

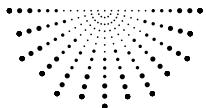
"I understood very little of that," Rhys said, saluting me. "Let's DO IT!"

I grinned and headed for the car. I might not find the Sacred Clock today, but I'd sleep a whole hell of a lot better knowing Clemit, Hoppy and Ebby didn't have to look over their shoulders the rest of their lives. I knew what that felt like. It sucked. I might have to live that way because of the crimes I'd committed. But they had committed no crimes. It was bullshit that they

were in hiding.

I was going to make damned sure today was the first day of the rest of their lives without fear.

R H Y S



REACHING DOWN, I COVERTLY MADE SURE MY TESTICLES WERE STILL attached. I'd never in my twelve hundred years taken orders from a woman. Thankfully, my nards were intact. I refused to be a gobshite Karen, but it was fucking difficult.

Clemit owned a metal chariot called an SUV. It was quite roomy and was less jolting than sitting atop a steed in battle. I watched from the backseat as he pressed buttons and made the chariot move without shouting at it. It was shocking.

Clemit and Vinnie sat up front. Hoppy, Juliet and I were in the second row, and Martha, Jane and Ebby sat behind us. It was quite civilized except for Martha and Jane slapping each other and swearing. Juliet had gotten the short end of the stick getting adopted by the crazy Vampyres. Although, I certainly wasn't faring much better in the what-the-fuck-happened department with Mother Nature deciding she was my new mommy.

The seats of the chariot were a soft leather and the floors were fuzzy under my combat boots. My army back at the Cressida House was going to shit over the horseless mode of transportation. I needed to speak to Sven about procuring us an SUV. My general was excellent at pilfering.

"This is so exciting," Hoppy said with his pale hands clasped. "I would be just fine dyin' for a cause. From what I understand, the Demon hunting club also hunts unusual humans and Fairies."

Juliet growled with anger. My pants got tight due to my man rod reacting with delight at the sound of her badass aggression. The damned jeans that Astrid had insisted I wear were not a friend to my situation.

"Demons aren't permitted to harm humans or others," she hissed.

“They’re only allowed to absorb the energy from the ill deeds of humans.”

“Seriously?” I asked. I’d always thought Demons to be heathens.

“Seriously,” Juliet confirmed. “That’s the way it’s always been. Demons have only needed the sins of men and women to survive. God gave man free will and many have used it to the detriment of man and womankind. Satan, much to God’s chagrin, loves reminding his brother of his misjudgment.”

Juliet’s brains were as attractive as her aggression and her rear end.

“However, some Demons blatantly defy the natural order,” she said with a hiss of disgust. She then stared at her hands and paled to the point she looked as if she was related to Clemit, Ebby and Hoppy. “Many Vampyres have also defied the natural order. They’re abominations... like me.”

“According to Buddha, ‘You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire Universe, deserve your love and affection’,” Clemit offered in a kind tone.

Juliet’s head shot up and she stared at him. “Have you done therapy with Mother Nature?”

“Can’t say I have,” Clemit answered with a chuckle. “But I can tell ya this, don’t know what happened in your past, but when you live forever like we do, what you do with your future matters the most.”

Juliet was speechless. The words hit her hard. Her hands shook and her lips compressed. They hit me as well. I wanted to know her secrets. I wanted to tell her mine. That was a foreign concept to me. It made me itchy and uncomfortable.

Catching her scent, a vision of blood and carnage settled in my frontal lobe. Pictures of a female being who was far less physically powerful than Juliet, meted out punishments to her so horrid, I felt ill. It made no sense that she didn’t defend herself.

Juliet gathered herself and gave Clemit a forced smile. “That’s a discussion for another day, or never. Right now, we have some evil Demons to deal with.”

I didn’t like her brushing over her pain, which was confusing. Broaching the subject would end in electrocution. Mine. However, I’d get to the bottom of it since I seemed to be a glutton for her punishment. “Demons now. Other situations later,” I stated firmly, staring at Juliet.

She ignored me, but at least she didn’t set me ablaze. I considered that a win.

“You got that shit right,” Martha agreed. “Some of them Demon fuckers stay earth-side and don’t listen to Blade Inferno. Pisses him off to no end.

Lizard has to take care of them rogues all the time, if you know what I mean...”

I knew exactly what she meant. Lizard was my kind of guy. But I was a bit lost. Again. “Who is Blade Inferno?”

“My bad,” Martha said, patting me on the head like I was a horse. “It’s Satan’s pen name.”

That made no sense whatsoever, but I did admire the moniker, Blade Inferno. It was outstanding—very strong and macho.

I wanted to come up with my own pen name, but that could wait until later. Juliet had made an interesting observation and I wanted clarification. “Since the Demons are killing without provocation, it means they’re fair game,” I stated.

She glanced over at me. “But if we kill without provocation then we’re no better than them.”

I mulled over her statement. Clearly, not all Demons were evil, much to my surprise. Astrid was part Demon. Lizard was a Demon, or at least partially. Everyone seemed to like Satan. Juliet’s words cut deep. My past as a human and as a new Vampyre eons ago was not pretty. Granted, I’d had my reasons, but I was certain she would shun me for what I’d done.

I’d changed... sort of. As a warrior, I’d always fought for justice. There was justice to be had now, but it was all in the way we went about it.

Swallowing my pride was almost as painful as my nuts at the moment, but I did it. “May I make a suggestion?” I choked out. I was proud of myself that I hadn’t pulled a gobshite Karen and usurped her authority.

Juliet eyed me for a long moment then shrugged. “Sure.”

“I believe sending in Clemit, Ebby and Hoppy as bait would cause the Demons to attack. The ashen crew could lead them out of the boob eatery and away from the humans. If they attack—which they will—we’re fully within our rights to protect the pale ones. Violently.”

She shook her head. “That’s too dangerous for the boys. They’ve been through enough. We’re going to give them a new life, not a ticket to death. I say we send Martha and Jane in to draw them out. They could piss off a cadaver and are seriously hard to kill.”

“Thank you,” Jane said.

“Welcome,” Juliet replied.

I turned to Hoppy. Putting my hand on his shoulder, I stared into his off-putting pink eyes. “I need more information on the shite Demons. Are they

the only hunting club you're aware of?"

He nodded and gulped. "They are. The lovely Martha is correct. This particular group stays on the earthly plane and wreaks havoc. They also rob banks."

I didn't understand the bank part, but got the rest of it. "How do you feel about being bait?" I asked. If he said no, I would accept Juliet's plan. But as annoying as Martha and Jane were, it was a risk to think they could draw all the Demons outside of the bosom business. We needed them together or it could get ugly fast.

Juliet was surprisingly quiet during the exchange. I placed my hand over my nuts just in case I pissed her off. It would suck to go into battle without my manhood.

"I can only speak for myself," Hoppy said. "But I'd be dang honored to be the decoy to end those murderin' dirtbags."

"I'm in," Clemit said.

"Me too," Ebby added.

I turned my attention to the commander of the mission. It was strange, but it also felt strangely right. Maybe it wasn't as hard as I'd thought not to be a gobshite Karen.

"Okay," she said with a curt nod. "Mother Nature said I needed a batshit crazy warrior on the mission. Respecting your ideas works for me."

"Does this mean you respect me as well?" I inquired casually.

"Nope."

"Ahh, of course," I said. "Just checking."

"We're here," Clemit said, parking the SUV next to other metal chariots.

I glanced at the boob-eating establishment and sized it up. It was obnoxiously bright and filled with humans. The entire restaurant could be observed from the metal chariot through the shiny see-through walls in the front. Many women wore outfits akin to Martha and Jane. The females inside the bosom eatery looked far more fetching than the two old Vamps in the horseless chariot, but strangely I only had eyes for the gorgeous woman in combat-wear who enjoyed kneeing my nards. It was unsettling.

Luckily, the other establishments around Hooters looked to be dark and empty.

"Open field." Juliet pointed to a grassy area to the left of the row of establishments. "We want them in the field."

"Agreed," I said, feeling the excitement of an impending battle course

through me.

Juliet's voice was low and commanding. I was pretty sure my dick was about to break in my constricting pants.

She kept giving orders and I got a little light-headed. "Martha and Jane, you will go into Hooters first. From here it looks like the bastards are at the twelve-top right by the window on the left."

"Sure as heck are," Ebby squeaked.

"That's them," Clemitt whispered.

"Martha and Jane," Juliet continued. "On my command, go in and join them at the table."

"Roger that," Jane said. "Want us to pretend to be hookers?"

Juliet squinted at them. "Umm... no. Not sure that's believable."

"Jehovah's Witnesses?" Martha suggested.

"No," Juliet said with a wince.

Jane tried again. "Strippers?"

"Nope."

"That one ain't far from the motherfuckin' truth," Martha informed the crew.

I wasn't sure what a stripper was, but from the facial expressions of my comrades in the chariot, it was not good.

"How 'bout underwear models or literary agents?" Jane asked.

"We could pose as nuns or topless hula dancers or even supermodels," Martha offered.

"Nope, nope, nope and nope," Juliet said, pressing the bridge of her nose.

"Well, butter my butt and call me a biscuit," Clemitt said, fanning himself. "You know the hula?"

Jane leaned forward. "Darn tootin', ghostly motherfucker. And I can teach ya."

"I'd be honored," he said with a nod of satisfaction. "Do you think them Demons have the sacred items y'all are searching for?"

"Doubtful," I said. "Mother Nature has given us a mission consisting of four strangely named cities in the States United. My guess would be the sacred shite is in Assawoman, Maryland. The first three, Toad Suck, Hooker and Belchertown are challenges to prepare us for the big one."

"That's what you think?" Juliet asked.

"It's the logical assumption."

She shrugged. "Logical isn't the first word that comes to mind when

thinking about Mother Nature.”

“Fine point. Well made,” I replied. “I shall change my answer to... I have no fucking idea.”

“Oh my! Rumor has it there’s a wild pack of cassowaries attacking Immortals in Hooker, Oklahoma,” Clemit announced.

“Hooker?” I shouted.

“No,” Martha said. “Juliet said no hookers.”

“Wait. What?” I demanded, confused.

Juliet held up her hand to both Martha and me. Her voice was tense.
“Clemit, are you sure about cassowaries in Hooker, Oklahoma?”

“I can’t rightly say,” he admitted. “Just heard it through the grapevine.”

I raised a brow. “Demons in Toad Suck. Cassowaries in Hooker. Belchertown? Who knows. Sacred shite in Assawoman. Not a problem.”

“From your mouth...” Juliet muttered. “One bloody battle at a time. Martha and Jane, you’re going to pose as criminals. Does anyone have cash?”

“Hell to the yes,” Jane said, reaching into the back of her booty shorts and pulling out a large wad of rectangular paper.

My guess was that the green paper was money. It was anyone’s guess why she kept it up her ass.

“Umm... gross, but great,” Juliet said with a pained laugh. “Flash the money and lead them outside.”

I pursed my lips and groaned under my breath. Juliet gave me the side eye.

“You want to add something?” she asked.

I considered my words carefully, but decided to go for it. Time was of the essence. “Please. Will my nards be in please danger if I do? Please.”

I figured the magic word couldn’t hurt.

She rolled her eyes. “Your nards are safe for now.”

“Excellent! Not sure the ass paper will be sufficient,” I pointed out. “We have one chance to get it right. Jane and Martha shall entice the bastards in the bosom canteen with the asshole currency. Then Clemit, Ebby and Hoppy will enter and stand in the doorway. I’d suggest calling out profane insults to the evil shites. Vinnie, my man, can you drop an enchanted barrier?”

“Absolutely!” he assured me.

“Outstanding! Once the pale ones, Martha, Jane and the ten motherfuckers have left the boob-eating house, drop the barrier around the bosom dining hall to keep the humans safe inside. When all is said and done,

the humans will be tranced into remembering nothing. Boys, lead the Demons to the field. Juliet and I shall be waiting for the bastards.”

Juliet nodded. Her grin was feral and I almost jumped her. The Vampyre was hot, but when she was in badass mode she was on fire.

“I like your style,” she said. “We’ll work quickly and stick to the plan unless it blows up in our faces. If it does, Jane, Martha and Vinnie, take the boys and get out of here.”

“What about me?” I inquired.

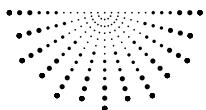
“You and I are going to take care of business.

I flexed my muscles and gave her my look of seduction.

She laughed.

Fuck, I needed that damned Sacred Cock immediately.

JULIET



MARTHA AND JANE WERE POSITIONED ON THE LEFT SIDE OF HOOTERS IN THE shadows, waiting for my signal. They couldn't be spotted from inside the restaurant. Clemit, Hoppy and Ebby were on the right side hidden in an alcove with Vinnie. They appeared to be terrified, and I was second-guessing the plan in a big way.

Rhys stood next to me outside of the SUV. He was outwardly calm, but I sensed his excitement. I felt the same thrilling sensation and it gutted me. My goal was to lose who I used to be. Right now, I was leaning into the violent and vicious person I'd always been. The Sacred Clock wouldn't matter if I punted my second chance in the next hour.

If I could breathe, I'd have expelled the mother of all sighs. My second choice would have been screaming, but tipping off the Demons and getting people I cared for killed would be worse.

Third choice was a long shot, but I was going with it. I had to.

“Rhys,” I whispered.

The look of shock on his face that I didn’t call him jackass or gobshite Karen would have made me laugh in another circumstance. Tonight, it did not.

“Yes?” he replied warily.

“I need you to promise me something,” I told him.

He watched me and waited.

It was best to just say it plainly and bluntly. Rhys didn’t understand subtlety. “If I get out of control—meaning if I lose my shit and become a soulless killing machine—I need you to end me.”

“Define soulless killing machine,” he said softly. “And keep in mind, I

have peeled the skin from my enemies.”

He had a point. Glancing over at Hooters, I groaned. Martha and Jane were getting antsy. I needed to hurry up. “Got it. I’m just going to lay it out there. I’m despised by all for trying to kill repeatedly. Violently. I’m broken and, I believe, unsalvageable. Astrid believes differently. What I want before my time is done is to try and make a little of all the wrongs I’ve caused right. My demise would be a joyous occasion for many. I don’t blame them. It would be justice if I was destroyed. But it feels so right to defend Clemit, Ebby and Hoppy. A step in the right direction, so to speak. My greatest fear is going over the edge and trying to kill everyone—even those on my side. I’m not known for my control.”

My stomach hurt, my eyes filled with bloody tears and I couldn’t look at the man. I reminded myself that his respect was immaterial. His promise was necessary.

The huge warrior placed his hands on my shoulders and turned my body to face his. His eyes glowed and his lips had compressed to a thin straight line. “I do not go into battle with those I deem unworthy. I choose to go into battle with you, Juliet,” he ground out.

His large hand cupped my chin. He raised it so our eyes met. It was shockingly gentle. It caused a zing of something unfamiliar to shoot through my veins.

“A past is a past and it should be left where it belongs,” he said. “You’re a damaged warrior like myself. Some things can’t be forgiven, but they can be atoned for. I spent my life in an army fighting for justice, because in the beginning I did anything but. Justice here means defending the unfortunate-looking but very friendly pale ones. Period. I might not understand restaurants, metal chariots, the Tube of You or Karen’s, but I do comprehend the difference between right and wrong. Being hunted because you’re colorless, unattractive and seriously bizarre is fucking bullshit. I’m proud of you for standing up for what’s right.”

I nodded jerkily, but he hadn’t addressed my request. “Thank you, but I need your promise.”

“I’m a fucking amazing, and—according to everyone else—batshit-crazy warrior. I never leave a man... or woman on the field. Not that I’ve ever been in battle with a woman until now, but I’m working on myself because getting electrocuted sucks. If you break ranks and try to harm your comrades, I will end you. You have my promise.”

The relief that coursed through me made my knees weak. “That is the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me. You’re not a gobshite Karen.”

He looked pleased. “You are most welcome. However, I already know you won’t harm your newly adopted mothers. While I find them alarming and appalling, they love you and if you care to admit it, you love them as well. The pale ones are weak and harmless. Vinnie is good to the core. The man is the only one who hasn’t electrocuted me. Well once, but it was a group thing. Doesn’t count. I choose to believe in you, even if you don’t believe in yourself.”

“You’re insane,” I muttered.

“Yes, I’ve been told. However, when I’ve been proven correct, I would like something in return.”

That sounded iffy, but he’d just agreed to kill me if I lost my shit. He was definitely owed something. “What?”

“A proper kiss without my nards being lodged into my esophagus,” he responded with a sexy twinkle in his eyes.

I groaned. That wasn’t what I was expecting at all. Part of me hoped he had to kill me in battle. Kissing him willingly was going to kill me just the same. I didn’t deserve any happiness. Yes, I’d imagined kissing the idiot... and much more. But that was a dream. Dreams didn’t come true for people like me.

“Why?” I asked. “I’m an abomination.”

He shrugged. “Just because.”

His answer was weird, but we needed to get the show on the road. Now. “Fine. One kiss.”

He grinned and saluted me. I pushed away all the inappropriate thoughts bombarding my brain and focused on the battle in front of me. That’s what Mother Nature said to do.

I would do it.

I signaled to Martha and Jane. They sauntered into Hooters and joined the Demons. We watched as the old Vamps waved their ass-cash around. It was more than clear that the exchange was aggressive on the Demons’ part. They covertly pulled weapons. If I had a working heart, it would have been beating out of my chest. Only six stood to follow them out. Rhys had been correct about it not being enough to entice all the Demons.

He didn’t comment.

I wasn’t surprised. While he might be a dingbat on life in the twenty-first

century, he was a fair and badass warrior. I was grateful to have him here.

“Send in the boys,” he whispered. “Now.”

I sent a signal to Vinnie and they sprinted to the entrance. I watched in horror as the Demons started to go crazy and behave like rabid dogs. They foamed at the mouth and ran at the boys like a freight train on a collision course to Hell.

They were about to find Hell, and I was going to serve it up.

“Field,” I hissed at Rhys.

I didn’t have to ask twice. We moved at a speed that would have rendered us invisible to the human eye. I pulled the bat from my scabbard and waited.

We didn’t have to wait long.

Clemit, Ebby and Hoppy’s expressions were ones I wouldn’t forget anytime soon. I wondered if I had caused the same terror in others.

I had.

I was as awful as the Demons hunting my friends.

“Stay focused, Juliet,” Rhys commanded as he took on three of the fastest Demons. They were ash before I even blinked. Badass didn’t even begin to describe Rhys.

Martha and Jane trailed behind the evil crew. They threw daggers and grenades at the Demons, but none of them landed. The parking lot looked like a war zone. I felt the earth shift as Vinnie dropped a barrier around Hooters to protect the humans.

It was time to play.

“No,” Clemit screamed as a Demon ripped off Hoppy’s arms.

Rhys’ bellow of fury made me smile. His roar as he decapitated the shit who’d harmed Hoppy filled me with joy. It should have scared me, but I wasn’t exactly right in the head.

“MINE,” a Demon screamed as he lunged for Clemit. “The freak dies NOW.”

His grunt of crazed laughter as he went for Clemit was sickening.

“No can do,” I growled as I wound up, swung and removed his head with Pappy’s bat. I felt the vibration of magic all the way up my arms when I made contact with his head. Pappy Lizard for the win.

“Excellent work, Juliet,” Rhys shouted.

There was no time to say thanks.

Clemit got away, but Ebby was surrounded. The Vampyre was curled up into a ball on the ground as the cowardly Demons went at him viciously. The

blood flowed from his body, making his already alabaster skin look translucent. His screams threw me back to a very dark time. Memories of being beaten by my mother to the point I begged for death almost paralyzed me. She had broken me. I'd let her. My unhinged need for her love had turned me into a monster.

Mother Nature seemed convinced broken things and people could be fixed. I disagreed. However, I could fix this situation. It would erase nothing of my past, but it would save Ebby.

Paris had told the boys everyone was worth something. I didn't believe that either. But Ebby was definitely worth more than something.

I shoved Rhys out of the way and went at the five whose fangs were gnashing and claws were out. Rhys was on my tail.

"Harm no more," I shouted as my vision blurred and I saw red for the first time in my life. The injustice to Ebby was just too much. The cruelty done to me was my cross to bear. My color-challenged little friend would live to see a tomorrow without fear. He'd done nothing wrong.



THE SILENCE WAS LOUD. THE SENSATION OF FIERY PINS AND NEEDLES DANCING on my skin was intense. As my vision cleared, I spotted Demon heads all over the place. I wasn't sure how much time had passed, but the blights on humanity were dead. All ten of them.

"Sweet, sweet gal," Ebby whispered through swollen and bloody lips as he gently cupped my cheek.

I was on the ground and held Ebby in my arms. A wave of overwhelming fear washed over me. I felt faint. Glancing around wildly, I started to cry with relief when I saw Martha, Jane, Clemit, Hoppy, Vinnie and Rhys. I hadn't hurt any of them. But the fact that I'd gone into some kind of fucked-up state when I'd fought the Demons wasn't lost on me.

I was still a danger to everyone.

Standing up with Ebby in my arms, I handed him to Clemit. Hoppy was still missing his arms even though they'd started to grow back. "You guys are free," I said. My tone was emotionless. If I said another word, I'd sob.

I wanted to leave.

I would not leave.

The Sacred Clock wouldn't help me now. I was too far gone. But I would honor Rhys by helping him find whatever it was he was looking for. After that... I was going to do what I already should have done. My time on this plane was fast coming to an end.

"Well, your pappy is gonna be fuckin' proud!" Martha announced, giving my rigid body a hug. "Never saw anything quite like that shit."

"Hell to the yes," Martha agreed. "Our little gal came to play."

"No," I said, feeling awful. "I was out of control."

Rhys approached and saluted me. "No. You were not out of control. I promised you that would not happen. I was right. Look around, Juliet. No one in your army was harmed by your hand."

I shook my head. "I don't remember ending the Demons," I ground out.

"But you did," he said. "And you kept the ones you care for safe. I'm honored to fight alongside you. You're a warrior like none I've ever seen, even though you're a woman. You make Sven look like a pussy. Don't tell him I said that. He'll get butthurt and I'll never hear the end of it."

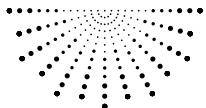
I laughed. It sounded thin and tinny. It verged on hysteria. Everyone was smiling. They had no clue how much danger they'd been in because of me. Rhys had made me a promise. I now was going to make myself a promise. If there was any more danger, I'd take it on alone. Not one person here was going to die because of me.

I would tell none of them my plan. No one would go for it. It was my secret to keep and their lives to spare. After all I'd done to the others who used to love me, I couldn't risk hurting anyone else. Ever.

Also, I owed Rhys a kiss. A thrill ran through me at the thought. I'd take the small pleasure while I could. Life hadn't been kind, but again, that was my fault.

A kiss. A secret promise. And a permanent ending... for me.
That was all I could hope for.

R H Y S



I FELT LIKE A BUMBLING SCHOOLBOY AS JULIET APPROACHED ME WITH AN expression on her gorgeous face that made all the blood in my brain transfer to the crotch of my pants. My hopes had been that the kiss would be private and then lead to something naked and sweaty. Being specific with my original request might have been helpful. I needed to find the fucking Sacred Cock.

“I believe I owe you something,” she said, standing in front of me.

I raised a brow and did my best to appear calm and collected. I was not. My insides rioted. The woman in front of me was pure perfection. My pants were so damned tight, I had to lean forward so as not to crack my family jewels.

She grinned.

I saw fucking stars.

She was more deadly right now than she’d been in battle.

“I believe you do,” I said in a slightly higher register than I would have liked. It wasn’t manly, but thankfully, it didn’t fall into the weenie-sphere. In a brief moment of terror, I worried that my cock had literally fallen off and I’d become a soprano. That was impossible since the agony in my pants was fierce. “I had hoped we could take this somewhere more priva—”

In the blink of an eye, Juliet slid her hands over my shoulders, went up on her toes, and silenced me with her lips.

Vampyre quickness came in handy when it came to battle and other menial tasks, but I’d be damned if I allowed it to dictate this. She’d promised me only one kiss, but she hadn’t bargained for how long it would last. As far as I was concerned, it could last an eternity.

I wrapped my arms around her. My pants were literally strangling my junk as her sinful body melted against mine. My fingers tangled in her blonde hair. Cupping the back of her neck, I tilted her head back to deepen the kiss. She moaned, her lips parting underneath mine, and the warrior inside me rejoiced. Juliet was life. She was love. She was mine, and I used my lips and tongue to claim her.

When I growled my pleasure and lifted her off the ground, she wrapped her legs around me in a vise-like grip. Her tongue darted, hot and fierce. The stars in my vision were now explosions. My palms found purchase on her combat pants-covered ass. My chest rumbled when she squirmed against my aching erection.

She moaned again. I moaned. Martha moaned.

Shite.

“Goddangit,” Jane shouted. “I wish Vamps showed up on film. I wanna record this for the spank-bank.”

Thusly, the kiss came to an abrupt halt.

Juliet dismounted from my waist and put a few feet of distance between us. Her face was flushed pink and her eyes were wild. Since I was positive I looked the same, I took it as a compliment.

“There. You got your kiss,” she told me. “One and done. Martha and Jane, we need to wipe the humans’ memories.”

“Not a problem,” Jane said.

As she walked away with Martha and Jane on either side, I smiled. I didn’t like watching her walk away from me one bit, however, the kiss was all I had hoped for and more. My head still spun. “We’re far from done,” I muttered. It was a promise I planned to keep.

“Well played!” Clemit said with a grin. “I thought there was some chemistry the first time that wonderful gal set you on fire!”

“Really?” I asked, surprised. “I was under the impression she hated me.”

“Oh no, Gobshite,” Clemit assured me. “I ain’t much of a ladies’ man, but I guessed that one fast.”

I winced. While I enjoyed what he’d said, the gobshite part wasn’t working for me. “Actually, my man, it would be just fine to call me Rhys.”

“Darnit,” Clemit said, smacking his forehead. “My apologies. I thought Juliet said your nickname was Gobshite.”

“I must need to clean out my ears,” Ebby said, shaking his head. “I coulda sworn Juliet said Gobshite too!”

"Well now, my arms ain't workin' but I thought my ears were," Hoppy said with a chuckle, holding up his stumps. "But I would've bet the bacon—which I can't eat no more since I'm technically dead—that I heard Gobshite too!"

Vinnie was doing his best not to giggle. He was not winning that war.

"Earwax is a problem," I shared, pressing the bridge of my nose and wanting to move on from the subject. "I'd suggest leeches."

"Leeches?" Ebby asked, confused.

These men were nice but slow. "Leeching," I explained. "Bloodletting. It's been the main medical treatment for centuries. It's quite effective for many maladies. It would certainly help with earwax. My guess would be your local apothecary would carry leeches."

"Apotha what?" Clemit asked, bewildered.

"You mean like the slimy bugs?" Hoppy inquired, appalled.

"I ain't lettin' no slug slurp on me," Ebby announced as his brothers nodded their horrified agreement.

I glanced over at Vinnie, who smiled and shook his head. "Leeching isn't the norm nowadays," he said kindly. "Q-tips work quite nicely for earwax."

"Are these tips of Q alive?" I asked.

"Nope," Clemit said. "Just a little cotton ball on a stick."

I mulled that over. It sounded ridiculous. The learning curve was steep and I was winging it. Whatever. We'd beaten the Demons. I'd kissed Juliet. If people were dim and didn't want to use leeches, it wasn't my problem.

There was more mission to accomplish.

"Shall we transport to Hooker, Oklahoma, this evening?" I asked as we headed back to the metal chariot.

"No," Vinnie said. "I believe it best that we get a good night's sleep and go early tomorrow morning."

"Good plan," I told him. Maybe... I could convince Juliet to bunk with me.



MY PLAN DID NOT GO ACCORDING TO PLAN. WHEN I'D POLITELY SUGGESTED to Juliet that we share accommodations—using the magic word *please* at least six times during my request—she electrocuted me. Twice.

The magic word was bullshit.

Not one to give up easily, I pointed out that she would be safer with a man in the room considering she was only a woman. As the words left my lips, I realized my faux pas and dove for cover. It didn't matter. I was set aflame by my entire little army. Old habits were fucking hard to break and getting set on fire sucked.

There were three sleeping chambers in Vinnie's Airbnb. Juliet took one room with Martha and Jane. Ebby, Hoppy and Clemit bunked in the second room. That left Vinnie and me to share the third.

"Do you snore?" I asked him as we each settled into what Vinnie had explained were two twin-sized beds.

"I have no clue," Vinnie said with a giggle. "I haven't roomed with anyone in a very long time, friend."

"Not to worry," I told my little buddy, giving him the thumbs of up. "If snoring occurs, I can help you stop by dismembering you and flogging you with your arms. I've done it to Sven multiple times. Works like a dream. And if I snore, you're more than welcome to return the favor!"

Vinnie winced. "Let's hope neither of us snore. And as a kind reminder, I'd like to point out that dismembering and flogging your friends isn't good manners."

I was shocked. Manners were complicated. "Is there some kind of fucking book on manners, preferably written in Latin or Sanskrit?"

"I'm sure I can find something," he assured me. "However, you're doing wonderfully by saying please."

"I've got that one down," I told him. "It seems that shoving it into sentences over and over impresses people and occasionally keeps them from electrocuting me."

Vinnie chuckled and got himself comfortable. It was easy for him. He was tiny.

The bed was too small. My feet hung off the end and there was barely an inch of space on either side of me. However, it was nice and soft. Back in my full-time warrior days a thousand years ago, I'd mostly slept on the ground. Sven and several of my comrades enjoyed sleeping in coffins. I felt that was entirely too cliché.

"Vinnie, I think I'd like to have a man-to-man conversation," I informed him.

The small Vamp sat up in his bed and glanced over. "I'd be happy to chat,

friend.”

I nodded and then couldn’t think of what to say. The silence was long. My only real ally, other than the idiot Sven, waited patiently. My mind was filled with so many thoughts, I didn’t know where to start. The beginning would be a good place but that would take years. In the end, I opted for the obvious. “I’d like to share with you what I’m searching for.”

“Oh my! I thought it was a secret.”

“It is, but according to the certifiably insane woman who set the mission up, I can tell one trusted person,” I explained. “I considered Sven, but he’s an ass and has loose lips. If he blabs, I’ll have to behead him. In my quest for manners, I’ve realized ripping heads off of allies is not mannerly.”

Vinnie bit down on his ashen lips and made a gurgling noise. I wondered if the diminutive Vamp was choking. “I am very proud of you, Rhys. You’re learning fast.”

“Because I’m amazing,” I told him.

“Yes, well, we might start working on a little humility too.”

I waved my hand. “No need. If I change too much, I’m in danger of losing my nards. I figure if I can refrain from maiming others for annoying me and occasionally for pleasure, I’ve accomplished much. My balls have shriveled tremendously during this exercise. The giggling I’ve done has decreased their size substantially. Taking orders from a woman reduced them to raisins. I fear for my rod if I continue on this path.”

“Interesting,” Vinnie said with a slight wince. “And how did taking orders from Juliet work out?”

I eyed him. The question was ridiculous. It had turned out perfectly. She was a top-notch warrior. “I am not following this line of questioning.”

“I thought not,” he muttered, reaching into his bag by his bed and pulling out two bottles of blood. He handed me one and opened the other for himself. “We need to get to the root of the problem of why you feel emasculated by the fairer sex.”

I had no clue what he’d just said, but the peach-flavored blood was delicious. I downed it. “While I’m loath to admit it, I don’t know what you mean.”

Vinnie smiled and handed me another bottle of blood. “No worries. Emasculation means to deprive a man of his perceived role or duty, usually by a woman. A metaphorical castration, so to speak. It usually happens when a man has his own massive insecurities. Back in the age of old, gender roles

were defined unfairly. We're now in a time where men and women are equal —especially in the Immortal world. The human world is working on it, but they're woefully behind."

I squeezed the glass in my hand so hard it shattered. I watched dispassionately as my own blood mixed with the fruity bottled blood and ran down my arm. Visions too horrible to relive bombarded my mind. Pushing them away was difficult.

Vinnie hopped out of his bed and sat on the edge of mine. I was surprised he didn't fall off. There wasn't much room. "Talking can help erase demons," he said.

"So does beheading them, as we proved today."

"No," Vinnie explained. "The demons in this case are the traumas of your past."

I shook my head. "I've erased them. Permanently." It was a lie.

We sat in a tense silence. My shame and guilt overwhelmed me. Vinnie was my only real friend in the twenty-first century. He wouldn't be if he knew my past.

"The Sacred Cock," I said flatly. "I'm looking for the Sacred Cock."

"I'm sorry, what?" Vinnie asked.

"You heard me," I replied. "If you'd like you can call it the Holy Johnson or the Hallowed Weenie or the Consecrated Man Bits or even the Spiritual Schlong. It's all the same."

Vinnie wasn't sure what to do with the information. I didn't blame him.

"Mother Nature sent you on a quest to find a Sacred Cock?"

When he said it aloud, it sounded stupid, but I wasn't one to shirk a mission just because it was absurd. "She did. My newly adopted mother insisted if I find the fucking blessed pecker, I'll be able to find my manners and my True Mate."

"Fascinating," he said with a wide smile. "She's a wise woman."

"I'd say deranged and stark raving mad, but we can agree to disagree," I told him.

"Sometimes the journey is more important than what you seek," Vinnie said.

Mother Nature had said something similar. I narrowed my gaze. "Did the crazy old bat tell you to say that?"

Vinnie got off the bed and paced the small sleeping chamber. "She did not," he promised. "But I've found in my many years that what I think I'm

seeking is often not the prize. It was the experience surrounding the quest. When one lives as long as we do, it's quite easy to lose track of the simple beauty around us and the lessons it holds.”

Vinnie had to be drunk. I wondered if he'd imbibed spiked blood. I was tempted to ask for one myself. I hadn't been drunk since I was human. It was incredibly hard for a Vamp to tie one on.

“And what if life holds no beauty?” I challenged.

Vinnie appeared to sigh. It was impossible since he didn't breathe, but his frustration was obvious. “What happened to you in your past, friend?”

I sat with the question and debated how much to say. While I was failing at life in the twenty-first century, I did like the man I'd become before I'd been put into a fucking coma by the Energy Vamps. I'd been on a good roll for at least a century.

Only Sven knew of my true past, and that was because he'd experienced it with me. I'd saved him from our shared history because the dolt, for all his faults, was my brother.

“Beware of what you wish to know,” I said flatly.

“What do you fear by telling me?” Vinnie asked.

I shrugged. The truth was I feared losing him as a friend. I'd never had one. The men in my army feared and respected me. As far as I knew, no one liked me.

When I didn't answer, the small Vampyre kept talking. “I will not judge you. We all have skeletons in our closets.”

I squinted at him. He was kind, and he was wrong—not about the skeletons, but about the judgment. Whatever. If he really wanted to know, I would tell him.

The story wasn't a pretty one. I planned to tell it quickly and without much detail... However, “the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry”—a quote by a gent named Robert Burns, which Sven was fond of saying after he had found it on the metal Book of Faces machine.

“Once there was a child,” I began, feeling slightly shaky. I might be a badass warrior now, but back then I was only a sixteen-year-old human boy who was starving both physically and emotionally. “He was one of ten. Boys. All boys. This particular child was the oldest of the sons. The sorry excuse of a woman who bore these males wanted a daughter in her own likeness. She loved herself more than any other. Her beauty was renowned in our part of the world.” I paused and pictured her in my mind. To say I despised her

would be an understatement. “The boys had different fathers.”

“All ten?” Vinnie asked in a hushed tone.

I nodded curtly. “Once she bore the man a son, she poisoned him so she could find another to give her a daughter.”

Vinnie turned a ghastly shade of pallid gray. It was impressive since he was normally ashen.

“Ten boys. Ten dead husbands. No one in the community batted an eye. Her beauty bewitched them all. The oldest son was forced to support his family,” I explained. I wasn’t fooling Vinnie. He was well aware that I was speaking of myself. “He did so without question. Letting his younger brothers starve wasn’t an option. He didn’t give a fuck about the woman, but his brothers were his life. This young man took degrading jobs selling his body, his mind and his soul. It was never enough. The woman beat him mercilessly for not bringing home more gold coins and food. And when he grew too strong for her to harm, she beat the younger ones and made him watch.”

My stomach roiled, but I kept going. All good fairy tales had endings. The gorier the better... and this one didn’t disappoint.

“The young man was unaware of what was happening when he wasn’t home. It wasn’t until three of the younger sons died from infections that he discovered how monstrous the woman had become in her desire to have a daughter.”

Vinnie closed his eyes. A solitary bloody tear ran down his cheek.

“She’d castrated them with a knife, believing if they didn’t have the male genitalia, they could pass for girls. She chose the youngest and the prettiest. The abhorrent female had spoken to a soothsayer who had fed her the deadly nonsense that she wanted to believe. She was methodical and emotionless in her pursuit. Two more of the innocent sons died by her hand before the eldest was able to get his revenge.”

Kicking the thin blanket off, I sat up and put my head in my hands. The memories, even from twelve hundred years ago, were raw.

“I’m so sorry,” Vinnie whispered.

“As am I,” I replied. “Would you like to hear the end of the story?”

Vinnie stared at me for a long moment. “If you would like to tell me, I would be honored to know, Rhys.”

“Don’t be so sure,” I said tonelessly. I hadn’t spoken about what I’d done ever. Not even to Sven. Although, Sven knew. “When the eldest son accused her of murder, she set a band of local men on him. They were besotted with

the witch—would do anything for her. The depraved fucks beat the young man with stones, fists, knives, mallets and sticks. He fought back. Not his smartest move. It only fed their frenzied need to destroy him for her. When he moved no more, they threw him into a gully and left the boy for dead. Only he wasn't dead—almost, but not quite. An ancient apothecary found the boy and made him a deal he couldn't refuse. An undead deal that would ensure he could carry out his revenge."

I looked up at Vinnie. His expression was twisted with pain and sorrow. "The day she hired the men to kill me was indeed the day I died, but not at their hands. I died by the fangs of my sire."

Vinnie handed me another bottle of blood. I nodded in thanks and drank it in one swallow.

"It took me several months to get past my bloodlust. My sire guided me and protected me like a good parent should. In our talks, I learned he was over a thousand years old. His name was Titus. The concept of eternal life wasn't anything I could grasp at the time. My need for vengeance far outweighed dissecting living forever."

"Is Titus still alive?" Vinnie asked.

"He is," I replied. "He lives on the outskirts of Rome. Sven was able to get in touch with him after the trance on us was broken. Ironically, my sire is on the Book of Faces. No photo of course since we don't show up on film. He might be well over three thousand years old, but he's more acclimated to these times than I am."

"And you will be too, friend," Vinnie assured me. "May I ask of the fate of your mother?"

"You may." I stood up to my full height and looked down at my small friend. "Her pride was her beauty. It defined who she was with every vile breath she took. I stole that from her, but I stole it in small and painful increments. First, I slashed her face with the blade she'd used to castrate my brothers. The scarring was hideous. Her rotten insides now matched her deformed face. I took my living brothers far away from her and offered them a new and Immortal life. Only Sven took me up on it; the others were appalled by me and ran. I let them go and have no clue how they ended up, but anything would have been better than the lot we'd been given. Over the next few months, I paid the witch nightly visits. No matter where she went, I followed. I was as methodical and as emotionless as she had been. When she finally perished, she was a diseased, mentally destroyed and infection-riddled

hag. She had no burial, no admirers and no family. I threw her into the same gully I was left in to die.”

Vinnie’s hands were clasped and his expression was difficult to read. “Did your revenge make you feel better?”

I laughed. It was humorless. The small man had hit the nail on the head. “No,” I ground out. “It did not. It made me sick, but what she’d done made me sicker. Each time I paid her back for the horrors she’d caused my brothers it took a piece of my soul. Since then, I’ve never truly trusted a woman. The bitch’s desire to have a daughter destroyed the ones I loved the most.” I stared at the ground. Shame and guilt made me feel ill. “Honestly, I’m not sure why I told you any of that.”

“Not all women are your mother,” he said quietly.

I nodded jerkily. “I am aware.”

Juliet wasn’t my mother. Astrid wasn’t my mother. Hell, even Martha and Jane weren’t my mother. Mother Nature, who wanted to *be* my mother for some strange and alarming reason, was nothing like my mother. Not all women were my mother. Intellectually, I knew that. Emotionally, I had a hard time with it.

Vinnie sat down and patted the space next to him on the bed. In many ways, he reminded me of Titus—kind to a fault. I sat down next to the Vampyre, who still seemed to want to be my friend even with knowing my past.

“Sometimes when the past hurts are too painful, it’s wise to put them in a box until you feel like visiting,” he said.

“A literal box?” I questioned, now sure the man was inebriated.

“Oh no, friend,” he said with a smile. “It’s metaphorical—pretend. If you carry the contents of the box with you at all times, you’ll live in the darkness. When life is eternal, the darkness is a very sad place to reside. I like to put my past transgressions on a shelf in my closet. That way when I need to work through them, they’re there waiting for me instead of dragging me down every waking minute. You can think of it as compartmentalizing. You deal with the pain when you have the strength to try and heal, or simply to make sense of it. If you keep it in your heart at all times, you’ll become desensitized and exist far beneath your potential.”

“Words are lovely things. Actions speak far louder,” I told him. “Some things in life will follow you to the grave. My mother—for lack of a better word—deserved what she got for killing my brothers and her husbands. I

held my brothers' small dead bodies in my arms. Those visions are never going to leave my nightmares. I don't regret ending her. If I had it to do over, I would be far more brutal. What I despise is that, in the end, I was the same as her. I killed with meticulous precision and forethought. I felt nothing but satisfaction when I ended her. And when I'd finished, I eliminated the band of men who'd done their best to end me."

"Rhys, you're not the same as her. You were a broken child who'd lived a life of unspeakable abuse and horror," Vinnie said, placing his hand gently on my shoulder. "What you did was in response to what was done to you and those you loved. Times were very different twelve hundred years ago."

I wanted to believe the good man, but I couldn't.

"Tell me about your life after you and Sven were free," Vinnie urged.

"I did what I knew best. I became a warrior and protected my people."

"That's noble," he said.

"Is it?" I questioned.

"Very," he replied with a smile. "Vampyres live public lives shrouded in privacy. If we were found out we would be slaughtered and experimented on. Our enemies are evil. Keeping the balance is the most noble thing one can do in the Immortal world."

"You could run for mayor," I said with a chuckle. All of a sudden, I felt incredibly light. Vinnie hadn't run away from me like my brothers had. He had been honest in his lack of judgement. It was astonishing. "I think we should get some rest. Hooker, Oklahoma, awaits us."

"Wise thought," he replied, getting settled back in his own twin bed.

"Thank you, Vinnie," I whispered.

"The pleasure was mine, friend," he whispered back.

I heard the footsteps in the hallway and my dead heart plummeted. I recognized them. They belonged to the one woman who'd smashed my image of what I'd believed all women to be.

I sprang from the bed and yanked open the door. Her scent lingered even though she was gone.

Juliet now knew my sordid secrets. I wasn't sure how much she'd overheard, but the worst had been at the end. Pressing the bridge of my nose, I felt the need to peel my own skin from my body.

If there was any chance at all with the blonde beauty it had died just as surely as my mother had.

"Fuck," I muttered as I quietly closed the door and made my way back to

the undersized bed.

“Tomorrow’s a new day,” Vinnie promised. “It brings new chances. New adventures and new challenges. Stay on your path, my friend. I believe everything will work out in the end.”

Vinnie was an optimist. I was not. Screw the Sacred Cock. I didn’t want some random True Mate, I wanted Juliet. That wasn’t going to happen, and I had no intention of settling for less. The manners part I had down. Saying please, giggling and giving the thumbs of up was working just fine. I was not a gobshite Karen. I’d add a few more tricks to my bag when Vinnie found a manners book written in Latin. Sven seemed to be somewhat polite. I’d get my brother to lend me a hand.

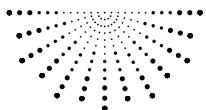
On top of all the shite that was my life right now, Mother Nature had been sorely mistaken. Some people were broken beyond repair. I was one of them. Instead of finding the Blessed Pecker, I’d help Juliet find what she was searching for. As far as respecting women was concerned... I knew five and none of them were my mother. So far, so good.

My goal was clear—covertly protect Juliet and aid her in discovering the sacred thing that will make her happy. My strategy was in the air. The Vampyres of this century seemed to be fond of winging it. I could do that. I was a badass warrior.

Closing my eyes, I knew sleep would elude me. That was a relief. The nightmares were too much to handle at the moment.

Hooker, Oklahoma... here we come.

JULIET



THE MORNING DAWNED GRAY AND CLOUDY. IT MATCHED MY MOOD.

After being unable to sleep, due to both Martha and Jane snoring and replaying the life-altering kiss with Rhys over and over in my mind, I'd gotten up to pace off my stress. I'd considered blowing something up, but didn't want to damage Vinnie's Airbnb. Rhys wasn't the only one working on manners.

And then I did something terrible. Not in the violence or property destruction column, but more in the eavesdropping column. Hearing Rhys and Vinnie talking, I quietly stood outside the door and listened. What I heard broke my dead heart into so many pieces that I had to admit I actually had one.

So much about Rhys made sense now, but I hadn't been meant to hear the tragic tale. In a bizarre twist of fate, he and I were similar. We both had mothers who'd defined the word evil, but in the end, Rhys chose justice and I'd chosen to lose my mind and tried to off everyone who had ever loved me.

He wasn't broken. He was just bent. I, on the other hand, was still an abomination. My most fervent hope was that he didn't know it was me standing outside his door. That was doubtful. The Vampyre was an expert and skilled warrior. He might not understand electronics, but he had a nose for the truth.

Keeping my distance was the plan. Now more than ever, I wanted to help him find what he was searching for. He deserved to find happiness after what he'd been through.

"Jackass," Martha grumbled, punching Jane in the head as they walked out of the room that they'd slept, or rather snored, in. "Don't you just put the

fun in dysfunctional.”

Jane gut-punched Martha and laughed. “Reality checks suck when they’re cashed in, sphincter head.”

“Ladies,” Vinnie said, wagging his finger. “You need to behave. We’re leaving for Hooker, Oklahoma, shortly.”

Jane pointed at Martha. “She stole my booty shorts.”

“Did not,” Martha protested. “You’re wearin’ ‘em, dumbass.”

Jane looked down and laughed. “I’ll be damned.”

“Ya already are,” Martha told her.

I shook my head and approached Clemit, Hoppy and Ebby. Thankfully, Hoppy’s arms had grown back. “It was a real pleasure meeting you guys.”

“Right back at ya, Juliet!” Clemit said, bowing low. “Can’t thank you enough for what you did.”

I put my hand on his shoulder. “Don’t do that, please. It’s not necessary.”

“As you wish,” he replied.

Ebby sauntered over and gave me a hug. “We was thinkin’... how about we join up with y’all and help you and Gobshite, I mean Rhys, find your secret stuff?”

“We’d be right honored,” Hoppy announced. “We might not be the best fighters, but we’re real dang good at scaring the pants right off of the enemy. We just smile and square dance. Does the trick every time.”

“True that,” Clemit agreed with a huge fangy grin. “I do believe we can help ya out with them cassowaries in Hooker.”

“I like it, men,” Rhys said, joining the group.

His words were to the boys, but his eyes were on me. If gazes could bore flaming holes, I’d be on fire. I ignored him. If he wanted to call me out for eavesdropping, it was his right.

Rhys continued. “The boys are batshit crazy in the most outstanding way. From what Lizard said, the cassowaries are deadly... probably immune to normal ways of elimination. Three brave and ghostly Vamps with no teeth except fangs might just be the ticket. If the birds can be distracted, they can be offed.”

I pressed my temples. “The boys have been used as bait already. Not sure using them again is a great plan.”

Rhys walked over and stood in front of me. The mortified part of me wanted to stare at his chest and not acknowledge him. I quashed that fast. I was as badass as he was. I was just more of an idiot.

Raising my eyes to his, I waited. It wasn't a great move. He was a beautiful man, but his eyes were stupid pretty.

"Do you have a better idea, Juliet?" he queried in a cold tone.

My name on his lips felt so right, but his tone made my blood feel like ice in my veins. "No."

"I thought not," he said flatly.

As he turned to walk away, I grabbed his arm. "I'm so sorry, Rhys."

His body stiffened and I dropped my grip quickly. "I do *not* need your pity," he snapped without looking back at me. "I'd prefer you call me asshole, jackass, batshit crazy or even Gobshite. Your anger and dislike, I understand. Your sympathy makes me ill."

I didn't know what to do. Everything that was socially correct made no sense to me. I was trying so hard and kept screwing up. My eyes welled up with tears and my instinct was to hurt myself. Jane walked over and held my arms at my sides. She'd seen me claw myself. My shame was almost debilitating.

"Alrighty, bunghole," Martha hissed at Rhys. "Don't know what's goin' on here, but I don't like it. Don't like it one fuckin' bit."

Jane got in on the action. "Don't make me shove a grenade up your ass. Cause I will, boy."

"And I'll reach on up there and pull the pin, motherfucker," Martha added.

"No," I said, louder than I intended. "No. Rhys... Gobshite has every right to be furious with me. I eavesdropped on a private conversation between Vinnie and him." Rhys was still facing away. His body language screamed don't approach. I had to... I walked around him and faced him. "I was wrong and I'm sorry for that. I can't unhear what you shared, but your secret is safe with me. I swear on what's left of my life."

His gaze jerked to mine and his eyes narrowed to slits. "What's left of your life?"

I winced. Letting the cat out of the bag wasn't smart. "I misspoke. I meant for the rest of my life."

If his expression was anything to go by, he didn't believe me. It didn't matter.

Martha stepped in between us. "I know hookers. Jane's a hooker. A nasty, skanky hooker. She don't wait for no one. That means Hooker, Oklahoma, ain't gonna wait for no one."

“Sure enough,” Jane chimed in, not the least insulted by what Martha had just said. “We better haul ass. Hookers will just up and move if their pimp don’t show up, if you know what I mean.”

I didn’t.

There was little to no logic in their bizarre analogy. Not that they were all that logical, but getting on with the mission meant it would be over sooner. No one seemed to follow what they’d said if the silence was an indication.

“I’d suggest we go with Rhys’ plan until we come up with something safer, friends,” Vinnie said, breaking the awkward silence.

“Love it,” Ebby said, holding a small suitcase. “Vinnie has a right nice log cabin Airbnb there. We’ve been to Hooker bunches. We can show you around!”

As before, Vinnie led the transport. This time Rhys didn’t cop a feel of my rear end. Sadly, those days were over. It was for the best. If my hearing his past killed his infatuation with me, then my eavesdropping had accomplished something positive. No one should want an abomination.



THE SIGN READ “HOOKER, OKLAHOMA... IT’S A LOCATION, NOT A vocation.”

“That certainly gets right to the point,” Vinnie said with a giggle.

We’d landed on the outskirts of town right in front of the welcome sign for the city. Thankfully, the area was deserted. There would have been a lot of explaining to do if we’d been spotted appearing out of thin air by humans. Vinnie’s Airbnb was a few miles down the road, deep in the forest. He was concerned if we’d transported directly to it, someone might lose a limb or a head in the landing due to the tree and boulder-covered landscape.

A limb would grow back. A head would not. I was grateful for Vinnie’s thoughtfulness. I’d be devastated if something happened to one of our crew. I paused and let that sink in. Realizing it was true, I let myself have a private moment of joy. Truly caring about others was new and strange. I did care for Astrid, but she’d saved me from death. Our relationship was complicated, to put it mildly. And while I believed what I felt for my sister was real, I also owed her. I didn’t owe anyone in our group, yet their well-being was my goal.

“Clemite, Ebby and Hoppy,” I said, scanning the area for cassowaries. I didn’t see any. So far, so good. “Are you good runners?”

“Heck to the yes, we are!” Hoppy announced with pride. “We’ve been runnin’ from stuff our whole lives. We can run like jackrabbits bein’ chased by a mountain lion.”

The admission made me sad, but the fact that they could run was good.

“Let’s do this. Stay low and keep your eyes open for cassowaries,” Rhys said, all business.

“And for the love of Simon Cowell, do not fuckin’ shave their asses,” Martha reminded everyone.

Rhys pressed the bridge of his nose. “Vinnie, lead the way, my man.”

“Follow me, friends,” Vinnie squealed as he took off with his velvet cape flying behind him.

We ran like the wind. Running set me free. For brief moments I was able to forget who I was and what I’d done. But all good things must come to an end. Unfortunately, for us that end involved Trolls.

“Shite,” Rhys growled as he grabbed Vinnie, Martha, Jane, Ebby, Hoppy, Clemite and me midstride and tossed us behind a huge boulder. I wasn’t sure how he’d done it, but was wildly happy he did.

Peering at the scene several hundred feet ahead of us, I shuddered. I’d dealt with Trolls. I’d made horrific deals with Trolls. These assholes were at least ten feet tall with rotting flesh and a stench that made my eyes water. I knew from experience, they were as deadly as they were vile.

The Trolls were agitated as they trembled with rage and sprinted around the home.

“And we thought the cassowaries were going to be the problem in Hooker,” Rhys ground out.

“How many?” Martha whispered, crouched down with Jane, Vinnie and the boys.

“Five,” I answered. The area was wooded, but we had a decently clear view. “To kill them you need to pierce the left side of the neck. Go clean through with a sword. Magic won’t work.”

“Oh my,” Vinnie said, peeking out from behind the rock. “They seem to have taken over my Airbnb.”

“Not for long,” Rhys muttered.

“What in the fuck are they doing?” Martha questioned as her head popped up to take in the action.

“Don’t know,” I told her, watching their every move.

Their skin expanded and contracted with their anger. The rancid flaps emitted a scent that was noxious. The Trolls were banging on the doors and the walls of the log cabin. I half expected the entire structure to fall to the ground.

“They want something inside the house,” I stated.

“That’s a given,” Rhys agreed. “The question is, what?”

One of the Trolls shouted something, punched his massive fist through the front door and stormed inside. His lumpy, hairless body turned a hideous shade of greenish-blue and vibrated with fury. One by one, he pulled bodies out of the house and tossed them onto the hard dirt ground. I wasn’t sure what the creatures were. They were huddled together, wailing and cowering. They were larger than the average size of a human, but weren’t human at all. Their skin was a mottled gray and they had shocks of spiky silver hair.

“Son of a bitch,” Rhys ground out.

“What are they?” I asked.

He glanced over at me in surprise. “Female Trolls.”

I realized I’d never come across a female Troll. From all the stories, they were very rare. We watched in horror as the five huge males beat the three helpless females.

“Why aren’t they fighting back?” My instinct to destroy the evil bastards was hot and painful under my skin. My body tingled and my fingers began to spark. This was so wrong.

Rhys grabbed me and pulled me against his body. “Don’t,” he warned. “It’s a death wish.”

“They’re killing them,” I hissed, disengaging myself. His touch had calmed me. I didn’t understand why.

He glanced down at me and raised a brow. “They’re Trolls.”

He was right, but he was wrong. Yes, Trolls were our sworn enemies. Yes, they were despicable, but watching them murder weaker beings was unacceptable—even if the weaker beings were also Trolls.

“You will never defy us again. You lowly wenches will breed boys and only boys. The next batch of girls you bear will be killed the minute they take their first breath just like the last,” the largest of the Trolls roared at the battered and broken women trembling on the ground. Smoke and fire huffed out of his nostrils.

“Dead Trolls walking,” Rhys snarled under his breath.

I couldn't have agreed more. Slapping my hand over my mouth before I could shout that the sperm decides the sex of a child, I fought back the urge to charge and destroy. My hatred for Trolls increased to the point I thought I might go up in flames. Rhys touched my shoulder and I calmed.

I didn't acknowledge it. He didn't acknowledge it. I needed to talk to someone about the odd effect we had on each other, but I didn't know who to turn to.

"This makes my heart hurt so badly," Clemit whispered, wringing his pasty hands in distress. "Paris Hilton said everyone is worth somethin'. That means everyone. Well, maybe not them males, but the ladies are helpless."

His words were so simple yet so profound, I felt like I'd been struck by lightning. Clemit was correct. I was just unsure what to do about it.

With several last kicks and punches, the disgusting male Trolls transported away in a blast of grayish-green mist.

"We gotta help them gals," Jane whispered. "I mean, I'm not real fuckin' fond of Trolls but that was bullshit."

Rhys' lips compressed into a thin line. His reluctance was beyond obvious. "I don't think it's prudent,"

I shook my head. "We can't just leave them to die." Without waiting for an answer, I stepped out from behind the rock. "I'll go, the rest of you stay back. Get ready to cover me if it goes sideways."

Rhys swore under his breath and joined me. "You're *not* dying today, Juliet. You owe me a conversation. I'm coming with you."

"Nope," I said, pushing him back. Not that the huge man moved much, but the intent was clear. "My life isn't worth as much as yours. Period. This situation is mine to fix."

"Wrong," he replied, getting in step beside me. "It's ours. You heard my sordid past. You owe me yours. If you die before I hear it, I'll drag your sorry ass out of Hell to satisfy my curiosity."

"You're a dick," I snapped.

"Been called far worse. Of course, I could simply concentrate on your scent and see your secrets, but I'd prefer to do it the old-fashioned way." He snapped his fingers, produced two swords and handed me one. "You'll use this if necessary. Am I clear?"

I wanted to flip him off. I didn't. He was correct. I wasn't stupid. "Crystal clear, Gobshite."

"Seriously?" he asked, perturbed.

Laughing was wildly inappropriate, but I couldn't help it. He glared at me as if I was insane. He wasn't wrong. "Yep. Henceforth, you're Gobshite. And, before this is all over, I will tell you my story."

If there was a way to make sure the man ran millions of miles away from me, it was to share my past. It made my heart feel heavy in my chest, but it wasn't too difficult to learn of my unforgivable transgressions. It was fairly common knowledge amongst our kind. But fair was fair. I'd heard his. He would hear mine.

"Shall we attend to some Trolls?" he asked with only the slightest of winces.

"Yes. We shall."

We made our way to the log cabin undetected by the dying women. They were missing limbs and bleeding profusely. It was sickening.

"Plan?" Rhys asked as we concealed ourselves behind a huge oak tree.

I glanced over at him and shrugged. "None. You?"

He groaned. "I was under the impression you were in charge of this particular mission."

"You're following the orders of a woman?" I asked.

He stared at me for a long moment. I half wondered if he was searching my past by catching my scent. If that was the case, he would have run away screaming with horror. It was safe to say he wasn't.

"I'm following the orders of a warrior," he replied. "The sex of the warrior is immaterial."

My eyes grew wide. The Vampyre had come a very long way in a very short time.

"Shite," he hissed, grabbing my hand and pulling me to the ground. "We have company."

In the Immortal world, company was rarely a good sign. This company was awful.

There were six and, according to my step-pappy, they were the worst of the double-wattled bitches—bright blue heads, red wattles and black feathers. They circled the battered women flapping their wings and making ear-splitting squawking noises.

"No way," I snarled as one began to peck viciously at an armless female Troll.

Racing from our hiding place, I sprinted at the cassowaries wielding my sword. Rhys was right behind me, cussing up a storm.

We were fast, but our crazy posse was faster.

I was blown off my feet as Vinnie dropped an enchanted barrier around the injured Trolls. They were on the inside. The rest of us and the cassowaries were not. The women formed a tight clump inside the magical safety net and glanced around in confusion. They had no clue what was happening. Quite honestly, I didn't either.

With my sword in one hand and bat in the other, I assessed the situation. Much to my delighted horror, the cassowaries were screeching and tripping over each other to get the Hell out of Dodge. Clemit, Ebby and Hoppy were grinning and square dancing up a storm, while Martha and Jane warbled what sounded like 'Turkey in the Straw'.

"Will you look at that?" Vinnie cried out with a giggle.

"What the fuck?" Rhys asked. He put his hands over his ears and shook his head. "The sound is hideous."

"Wrong," I contradicted him. "It's freaking gorgeous." Slapping the bat on my open palm like I'd seen my pappy do, I grinned. "What say you we eliminate some cassowaries?"

Rhys looked at me like I was a goddess. I wasn't. Not even close.

"I say yes," he shot back with glowing eyes.

Together, along with Vinnie, we took on the cassowaries. They didn't even see us coming. Their shock as their heads began to fly off was the stuff legends were made of. Vinnie, as sweet as he was, was an absolute maniac in battle. I felt Rhys' roar of fury all the way to my toes as several of the cassowaries tried to maim the square-dancing boys. Due to the batshit-crazy warrior's mad skills, the birds didn't even scratch our friends. I was no slouch either. Pappy's bat came in handy.

The Vamps won the day. The cassowaries? Not so much.

"Hell to the yes!" Martha shouted.

"Yay!" Ebby sang as he did a little do-si-do around his cheering brothers.

Jane was so excited she slid into the splits and got stuck. "My cooter," she screamed. "Broke my dang cooter."

It took Clemit, Ebby, Hoppy and Vinnie to get her back up. Martha laughed her fool head off as Jane bitched and moaned about her no-no being busted. Once she was back on her feet, she dove at her bestie and they proceeded to wallop each other. It was ignored. The gals enjoyed a little physical fun.

There was still more to do.

We stood outside the enchanted barrier and stared at the female Trolls. They were hideous, but the thankfulness in their expressions wasn't lost on me.

Everyone was worth something.

"I say we take down the barrier," I announced.

"As you wish," Vinnie said, waving his hands.

The magical dome disintegrated into a rainbow of crystals. It rained down on all of us. The Trolls were still huddled together in fear.

To my shock and surprise, Rhys was the first to step forward. He extended his hand and nodded in respect.

I'd never been so humbled and proud in my life. I quickly joined him and smiled at the women. "We're not here to harm you."

"However, if you come at us, it will be the last thing you do," Rhys stated.

The least of the injured reached out and clasped Rhys' hand in hers.

"Thank you. We owe you our lives. What can we do to repay you?"

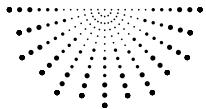
It was a loaded question and one I had no answer to.

"I think we should go inside and have a little chat," Vinnie suggested.

So, we did.

And the strange kept getting stranger.

R H Y S



THE LOG CABIN SMELLED RANK. WHILE IT WAS STILL SERVICEABLE, I WASN'T sure Vinnie would ever be able to remove the stench. It sucked that Vamps had such outstanding olfactory skills. If I had the luxury to puke, I would have.

I didn't. I was technically dead. However, I was quite proud of my avoidance of shitty manners. Even Vinnie noticed I didn't gag, dismember anyone or shout something profane. His covert thumbs of up made me feel excellent. I made a mental note to tell my batshit insane newly adopted mother how phenomenal I was. I needed all the extra credit I could amass. It would help offset the fireballs.

"Well, I have never," Clemit said, fanning himself frantically with his hands. "If there was ever a reason for a D-I-V-O-R-C-E, this is it! You gorgeous gals deserve so much better."

It looked to me that Clemit was wooing... the Trolls. Not only was the man as white as a ghost, but he had no taste whatsoever. What was even more perplexing was that the female Trolls were wooing back. Appalling wonders never ceased to amaze.

Ebby and Hoppy, not to be outdone by their brother, did a bit of a square dance. It was terrifying. No wonder the cassowaries lost their shit. The only saving grace was that Martha and Jane didn't sing.

That was good. I wasn't sure I'd be able to stop myself from peeling their skin off if they broke into song.

The three female Trolls giggled uncontrollably at Clemit's exclamation and the ungainly square dancing. At least I thought it was giggling. The noise was fang-grinding. Their speaking voices sounded like they'd chewed up

glass and swallowed it. Their giggles made mine sound fucking professional.

"Tooty, Tiny and Tinsel," Juliet said, checking the wounds on Tiny's head. "I agree with Clemite. You have to go into hiding. That was bullshit."

"Right you are," Martha said, handing each of the Trolls a pair of booty shorts and some kind of shiny band to wear as a top. "Jane and I can get y'all jobs as pole dancin' instructors. We're opening up a studio and need some hearty gals who don't mind concussin' themselves on the regular."

Everyone sat in the comfortable living room in confused silence after the offer. While it was indeed good of Martha to offer employment, getting concussed *on the regular* seemed like the last thing the Trolls needed.

Something wasn't sitting right. "May I inquire as to why you didn't try to defend yourselves?" I asked.

Tooty sighed and put her large mottled gray hands over her heart. "We're unable to fight back."

I squinted at her in disbelief. Trolls were the most violent of all the species. "Unwilling or unable?"

"Unable," Tiny confirmed.

It was far-fetched, but from the horror I'd observed, it stood to reason. "Explain."

Tinsel spoke up. "Long ago a spell was put on the females of our kind. We were created only for the use of the males to procreate. We were damned —given no skills or talent to protect ourselves or our children."

Tiny swiped at a green tear rolling down her cheek. "Our babes are taken from us upon birth. The males are raised to be fighters... and the females, except for the ones set aside for breeding, are killed."

I was incensed. Myself and my army had been spelled into a coma for a thousand years. Spells and curses chapped my ass. "Who cast this spell?"

"The Troll King," Tiny answered.

"Hang on a fuckin' second," Jane shouted, digging through her bag and pulling out black socks and strappy footwear to give to the Trolls. "Bitable McLuciousBuns offed that motherfucker a while back."

"Sure did," Jane added. "Ripped that slimy bastard's head right off his putrid body."

"What?" Tinsel asked on a gasp.

"Who in the fuck is Bitable McLuciousBuns?" I questioned.

"Satan," Juliet supplied.

The more I heard about the man, the more I admired him. He had a

reputation for being bad, but his actions proved otherwise. For a moment, I mulled over the information of the heinous spell cast on the female Trolls and the wretched treatment they'd endured for centuries as a result. My brain raced to put the pieces together. If Satan killed the Troll King, then there was only one conclusion. "The curse has been lifted."

"Are you sure?" Vinnie asked, handing out bottled blood to the Vamps and bags of crisps to the Trolls.

"It's a hunch," I admitted after I'd downed the liquid. "However, if the one who cast the curse is no more, then there's a fine chance that the curse is no more as well."

Juliet's smile was wide and very real. It made my heart feel light in a way that I didn't understand. Her joy made me unexplainably happy. My lips curled up and I almost hugged her. I refrained. Getting electrocuted wasn't on the agenda.

"Let's test the theory," she said, jumping to her feet. "Fight practice. Outside."

"With ground rules," I added, giving Tiny, Tinsel and Tooty a warning glare. While it felt right to have saved them, I didn't trust them completely. They were still Trolls. "No death blows. Period. If any of the three of you try, it will be the last move you make. Am I clear?"

The Trolls nodded. "Beyond fair," Tiny agreed. "Thank you."

"To be on the safe side we'll only fight each other," Tooty promised.

"We'll swear on the lives of our daughters not to harm our saviors," Tinsel added, then slapped her big beefy hand over her mouth.

I was confused. The disgusting males had stated that they'd killed the female offspring. "Not following."

Tinsel glanced over at the other two with an expression of grave hesitation. They nodded. She stood up and hustled to the back of the log cabin. Upon her return, she held three very stinky and arguably cute in an ugly way swaddled bundles. "Our daughters," she announced with pride.

"Ohhhhh, babies!" Ebby squealed, hopping up and beelining to the odiferous babes. "I love babies!"

I was a little concerned that he might have meant eating them, but my worry was quashed as he covered the smelly little gals in kisses. Hoppy and Clemit joined the reeking scene. Martha and Jane got right in there and began to fuss over the small babes.

"This is much more than we bargained for," Juliet commented, watching

the group gush over the baby Trolls. “If they can’t fight, we’re taking them with us.”

Pressing the bridge of my nose, it took all I had not to groan. I no longer cared about finding the Sacred Cock, but if we were going to locate what Juliet was searching for, having a large entourage wasn’t prudent. However, in my gut, I knew she was right. Even if Tiny, Tooty and Tinsel could fight, they had no experience and couldn’t be taught to take down a male Troll with a few hours of lessons.

“They’re going to be a liability,” I stated quietly.

She shrugged and refused to make eye contact. “Like I’m not already a liability?”

That was enough of that kind of talk. Staying at the log Airbnb for too long wasn’t smart. The Trolls might return to finish the job they’d started. However, a conversation needed to be had—a private one.

“Vinnie,” I said, approaching the fetid smelling party. “The plan is as follows. You and the boys will take Tiny, Tooty and Tinsel into the yard and assess their skills. If I’m correct that the spell died with the Troll King, we’re in better stead. If it didn’t, we’ll have an idea of what we’re dealing with.”

“We’ll watch them stinky babies!” Martha crowed, taking two into her bony arms. “Love me some youngins’! Even ones who smell like ass.”

“Fuck to the yes,” Jane agreed, cuddling the third smelly infant in her arms. “Little pole dancers for sure!”

I glanced out of the window and checked the sun in the sky. It was midday. “Two hours. Then we leave for Belchertown.”

I was saluted by all. It felt nice. My army was ragtag, but they were committed. One by one they filed out of the broken front door. Juliet brought up the rear. I grabbed her hand and pulled her back.

“You’re staying with me. We have an overdue chat,” I said.

All the color drained from her beautiful face and her eyes went from bright to dull and lifeless. It felt like a punch to the gut. I’d gone from putting a smile on her lips to devastating her. I hated the feeling. Honestly, it kind of sucked all around to have feelings. My instinct was to comfort her, but that would end in electrocution. Instead, I’d use my words.

Shite.

“Umm...” What in the Hell had Mother Nature told me to say? For the undead life of me, I couldn’t remember. I’d wing it—dangerous but doable. “Please and please.”

I winced. The magic word wasn't going to cut it. I closed my eyes and just spoke from my undead heart. It was difficult and possibly deadly—for me—since I had no idea what was going to come out of my mouth. I'd led armies into battle, but talking to Juliet was terrifying.

"You don't have to tell me anything. You owe me nothing. I just thought if we... umm... got to know each other a little, you might not want to set me on fire as often." There was no way I was going to open my eyes at this point. I needed to stop but my mouth didn't get the memo. "It gives me pain to know you want to end yourself. I don't want to be in a world without you in it, even if you continue to knee my balls into my esophagus. And yes, I understand in an academic way that your past is none of my business, but the fucking feelings I didn't know I possessed don't agree. Also, I freely admit I envision you naked constantly."

I smacked myself in the head. Hard.

"What did you just say?" Juliet asked.

I ignored her. If I didn't repeat it, she might think she'd imagined it. "The way you wield the pappy-bat makes the crotch of my pants very uncomfortable. Watching you behead Demons and cassowaries is the fucking sexiest thing I've ever witnessed." Someone seriously needed to set me on fire. I wondered if I could electrocute myself...

"Oh my God," Juliet muttered with a laugh.

I opened one eye. If my heart had the ability to beat it would be pounding out of my chest. She was smiling.

"That's much better," I told her. "I'd like you to forget most of what I just said."

"That's going to be hard," she replied, still grinning.

Who knew that making an ass of oneself was the way to woo a woman? Sven had never shared that information. I'd be sure to remove his arms and beat him soundly when I next saw my brother.

"Yes, well, the section that you're permitted to recall is the part where you don't have to tell me of your past. I'm rarely wrong—as in never—but I was wrong about that."

Juliet stared at me. It made me want to grab her and kiss her. I didn't. The next time we kissed, if we ever kissed again, it would be at her behest. I was pretty sure manners dictated that kissing people who didn't want to be kissed was not good. That sucked since I wanted to lock lips with her more than I wanted to remove Sven's arms.

“A deal is a deal,” she replied, back to looking lost and scared.

“Another time,” I said quickly. I needed her to smile. “More importantly than demanding things I have no right to know, I’d like you to define a Karen... please.”

“Seriously?”

“Very,” I replied.

The smile was back. I was winning.

“Okay,” she said, shaking her head and laughing. She pulled out the small metal rectangle that was used to replace pigeons and pressed some buttons. “According to the internet, ‘A Karen is a pejorative slang term for an obnoxious, angry, entitled and often racist middle-aged woman who uses her privilege to get her way or police other people’s behaviors.’”

While I didn’t technically understand much of what she’d just said, I’d gotten the gist of it. It was clear that Karens were a scourge on society. “My God,” I said, horrified. “That’s disgusting.”

“Correct,” she replied. “They also have very unattractive haircuts.”

I took the information in. The twenty-first century had produced some unsavory beings. “So, I *could* use Karens as weapons.”

Juliet tilted her head and observed me questioningly. “How?”

“Picture this,” I said, setting the scene. “It’s brilliant. If I had fifty Karens, I could launch them at my enemies like cannon balls. If they’re as heinous as you say, I can cut back on the dismemberment and skin peeling, which from what I’m learning is bad manners. Of course, while transporting the Karens to the battle I’d muzzle them and most likely put bags over their heads so we wouldn’t have to witness the haircuts. When I’m ready to propel the hideous creatures, I’d simply remove the bags and muzzles and throw them. The Karens could do their thing and voilà, the skirmish is done.”

Juliet’s mouth hung open. It was clear she was impressed.

“The main issue I see is how to find a Karen,” I explained. “My guess is that Sven could find them on the Book of Faces or the Tube of You. If you’d like to join me in procuring some Karens to use in melees I would be appreciative, since I’m not entirely sure what they look like. You’ve proven yourself to be a great warrior in battle and I’d be proud to hunt for Karens by your side.”

Juliet held up her hand. “Rhys, I’m going to stop you right there. We can’t launch Karens at the enemy.”

“Why?”

"Well," she said, trying to stifle her smile and failing. "They're human. We don't ever randomly kill humans."

I squinted at her. "Even Karen humans?"

"Even Karen humans. We're not supposed to ever kill unless provoked or to protect."

"I find that to be a very difficult rule," I admitted. "Your ethics are far superior to mine."

Juliet turned ashen and began to cry. I was so fucking confused I didn't know what to do. I'd just complimented her. It was the first time I'd complimented a woman in my life and I'd somehow screwed it up. Pulling a plan out of my ass, I was determined to make her smile again.

It was a grave mistake to start with square dancing. I hadn't danced in all my years. When my feet got tangled and I tripped over the low table in front of the couch, it shattered and a sharp wooden piece impaled my thigh. Yanking it out, I tossed it and broke Vinnie's window. I was a fucking shiteshow. However, Juliet was no longer as pale as a ghost. Her hands were over her mouth and her eyes were huge.

I decided to keep going. Granted, I'd never tried to electrocute myself, but there was a first time for everything. If Sven and my men were here, I'd never live this down. They were not here and honestly, even if they were, I wouldn't have given a shite. It took three times before I successfully set myself on fire. I was unsure if Juliet screamed or cheered. The roar of the flames in my ears was loud. I didn't do anything half-assed.

Of course, square dancing while on fire wasn't my finest moment. It led to another spectacular fall, which resulted in setting the cabin ablaze.

"Shite," I shouted, grabbing Juliet and racing out of the inferno I'd caused by hoping to make her laugh. Wooing a woman was painful.

"Vinnie, I set your house on fire," I shouted as I tossed Juliet onto a soft patch of grass. Dropping to the ground, I rolled until I was only smoldering. Standing up, I nodded in respect to my only friend. I was pretty sure it was bad manners to incinerate someone's home. "I'm sorry about your abode. Although, it might not be an enormous loss since it stank like shite, but I do apologize."

Martha marched over to Juliet and pulled her to her feet. "Girlie, you're gonna have to stop setting Gobshite on fire."

She shook her head. "I didn't."

"Juliet speaks the truth. I electrocuted myself—not something I'd

recommend,” I announced, slapping out the last of the flames. “In my attempt to make her smile, I might have gotten a little out of control. Square dancing is not my forte. In the future, I’ll leave that to Clemit, Ebby and Hoppy.” I turned back to Vinnie. “I’d like to make amends by purchasing you a new Airbnb. I have no money, so if you would be so kind as to loan me some, I shall hand it back to you.”

“Not to worry, friend,” Vinnie said with a wide smile. “An Airbnb is simply a thing. What’s important is that you and Juliet are fine. Things can be replaced. People cannot.”

I would never be as kind as Vinnie. If someone burned my home down, they’d be missing body parts.

“Cape boy is right,” Jane said, still holding the Troll babies. “And just so you know, Tiny, Tooty and Tinsel can fight. They suck, but they ain’t helpless no more.”

“They’re poetry in motion,” Clemit gushed. “But I don’t think they should be left without protection.”

“Ohhhhh, I agree!” Ebby chimed in.

The man was holding Tiny’s hand. Hoppy had his skinny arm around Tooty and Clemit was standing in Tinsel’s personal space. What was happening here? Did they procure smelly mates in the half hour I’d been making an ass of myself? Fuck talking to Sven. I’d be having a wooing conversation with the boys.

“Fine,” I said, glancing over at Juliet to make sure she was okay. She was staring at me like I was insane, but I was certain the corners of her kissable lips were slightly turned up. “The Trolls will join our army. The babies will be our mascots. If Tiny, Tooty and Tinsel’s fighting skills are not up to par, there’s a fine chance they can asphyxiate the enemy with their odor.”

“We’d be honored to choke out the enemy with our aroma,” Tiny said with a giggle.

“And we’ll square dance,” Hoppy chimed in.

“Don’t forget about us singing,” Martha added.

It took all I had not to remove the old gals’ tongues.

“Also,” Tooty said shyly. “We’ve named our girls.”

“Yes!” Tinsel chimed in. “We’ve named them in honor of our heroes—Rhysaline, Julie and Julrhys.”

I was shocked and moved. No one had ever named anything after me. Juliet’s smile was blinding. Her eyes sparkled and she swiped at a bloody

tear.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

“Nope!” Tooty said. “Thank you. We can never repay you.”

“Repayment isn’t necessary,” Juliet assured them. “It was our honor.”

“Agreed,” I said, glancing over at our stinky namesakes and giving them the thumbs up. “Are we ready to move on?”

A chorus of yesses answered my question.

“Excellent,” I replied, saluting the army of misfits. “It’s time to leave Hooker. Belchertown awaits.”

We gathered in a circle. I considered pinching my nose to block the stank, but thought it might be bad manners. I smiled. I didn’t need the Sacred Cock after all. Maybe the journey *was* the prize... The matter of finding my True Mate had been solved as well, I was just going to have to convince her of it.

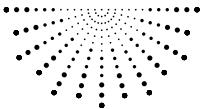
The woman in question stood next to me in the circle. Her closeness calmed my soul. When she leaned over and whispered in my ear, I had to bend over to accommodate the painful bulge in my pants.

“On the transport, you can touch my butt,” she said.

The wooing had been successful, albeit painful.

No pain, no gain. It was my new motto and I would embrace it with gusto.

JULIET



RHYS TOUCHED MY BUTT.

It made me tingle all over and wish for so much more.

I had no right to be happy, yet I was. It wouldn't last. It never did. The guilt for feeling moments of joy was overwhelming. People like me didn't deserve happiness.

It would be over the moment I shared my mortifying and horrific past with Rhys. I would tell him in Belchertown. Once we'd found the sacred item he searched for, I would disappear and never see his handsome face again. He deserved to find someone better than me to love.

"Where in tarnation is Burp Village?" Martha asked, looking around.

I smiled and shook my head at the butchering of the name. Although, she'd made a good point. While the landscape was gorgeous—rolling hills, ancient trees and a lovely body of water—I saw no evidence of a town.

"Belchertown—the one the humans know of—is about a half-hour drive away," Vinnie explained. "The Immortal Belchertown is right here!"

He was beyond excited. I was beyond confused. Was it invisible? The small Vamp spun in circles, causing his cape to flap wildly in the wind. His joy was contagious. Martha and Jane began to sing. It was heinous. Clemit, Hoppy and Ebby square danced—also heinous. Tiny, Tooty and Tinsel giggled and cheered the show on. Even the babies cooed.

On the flip side of the coin, Rhys looked as if he might have an aneurysm. That was impossible since he was dead, but I could sense from his expression he was only minutes away from some skin peeling. I had the urge to dismember a few folks as well, but I knew we would be distraught if we harmed our friends. I did give myself an internal pat on the back for my

realization.

When I placed my hand on his shoulder, he immediately calmed... as did I. We had some kind of strange juju going on. He put his large hand over mine and winked. It made my stomach flip. I tried to pull my hand back, but he was having none of it. In the end, I gave up and continued to touch him. It felt all kinds of right even though I knew it was wrong.

"Okay, friends," Vinnie said, wobbling unsteadily on his feet. He was clearly dizzy from his impromptu performance. "Let me explain a little bit about where we're about to visit. And I must say it's not surprising that Mother Nature chose Belchertown!"

"Spit it out," Martha insisted, bouncing a fussy baby in her arms. "Pretty sure Rhysaline took a dump. Or maybe not. Maybe it was a fart. Can't tell."

"Yes, yes, of course," Vinnie said. "Belchertown is only accessible through an enchanted portal. It's a place of safety for Immortals who don't quite fit into the normal world."

I wanted to point out that the words normal and Immortal didn't actually fit together, but stopped myself. Strange and unbelievable was our normal.

"You mean freaks like that asshat Martha?" Jane asked.

Martha flipped her buddy off. Thankfully, she didn't deck her. They were both holding babies.

"We don't call anyone freaks," Vinnie told her. "It's not nice."

"I knew that!" Rhys shouted. "And would you like to know why I know that?"

"You bet we do," Clemit told him.

Rhys flexed his muscles then took a bow. "Because I'm fabulous and I have fucking manners."

Everyone applauded... even me. He was nuts.

"Congratulations, friend," Vinnie said with a giggle. "I'm very proud of you."

Rhys grinned and took another bow. It was so absurd, it made me smile. Even at his most ridiculous, he brought light to my darkness.

"So, with that being said," Vinnie continued, "I want you to know you're about to enter a beautiful place filled with acceptance, love and redemption."

"You sayin' we're not gonna have to kick ass here?" Jane inquired, sniffing the babies' diapered bottoms then gagging.

"No ass-kicking in Belchertown will be necessary," Vinnie assured her. If I could have breathed a sigh of relief I would have.

“However, no place is without its own issues,” Vinnie shared. “From what I understand, an HOA has been established and isn’t going all that well.”

“And may I please inquire as to what the fuck an HOA is?” Rhys asked.

His use of the words please and fuck in the same sentence was par for the course.

“For the love of everything shitty,” Martha grumbled. “It’s a Homeowners Association. They tried that crap in Hell and about ninety Demons got desphinctered. It was a dang mess.”

The visuals were bad. I’d read about HOAs but had never seen one in action. Granted, I’d been in a dungeon for a decade and before that I’d been busy trying to off people I was related to.

“Sounds painful,” Tooty said. “The Trolls tried it ten years ago and about fifty ended up decapitated.”

“Think I’d rather be decapitated than desphinctered,” Jane commented. “But we didn’t really answer Gobshite.”

“You may call me Rhys,” Rhys said with a wince.

“Nah,” Jane said, patting him on the back. “I like Gobshite better. Anyhoo, an HOA is a bunch of pissants who get together and make up bullshit rules about your grass and if it’s okay to sunbathe naked. From what I’ve heard, they fine you if you take a dump in your front yard.”

“What about the backyard?” Martha asked.

Jane was stumped.

I was grossed out.

“Ohhhhhh!” Ebby squealed. “I’ve heard if you trim your trees incorrectly, you get your nards shaved in the town square.”

“Wait,” Martha yelled, perturbed. “What happens if you don’t have nards?”

Tiny raised her hand. Everyone glanced over. “My guess is that if you don’t have nards, they would shave your no-no in the town square.”

“Logical,” Jane said. “You’ve got you some big brains along with that stank-ass aroma.”

Tiny blushed with joy at the off-putting compliment. I wasn’t sure how the conversation had degenerated into this, but it kept on going.

Clemit added his two cents. “Not only that, but on reality TV, I saw an HOA stuff a poor little old lady into her trash bin because she forgot to take them up off the street after the garbage company came.”

“That’s bloody bullshit,” Rhys shouted. “What the fuck is wrong with those people?”

“Gobshite,” Martha reminded him with an eye roll. “You like to peel people’s skin off.”

Rhys smacked himself in the head. “Right. My bad. Bin stuffing is fine.”

“Calm down, friends,” Vinnie said. “Not that I’m a fan of HOAs, but I’m fairly sure there is no nard or no-no shaving and bin stuffing isn’t allowed.”

“Is there a reason they formed an HOA?” I asked.

Vinnie shrugged. “It boils down to a lack of leadership. The Belchertonians tried to elect a mayor, but that ended in somewhat of a civil war.”

“Are you positive there will be no ass-kicking today?” Rhys asked with a skeptical expression.

“Quite sure,” Vinnie said. “The Vamps, Fairies and Demons who got violent were sent to Hell to get their unruly ways readjusted.”

“Probably got desphinctered,” Jane commented.

She was ignored.

I was so confused. “How and why does Belchertown exist?”

Vinnie smiled and bounced up and down. “It was the lovely brainchild of Mother Nature herself! Many Immortals aren’t tolerant of those who are different. The ones who live there don’t have to stay, but most choose to remain in Belchertown. All the residents are free to come and go as they please.”

“I’m ready to check it out,” Martha announced. “If I keep smellin’ Rhysaline’s ass, I’m gonna pass out.”

Tooty giggled and gently took the baby from Martha. “She’s breastfeeding and very gassy.”

“Underfuckingstatement,” Martha said with a chuckle and kissed the baby’s head. “That little gal could blow a hole in the ozone layer with them stinky-ass farts!”

“Thank you,” Tooty said.

“Welcome,” Martha replied.

“Are we ready?” Vinnie inquired.

I took in our band of misfits and nodded. “We are.”



THE PORTAL TURNED OUT TO BE INSIDE A MASSIVE THREE-HUNDRED-YEAR-OLD oak. Vinnie waved his small hands. A shimmering hole appeared and we walked right through it. What was on the other side was far more magical... and busier than where we'd just been.

"Wow," I whispered as I took a look around.

"Call me crazy," Martha said. "But I'm gonna say these here folks need a new fuckin' PR person."

"Well, I'll be danged!" Hoppy said, slapping his thigh. "I'm gonna agree with you there, Martha. Never seen so many signs in my life."

So many was an understatement. There had to be at least forty welcome signs and each one was worse than the last.

"Strange," Rhys said, squinting at a sign in disbelief. "I'm aware that I've been in a coma for a thousand years but is 'There's More Than One Way To Eat A Belch!' normal?"

"Nope," I said with a half-laugh, half-groan. "Not normal. Nor is, 'Strong Enough For A Man, Made For A Belch!'"

"I'm just relieved to know that eating belches isn't part of fitting into the twenty-first century," Rhys muttered.

"Word," Martha said.

Jane cackled and pointed to a huge orange sign. "Lookit that one! 'Hands That Do Dishes Can Be As Soft As Your Belch!' What the fuck does that even mean?"

"Looks to me that someone got rather creative with slogans," Vinnie said with a giggle.

"That one's not too bad," Tooty said, referring to an enormous pink sign that read 'Bigger. Better. Belch.'

Clemit shook his head and chuckled. "I'm goin' with 'Melts In Your Belch, Not In Your Hand!' for the winner."

"If I had to surmise," Vinnie said. "I'd guess that this is the work of the HOA. These signs weren't here last month when I visited."

"That HOA needs to pull its head out of its crack," Jane said.

Vinnie looked intrigued. "Maybe that's why we're here... to help."

Rhys stepped forward. "I'd be happy to dismember and flog them with their appendages."

"Friend, that's bad manners," Vinnie reminded him.

"Yet eating belches isn't bad fucking manners?" Rhys demanded.

He did have a point.

Vinnie shook his head and grinned. “Let’s put dismemberment on the back burner as a last resort.”

Rhys wasn’t convinced, but his newly found manners had shown up with a vengeance and were here to stay... for the most part. “If you insist,” he said with a pout.

We began our trek into Belchertown.

It wasn’t clear how big the town was from where we were, but beyond the ridiculous signs I caught glimpses of charming Cape Cod homes nestled in colorful floral landscaping and quaint cobblestone streets. The mix of riotous colors shouldn’t have been a surprise. Mother Nature had created the place. It’s beauty rivaled Nirvana.

“Oh my!” Tinsel gushed. “So pretty.”

“Feels like home,” Clemit said with his ghostly white hands clasped in front of him.

In a strange way, I agreed with him. I had an intense desire to stay in Belchertown... crappy signs and all.

“Walk with me, friends,” Vinnie said to our group.

We followed our little buddy down manicured street after street. Martha, Jane and I stayed close to the Trolls. They were one of the most despised of the species. If anyone came at them there would be Hell to pay. They’d been through enough.

We walked several blocks of well-manicured neighborhoods then we approached the small downtown area. Everyone knew Vinnie and adored him. No surprise there. He was adorable and kind. There were Vampyres riding bikes, Demons flying kites and even Fairies doing yoga in a quaint little park.

Everyone waved and smiled... even at the Trolls.

Upon closer observation, I realized the Vamps were fangless, the Demons appeared to have purple eyes instead of red and the Fairies in the park were all sporting one wing instead of two. The species intermingled and seemed to get along with each other. It was odd and unheard of.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Martha shouted, pointing to a shop with a pair of enormous fangs done in fluffy white carnations resting above a sign that read, ‘Fangs-R-Us’. “It’s a freakin’ blood shop.”

“Yes,” Vinnie squealed. “They serve my bottled blood. It’s a necessity since many of the Vamps here are missing a fang... or two. Of course, there’s a back room for those who enjoy getting their sustenance the old-fashioned

way.”

“You mean playing hide the salami?” Jane asked, perplexed.

“Umm... no,” he replied with a grimace. “Taking it from the vein. Come meet the shop owners.”

The interior of the blood shop was as charming as the rest of Belchertown. Oak tables were scattered about on a shiny pink and white marbled floor. All the chairs were upholstered in delicate florals and bold stripes. The main colors were pink and red—lots of red. The blood was served in crystal goblets on silver trays. Over-the-top came to mind, but the atmosphere was warm and inclusive. I spotted several Vamps and even a few Fairies.

Two extremely well-put-together male Vampyres sprinted to the front of the shop and screamed with delight when they saw Vinnie. They both wore blood-red Armani from head to toe. It was a little in your face, considering the business. However, both of the men were friendly and thrilled to meet Vinnie’s bizarre entourage.

Vinnie hugged his buddies then turned to us. “These are my dear old comrades, Keith and Kurt! They’re the proprietors of Fangs-R-Us!”

Keith, tall, dark and handsome with piercing blue eyes, threw his hands in the air and squealed. “Any friend of Vinnie’s is a friend of ours.” He bowed to us. “Keith, at your service.”

“Absolutely!” Kurt agreed, handing out complimentary blood to all. He was short, freckle-faced and had a shock of red hair that stood straight up on his head and clashed badly with his fashion choice. His laugh was infectious and he was an excellent host. “I’m Kurt. Hope you’re enjoying Belchertown so far.”

“Thanks, Red,” Martha said, accepting a crystal goblet. “What the hell is up with all them signs at the entrance?”

Kurt rolled his eyes dramatically. “Right?” he squeaked. “The HOA has lost its mind. My husband and I are appalled. So tacky.”

“I,” Keith said, patting Kurt on the bottom, “am his husband, and he’s correct. We tried to vote the signs down, but that caused some rather unsavory retribution.”

“Didn’t understand that,” Rhys said. “Can you speak in Latin or Sanskrit?”

Both Keith and Kurt looked perplexed. I stepped right in. “Hi, I’m Juliet and the Latin speaker is Rhys. He’s been in a coma for a thousand years. He

just woke up recently and isn't quite up on all the lingo yet."

"Oh my! How exciting!" Keith said, ushering us over to a large table. "My apologies. Let me rephrase. The cranky Demons who appointed themselves the leaders of the Homeowners Association are meanies. If you disagree with what they say or set in motion, they do terrible things."

"Yes," Kurt chimed in as he arrived at the table with a tray of fang-shaped cookies for the Trolls. "The doody-heads threw raw eggs at our house and scratched the new paint job on our car."

"Your metal chariot?" Rhys asked, horrified.

Kurt was only confused for a hot sec. "Yes, our metal chariot. I was devastated and cried for three days."

"Unacceptable," Rhys huffed. "Shall I peel them for you?"

"I'm not sure what that means," Keith said.

"Not complicated," Rhys assured him as the rest of us groaned. "You point out the metal chariot defacers and I peel their skin from their bodies in retribution."

"Wow," Kurt said, paling a bit. "Not sure we want another war here. Although, it's lovely of you to make such a... umm... brutal offer."

"Yes," Rhys agreed. "I'm a badass warrior. Although, I've been led to believe that skin peeling is bad manners—which I find to be bullshit but I feel strongly that when metal chariots are involved, I can make an exception."

Vinnie chimed in. "Let's leave the skin peeling on the same back burner as the dismemberment."

Rhys looked so disappointed, I almost laughed. I wasn't sure why, but I felt bad for him. The dummy was just trying to help in the only way he knew how. He began to fidget to hide his embarrassment. My mouth moved before my brain had time to stop it. My brain was kind of an asshole.

"You know," I said, trying to offset how savage the warrior Vamp appeared to be. "Back in the olden days, I would have done even worse. I might have sent a few Wraiths their way or even knocked a few heads off just to show them I meant business." I was horrified at the words leaving my lips, but they seemed to perk Rhys up. The corners of his absurdly kissable lips curled, so I stupidly kept talking. "Possibly a little bludgeoning—definitely a face rearrangement. Maiming. Lots of maiming. Maybe pitting them against each other with homicidal lies so they offed each other. So, please don't judge Rhys."

"My goodness," Keith said, fanning himself with a cookie.

I closed my eyes and pretended if I couldn't see them, they couldn't see me. What I'd just said was awful. I recognized that. "Sorry for the heinous word vomit," I whispered. "That was the old me, not the new me. I just didn't want you to think badly of Rhys."

"You mean Gobshite," Jane cut in.

"Umm... sure," I agreed, still reeling from what I'd said and the mind-blowing realization that I knew all of it was very wrong. "Don't judge Gobshite. He and I are both working hard to curb our bloodthirsty tendencies unless we're attacked or defending others."

Keith and Kurt exchanged a glance of excitement. It made no sense. They bounced up and down in their chairs. I was about to ask what was going on but got interrupted.

"I have a boner," Rhys announced, pointing to his crotch.

"Oh my God," I muttered and let my head fall to the wooden table with a thud. Never again would I defend him. I was an idiot.

Clemit jumped in and thankfully changed the subject. "So, Keith and Kurt, tell me why y'all nice men have chosen to live in Belchertown."

Keith put his arm around his husband and smiled. "While it's not unacceptable to be gay in the Vampyre world, it's frowned upon by many. We got so tired of having to live a lie to protect ourselves. Belchertown accepts all as God made us."

"This is so true," Kurt said, resting his head on Keith's shoulder. "Other than the cranky Demons who insisted on an HOA, this place is Heaven on Earth."

"I too am beginning to be gay—just like you," Rhys announced, much to everyone's confusion. He held up his hand to stop the barrage of comments coming his way and continued to put his large foot into his mouth. "I've spent my life being angry and aggressive—furious at the world. I had no friends. No fucking manners... just my army of men who feared me. It wasn't until I met Juliet that I thought I might indeed be gay."

He smiled at me. My mouth just hung open. He took that as a good sign. It was and it wasn't. I knew what he was saying even though he had no clue what it sounded like he was saying.

"Yes, I think of Juliet naked all the time. She makes me very gay. She hasn't electrocuted me in at least twenty-four hours. That makes me even gayer. The gayness I feel for Juliet makes me want to be a better man. It's not a good gay trait to skin people alive. I know that now. However, the offer is

still on the table to peel the cranky Demons.” He stood up and addressed the occupants of the blood shop. “My name is Rhys and I am proud to finally be gay.”

He received a round of applause from the customers. The Vampyre took a bow and sat back down.

“Gobshite,” Martha said, barely containing her laughter. “While what you said was beautiful in a real fucked-up way, I’m gonna have to tell you that lots of words have more than one meaning nowadays—like the word gay.”

“Speak,” he demanded, eyeing her warily.

Vinnie took the lead. He smiled and patted Rhys’ hand. “Gay can definitely mean happy. But it’s also the term used to define a loving male/male or female/female relationship—sexually speaking.”

Rhys’ brow wrinkled in thought as he mulled over the new information. When it hit him, his eyes grew huge. “Ahhh, I see,” he said with a laugh. “First off, I take no issue with the kind of gay Keith and Kurt happen to be. In fact, it would give me great pleasure to peel the skin from the shites who’ve made you have to hide who you are.”

“What a lovely offer,” Kurt said with his hands on his undead heart.

Keith nodded his grateful agreement.

“However,” Rhys continued, staring straight at me. “Juliet makes me and my rod the other kind of gay, if you all know what I mean.”

I let my head fall back and I stared at the ceiling. “That is entirely too much information, Gobshite.”

“The truth is the truth,” he replied. “If anyone needs proof, I can pull down my pants.”

“Hell to the no,” I snapped. “Your pants stay on. It’s terrible manners to flash your junk in public.”

“Noted,” he said with a wink.

I wanted to punch him, electrocute him and kiss him. I did none of those things. He was insane.

“I do believe the real question here is, does Rhys make Juliet feel gay?” Keith asked with a twinkle in his bright blue eyes.

I wanted to answer. The answer would be yes. I would not answer. It wouldn’t be fair to Rhys or me. He needed to understand my past. He would no longer feel gay around me when I told him.

I gave Keith a tight smile that didn’t reach my eyes. “I plead the Fifth.”

Rhys appeared confused. “Does that mean yes or no?”

No one said a word. Leaving him hanging was low. I was working on not being hateful. “It means... that it remains to be seen.”

Rhys’ wide grin made me feel breathless even though I didn’t breathe. His smile would turn into a frown shortly.

What I’d done couldn’t be changed. It colored my future no matter how sorry I was.

“Shall we show you around Belchertown?” Kurt asked. “There are some people you must meet.”

“Oh yes!” Ebby said. “I just love it here. Is there an application to fill out to be a resident? We’d love to have a place to call home... and maybe... Tooty, Tinsel, Tiny and the babies would enjoy bunking with us. Forever.”

The Trolls giggled and squealed so loudly it shook the building. The sound was alarming but the joy was unmistakable. Tiny gathered herself and answered Ebby’s request. “It would be our greatest honor to bunk with beautiful men like you!”

The three ghostly white and mostly toothless Vampyres whooped it up and did a quick square dance to celebrate. Martha and Jane sang an incredibly shitty rendition of Bruno Mars’ ‘I Think I Wanna Marry You’. I was worried that the customers in the blood shop might attack since the performance was an ear-splitting eyesore, but they clapped and cheered them on.

It was surreal... and truly beautiful. The acceptance here was staggering.

Rhys recognized the beauty even though the out-of-key and alarming physical display set him on edge. He gripped the edge of the table so he wouldn’t peel off anyone’s skin.

I was proud of him. I was proud of me. My desire to headbutt my newly adopted mothers was strong, but my love for them made me rethink it. It was a win.

Keith quickly ran to the blood counter and came back with a stack of papers and handed them out. “It’s just a formality,” he explained. “If you think Belchertown is for you, then you’re all more than welcome! Plus, Kurt is an ordained Mating Minister! We’d be honored to perform a commitment ceremony. It would be just darling!”

“Totally darling,” Kurt agreed. “We could do it in the town square and make it a real shindig.”

“We’ve been led to believe that the town square is utilized for nard and no-no shaving,” Rhys announced, eyeing Keith and Kurt with distrust. “My army might be smelly and somewhat alarming looking, but I will not tolerate

having their balls and lady bits de-haired in public.”

“Oh my goodness,” Keith said, gobsmacked. “Where on earth did you hear that?”

Rhys glanced over at me in a panic. He wasn’t sure how to reply without dismembering someone. I immediately saved him without a thought. I was as nuts as he was.

“Probably the Tube of You,” I explained with only the slightest of winces. “Obviously, he needs to spend a little less time on the internet.”

“Yes!” Rhys bellowed. “The Tube of You is a dangerous place. I’d have to put it right up there with Hell, the Book of Faces and Karen.”

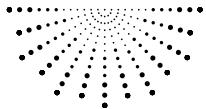
Our small army and our newest friends did their best not to laugh. Rhys didn’t even notice. He was looking at me with a huge grin. He gave me the *thumbs of up* and a wink. I just shook my head. The idiot had grown on me. I was an idiot to lead him on, but tragically, that would soon be remedied.

“Let’s get moving,” Kurt said, ushering us out of the front door. “I have a very good feeling about today!”

I wasn’t as certain as the optimistic Vamp, but I wasn’t going to be the party pooper.

12

R H Y S



THE STROLL THROUGH BELCHERTOWN WITH KEITH AND KURT WAS QUITE pleasant. I felt strangely comfortable in this odd place. It helped that several of the shops had signs written in Sanskrit. Sven and my men would feel right at home here. Although, it was shocking to see so many different species getting along without bloodshed or violence. I walked slightly behind Juliet so I could watch her butt sway. It was outstanding and I longed to grab it. The woman was a goddess in a t-shirt, combat pants and boots. My rod had taken notice, which caused me to walk as if I had a limp. I didn't care. It was worth it.

Vinnie noticed and gave me a light elbow to the gut.

"Juliet is far more than her backside," he whispered. "It's not great manners to ogle her bottom."

I heard what he said. It was true that Vinnie had many more years of experience with manners than me, but I disagreed with his assessment. "If I thought her bottom was heinous, and I stared at it to make rude comments, *that* would be bad manners. What I'm doing is entirely different," I explained, adjusting my cock in my pants so I didn't fall to my knees from the pain of my erection. "I'm *worshiping* her butt. It's like a spoken compliment but with my eyes and my rod."

My outstanding answer left my best friend speechless. I loved winning.

"Mmmkay," Vinnie said. "How about instead of staring at her bottom, you ask her out on a date?"

I glanced over at my small companion. "I don't understand."

"A date is an evening or afternoon of doing something fun with someone you enjoy spending time with," he explained.

"Like shagging Juliet in a field of fragrant wildflowers?" I questioned.

"Umm... no. At least not initially," he told me. "Definitely not on the first date."

I was greatly disappointed. "The second date?"

Vinnie took my arm and walked us away from our group. "Hmmm... how can I explain this to you?"

"I'd suggest uncomplicated language and getting right to the heart of the matter," I told him. "If you'd like to speak in Latin that might be helpful too."

Vinnie laughed. "Okay, if you want to date Juliet, you need to get to know her—really know her. Find out what you have in common. Find out what she likes and dislikes. If you're truly compatible, then the shagging in a field of fragrant wildflowers will happen naturally."

"I see," I said, nodding. "This is excellent wooing information. Shall I inquire what shagging positions she enjoys?"

"No," Vinnie said with an eye roll. "Ask her what her favorite color is or what books she likes to read."

"I can do that," I told him. "I could also ask her for tips on dismemberment and decapitation."

"I'm going to go with a no on that," Vinnie advised. "Juliet is working hard on becoming a better person and not being as violent."

"Wise counseling," I said, slapping my friend on the back and accidentally sending him crashing into a group of Fairies.

"Oh no!" Vinnie said, getting to his feet and making sure the Fairies were okay. "My apologies."

"No worries," a female Fairy said, patting the little Vamp on the head. "I'm very clumsy myself."

Our group had stopped and came back to see what the fuss was about. Other Belchertonians had gathered as well, making sure all were fine. It was unusual to observe Vampyres aiding Fairies with Demons helping as well. There were even a few Angels in the crowd.

"You're too kind," Vinnie said, bowing to the Fairy. "I'm Vinnie."

She batted her lashes at my friend and curtsied to him. "Pleasure to meet you, Vinnie. I'm Karen."

"OH MY GOD," I shouted. "Everyone back away. It's a Gobshite Karen. Not to worry. I will kill it."

The townsfolk who had gathered screamed when I drew my sword and aimed it at the Gobshite Karen. It was chaos. I knew I'd be admired greatly

for eliminating the Gobshite Karen. Honestly, I was shocked they hadn't realized a monster was in their midst. What was even more shocking was that Vinnie dove on top of the Gobshite Karen to protect her. Beheading my best friend wasn't good manners or on my list of things to do, but the Gobshite Karen must be vanquished.

Just as I was about to do the deed, I was expertly tackled from behind by someone whose skills rivaled mine. It was unsettling. I roared and tried to outmaneuver the warrior to get them off my back. I failed. The electrocution was excruciating. I literally saw stars. However, the hissed warning whispered in my ear made my rod so hard I was certain it would break.

"Back down. You can't kill an innocent Fairy," Juliet snarled. "Just because someone is named Karen doesn't mean she's a Gobshite Karen."

My reply was a few octaves higher than I'd intended due to the problem in my pants. "And how was I supposed to know this?"

Her body relaxed and she rested her cheek next to mine. It was heavenly. The temptation to turn my head and kiss her lips was enormous.

"It's okay, Rhys," she said. "There was no way for you to know. I had to make sure you didn't do something stupid that you'd regret."

It was the kindest thing anyone had ever done for me. "So let me get this straight. A Karen isn't always a Karen?"

"Correct," she said, rolling off of me.

I felt the loss of her body heat acutely. I didn't like it. "Should I have paid more attention to the haircut?" I inquired.

She shook her head and laughed. I didn't know why, but I was delighted to have caused it.

"No," she said, extending her hand to help me to my feet.

I wasn't sure I could stand up yet, but wasn't about to let the opportunity to touch her without getting electrocuted pass me by.

"I want you to apologize to the Fairy," she told me, slapping out the small fire on my t-shirt.

"Seriously?" I asked.

"Deadly," she replied. "In the future, we're going to make sure you understand things a little more thoroughly."

The fact that she said the word future made me happy. She was my future whether she wanted to admit it or not. If Juliet wanted me to apologize, I would do it.

As I approached the Karen, she backed away in fear. Normally, I

would've felt no remorse. Today I did. Turning into a weenie was strange... I rather liked it. I considered setting myself aflame to show my regret, but I'd just been on fire and it had sucked. Instead, I'd use my words.

"Karen. Please," I bellowed. "I have made a grave misjudgment." I got down on one knee and stole a glance at Juliet. She gave me the thumbs up. I was on the right track. "I thought you were a Gobshite Karen from the Tube of You. Please. It's my fault that I didn't check out your haircut closely enough. It's quite fetching. If I'd not lost my shite and jumped to conclusions, I would have recognized that there is no way that you're a Gobshite Karen. Please. If you would like, you're welcome to bludgeon or dismember me. While I did believe I was protecting Belchertown from a monster, I was wrong. This is something that rarely—like, as in never—happens. It was an error that could have ended terribly and for that, I hope you can accept my regrets. In the future, I will assess the hairdo before I attack. Please."

I figured the magic word would be helpful. I'd used it four fucking times so she was aware I had manners.

There was animated murmuring in the crowd as Karen mulled over what I believed to be an exceptional apology. She discussed the validity of my words with her Fairy friends. A few Demons got in on the heated debate. That might not bode well. Demons were generally dicks. Unsure of what I would do if my regrets were denied, I tried to come up with a few backup plans. Sadly, they all involved dismemberment. Hopefully, Karen would accept my *mea culpa*. I was kind of fucked if she didn't.

"Apology accepted," Karen finally said with a friendly smile. "I've been thinking about changing my name and this might just be the nudge I needed. Thank you."

I bowed to her. I was a little perplexed by her admission, but knew that it was good manners to say "you're welcome" after someone said "thank you". "You are most welcome, ummm..."

"Karolyn," she replied. "I shall now be called Karolyn!"

The crowd that had amassed when I'd almost offed an innocent person cheered wildly. Karolyn curtsied and I bowed. There was whispering amongst the spectators focused on both Juliet and me. I observed Keith and Kurt talking excitedly to the Belchertonians. Something was amiss.

"Okay friends," Kurt said, gathering our small group back together. "It's time to meet Ronald and McDonald!"

“I’ll have a Big Mac and some fries,” Martha announced, much to the amusement of Jane and the rest of the gang.

I didn’t get it, but that was to be expected. The twenty-first century was fucking baffling.

“Yes, yes, yes!” Keith said. “Ronald and McDonald are thrilled you’re here. They’ve been waiting for you for eons.”

“Waiting for who?” Hoppy asked.

“Juliet and Rhys,” Keith said.

Juliet squinted at Vinnie. “That doesn’t sound good.”

The little Vampyre was as confused as she was. “It is a bit odd, but perhaps they’re seers.”

“I’m going alone,” Juliet announced in a brook-no-bullshit tone.

My Johnson was intrigued by her authoritative bossiness. However, I wasn’t one to be bossed. There was no way in Hell she was facing anything alone... ever again.

“No can do,” I said in my outdoor voice. The louder one spoke, the more command one had. “If Ronald McDonald wants to see both of us, that is what he shall get.”

“Ronald and McDonald,” Kurt corrected me.

“Is And his middle name?” I asked, puzzled.

“Umm... no,” Keith chimed in. “They’re two people.”

“With the same name?” I demanded. This was ridiculous.

Keith sighed, which was impossible since he didn’t breathe. It had to be for effect. I put the move in my back pocket to use at another time. It would freak Sven out.

“No,” Keith said. “How about we just go and meet them?”

“As you wish,” I replied. “We will join you.”

Juliet gave me the stink eye. I gave her the thumbs up.

“But first,” I said, pointing at Juliet. She was antsy and looked like she might blow something up. “Is there somewhere private I could chat with Juliet?”

“Oh yes!” Kurt assured me, gesturing ahead. “There’s a lovely field of fragrant wildflowers just down the street.”

I shot Vinnie a shocked glance. He raised a brow and shook his head. Shite. There would be no shagging today. We hadn’t had our first date yet.

“That will be just fine,” I said, taking a reluctant Juliet’s hand in mine and dragging her down the street.

It was time for us to have our overdue talk.



THE FIELD WAS ENCHANTING, BUT IT PALED IN COMPARISON TO JULIET'S ethereal beauty. She paced the colorful meadow like a general about to go into a deadly battle that she knew she couldn't win. I watched and said nothing. I wanted to force her to tell me why she despised herself enough to want to end her existence. The mere thought of a world without her in it made me feel empty and cold. I'd compelled myself to block all feelings and emotions after I'd viciously done away with the spiteful witch who'd killed my brothers. To me, love meant pain and death. The only person I'd let myself feel anything for was Sven. He was my blood.

But Juliet... she made me feel again.

I didn't want it to end. I hadn't felt so alive in all my years.

Ronald McDonald awaited us. I was sure he would get annoyed if we didn't show up soon. I'd already almost beheaded an innocent Karen who wasn't a Karen. My track record in Belchertown wasn't good.

"You are not an abomination," I said.

Juliet paused mid-step and glared. Her eyes sparkled dangerously. "You know nothing of me."

"I know much," I shot back. "I know a woman who's a more passionate warrior for justice than most men I've fought alongside. I know a woman who fought fucking cassowaries to save the women and children of our most heinous enemy. I know a woman who rightly electrocuted me when I almost offed the ghostly pale and mostly toothless trio of Vampyres who turned out to be really great gents. I know a woman who touches me and calms my soul."

"That's the new me," she hissed. "The old me is the one you should run away from."

"I don't see her," I replied.

Juliet raised her arms above her head. Her voice was ragged and her body trembled. "She's standing right here and she's the most abhorrent Immortal alive."

"Tell me why."

She stared at the ground for a long moment then dropped to her knees.

The broken Vampyre dug her nails into the skin on her arms and scratched herself deeply enough to draw blood. I wasn't the one who was bleeding but I felt her pain in a raw and visceral way.

Without a care for my own safety, I pulled her to her feet and took her into my arms. With one hand, I cupped the back of her head and gently rubbed. With my other, I held her close so she wouldn't fall. Juliet fit against my body like she'd been meant for me. I was shocked that my rod didn't react. Instead, it was my heart. It felt broken for her despair, yet it felt whole with her in my arms.

"Talk to me," I whispered. "I will not judge."

My t-shirt was covered in blood from her tears.

"You will," she insisted. "And you should."

I waited. If she chose to tell me nothing, that was fine. I wasn't going anywhere and neither was she. We were undead. We were Immortal. We had many years ahead of us to talk.

"I tried to kill my family," she choked out as the tears flowed freely.
"Astrid. My father. My sister Raquel. My brothers. All of them."

"I heard the word *tried*," I said, picking her up and carrying her to a bench. I sat down and kept her firmly on my lap. She had no clue, but I needed her as much as she needed me right now.

She shook her head. "You don't get it," she ground out. "I summoned Wraiths. I made deals with Trolls. I attempted to kidnap Astrid's son. Murderous chaos followed me everywhere I went. I was out of my mind."

"Did you succeed?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No."

"Was it in retribution?" I queried.

She laughed. It was harsh. When Juliet tried to pull away, I held her fast.

"Stay with me," I begged. "Talk to me. Let me help you. I'm as broken as you are. I can keep you calm the way you keep me calm."

Her body sagged in my arms. "You're an idiot."

"So I've been told," I replied with a small smile.

She ran her hands through her hair then winced in embarrassment when she saw the damage she'd done to her arms. "It wasn't retribution. They'd done nothing to me. It was all me. Every deadly action was my fault. I was finally captured—best day of my life." She swiped at her tears and stared off into the distance. "Because of Astrid's compassion, I was put in the dungeon at the Cressida House for a decade. Everyone else wanted me put to death. I

should have been put to death. Astrid made a mistake.”

“Astrid’s the Chosen One. I doubt she made a mistake,” I reminded her. “And things in our world rarely happen for no reason.”

She didn’t reply. I kept talking.

“Astrid’s mate Ethan would have perished without your knowledge. In turn, I don’t believe that Astrid would have survived his demise. That alone is enough of a gift to be forgiven for the past.”

She ran her hands through her hair and made a sound like a wounded animal. It tore at my heart.

“I don’t expect forgiveness. All I want is the chance to apologize to those I’ve harmed. I feel selfish even wanting the chance...”

She tried to gouge herself again. I took her hands in mine and held them.

“What happened to you?” I asked, softly. I knew with everything I was that Juliet wasn’t inherently evil. My guess was that Astrid knew it as well. Something beyond tragic had happened to the woman in my arms.

She shook her head. “Nothing,” she said flatly. “The reasons don’t matter. What I did matters.”

I didn’t agree. Her scent was alluring. If I wanted to, I could look into her past. However, for the first time in all my years, I wanted permission. “Let me in. Please.”

“Why haven’t you run away yet?” she demanded. “I’m not good enough for you or anyone.”

“Wrong,” I said. “Let me into your mind. Please.”

She hesitated then closed her eyes. “You may look. And after that we’re done with each other. Forever. Please.”

I didn’t reply. If I agreed with her, it would be a lie.

I breathed her in. I felt dizzy and ill. The pictures came fast and disjointed. My fury as the images cleared was all-consuming. The sheer depravity was beyond anything I’d witnessed.

A woman held a power so strong over Juliet, it was terrifying. Scene after scene of Juliet begging to be loved ended in psychotic games and abuse so hideous, my blood began to boil. Visions of Juliet on the ground in literal pieces as the woman watched with dispassion and hatred. She’d been groomed through violence to be the tool of an abomination...all because she loved her mother. The verbal, physical and mental abuse should have broken her.

It did.

Juliet and Astrid were the daughters of a monster... like I was the son of a monster. The difference was that I didn't want my mother's love. Juliet had. She'd wanted it desperately and it had destroyed her.

I also saw the crimes she'd committed against her family at the behest of her mother. The tragedy was that even after her mother was gone, she still tried to carry out her gruesome agenda. I understood why she thought she was an abomination, but I didn't agree.

I watched as Juliet did years of therapy in a cell. It was painfully clear she was horrified by what she'd done and was sorry. Her self-worth was nonexistent.

It was the past.

She'd been given a second chance... but she didn't want to take it.

Tears filled my eyes. I hadn't cried since I'd held the bodies of my dead brothers in my arms twelve hundred years ago. Ending my mother's life had ended the cycle of abuse. I wished more than anything that I'd been around to end Juliet's mother as well.

"It's okay," I whispered against her hair. She sobbed in my arms. "It will be okay."

We sat together and cried. I didn't give a fuck that it wasn't manly. When her tears finally subsided, she looked up at me.

"Why are you still here?" she asked.

"Because I see you," I told her.

"If that's the case, then I repeat," she said in an emotionless tone, as she pushed me away and got off my lap. "Why are you still here?"

The fact that she sat down next to me was a good sign. The fact that she didn't set me on fire was priceless. "Listen to me. You might not ever get the forgiveness you seek, but it doesn't mean you shouldn't go after it." I considered the options for a brief moment and then came up with a plan of action. "I don't know... maybe when you go to apologize you might want to rip off an arm or a leg to show you mean business."

Her eyes grew huge and her mouth fell open.

"Shite." It wasn't the reaction I hoped for. "That might be a bit much. I was just thinking of an eye for an eye sort of thing. And since you didn't actually kill anyone in your family, you don't actually have to kill yourself... but my idea was foolish."

"Oh my God," she gasped out. "I had the same idea. Mother Nature shot it down."

I raised a brow. “She greases herself up and falls off of poles.”

Juliet’s giggle was the most beautiful music. I felt as if I’d won the battle of my life.

Grabbing her hands, I pulled her closer. “How about this? I’ll go with you to apologize to each of your family members. If you start to lose your shite or if I think the apology isn’t sincere enough, I can electrocute you or even rip off an arm or a leg and flog you with it.”

“Wait. What?” she asked with a grimace.

“Umm... okay,” I said, kind of freaking out. I wasn’t good at the twenty-first-century crap. “If that doesn’t work, I can rip off my own legs and flog myself to distract your family while you come up with a better apology. I’d prefer not to electrocute myself, but if you feel that would be more impressive, I’ll do it!”

Juliet was awestruck. “You would do all of that for me?”

“Yes. I would.”

“Why?”

I considered what I wanted to say. Scaring her off was the last thing I wanted to do. “Should a person ask a question when they’re not ready to hear the answer?”

She twisted her hair in her fingers as she stared at me. She shook her head. “No, they should not.”

I shrugged and smiled.

“So, I’ll ask again,” she informed me. “Why would you do that for me?”

The air between us felt electrically charged. My greatest desire was to take her into my arms and kiss her until we both forgot our names. And after that, I wanted to shag her in the fragrant field of wildflowers. I didn’t. Getting busted by our small dysfunctional army and the population of Belchertown wasn’t my idea of a romantic time. While my wooing skills weren’t stellar, I knew public shagging was not good.

“I’ll do that for you because my soul recognizes yours at a bone-deep level,” I said, as her cheeks turned pink. “I will do that for you because I’d rather be electrocuted by you than be without your company for even a moment. I will do that for you because you make me feel strangely squishy. When I’m not with you, I’m thinking about you. Constantly.”

“Naked?” she asked with a tiny and very naughty grin.

My rod got involved now along with my heart. I was quite sure my nards were a hellish shade of blue. “Yes. Absolutely.”

She bit down on her lips and I almost jumped her.

"Mmkay," she said, running her hands through her blonde hair. "I don't deserve you. You deserve someone much better than me." She held up her hand to stop me from speaking. "But... I know it's unusual in the Vampyre world to date, but I need you to understand what you're getting into with me. I want you to have the freedom to walk away if my past is too much."

My smile was so wide it hurt my cheeks.

She continued with a smile she couldn't hide. "We'll go slow."

I squinted at her. "Define slow."

She laughed. "We'll go on dates. Kind of like humans do when they get to really know each other."

"Like to Hooters?" I asked.

"No. Not like Hooters," she replied with a laugh.

I nodded. Hooters was too loud and filled with too many humans anyway. Vinnie had given me a few suggestions. I'd use them soon, but now I wanted to speak from my heart—something very new to me. I took a fake and unnecessary breath like I'd seen Keith do and went for it.

"My goal is to shag you in a fragrant field of wildflowers until neither of us can walk for a week or possibly a month," I admitted. Using my words was getting easier and easier. Juliet's wide-eyed and open-mouthed response gave me confidence. "From what I understand, shagging isn't on the agenda until we've accomplished a few dates. However, we did visit Toad Suck, Hooker and now Belchertown. Should we count those as dates?"

"I'm going with a no on that," Juliet said. "Beheading Demons, fighting cassowaries and keeping you from offing an innocent Karen are not great dates."

"I see what you're saying," I told her. "I shall talk with Clemit, Hoppy and Ebby about an appropriate idea for a date. They seemed to have bagged the Trolls very quickly. My guess is that even though they're unimpressive in the looks department, they're expert wooers. Or they have big dicks."

"Oh my God," Juliet muttered with a strained laugh.

I took that as a sign of assent. A laugh was a laugh no matter how much it sounded like she was choking.

"Excellent! I'd suggest we visit Ronald McDonald now."

"Ronald and McDonald," she corrected me with a light punch to my arm.

"Whatever," I told her, taking her hand in mine. "Let's get this over with and then we'll go on a date. Maybe Martha and Jane have some suggestions."

The horrified look on her face made me grin.

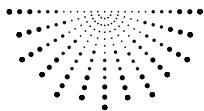
“Or maybe not,” she said, leading me out of the fragrant field of wildflowers.

I owed Mother Nature a grand gesture of gratitude. I knew now without a doubt that women were equal to men. I had a good grip on manners even though I was a work in progress. The word please was a real lifesaver. I’d also found my True Mate. I knew it and she knew it. Going slow wasn’t an issue. We had a lifetime of shagging in fragrant fields of wildflowers to look forward to. The feeling of joy was indescribable.

The Sacred Cock was immaterial now. All that mattered was Juliet’s healing. We would find what she was searching for and begin our wooing.

The journey was definitely the gift.

JULIET



WHEN I'D TOLD RHYS WHAT I'D DONE AND LET HIM SEE MY PAST, IT FELT like my world had ended—like someone had shoved a vacuum into my sternum and sucked out my insides. What replaced the newly vacant space was icy cold and desolate. My disbelief when he didn't run was overwhelming. His offer of dismembering himself to help me apologize to my family was ridiculously beautiful.

I didn't deserve him.

He deserved so much more.

But I wanted him with every fiber of who I was becoming... who I'd become.

I'd embraced my de facto family of Martha, Jane and Lizard. Forever, I would be profoundly grateful to Astrid and Ethan. I'd worked so hard for a decade to be acceptable in society. I knew the chances of being forgiven by the rest of my family were slim and that finding future happiness for myself was selfish, but I wanted it with all of my undead heart.

My biggest concern was going off the rails again. However, Rhys was correct about being able to calm each other's souls. A simple touch was magical. I no longer needed to find the Sacred Clock. With Rhys by my side, I knew I had the time to do what I had to do. In the end, my family might not be able to forgive me. I wouldn't blame them, but it wouldn't stop me from trying.

"Do you think Ronald McDonald has nefarious plans?" Rhys asked as we made our way back to the group.

I gave up on explaining they were two separate people. He'd figure that out soon enough. "I'm not sure," I admitted. "It's odd that they've been

waiting eons for us. We don't have the best of reputations... or at least I don't. It's possible I caused harm to Ronald and McDonald in the past."

Rhys put his arm around me. "Not to worry. If he so much as squints at you, I'll peel him. And don't forget, it's not just you who might have done him wrong. I've been in many a bloody skirmish as a warrior."

I pulled him to a stop. "I don't think it's a good plan to peel anyone." I glanced around at the charming town. For the strangest reason, it felt like home. Home was a foreign concept to me, but I couldn't shake the feeling. "I like it here and I think if we peel people we might not be liked back."

Rhys reached into the back pocket of the jeans that made his ass look amazing. He pulled out a piece of paper and then got super cagey.

"What is that?" I asked.

"Well... umm..." He rocked back and forth on his feet and was at a loss for words.

That was a first for him.

Instead of answering, he hesitantly handed me the paper then quickly covered his privates with both hands. His behavior made me itchy. Yesterday, my go-to move would have been to electrocute first then ask questions after. That was yesterday. Today was a new day.

It was difficult, but I tamped back my discomfort and violent tendencies and accepted the sheet of paper. I unfolded it and read... then I began to cry. I couldn't help it. The dingbat had written in Latin, but it was a language I understood.

The Vampyre had filled out an application to live in Belchertown... for both of us. Together.

He'd requested a cottage on the outskirts of town so our shagging noises wouldn't be a nuisance to neighbors. He insisted on a fenced-in backyard just in case I wanted a puppy or a Hell Hound. He'd noted that he'd like to purchase two metal chariots—one for me and one for him. He'd been very upfront about having no money due to being in a coma for a thousand years. The insane Vamp had let the Belchertown property board know that Martha and Jane had lots of green ass paper and would most likely pony up for the chariots.

"Wow," I said with a laugh.

"You're not mad?" he asked, still keeping his hands firmly over his crotch.

"Not mad," I assured him. "Kind of shocked, but not mad."

He removed his hands but kept them close to his sides just in case. I kept reading.

He'd also requested a home for his brother Sven and insisted it be on the other side of town. Rhys made it beyond clear that Sven was a jackass, but he was loyal and outstanding at baking bread. That one was very odd, since Vamps didn't eat, but I didn't comment.

In conclusion, he'd stated that neither he nor I had a place to call home and we'd be honored to have that place be Belchertown. He also wrote that there was a fine chance I would set him on fire for being so bold, but that he took no issue with it. It was just our way of being affectionate. The nutty man had also included the word please at least twenty times.

"You are crazy," I whispered, wiping away my tears with the back of my hand.

He took a bow. "Crazy for you."

I shook my head and handed him back the application. "It's not really going slow if we move in together," I pointed out.

"Interesting," he said, working out a solution in his debatably sane mind. "Here's the plan. I'll sleep in Sven's home while we date. He'll bunk outside."

"That's not nice," I told him.

He waved his hand. "Not to worry. He's used to it. As long as I provide him with a coffin, he'll be fine."

"Are you serious?"

"Very. My brother's very old school and missing many brain cells."

Just as I was about to delve deeper, our little band of misfits found us.

"Gobshite," Martha yelled, pointing to his shirt. "You're all bloody."

Rhys grinned and took a bow. "I have become a weenie! It's no secret that I have a charming giggle and my manners are outstanding. I have now cried and I'm not ashamed. Juliet has agreed to date me. Today is the best day of my life. The next best day will be when we shag in the field of fragrant wildflowers."

I electrocuted him. That was entirely too much information. He roared with laughter as he smacked out the flames.

Clemit, Ebby, Hoppy, Tiny, Tinsel, Tooty, Vinnie, Martha and Jane were all smiling. Even Keith and Kurt seemed delighted.

It was a little too much happy for me to take. As much as I wanted it all to work out, a small part of me didn't think it would. Getting back to business

was the answer. “Shall we go meet Ronald and McDonald?”
“Absolutely!” Keith said. “Follow me.”



THE HOME OF RONALD AND McDONALD WAS YELLOW AND RED. THE IRONY didn’t escape me. Even though I was undead and didn’t eat, I knew what a McDonald’s fast-food place looked like. Martha and Jane jogged around the house looking for a drive-through window.

There wasn’t one and the place didn’t smell like French fries and hamburgers. Nope. It smelled bad and very familiar. Tiny, Tinsel and Tooty held their babes tight and appeared nervous. Ebby, Clemit and Hoppy were agitated and stuck close to their gals.

Vinnie and Rhys exchanged concerned glances. Martha and Jane pulled out throwing stars and swords.

“Stop,” I commanded, before Keith walked to the front door and rang the doorbell. “What kind of species are Ronald and McDonald?”

“Trolls,” he replied.

I yanked out the pappy-bat and held it high. “Why are there *male* Trolls in Belchertown?”

“What the ever-lovin’ fuck?” Jane grunted, situating herself in front of the female Trolls and their babies. “I thought there wasn’t gonna be no ass-kickin’ in Burp Village.”

Kurt held up his hands. “No, no! Everything is just fine and dandy. Ronald and McDonald are pacifists!”

“Pacifist Trolls?” I ground out, unable to believe it.

Vinnie stepped forward and addressed Keith and Kurt. “My friends, this is rather off-putting. We’ve just left a situation in Hooker, Oklahoma, where we learned male Trolls kill female offspring. As you’ve noticed, Tiny, Tooty and Tinsel are present with their daughters.”

“I do *not* like this,” Rhys announced, glowing like a bomb about to detonate. “While the precious babes might smell like assholes, they’re the mascots of our army. Putting them and their smelly mothers in peril is not in the plans.”

“Thank you, Gobshite,” Tiny said.

Rhys winced at the unwelcome nickname but didn’t remove any of her

appendages. "You're welcome."

"I agree with Rhys," I said, moving our group away from the yellow and red abode. "Plus, I have a very bad history with Trolls."

"And that's a fuckin' understatement," Martha shouted, patting me on the back.

"I've got this," I told her.

"Course you do, motherfucker," she said. "Just helpin' you out because that's what a good mammy does."

I didn't have a response since I didn't know what good mothers actually did.

Clemite joined Vinnie in his conversation with Keith and Kurt. The pale Vamp ran his hands through his silvery-white mullet in distress. "I'm right sorry, but I'm gonna have to agree with my posse of buddies. I hate that we're bein' intolerant of others, but I can't risk my lady and her sisters. They've been through some heinous and unspeakable tragedies due to male Trolls."

"We sure do understand what it's like to be hated for who we are," Hoppy shared with a sad expression. "But after a lifetime of loneliness, we've found real love with Tiny, Tooty and Tinsel. It ain't just about us no more. We've got mates and babes to protect."

"Plus, we ain't real good fighters," Ebby explained. "I'd die for the gals, but I'd sure like to live for them."

Keith and Kurt exchanged sorrowful glances. "Ronald and McDonald have also been treated horrifically by other male Trolls. I so wish you could find it in your hearts to give them a chance."

I couldn't believe I was actually torn. Was it possible for Trolls to reform? They were created to kill and destroy... kind of like me. I paced the sidewalk and slapped the pappy-bat on my open palm just as I'd seen Lizard do. It stung but was comforting at the same time. Rhys fell into step next to me. He didn't say a word. The Vamp could tell I was working something out.

If I thought I could be redeemed, who was I to say something as abhorrent as me couldn't change as well? It was a long shot, but I was an even longer shot. The only reason I was standing here today was because my sister refused to give up on me. She should have, but she didn't.

Mother Nature had said that there was always more to a picture than meets the eye and if I don't remember that, it will bite me in the ass... Was this the picture I wasn't seeing clearly? If I wanted a chance at a new life,

was it my responsibility to give others the same courtesy? Was my butt about to be bitten?

Shit.

“How long have they lived in Belchertown?” I asked, continuing to pace.

“Six decades,” Kurt answered.

“And in that time, they’ve never harmed anyone?”

“Not a hair on anyone’s head,” Keith promised. “Ronald and McDonald are quite timid gentlemen.”

Using the term gentlemen for Trolls was pushing it.

“Has he been in close proximity to the female of their kind?” Rhys asked.

It was an excellent question.

Keith giggled. “Most definitely,” he assured everyone.

I eyed him warily. “Would you care to be more specific?”

Keith walked over to me and gently touched my face. It was sweet and kind. “Will you trust me enough to show you?”

I glanced over at Rhys. He was on edge but gave me a curt nod. I knew if anything went sideways, he’d start peeling the enemy with gusto. He reached out and took my hand in his. We both immediately calmed.

If I could be redeemed, others could too. If Keith was mistaken about Ronald and McDonald, they’d have two less residents in Belchertown.

“Yes,” I said tightly. “You may show me.”

Before I could change my mind, Keith called out to the Trolls. The red front door opened and a gaggle of young female Trolls in pink ruffled dresses and bright blue tennis shoes sprinted out of the house, giggling and singing. Two very strange-looking male Trolls followed them out with welcoming smiles on their disfigured faces.

“What in the Hell happened to you two?” Martha shouted, pointing at the Trolls.

I was thinking the same thing, but didn’t want to be rude. Their heads were misshapen as if they’d been bashed in and never healed. Their faces were badly scarred. One of them walked with a pronounced limp and the other was missing an arm.

The ten little females—who I guessed to be between seven and twelve, due to their sizes—skipped around Tooty, Tinsel and Tiny while oohing and ahing at the babies.

“My name is Ronald. It’s an honor to make your acquaintances,” the one with the limp said. “My partner is McDonald. And these,” he said, pointing to

the little girls with great fondness, “are our adopted daughters.”

His words were shocking. His voice sounded very Troll-like—rough and as if he’d chewed up broken glass and swallowed it. However, a Troll would never adopt little girls.

McDonald waved shyly with his one good arm. “As to your query about what happened to us, let’s just say Trolls who won’t fight aren’t safe in the Immortal world.”

Ronald put his beefy arm around McDonald. “It also doesn’t help that we’re gay. We don’t fight and don’t reproduce. We were deemed useless.”

“And paid the price,” McDonald added.

“Queer Trolls,” Jane said with a nod and a salute. “Love it!”

“Ohhhhh, babies!” McDonald said, waving at Tiny, Tooty and Tinsel. “May I take a peek?”

The female Trolls nodded warily. It was surreal to watch male Trolls gush over the baby girls. Ronald and McDonald ambled on over and squealed with delight. The sound was terrifying, but the adoration for the babes was real. After about one minute, one would have thought everyone had been the best of friends for decades.

Only Rhys and I stayed back.

“I’m kind of in a state of shock,” I muttered, still holding tight to Rhys’ hand.

“As am I,” he agreed. “Only yesterday, I would have ended them without a thought.”

The lessons here were huge.

Vinnie skipped over to us with his cape flying. “We’re going to take the children to the park while you have your chat with Ronald and McDonald.”

“Umm... okay,” I said. Weird didn’t begin to describe all the thoughts racing in my brain.

“Shall I stay with you?” Vinnie asked, concerned.

I glanced at Rhys. Old habits were hard to break. The innate response to eliminate Trolls was strong.

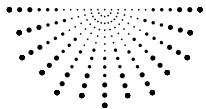
“No. Go to the park. We’re fine,” I assured him.

Having no clue as to why the Trolls had been waiting for us for eons, I was now curious. I didn’t fear them, but still didn’t completely trust them.

Rhys backed me up. “Go, my little buddy,” he told Vinnie. “We will join you shortly.”

That remained to be seen.

R H Y S



THE INTERIOR OF THE TROLLS' HOME WAS A STINKY MESS. I THOUGHT SVEN was a shitty housekeeper, but the Trolls had my brother beat. Colorful balls, blocks and dolls littered the smelly floor. The curtains looked as if they had been swung from and all of the furniture had been scribbled on. That being said, it was a very homey, albeit, odiferous abode. The tables and chairs were on the large side since the males were enormous. I didn't mind that, being a big man myself.

"So, we understand you want to talk to us?" Juliet said, removing a headless doll from a chair and seating herself.

"We do!" Ronald McDonald with the limp said. "We've so been looking forward to you coming to Belchertown. You've been visiting our dreams for ages."

"Did we happen to be shagging in a fragrant field of wildflowers?" I inquired right before Juliet electrocuted me.

Screaming wasn't manly, but I'd embraced my inner weenie. After a screaming stop, drop and roll, we got back to business.

"I do have a question before we start," I said.

Juliet looked a bit terrified. She didn't have to worry. I would not embarrass her again by talking about shagging her with virtual strangers. I'd learned my lesson well.

"Why is it that you're both named Ronald McDonald?" I asked.

The Trolls appeared perplexed.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand," the Ronald McDonald with the single arm said.

"Neither do I," I told him. "It must get confusing unless one of you goes

by your middle name.”

“Our middle name?” the limping Ronald McDonald questioned.

“Yes,” I said, wondering how daft the men were. “Your middle name, And.”

Juliet rolled her eyes and groaned. I was concerned I was about to be set aflame again.

“Rhys, they aren’t both named Ronald McDonald,” she said. “The gentleman on the couch is Ronald and the other gentleman is McDonald.”

“Interesting. Do either of your middle names happen to be And?”

Both men shook their heads.

“Alrighty then,” Juliet said, taking over. “Can you share why you’ve been waiting for us and what you mean about us coming to you in your dreams?”

“We would love to,” Ronald said. “But let’s get to know each other first.”

I wasn’t used to or good at idle chitchat. However, I had the wherewithal to realize we were guests in the rank-smelling home. If we were going to live in Belchertown, it was best to try to fit in... even with Trolls.

“I shall go first,” I announced. “I’m a badass, very good-looking warrior as you can see. I’m over twelve hundred years old, give or take a decade or three. Recently, I woke up from a thousand-year fucking coma compliments of Energy Vampyres. That sucked ass. Back in the day, I enjoyed dismemberment, skin peeling and the removal of the entrails of my enemies. I will freely admit, I still enjoy that. However, I’m far more discerning now as to who my enemies are since learning manners.”

Flexing my muscles, I took a quick bow then recalled Vinnie’s suggestions for getting to know someone. “Oh! My favorite color is whatever color Juliet is wearing and my favorite book is anything written in Sanskrit. My goals in life, other than shagging Juliet in a field of fragrant wildflowers, are to improve the quality of my giggle so it doesn’t sound like a dying animal and to own a metal chariot. I have an asshole brother named Sven. I’m the only one allowed to insult the idiot. Anyone who is a meanie to the shite stain will be soundly beaten and most likely lose a few appendages.”

“You done?” Juliet asked with what I thought might be a smile disguised as a grimace.

“No. There’s more.”

“Of course, there is,” she replied.

“Frighteningly, Mother Nature has adopted me. Be that as it may, I will not be greasing myself up and concussing myself by falling off of metal

poles. I plan to raise a flock of homing pigeons because I don't trust the small metal squares used for communication that seem so popular in the twenty-first century. Also, pigeons are cute. I'm firmly against the Tube of You and the Book of Faces. Because of the misinformation they promote, I almost beheaded a Karen who wasn't a Gobshite Karen. I'm sure you can understand my reasoning. It's logical and sound. In conclusion, I'd like to know if there's a coffin shop in town, as I'll be needing one for my brother Sven to sleep in while Juliet and I date."

"Oh my God," Juliet muttered.

The Trolls were smiling. It was proof that my chitchat had been successful. Using words had gotten so much easier.

"Now I'm done," I said. "Who wants to go next?"

Juliet spoke up. "I'm Juliet. I'm well over five-hundred-years-old. My goal in life is to reform my abomination status."

"And to shag me in a field of fragrant wildflowers," I reminded her.

She shot me a glare that made me dive behind the chair. Again, I was reminded that speaking of shagging in public wasn't good manners.

"I'm estranged from most of my family because of the pain and destruction I've caused," she said softly. "It's well deserved. From now until the day I perish, I'll work to be forgiven. Also, I've been adopted as well. Martha and Jane are my moms and the Demon Lizard is my step-pappy."

"It's a pappyship situation," I clarified for the Trolls.

"Fascinating," Ronald said. "Such colorful lives you've led!"

"Well, that's one way to put it," Juliet conceded with a wince.

"Redemption is available to those who truly desire it," McDonald shared. "Forgiveness is not guaranteed, but it will never come to fruition if the effort isn't made."

"We're going to remove our body parts in front of her family to show our remorse," I volunteered. "I'm also fully willing to electrocute myself. However, I wouldn't recommend trying that at home. Along with getting drunk and shaving cassowaries' asses, self-electrocution is not the finest of plans. I accidentally incinerated Vinnie's Airbnb in Hooker, Oklahoma, by lighting myself on fire—which by the way is a location, not a vocation."

"Oh my," Ronald said. "Did you commit crimes against Juliet's family too?"

"I did not," I told him. "However, Juliet is my reason for living, and I would die for her, so ripping off a limb or three is no biggie."

“Beautiful,” McDonald said with a warm smile. “That kind of love is rare indeed.”

Juliet sat silently with tears in her gorgeous eyes. She gave me a watery smile. “I don’t deserve you.”

“Oh no, darling,” McDonald said, lumbering over to her and giving her a one-armed hug. “Everyone deserves to be loved.”

“Love is what makes us whole,” Ronald said. “The loveless child is the one who can’t cope in this world.”

“Which is why we’ve opened our home to our special daughters!” McDonald shared. “We have an underground system, so to speak. When a female Troll gives birth to a daughter, there are several Angels and Demons who bring them to us—with their mothers’ blessings, of course.”

“Demons?” I asked, surprised.

“Oh yes!” McDonald confirmed. “Satan himself set up the program. The man tries to pretend he’s not a softie, but we know the truth.”

The two Trolls giggled so hard the smelly house shook on its foundation.

Ronald turned to Juliet. “You said a Demon named Lizard is your step-pappy?”

She nodded.

“Does he happen to wear tracksuits, black socks and sandals, chew gum and carry a bat?” he inquired, bouncing up and down in his chair.

“He does,” Juliet said, squinting at the Troll. “Why?”

“I knew it!” Ronald squealed. “Your step-pappy is the main man in our mission of mercy. He’s a beautiful Demon, inside and out.”

I wanted to point out that Lizard was a little odd-looking, but manners dictated I keep my mouth shut. I liked the man. It didn’t matter that his eyes were too close together and he was a bit scaly. Anyone who loved Juliet and saved baby female Trolls was good in my book.

“All of this is nice and informative,” Juliet said. “But I still don’t understand why you’re waiting for us.”

I didn’t either. However, if they wanted us to pilfer baby Troll girls and deliver them to Belchertown, I was fine with that. It was noble. Sven would be in as well. He was excellent at stealing things.

“Yes,” McDonald said. “In our dreams, we saw two beautiful and broken warriors come and save our town who look exactly like you! Two brave and compassionate, motherless souls who are on the road to redemption. Your arrival is the answer to our prayers.”

“We’re not broken anymore,” I stated. “Just bent.”

“I can see that,” Ronald said with a thumbs up. “It’s quite lovely. When the broken fix the broken it’s an exquisite event. We should know.”

He gently touched his partner’s cheek.

His partner placed his hand over his.

The love was obvious.

Juliet smiled at the Trolls. “How can we help save the town?”

Ronald and McDonald exchanged excited glances. “Three days ago, something very precious disappeared from our town square. It’s the item that keeps Belchertown safe from those who would wish to harm the misfits who reside here. If it’s not returned, the portal will be open for evil to come in and destroy us.”

“You are not misfits,” I stated firmly. “You might smell like a dirty ass, but I find you to be upstanding and generous gentlemen. I call bullshit on the misfit moniker.”

Ronald giggled. I was a little put out that his giggle was better than mine.

“Oh no, Rhys,” he said. “We’ve named ourselves misfits with great affection.”

I shrugged. “Well, okay. It is a less offensive nickname than Gobshite.”

Juliet laughed. The delightful sound made me squishy. If the one who calmed my soul was amused by people calling me Gobshite, I would embrace it. It was a horrific, yet small, price to pay to make her happy.

“What is the item?” Juliet inquired.

“It’s a Sacred Clock shaped like a cock,” Ronald shared.

I was gobsmacked. Juliet was as well. I knew why I was shocked, but had no clue why she was surprised.

“Umm... a male chicken?” she asked.

“No,” McDonald said. “A large penis.”

“Interesting,” I said. “And do you know where the unlubed holy time-telling pecker might have disappeared to?”

“It’s unlubed?” Ronald asked with his brow wrinkled in confusion.

“Yes,” I confirmed. “The dildo of consequences rarely comes with lubrication.”

My words produced a somewhat dazed silence.

“So... okay,” Juliet said, stifling a laugh. “Do you have any clue where it is?”

Both Ronald and McDonald shook their misshapen heads. “We do not,”

Ronald said.

"We were hoping you might know," McDonald added. "Tomorrow the portal will open to evil if the Sacred Cock Clock isn't returned to its rightful home."

"That's unacceptable," I bellowed. "I like Belchertown. I've applied for fucking housing and two metal chariots. I plan to shag Juliet in the fragrant field of wildflowers."

"Calm down," Juliet said, touching my arm. "I think I know where it might be."

"As do I," I said, giving her a curious glance.

I no longer needed the Sacred Cock. Keeping it a secret wasn't necessary. Was it possible Juliet was searching for a Sacred Clock... shaped like a rod? Had Mother Nature pulled one over on us?

Were we searching for the same thing?

When I next saw Mother Nature, she was going to get a piece of my mind. Of course, I'd have an excellent exit strategy since she was liberal with the fucking fireballs.

"Ronald and McDonald, could we have some privacy?" Juliet asked.

"We'll find the Sacred Cock Clock. We just need to have a chat first."

"By all means," McDonald said, bowing to us. "We shall join the others in the park. If you need anything, please let us know."

"Yes," Ronald said, also bowing. "It would be our honor to aid our saviors and future mayors of Belchertown!"

Juliet sucked her bottom lip into her mouth and made a face. I stared at the Trolls in bewilderment. Strangely, the idea appealed. Sven would shite his pants with jealousy if I was the mayor.

"Toodleloo!" the Trolls sang as they left the reeking abode.

We stared at each other in silence for a long beat. Juliet spoke first.

"I was on a mission to find the Sacred Clock," she admitted. "I don't need it anymore. It was to buy me time to find forgiveness. I have you. You're all I need. My plan was to make sure you found what you needed."

The beautiful irony made me grin. "My mission was finding the Sacred Cock. It's moot. It was to help me learn manners and find my True Mate. I've found both. My goal was to help you find what you were searching for."

We both laughed.

"I found what I'm searching for," she said. "It's you."

If my heart could beat, it would have erupted in my chest. "You're my

light and everything I could have dreamt of. I owe the fucking Energy Vamps a thank you for placing me in a coma. It helped me pass the time while I was waiting for you.”

Her face pinkened and her smile widened. “You’re pretty good at that.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “I’m fabulous.”

She laughed. “Alrighty then, my guess is that the Sacred Cock Clock is in Assawoman, Maryland.”

“I’m in agreement with your assessment,” I replied. “Shall we gather the others?”

She shook her head. “Nope. This one is just you and me.”

I winked at the love of my undead life and gave her the thumbs up. She quickly checked the metal rectangle for the location of Assawoman then groaned. “It’s a bay.”

“Explain,” I said, not following.

“Assawoman, Maryland, is basically a body of water. I hate the water.”

“Do you think the Revered Johnson that keeps time is submerged?” I inquired.

She shrugged. “There’s only one way to find out.”

She extended her hand. I took it in mine and off we went to Assawoman, Maryland.



ASSAWOMAN, MARYLAND, WAS INDEED A BODY OF WATER—WITH MUCH human activity surrounding it. There was a road suspended over the water that had metal chariots driving on it. I was amazed. We stood on the rocky shore and searched the water. I saw no cock-shaped clock. I truly regretted not inquiring about the size of the hallowed weenie.

“Crap,” Juliet said, running her hands through her hair in frustration. “I’m not a good swimmer.”

My brow furrowed as I stared out at the water. I had no fucking clue if I could swim. Thankfully, I didn’t need to breathe, so going underwater would be no issue. Sinking, that would be the problem. Once on the bottom, I wasn’t sure if I could get myself back out. Most likely, I’d get stuck.

“Wait,” I said, scanning the bay. “What is that?”

I pointed to something sparkling floating atop the water. It was a few

hundred yards away. It appeared to be about three feet tall and just as wide.

"Oh my God," Juliet cried out. "I think it's the Sacred Cock Clock." She paced the shore. "How are we going to get out there to retrieve it?"

I was pretty sure Sven knew how to swim, but there was no time to send a homing pigeon to alert him that he was needed. "A ship," I said, pointing to a group of boats down the shoreline. "We steal a ship, sail out to the Revered Rod and scoop it out of the bay."

Juliet glanced in the direction that I pointed. "It's a good idea, but that area is filled with humans. It's not going to be easy to steal a boat."

"I could peel them to get them out of the way," I suggested.

She glared at me.

"Or maybe not."

"Definitely not," she said. "We have until tomorrow. Maybe we go to the store and buy inflatable floats. We can then make our way out to the clock without drowning."

I eyed her. "We can drown?"

"Technically, no," she said. "However, I'm not sure how long it would take someone to find us if we got stuck at the bottom of the bay. Also, if we got fished out by humans, it would be awfully suspect that we weren't dead."

"But we *are* dead."

She punched my arm and laughed. "You know what I mean."

I do," I replied with a sheepish smile. "Only problem I see with the float idea is the green ass paper. Do you have any?"

Her chin dropped to her chest. "No. I don't."

We should have brought Martha and Jane along. They had loads of the ass paper used as currency in the twenty-first century. "Not a problem. While I'm not as adept as Sven at stealing, I'm good enough. And please, do not tell him I said he's a better pilferer than me. I'll never hear the end of it."

"Your secret is safe with me," she promised. "Let's go find a store that sells floats so we can steal them."

"I like your style," I said. "Transport or walk?"

"Walk," she replied, taking my hand in hers. "Too risky to transport with all the humans nearby."



AFTER TWO HOURS OF TRYING TO PURLOIN FLOATS, WE'D COME UP EMPTY-handed. We were not skilled in the looting department. I wouldn't be sharing the story of our failure to abscond with the floats with Sven. He would laugh and that would mean I'd have to dismember him. I was trying not to do that as much anymore.

"Thoughts?" Juliet asked as she sat down on a large boulder and stared at the clock out in the bay.

The sound of the waves rolling up and gently lapping against the rocks was hypnotic. It didn't relax me. Juliet and I were badass warriors. Failure wasn't an option. Shagging her in the fragrant field of wildflowers would be out of the question if Belchertown got destroyed by evil.

"We're going to have to swim," I said with a grimace, glancing up at the sky. "The sun is beginning to set. If we don't go now, we might lose the clock altogether."

"You're right," Juliet said, kicking off her boots. "Together we will succeed."

"Or drown," I said, kicking off my own boots.

She laughed. I wasn't trying to be funny but was happy to make her smile.

We didn't sink to the bottom but came close. It was a comedy of errors as one of us saved the other every five minutes.

"This sucks," Juliet shouted right before she went under.

I pulled her back up and then took her place.

"Fuck," I growled, spitting out water as I hit the surface. "How far are we from the Consecrated Love Stick?"

Juliet's shriek of laughter caused her to go under again. I fished her back up.

"About two hundred yards give or take," she choked out. Her eyes grew huge and she grabbed me. "Watch out! A ship!"

I had no clue what she was talking about. The weight of her body and mine together pulled both of us under. It wasn't until a rope with an anchor appeared from out of nowhere, that we were able to rise above the waves.

Holding Juliet tight, I grabbed the rope and pulled on it. I didn't know what was on the other end, but right now I didn't care. We were perilously close to sinking and not coming back up. If it was humans, I'd green-eye them into forgetting they ever saw us. I'd steal the boat and get the damned blessed pecker clock, then I never wanted to go near water again in my

fucking life.

Juliet's expression was alarmed as we were pulled up. I shrugged and tried to wink. Not sure it was successful under the water, but it was the thought that counted.

As our heads hit the air, the most glorious sight I'd ever witnessed stood on the deck of the ship grinning from ear to ear. Juliet squealed with relief and joy.

"Heard you needed a ship?" Lizard winked. "One pappyship, at your service." He smirked then gave us a bow.

"You heard correctly, my good man," I shouted as I pushed Juliet up to the deck of the vessel then followed behind.

Juliet jumped into her pappy's arms and hugged the Demon tight. I wasn't jealous at all. In fact, I picked the man up and swung him around. Lizard was a lifesaver. Literally.

It took Lizard punching me in the head for me to put him down. I punched him back and we both had a good laugh. He was an excellent guy.

"Whatcha lookin' for?" he asked as he snapped his fingers and produced two big white fluffy towels for us to dry off.

"There," I said, pointing to the shiny object a hundred yards away. "We need to get the Holy Time-Telling Johnson back to Belchertown before the portal gets compromised by shite holes."

"Holy Johnson?" Lizard asked, unsure he heard me correctly.

I made myself clearer. "The Hallowed Weenie. The Spiritual Schlong. The Consecrated Man Bits. The Revered Rod." I had more, but Juliet put her hand over my lips.

"Thank you, Rhys," she said. "But I think he's got it now."

I kissed the palm of her hand and glanced over at her amused pappy.

"It's a Sacred Clock that's shaped like a cock," Juliet explained in a more succinct way than I had. We were an excellent team. I might be a little stronger, but she was way smarter. "It's the magical item that keeps Belchertown safe. It disappeared a few days ago and we need to return it by tomorrow so the town stays protected from evil."

"We can make that work," Lizard assured us. "Grab an oar and start paddling!"

We did. However, the Hallowed Pecker played games with us. Every time we got close, the damned thing swam away.

"I had no idea that dicks could swim," I shouted.

“Apparently, they can,” Juliet hissed, rowing faster. “That dick will not get away from us.”

Lizard gathered us close. “I say we piss the dick off.”

“Not following,” I said, thinking Lizard might be a little crazier than I’d originally suspected.

“Well, now,” he said, eyeing the floating cock and smacking on his gum. “We’re bein’ too nice. That dick has a bad attitude. I say we tell a few dick jokes, piss it off and make it attack us. Once it’s in range, I’ll net that dick and smack it upside its dang head—or in the nards.”

“Umm... not so sure about that,” Juliet said. “You really think pissing off a dick is the way to go?”

Lizard shrugged. “Do you have a better idea, daughter?”

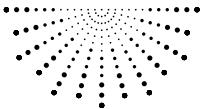
We stood in silence and mulled it over. Juliet shook her head. I shook mine as well. Glancing up at the moon in the sky, I knew we only had a few more hours to accomplish the mission.

“Let’s piss off the dick,” I said.

Lizard grinned. I had to admit, it was a tad bit terrifying.

“Now you’re talkin’! That dick ain’t gonna know what hit him!”

JULIET



THE CALM STAR-FILLED SKY WAS IN STARK JUXTAPOSITION TO THE GUT-wrenching chaos we were dealing with on Assawoman Bay.

“You kids ready?” Lizard asked, putting an entire pack of gum into his mouth. He offered us each a stick, but Rhys and I politely declined.

“Ready,” I told him. There was only one mission now, keeping Belchertown safe.

In the past three days, I’d never felt so accepted and loved. Finding Rhys had changed everything. Having two smack-talking, horribly dressed mothers and a batshit crazy step-pappy was life-changing too. There were people who loved me for who I was... warts and all. Shockingly, their love didn’t come with an abusive price tag. It was freely given. I knew in my undead heart that I could love them just as freely and without fear.

Finding Belchertown was the icing on the cake. It was every kind of strange and absolutely glorious. A sneaking suspicion that I couldn’t shake, made me believe that I might even learn to love and forgive myself in such a magical place. I needed Belchertown, and right now Belchertown needed me. The thought of being so close to the Sacred Cock Clock, the one item that could keep the enchanted town safe, and failing was terrifying.

“We’re armed and ready,” Rhys growled, holding a glowing sword high.

Lizard glanced over at him and shook his head. “Words, boy. Use your words. We’re aiming to catch it, not kill it. Watch and learn. Hey, motherfucker!” Lizard shouted at the floating cock clock. “You ever think your dick is so small ’cause you took three-fourths of it and shoved it into your shitty personality?”

I was wildly unsure that pissing the dick off was going to work. However,

Lizard was the only one of us with an idea of how to capture it.

I gasped as what looked like a tiny hand rose out of the water and shot us the bird.

“Oh my God,” I said, squinting at the cock clock in the distance. “Did that thing just flip us off?”

Rhys was fuming. “If flipping off means it raised a middle finger at us, then yes.”

While the dick was definitely pissed off, he didn’t come at us. He swam farther away.

“If that dick had an idea, it would die of loneliness,” Rhys muttered.

Lizard smacked Rhys in the head. “Boy, if you’re gonna insult the dick, the dick needs to hear you.”

The Vampyre saluted the Demon and took his orders seriously.

At the top of his lungs, Rhys went for it. “Pecker,” he bellowed. “You’re so abysmal-looking that when you admire yourself in the mirror, your reflection screams in terror and runs away.”

The dick shot out of the water and vibrated. It definitely didn’t like the insult.

Lizard did. My Demon pappy laughed like a loon.

“Lookieloo,” Lizard sang. “It’s comin’ closer. Keep goin’, kids!”

While Lizard maneuvered the ship, Rhys and I did as we were told.

“Fugly wiener,” I yelled, feeling like an idiot and trying not to laugh. “You didn’t just get hit with the ugly stick, you got walloped with the whole damn forest.”

I truly couldn’t believe what was happening. It was weird, hilarious and unheard of. However, it was working. The angry cock clock swam at us as if it were a great white shark and we were chum.

“Good one!” Rhys said, patting my back as the dick swam even closer. “Time-telling Johnson, you’re so unattractive you scare the crap out of the shitter!”

The clock began circling the ship in a frenzy. The force of its wake began to spin the ship.

Lizard steadied the boat, took the wad of gum out of his mouth and stuck it to the end of his oar. “Wanna watch a master at work?”

I grinned. He was batshit nuts. “Yes, Pappy. I do.”

He winked and leaned over the side of the ship. “Hey, pork sword,” he bellowed. “I heard you have a bad case of phallo photoportaphilla. You

know, the urge to put your pecker in a light socket. You're one dumb bastard!"

The Sacred Cock Clock shrieked in fury, chiming loudly as the hands on its face spun backwards.

"That ain't all," Lizard continued as Rhys and I watched in shock and awe. "Heard that on Phalloween, you dressed your peepee up in a Yoda costume and went door to door yelling, Schwantz... or maybe it was Schwartz."

"I did not, shitass," a tinny and high-pitched voice shouted back.

"It talks?" I asked.

Pappy just chuckled and kept going. "Also heard that you're addicted to phallus booking."

That gave all of us pause, even the floating dick.

"What does that mean?" the cock clock shouted.

"Don't act all innocent," Lizard told him with glee. "You know as well as I do, it's the act of shuttin' your beef bullet in the center pages of a large hard-backed tome with considerable force. Rumor has it you do it every Tuesday."

The clock began to throw a tantrum. It was alarming. The waves grew violent and smashed against the sides of the ship.

"Is that a real thing? Phallus booking?" Rhys choked out, leaning forward in phantom pain.

"One-hundred fuckin' percent," Lizard assured him. "Tried it once out of curiosity. Not good. I'd put it right up there with gettin' soused and shaving a cassowary's ass."

"Take that back, Demon," the Sacred Cock Clock shrieked as it floated right next to the ship.

I held up my hand to let Rhys and Lizard know to be silent and mimed getting a net to scoop the foul timepiece out of the bay. The men followed my orders.

My go-to my entire life had been violence. And yes, I wanted desperately to electrocute the dick, but I didn't. For the first time, I was cognizant of the bigger picture. What formerly would've felt right in the moment wasn't going to serve me in my current situation or in the long run. The realization was stunning.

For the first time ever, I was going to try and reason with my enemy.

Leaning over the side, I eyed the profane and nasty piece of work.

“What’s your problem? Why are you being such a dick?”

The penis with arms and a clock for a face shrugged. “I’m underappreciated. That’s why I up and left Belchertown,” he squeaked. “No one ever thinks to chat with me or invite me to dinner.”

I was at a loss for words. I hadn’t realized clocks ate food.

Rhys wasn’t at a loss. Not a big surprise. “Did you ever consider that your manners might be the issue?” he asked.

The cock clock pouted and splashed us. He obviously felt lonely and ostracized. I understood that at a bone-deep level.

“What’s your name?” I asked him.

“Peter,” he replied morosely. “My nickname is Peter Johnson Balls.”

It took all I had not to scream with laughter. Lizard stuffed one of the white fluffy towels into his mouth to keep from cackling. Rhys winced but didn’t even so much as chuckle. It was impressive.

“Peter Johnson Balls,” he said. “I feel your pain. For I, too, have a nickname that is shite.”

“What is it?” Peter Johnson Balls inquired.

Rhys winced. “Gobshite. My nickname is Gobshite.”

The weenie clock laughed. I was so tempted to set it on fire that I could taste it. Only Rhys’ touch kept me from incinerating the enchanted item we needed to save Belchertown.

“I won’t go back to Belchertown,” Peter Johnson Balls snapped. “I’m going out into the world and searching for a new nickname that won’t make me feel bad.”

Lizard, Rhys and I exchanged glances. Lizard still had a towel shoved in his mouth. I was still on the verge of hysterics. Only Rhys was calm and collected, while displaying a masterful amount of good manners.

“I’d like to suggest a solution,” he began as Peter Johnson Balls perked up and listened. “First off, your manners, unlike mine, are bullshit. No one wants a friend with shite manners. I’d suggest inserting the magic word please into your conversations.” He twirled his hand with a flourish. “Use it liberally.”

“I don’t get it,” Peter said.

Rhys’ handsome brow wrinkled in thought. I was slightly terrified, but didn’t say anything.

“I shall give you an example,” he announced. “Okay, I’m pretending to be you... Hi, please. My name is Peter. Please. It hurts my fucking feelings

please to be called Peter Johnson Balls. Please. It's redundant to have three gonad names. One is enough, please. It's more than obvious that I'm a wanker due to my pleasing sausage-like exterior. Please. When you add Johnson and Balls to Peter, I feel objectified and like I'm only valuable because I'm a sexy time-telling penis. Please. In the future I would like to be respected for being a purple-headed love warrior. Please."

Peter Johnson Balls began to sob. "That was beautiful, Gobshite," he wailed. "The most beautiful words I've ever heard... please."

"Excellent," Rhys said, holding up the net for the dick to see. "May I please get you out of the water? I would think the liquid might rust your inner gears and your peen-like frame."

"Yes," Peter said, sniffling. "I would like to please have you please remove me from the pleasing water, please."

"Very well done, Peter!" Rhys grinned and, without hesitation, fished the Sacred Cock Clock from the bay.

I quickly wrapped the strange being into a fluffy white towel and dried him off.

"Better?" I asked.

"Much," he said, giving me the once over. "Are you dating anyone?"

I gagged. Rhys growled.

"She's going to shag me in a fragrant field of wildflowers as soon as we've had a few dates. And not at Hooters," he ground out. "Juliet is not available. Period. She is mine and I am hers."

Peter held his tiny hands at eleven and one. "Sorry. Just checking... umm... please."

"Mmkay," I said, keeping a bit of distance from the randy cock clock. "Is there anything we can do to convince you to go back to Belchertown?"

Peter scratched his head while he considered his options. It was off-putting since he was shaped like a penis.

"Yes," he finally said. "I'd like to pick my own nickname. I would enjoy being invited to dinner at the townsfolk of Belchertown's homes once a week. I'd also like a holiday to celebrate me—everyone will dress up like a penis and dance in the town square."

That one made me reconsider living in Belchertown for a hot sec... Even Rhys and Lizard were appalled at the request.

"What would you like to be called?" I asked, dealing with the easiest first. Peter giggled and hopped around on his testicle-like legs. Again, it was

disturbing.

“I’ve always dreamed of being called Big Peter the Bacon Bazooka of the Universe!”

Lizard chuckled. “That sure is a mouthful. No pun intended.”

I wanted to point out that Peter Johnson Balls was way less offensive than the nickname he’d chosen, but who was I to say someone’s dreams were beyond screwed up?

“Done,” I replied.

“Say it,” he insisted. “All of you. Please.”

As one, we granted his request. “Big Peter the Bacon Bazooka of the Universe.”

“Love it,” he squealed. “What about the dinners?”

“I’m quite sure the smelly Trolls would be thrilled to be hosts,” Rhys said.

I was positive he was correct. “And when Rhys and I get our home there, we’ll have you over, even though we don’t eat food.”

“I am moved,” Big Peter the Bacon Bazooka of the Universe said.

There was only one condition left, and it was a doozy.

Rhys began to pace, which meant he was coming up with a plan. If I had breath to hold, I would have. “Juliet and I are the soon-to-be mayors of Belchertown,” he said. “As mayors, we can create holidays. However, I feel it’s sexist to demand everyone dress up as a penis. I now understand that women are equal to men—and in many cases superior.” He winked at me. “Big Peter the Bacon Bazooka of the Universe, you’re behaving like a misogynistic shitehole if you don’t add vaginas to the mix. If there will be wankers, there must be clams.”

I swallowed back my scream of horror. The conversation had taken a hard left and driven into an abyss.

“I agree! No-nos and rods, it is!” Big Peter the Bacon Bazooka of the Universe exclaimed. “I’m ready to go back to Belchertown for good.”

I didn’t know how we were going to explain the new holiday, but we’d cross that bridge when we got there. The sun was rising, and we needed to get Big Peter the Bacon Bazooka of the Universe back home before the town was left unprotected.

“Alrighty, fuckers,” Lizard said. “Next stop, Belchertown!”



I EXPECTED TO TRANSPORT BACK TO BELCHERTOWN WITH RHYS, LIZARD AND Big Peter the Bacon Bazooka of the Universe. What I didn't expect was that the ship was coming with us.

"Land ho!" Lizard shouted as we arrived with an enormous crash right in the middle of the town square. While the ship wasn't massive, it was large. The hull embedded itself into the cobblestone and sizzled with a blast of sparkling purple mist.

It was a miracle we hadn't decapitated one single Belchertonian. Sadly—for Rhys and, inadvertently, Sven—we did obliterate a coffin that a one-legged Demon wood-smith named Ace had created as a surprise for Rhys to gift to his brother. Ace was quick to assure Rhys he could whip up another *pinewood overcoat* lickety-split.

As the crowd gathered around the pappyship, all eyes were on Rhys and me. Lizard had joined his loves, Martha and Jane, in the audience. Peter stayed with us on the deck. The excitement was palpable. The cheering was loud. The chanting of "Rhys" and "Juliet" by the motley group made me uncomfortable. Believing I deserved anyone's praise was difficult.

Rhys gently pushed me forward. "You've got this, Mayor Juliet," he said with a wink. "Talk to our people."

I nodded curtly then swallowed loudly. It had been hundreds and hundreds of years since I'd been welcomed anywhere with open arms. Part of me wanted to run and hide, but a bigger part of me wanted to bask in it. The bigger part won out. I'd been born a princess. I wasn't good at that. Having the chance at a do-over, I was going to try with all my might to be a good mayor.

"Ladies and gentlemen of Belchertown," I began. The crowd quieted immediately. "Peter is home! However, he relayed to us that the reason he left was because he didn't feel welcome here."

"Oh my," Keith cried out. "That's just terrible. I'm so sorry, Peter Johnson Balls."

Big Peter the Bacon Bazooka of the Universe kicked my calf. I was pretty sure he'd kicked me with his nards. I shoved my hands into my pockets so I didn't blast the little shit into Kingdom Come. That wasn't what a good mayor would do.

"About that name," I said, walking away from the cock clock. I didn't trust myself not to punt him into the sky if he rubbed his nards against me again. That would be bad optics for the good mayor reputation I was striving

for. “The nickname you all have been calling him has hurt Peter’s feelings.”

“Yes,” Rhys chimed in. “The triple gonad reference is a little much. It’s obvious he’s a dick. He looks like a dick. He acts like a dick. Therefore, he is a dick. He also has disgusting manners and comes off as a shitehole. I’ve taken it upon myself to teach him etiquette since I’m a fabulous champion of good manners. Please and please.” He took a bow. “I’m the disciple of the most genius of the batshite crazy etiquette instructors, Mother Nature—also known as my newly, albeit unwillingly on my part, adopted mother. And in closing, I’d like to point out that even though it might not be manly, dicks have feelings too. Dicks, even shite-ass dicks like Peter, need to feel loved.”

I wished I had a big white fluffy towel to shove into my mouth. The impulse to laugh was strong.

McDonald raised his good arm. With a nod, I acknowledged him.

“I’d like to sincerely apologize for myself and the rest of the Belchers,” he said. The *Belchers* murmured their agreement. “Dicks have rights too, and we stomped on Peter’s... effectively cock-blocking his happiness. What would Peter like to be called?”

Peter shrieked with joy at the willingness of the town to accept him. He danced around the deck with an abandon that was positively pornographic. It was a huge relief when Rhys punched him in the head and ended the performance. Even the Belchers collectively sighed with relief.

“He’d like to be called Big Peter the Bacon Bazooka of the Universe,” I said with a forced smile that I was pretty sure looked like a grimace.

“Are you fuckin’ kidding me?” Martha yelled with a grunt of laughter.

“Nope,” I told her, giving her the eyeball. “Peter has chosen his name, and we will all respect it.”

Vinnie spoke up—kind as always. “It’s actually better than Peter Johnson Balls. It has only two penis references as opposed to three and a lovely ring to it!”

“I quite like it,” Ronald said. “It’s fitting in a rude and phallic way, just like Big Peter the Bacon Bazooka of the Universe.”

Clemit, Hoppy and Ebby did a quick square dance to celebrate the new nickname. It was disturbing, but far less gross than the dance Big Peter the Bacon Bazooka of the Universe had graced us with.

The Belchers were insane... and I loved it.

“As for Big Peter the Bacon Bazooka of the Universe’s second request,” I explained to the group. “He’d enjoy being invited to dinner at each of your

homes.”

Everyone appeared slightly uncomfortable with that one. I didn’t blame them, but the Belchers were very good people.

McDonald stepped forward with three of his Troll daughters hanging on him like adorable, stinky little monkeys. “We would like to invite Big Peter the Bacon Bazooka of the Universe to sup with us this evening.”

Again, Big Peter the Bacon Bazooka of the Universe shrieked.

Again, Big Peter the Bacon Bazooka of the Universe danced.

Again, Rhys put an end to the eyesore of a presentation with a solid right hook.

I was proud of him that he didn’t peel Big Peter the Bacon Bazooka of the Universe. We’d both come a long way in a very short time.

“What about the holiday?” Big Peter the Bacon Bazooka of the Universe asked me.

I winced. Reasoning with the dick had worked once. I’d try it again. It was a more positive way to handle situations than decapitation. “I think we’ve pushed our luck with the dinner requests. Let’s hold off on the holiday for a bit.”

Big Peter the Bacon Bazooka of the Universe looked disappointed, but went with it. There was no way in Hell I wanted to tell the Belchers they were expected to dress up like wankers and clams. I’d happily leave that messed-up situation to Mayor Rhys. He had a way with words that confused the heck out of everyone. If anyone could convince the good townsfolk of Belchertown to dress as privates and party, it was the Vampyre of my dreams.

Keith and Kurt hustled up onto the deck of the ship with wide and excited smiles.

“A vote has been taken,” Kurt announced, bouncing on his toes.

“It was unanimous!” Keith squealed. “Rhys and Juliet have officially been elected mayors of Belchertown! Term—ten million years!”

The Belchertoniens went nuts. Rhys grabbed my hand and pumped both of our fists in the air. My eyes filled with bloody tears and I laughed. The reality of the situation was surreal.

“We accept!” Rhys shouted over the cheers. “I would also like to announce that I love Juliet. She’s my other half I didn’t know I would ever find. We were both broken, but now we’re only bent. Yes, the undead love of my life has better manners than me, but I say please far more often, which I

think needs to be acknowledged.”

The Vampyre gazed at me with such adoration and love, the tears that had gathered in my eyes ran freely down my cheeks.

“It shall be noted that we’re going to date,” he continued in a booming voice. “Until further notice, as one of your mayors, I decree that everyone avoid the fragrant field of wildflowers. I plan to shag Juliet there as soon as she’ll consent, and I wouldn’t want to make anyone uncomfortable since my member is huge and my skills are outstanding.”

Mortified didn’t even touch how I felt, but the Belchertonians seemed delighted with the overshare.

Rhys wasn’t done. I’d come to realize he was never done... and I was okay with that.

“Also, my asshole brother Sven shall be moving to Belchertown as well. He has sticky fingers, and I’d suggest locking up your valuables in his presence. That being said, I’m the only one allowed to call him a shite stain because, secretly, I love the idiot.”

“Jackass,” a voice at the back of the crowd shouted. “I’m here and will kick your ass shortly for calling me a shite stain.”

Rhys threw his head back and laughed with joy. “Good luck, son-of-a-bitch. Your right leg is mine!”

I was kind of horrified at the exchange, but the Belchers thought it was hilarious. At least he didn’t say he was going to rip out his brother’s entrails and shove them down his throat.

I scanned the crowd to find Sven.

I found him and so much more.

Holding onto Rhys so I didn’t fall, I closed my eyes, then opened them to make sure I wasn’t imagining things.

I wasn’t.

Astrid and Ethan stood at the very back of the gathering with Sven. The grin on Astrid’s face was smug. She knew she’d been right about me all along. I’d be thankful to my sister for the rest of my days. Even Ethan had a small smile on his face. Mother Nature floated in the air above them. If possible, her grin was even more smug than Astrid’s. Both women had won the right to be self-congratulatory for the next few centuries. Without them, Rhys and I wouldn’t be standing where we were right now. They knew it and we knew it. It was the kindest and most beautiful thing anyone had ever done for me. For us.

Mother Nature and Astrid hadn't physically given us life, but they'd given us a second chance at actually living a life. I would embrace and honor their gift forever.

But that wasn't why I was humbled to the core.

Next to Astrid stood my father and his mate, the Angel Pam. With them were all of my brothers and sisters—all of the people who I'd harmed so ruthlessly. They stared at me with curiosity and earned trepidation. I was fully aware that their presence had to be Astrid's doing.

I gazed back at the people I had called family hundreds of years ago. I no longer deserved them. If they had come to seek retribution, they could take it. I knew I wasn't the same woman who was completely broken and out of control. However, it didn't reverse what I'd done... but the knowledge I'd tried to make some of it right would let me go to my maker knowing I'd done my very best.

Rhys' gaze honed in on the group. He pulled me closer. "Shall I start removing my appendages?" he asked. "I'm also willing to electrocute myself. It's very impressive. I'd even go so far as phallus booking if you think that would help."

Gazing up at the man who made me believe I could be a good person, I smiled. I was impressed and horrified that he'd be willing to smash his man bits in a book for me. His love knew no bounds, even when bounds were warranted. "No. Not necessary. But I do want to make one thing clear."

He shot me a wary look. "And what might that be?"

"I love you," I whispered.

His smile made his gorgeous eyes sparkle in the sun. "And I love you, Juliet. Today, tomorrow and forever."

I turned my head and drank in the vision of my father. He was a beautiful man—inside and out. The shame I felt for what I'd done was immense. There was no going back, but with Rhys and my new friends by my side, I could move forward.

My shock as my father raised a hand and waved made fresh tears fill my eyes. Lizard's words floated in my mind... a daddy is a daddy and love is love. It wasn't that simple, but my father's wave made me feel as if the door had creaked open a small fraction.

With a final smile from my father, in a flash of golden mist, my family disappeared.

I knew I hadn't yet been forgiven and might never be absolved of my

crimes, but the fleeting moment had been beyond cathartic. Them witnessing my good deeds was a gift I didn't deserve to have. The road ahead to win forgiveness would be long and not guaranteed. However, it meant more than I could have imagined for them to be in my presence, if only for a few seconds.

Turning back to Rhys, I placed my hands on his cheeks and pulled his face down to mine.

"I'm going to kiss you." I slipped my hands over his shoulders and laced my fingers behind his neck. The smile on my lips matched the smile burning in my heart and soul. "After that, we're going to that fragrant field of wildflowers... to shag. Am I clear?"

"Crystal," Rhys growled.

He took me in his arms and lifted me from the ground. His lips brushed mine with a sweet heat that sent a zing of pleasure through me. My toes curled as the kiss deepened. When his tongue parted my lips, electricity sizzled along my skin, ending with a jolt of pleasure in my no-no.

He moaned as I rubbed my body against his, and I could feel his yes-yes huge and solid against my stomach. Our fangs dropped at the same time. The realization that we were going to participate in far more than just shagging in the fragrant field of wildflowers was thrilling. He was my mate. I was his. We were about to make it official.

"Need to bite you," I gasped out, hopping up on him and wrapping my legs around his strong body.

"Mine," he growled, grazing my neck with his sharp fangs.

"Yours," I promised, nipping at his lips.

"That's hot," Big Peter the Bacon Bazooka of the Universe squealed.
"I'm getting hard."

Big Peter the Bacon Bazooka of the Universe was the massive bucket of cold water we needed before we put on a pornographic display for the good folks of Belchertown. That's not what good mayors should do.

"Shite," Rhys muttered with wild eyes.

He was losing control. I was even farther gone.

"We're umm..." My mind was a muddled mess of lust. All I could think about was getting the warrior naked. "Stay out of the fragrant field of wildflowers," I finally shouted as I slid off of Rhys and grabbed his hand.

Rhys' whooped with joy, and it made me giggle.

"Going to shag," he shouted, throwing me over his shoulder and jumping

off the pappyship.

Without any more pomp or circumstance, he carried me at a sprint toward the magical field as if our lives depended on it.

When he set me on my feet among lavender, sweet alyssum, marigolds, lemon mint and more, I whispered, “Love you. Love you. Love you,” against his mouth as I kissed him like I’d never kissed anyone before.

“This is the best day of my life,” he said so gently as he caressed my body that it made me weep with joy.

And it was.

For both of us.

The three days we spent in the field would be happily burned into my memories for the rest of time. We both limped like Ronald for a week after we came up for air, so to speak. The Belchertonians teased us mercilessly, and I didn’t dismember one of them. I’d grown tremendously as a person.

Mother Nature was a smart cookie—when the broken heal the broken it’s beautiful. Life changing.

We were no longer broken. Rhys and I had healed each other. We might always be bent, but I was fine with it.

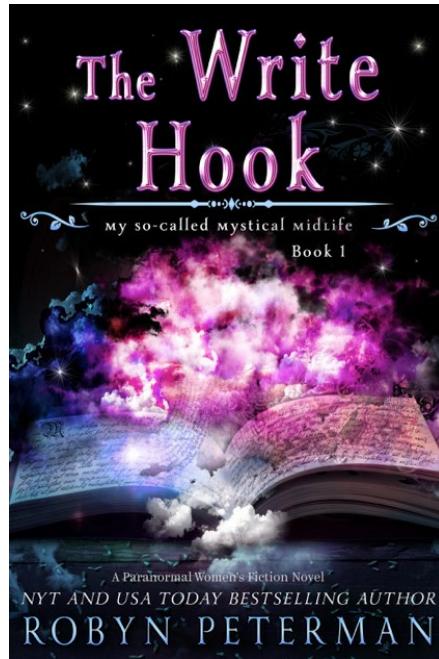
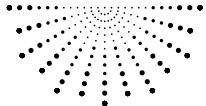
We were fashionable.

We were fierce.

And we were in love. It doesn’t get much better than that.

The End... for now.

EXCERPT: THE WRITE HOOK



BOOK DESCRIPTION

THE WRITE HOOK

Midlife is full of surprises. Not all of them are working for me.

At forty-two I've had my share of ups and downs. Relatively normal, except when the definition of normal changes... drastically.

NYT Bestselling Romance Author: Check

Amazing besties: Check

Lovely home: Check

Pet cat named Thick Stella who wants to kill me: Check

Wacky Tabacky Dealing Aunt: Check

Cheating husband banging the weather girl on our kitchen table: Check

Nasty Divorce: Oh yes

Characters from my novels coming to life: Umm... yes

Crazy: Possibly

Four months of wallowing in embarrassed depression should be enough. I'm beginning to realize that no one is who they seem to be, and my life story might be spinning out of my control. It's time to take a shower, put on a bra, and wear something other than sweatpants. Difficult, but doable.

With my friends—real and imaginary—by my side, I need to edit my life before the elusive darkness comes for all of us.

The plot is no longer fiction. It's my reality, and I'm writing a happy ever

after no matter what. I just have to find the *write hook*.

CHAPTER 1

“I didn’t leave that bowl in the sink,” I muttered to no one as I stared in confusion at the blue piece of pottery with milk residue in the bottom. “Wait. Did I?”

Slowly backing away, I ran my hands through my hair that hadn’t seen a brush in days—possibly longer—and decided that I wasn’t going to think too hard about it. Thinking led to introspective thought, which led to dealing with reality, and that was a no-no.

Reality wasn’t my thing right now.

Maybe I’d walked in my sleep, eaten a bowl of cereal, then politely put the bowl in the sink. It was possible.

“That has to be it,” I announced, walking out of the kitchen and avoiding all mirrors and any glass where I could catch a glimpse of myself.

It was time to get to work. Sadly, books didn’t write themselves.

“I can do this. I have to do this.” I sat down at my desk and made sure my posture didn’t suck. I was fully aware it would suck in approximately five minutes, but I wanted to start out right. It would be a bad week to throw my back out. “Today, I’ll write ten thousand words. They will be coherent. I will not mistakenly or on purpose make a list of the plethora of ways I would like to kill Darren. He’s my past. Beheading him is illegal. I’m far better than that. On a more positive note, my imaginary muse will show his ponytailed, obnoxious ass up today, and I won’t play Candy Jelly Crush until the words are on the page.”

Two hours later...

Zero words. However, I’d done three loads of laundry—sweatpants, t-shirts and underwear—and played Candy Jelly Crush until I didn’t have any

more lives. As pathetic as I'd become, I hadn't sunk so low as to purchase new lives. That would mean I'd hit rock bottom. Of course, I was precariously close, evidenced by my cussing out of the Jelly Queen for ten minutes, but I didn't pay for lives. I considered it a win.

I'd planned on folding the laundry but decided to vacuum instead. I'd fold the loads by Friday. It was Tuesday. That was reasonable. If they were too wrinkled, I'd simply wash them again. No biggie. After the vacuuming was done, I rearranged my office for thirty minutes. I wasn't sure how to Feng Shui, but after looking it up on my phone, I gave it a half-assed effort.

Glancing around at my handiwork, I nodded. "Much better. If the surroundings are aligned correctly, the words will flow magically. I hope."

Two hours later...

"Mother humper," I grunted as I pushed my monstrosity of a bed from one side of the bedroom to the other. "This weighs a damn ton."

I'd burned all the bedding seven weeks ago. The bonfire had been cathartic. I'd taken pictures as the five hundred thread count sheets had gone up in flame. I'd kept the comforter. I'd paid a fortune for it. It had been thoroughly saged and washed five times. Even though there was no trace of Darren left in the bedroom, I'd been sleeping in my office.

The house was huge, beautiful... and mine—a gorgeously restored Victorian where I'd spent tons of time as a child. It had an enchanted feel to it that I adored. I didn't need such an enormous abode, but I loved the location—the middle of nowhere. The internet was iffy, but I solved that by going into town to the local coffee shop if I had something important to download or send.

Darren, with the wandering pecker, thought he would get a piece of the house. He was wrong. I'd inherited it from my whackadoo grandmother and great-aunt Flip. My parents hadn't always been too keen on me spending so much time with Granny and Aunt Flip growing up, but I adored the two old gals so much they'd relented. Since I spent a lot of time in an imaginary dream world, my mom and dad were delighted when I related to actual people—even if they were left of center.

Granny and Flip made sure the house was in my name only—nontransferable and non-sellable. It was stipulated that I had to pass it to a family member or the Historical Society when I died. Basically, I had life rights. It was as if Granny and Aunt Flip had known I would waste two decades of my life married to a jackhole who couldn't keep his salami in his

pants and would need someplace to live. God rest Granny's insane soul. Aunt Flip was still kicking, although I hadn't seen her in a few years.

Aunt Flip put the K in kooky. She'd bought a cottage in the hills about an hour away and grew medicinal marijuana—before it was legal. The old gal was the black sheep of the family and preferred her solitude and her pot to company. She hadn't liked Darren a bit. She and Granny both had worn black to my wedding. Everyone had been appalled—even me—but in the end, it made perfect sense. I had to hand it to the old broads. They'd been smarter than me by a long shot. And the house? It had always been my charmed haven in the storm.

Even though there were four spare bedrooms plus the master suite, I chose my office. It felt safe to me.

Thick Stella preferred my office, and I needed to be around something that had a heartbeat. It didn't matter that Thick Stella was bitchy and swiped at me with her deadly kitty claws every time I passed her. I loved her. The feeling didn't seem mutual, but she hadn't left me for a twenty-three-year-old with silicone breast implants and huge, bright white teeth.

"Thick Stella, do you think Sasha should wear red to her stepmother's funeral?" I asked as I plopped down on my newly Feng Shui'd couch and narrowly missed getting gouged by my cat. "Yes or no? Hiss at me if it's a yes. Growl at me if it's a no."

Thick Stella had a go at her privates. She was useless.

"That wasn't an answer." I grabbed my laptop from my desk. Deciding it was too dangerous to sit near my cat, I settled for the love seat. The irony of the piece of furniture I'd chosen didn't escape me.

"I think she should wear red," I told Thick Stella, who didn't give a crap what Sasha wore. "Her stepmother was an asshat, and it would show fabu disrespect."

Typing felt good. Getting lost in a story felt great. I dressed Sasha in a red Prada sheath, then had her behead her ex-husband with a dull butter knife when he and his bimbo showed up unexpectedly to pay their respects at the funeral home. It was a bloodbath. Putting Sasha in red was an excellent move. The blood matched her frock to a T.

Quickly rethinking the necessary murder, I moved the scene of the decapitation to the empty lobby of the funeral home. It would suck if I had to send Sasha to prison. She hadn't banged Damien yet, and everyone was eagerly awaiting the sexy buildup—including me. It was the fourth book in

the series, and it was about time they got together. The sexual tension was palpable.

“What in the freaking hell?” I snapped my laptop shut and groaned. “Sasha doesn’t have an ex-husband. I can’t do this. I’ve got nothing.” Where was my muse hiding? I needed the elusive imaginary idiot if I was going to get any writing done. “Chauncey, dammit, where are you?”

“My God, you’re loud, Clementine,” a busty, beautiful woman dressed in a deep purple Regency gown said with an eye roll.

She was seated on the couch next to Thick Stella, who barely acknowledged her. My cat attacked strangers and friends. Not today. My fat feline simply glanced over at the intruder and yawned. The cat was a traitor.

Forget the furry betrayer. How in the heck did the woman get into my house—not to mention my office—without me seeing her enter? For a brief moment, I wondered if she’d banged my husband too but pushed the sordid thought out of my head. She looked to be close to thirty—too old for the asshole.

“Who are you?” I demanded, holding my laptop over my head as a weapon.

If I threw it and it shattered, I would be screwed. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d backed it up. If I lost the measly, somewhat disjointed fifty thousand words I’d written so far, I’d have to start over. That wouldn’t fly with my agent or my publisher.

“Don’t be daft,” the woman replied. “It’s rather unbecoming. May I ask a question?”

“No, you may not,” I shot back, trying to place her.

She was clearly a nutjob. The woman was rolling up on thirty but had the vernacular of a seventy-year-old British society matron. She was dressed like she’d walked off the set of a film starring Emma Thompson. Her blonde hair shone to the point of absurdity and was twisted into an elaborate up-do. Wispy tendrils framed her perfectly heart-shaped face. Her sparkling eyes were lavender, enhanced by the over-the-top gown she wore.

Strangely, she was vaguely familiar. I just couldn’t remember how I knew her.

“How long has it been since you attended to your hygiene?” she inquired.

Putting my laptop down and picking up a lamp, I eyed her. I didn’t care much for the lamp or her question. I had been thinking about Marie Condo-ing my life, and the lamp didn’t bring me all that much joy. If it met its

demise by use of self-defense, so be it. “I don’t see how that’s any of your business, lady. What I’d suggest is that you leave. Now. Or else I’ll call the police. Breaking and entering is a crime.”

She laughed. It sounded like freaking bells. Even though she was either a criminal or certifiable, she was incredibly charming.

“Oh dear,” she said, placing her hand delicately on her still heaving, milky-white bosom. “You are so silly. The constable knows quite well that I’m here. He advised me to come.”

“The constable?” I asked, wondering how far off her rocker she was.

She nodded coyly. “Most certainly. We’re all terribly concerned.”

I squinted at her. “About my hygiene?”

“That, amongst other things,” she confirmed. “Darling girl, you are not an ace of spades or, heaven forbid, an adventuress. Unless you want to be an ape leader, I’d recommend bathing.”

“Are you right in the head?” I asked, wondering where I’d left my damn cell phone. It was probably in the laundry room. I was going to be murdered by a nutjob, and I’d lost my chance to save myself because I’d been playing Candy Jelly Crush. The headline would be horrifying—*Homeless-looking, Hygiene-free Paranormal Romance Author Beheaded by Victorian Psycho*.

If I lived through the next hour, I was deleting the game for good.

“I think it would do wonders for your spirit if you donned a nice tight corset and a clean chemise,” she suggested, skillfully ignoring my question. “You must pull yourself together. Your behavior is dicked in the nob.”

I sat down and studied her. My about-to-be-murdered radar relaxed a tiny bit, but I kept the lamp clutched tightly in my hand. My gut told me she wasn’t going to strangle me. Of course, I could be mistaken, but Purple Gal didn’t seem violent—just bizarre. Plus, the lamp was heavy. I could knock her ladylike ass out with one good swing.

How in the heck did I know her? College? Grad School? The grocery store? At forty-two, I’d met a lot of people in my life. Was she with the local community theater troop? I was eighty-six percent sure she wasn’t here to off me. However, I’d been wrong about life-altering events before—like not knowing my husband was boffing someone young enough to have been our daughter.

“What language are you speaking?” I spotted a pair of scissors on my desk. If I needed them, it was a quick move to grab them. I’d never actually killed anyone except in fictitious situations, but there was a first time for

everything.

Pulling an embroidered lavender hankey from her cleavage, she clutched it and twisted it in her slim fingers. “Clementine, you should know.”

“I’m at a little disadvantage here,” I said, fascinated by the batshit crazy woman who’d broken into my home. “You seem to know my name, but I don’t know yours.”

And that was when the tears started. Hers. Not mine.

“Such claptrap. How very unkind of you, Clementine,” she burst out through her stupidly attractive sobs.

It was ridiculous how good the woman looked while crying. I got all blotchy and red, but not the mystery gal in purple. She grew even more lovely. It wasn’t fair. I still had no clue what the hell she was talking about, but on the off chance she might throw a tantrum if I asked more questions, I kept my mouth shut.

And yes, she had a point, but my *hygiene* was none of her damn business. I couldn’t quite put my finger on the last time I’d showered. If I had to guess, it was probably in the last five to twelve days. I was on a deadline for a book. To be more precise, I was late for my deadline on a book. I didn’t exactly have time for personal sanitation right now.

And speaking of deadlines...

“How about this?” My tone was excessively polite. I almost laughed. The woman had illegally entered my house, and I was behaving like she was a guest. “I’ll take a shower later today after I get through a few pivotal chapters. Right now, you should leave so I can work.”

“Yes, of course,” she replied, absently stroking Fat Stella, who purred. If I’d done that, I would be minus a finger. “It would be dreadfully sad if you were under the hatches.”

I nodded. “Right. That would, umm... suck.”

The woman in purple smiled. It was radiant, and I would have sworn I heard birds happily chirping. I was losing it.

“Excellent,” she said, pulling a small periwinkle velvet bag from her cleavage. I wondered what else she had stored in there and hoped there wasn’t a weapon. “I shall leave you with two gold coins. While the Grape Nuts were tasty, I would prefer that you purchase some Lucky Charms. I understand they are magically delicious.”

“It was you?” I asked, wildly relieved that I hadn’t been sleep eating. I had enough problems at the moment. Gaining weight from midnight dates

with cereal wasn't on the to-do list.

"It was," she confirmed, getting to her feet and dropping the coins into my hand. "The consistency was quite different from porridge, but I found it tasty—very crunchy."

"Right... well... thank you for putting the bowl in the sink." Wait. Why the hell was I thanking her? She'd wandered in and eaten my Grape Nuts.

"You are most welcome, Clementine," she said with a disarming smile that lit up her unusual eyes. "It was lovely finally meeting you even if your disheveled outward show is entirely astonishing."

I was reasonably sure I had just been insulted by the cereal lover, but it was presented with excellent manners. However, she did answer a question. We hadn't met. I wasn't sure why she seemed familiar. The fact that she knew my name was alarming.

"Are you a stalker?" I asked before I could stop myself.

I'd had a few over the years. Being a *New York Times* bestselling author was something I was proud of, but it had come with a little baggage here and there. Some people seemed to have difficulty discerning fiction from reality. If I had to guess, I'd say Purple Gal might be one of those people.

I'd only written one Regency novel, and that had been at the beginning of my career, before I'd found my groove in paranormal romance. I was way more comfortable writing about demons and vampires than people dressed in top hats and hoopskirts. Maybe the crazy woman had read my first book. It hadn't done well, and for good reason. It was over-the-top bad. I'd blocked the entire novel out of my mind. Live and learn. It had been my homage to Elizabeth Hoyt well over a decade ago. It had been clear to all that I should leave Regency romance to the masters.

"Don't be a Merry Andrew," the woman chided me. "Your bone box is addled. We must see to it at once. I shall pay a visit again soon."

The only part of her gibberish I understood was that she thought she was coming back. Note to self—change all the locks on the doors. Since it wasn't clear if she was packing heat in her cleavage, I just smiled and nodded.

"Alrighty then..." I was unsure if I should walk her to the door or if she would let herself out. Deciding it would be better to make sure she actually left instead of letting her hide in my pantry to finish off my cereal, I gestured to the door. "Follow me."

Thick Stella growled at me. I was so tempted to flip her off but thought it might earn another lecture from Purple Gal. It was more than enough to be

lambasted for my appearance. I didn't need my manners picked apart by someone with a tenuous grip on reality.

My own grip was dubious as it was.

"You might want to reconsider breaking into homes," I said, holding the front door open. "It could end badly—for you."

Part of me couldn't believe that I was trying to help the nutty woman out, but I couldn't seem to stop myself. I kind of liked her.

"I'll keep that in mind," she replied as she sauntered out of my house into the warm spring afternoon. "Remember, Clementine, there is always sunshine after the rain."

As she made her way down the long sunlit, tree-lined drive, she didn't look back. It was disturbingly like watching the end of a period movie where the heroine left her old life behind and walked proudly toward her new and promising future.

Glancing around for a car, I didn't spot one. Had she left it parked on the road so she could make a clean getaway after she'd bludgeoned me? Had I just politely escorted a murderer out of my house?

Had I lost it for real?

Probably.

As she disappeared from sight, I felt the weight of the gold coins still clutched in my hand. Today couldn't get any stranger.

At least, I hoped not.

Opening my fist to examine the coins, I gasped. "What in the heck?"

There was nothing in my hand.

Had I dropped them? Getting down on all fours, I searched. Thick Stella joined me, kind of—more like watched me as I crawled around and wondered if anything that had just happened had actually happened.

"Purple Gal gave me coins to buy Lucky Charms," I told my cat, my search now growing frantic. "You saw her do it. Right? She sat next to you. And you didn't attack her. *Right?*"

Thick Stella simply stared at me. What did I expect? If my cat answered me, I'd have to commit myself. That option might still be on the table. Had I just imagined the entire exchange with the strange woman? Should I call the cops?

"And tell them what?" I asked, standing back up and locking the front door securely. "That a woman in a purple gown broke in and ate my cereal while politely insulting my hygiene? Oh, and she left me two gold coins that

disappeared in my hand as soon as she was out of sight? That's not going to work."

I'd call the police if she came back, since I wasn't sure she'd been here at all. She hadn't threatened to harm me. Purple Gal had been charming and well-mannered the entire time she'd badmouthed my cleanliness habits. And to be quite honest, real or not, she'd made a solid point. I could use a shower.

Maybe four months of wallowing in self-pity and only living inside the fictional worlds I created on paper had taken more of a toll than I was aware of. Getting lost in my stories was one of my favorite things to do. It had saved me more than once over the years. It was possible that I'd let it go too far. Hence, the Purple Gal hallucination.

Shit.

First things first. Delete Candy Jelly Crush. Getting rid of the white noise in my life was the first step to... well, the first step to something.

I'd figure it out later.

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ROBYN'S BOOK LIST

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Fashionably Hotter Than Hell
Fashionably Dead and Wed
Fashionably Fanged
Fashionably Flawed
A Fashionably Dead Diary
Fashionably Forever After
Fashionably Fabulous
A Fashionable Fiasco
Fashionably Fooled
Fashionably Dead and Loving It
Fashionably Dead and Demonic
The Oh My Gawd Couple
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If after reading all the above you are still wanting more adventure and zany fun, read *Pirate Dave and His Randy Adventures*, the romance novel budding novelist Rena helped wicked Evangeline write in *How Hard Can It Be?*

Warning: Pirate Dave Contains Romance Satire, Spoofing, and Pirates with Two Pork Swords.

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

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You are the reason I write these stories and I sincerely appreciate each of you!

*Many thanks for your support,
~ Robyn Peterman*

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ABOUT ROBYN PETERMAN



Robyn Peterman writes because the people inside her head won't leave her alone until she gives them life on paper. Her addictions include laughing really hard with friends, shoes (the expensive kind), Target, Coke (the drink not the drug LOL) with extra ice in a Yeti cup, bejeweled reading glasses, her kids, her super-hot hubby and collecting stray animals.

A former professional actress with Broadway, film and T.V. credits, she now lives in the South with her family and too many animals to count.

Writing gives her peace and makes her whole, plus having a job where she can work in sweatpants works really well for her.

