

A Fashionable **DISASTER**

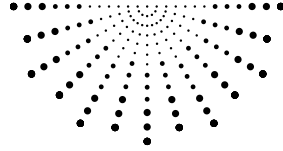
THE HOT DAMNED SERIES
BOOK SEVENTEEN



NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ROBYN PETERMAN

A FASHIONABLE DISASTER

HOT DAMNED, BOOK 17



ROBYN PETERMAN

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

Cover design by *Dreams2media*

Edited by *Kelli Collins*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Hot Damned series is the series of my heart. Writing Astrid's story will never get old. I hope you enjoy reading her newest adventure as much as I loved writing it.

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

Kelli — Your editing makes me look like a better writer. Thank you.

Wanda — You are the freaking bomb. Love you to the moon and back.

Heather, Nancy, Susan, Caroline and Wanda — Thank you for reading early and helping me find the boobos. You all rock.

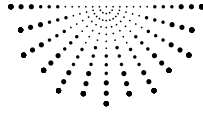
My Readers — Thank you for loving the stories that come from my warped mind. It thrills me.

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

DEDICATION

For Cindy, Helen and Kevin. Welcome to the sandbox!

MORE IN THE HOT DAMNED SERIES



CHECK OUT THE WHOLE SERIES!

BOOK DESCRIPTION

A FASHIONABLE DISASTER

The rich bloodsuckers don't want to pay taxes. Too bad, so sad.

They're the least of my problems right now. At the wise suggestion of my beloved mate, I indulge in a little retail therapy so I don't dismember the pissed off crew of greedy Vamps who don't want to pay their fair share.

How could a trip to the happiest place on earth aka Target go wrong?

Let me count the ways...

Martha and Jane want to ride in the cart.

Vinnie convinces me to buy chicken potholders because everyone needs poultry inspired oven mitts.

Most horrifying? I've run into the most dastardly and most boring enemy yet, and they've turned my happy place into a nightmare.

Their diabolical powers have already put Ethan into a trance, and I'm next on their list.

I'm going to have to rely on my unconventional crew, Martha, Jane, Vinnie and some undead mimes hopped up on caffeinated blood, if I want to kick ass and end this supernatural snoozefest. Adding my untrustworthy, homicidal sister to the mix might end in catastrophe, but it's a case of the Devil made me do it.

Disaster has struck again, but I'll handle it on my terms—
fashionably and with no mercy. May the best Vamp stay awake
long enough to win... and let it be me.

CHAPTER ONE



BEING UNDEAD CAME WITH SOME BAGGAGE. IT TENDED TO BE heavy. Mine weighed a ton. Granted, there were many beautiful people in my life, but I still had the occasional doozy of a nightmare. The memories were from the past, but they were as real as if they'd just happened. The horror that was associated with my sister would never die.

I stared at the enchanted and impenetrable door that led to the cells of the dungeon. I'd been visiting my sister monthly for as long as she'd been locked up. It didn't do her or me any good, but for some pathetic reason, I felt compelled to try and reach her. As always, I didn't want to go in, but I would.

Still, I wouldn't forget my history. If I did, it might repeat itself. I didn't have time for that shit. Once had been enough. I closed my eyes and forced myself to remember.

The rolling hills around the compound were eerily quiet. Ten-foot-high Trolls stood as still as statues, peppering the hills menacingly, while the Wraiths looked like a swarm of bloody bees in the distance. They hovered around a lone figure with wild blonde hair and piercing red eyes.

"Son of a bitch," I swore. "It is her."

My sister was insane.

Juliet's arms were raised, and her fangs were bared. She appeared to be deranged and ready to snap. She was clearly controlling the Wraiths. They moaned and screamed impatiently as they floated around her in a frenzy.

“I’d say it’s nice to see you,” Juliet yelled. “But it’s not.” Her laugh pierced the air and the wailing of the ghosts increased to deafening levels.

“Jesus Christ, she’s a fucking nut bucket,” I hissed.

“She always was,” my sister-in-law Raquel said as she watched Juliet with disgust. “She used to steal my clothes and then burn them after she was done wearing them.”

“What the hell?” I snapped. “I hear you. The hag stole my expensive nail polish. She’s going down.”

“Because she took your nail polish?” Ethan asked, completely confused.

“No,” I said. “Because she’s still trying to take what isn’t hers. She can’t have my baby... or my damn sister-in-law. They’re mine.”

“Got it,” Heathcliff said as he put a calming hand on my shoulder.

I was well aware it would be a clusterfuck if I blew up the hillside. It wouldn’t kill the Trolls or the Wraiths, and it would make our job much more dangerous than it already was.

“Heathcliff, you will talk to her. She’ll be more volatile and less reasonable with her blood relatives,” Ethan instructed under his breath.

“You’re kidding yourself if you think Juliet’s going to be reasonable with anyone,” Raquel muttered. “She’s completely lost her shit. Look at her.”

I had to agree with Raquel, but Ethan made a good point. She didn’t know Heathcliff like she knew her family. He was an unknown to her. It might throw her.

“What do you want?” he shouted up the hill as he stepped forward.

“And who are you?” Juliet demanded shrilly. “You’re very pretty. Maybe we can spare you.”

“My name is not of importance and looks can be deceiving. Are you here to negotiate or are your terms as we

have heard?”

“I really like you,” she bellowed with a grunt of animalistic pleasure. She ran her hands over her body and cupped herself between her legs.

It was disgusting and pathetic.

“Terms?” Heathcliff shouted again, most likely knowing she had none.

However, treating her like a sane equal might help. My dear friend was a very smart man.

“No terms,” she shrieked. “No negotiations. I want Astrid’s baby and I want Raquel. Now—or else everyone dies... and I still get Raquel and the baby.”

The Trolls watched the insane woman with narrowed eyes. Were they a joined enemy or were we dealing with two separate factions? The fact that my sister had summoned both Trolls and Wraiths was batshit crazy.

“No can do, Juliet,” I shouted. “You don’t look like the motherly type and Raquel thinks you’re an asshole.”

“Love what you’ve done with your hair,” Juliet snarled. “The red streaks make you look like a whore.”

“What the fuck?” I stomped my foot and the ground beneath us shook. “How many different immortal whack-jobs are going to call me a whore? I mean, I have plenty of faults, but loose morals are not one of them. I’m sorry guys, but I have to kill her.”

“Fine by me,” Raquel hissed.

“Not yet,” Heathcliff said calmly. “Let her make her move. We don’t know if she’s controlling the Trolls too. If we keep her talking, there’s more of a chance of taking the Trolls from behind.”

“Motherfucker,” I complained. “I hate it when you make sense.”

“Getting bored up here,” Juliet screamed and began to pace in tight, erratic circles. “Get the baby. I want the baby.

And send that bitch Raquel up the hill before the sun goes down. I'm hungry."

The Trolls were grumbling and examining Juliet with detached hatred. Were they with her or against her? It really didn't matter in the end because they definitely didn't like us either.

"How many Wraiths have you sent back to Hell at one time?" Ethan questioned Raquel as we all watched the deadly ghosts shimmer and shriek.

"Ten."

"I will pretend I didn't hear that," Heathcliff ground out as my stomach lurched. "That might have been a good fucking question to ask while we were still in the planning stages."

"I'm your best bet for getting out of here alive," Raquel snapped. "Ten or a hundred—what does it matter? If I fail, we die. If I try, we might not."

She was correct. I didn't like it, but she was. Sacrificing my sister-in-law for my evil sister wasn't in the game plan.

Raquel continued. "I need the Wraiths to come closer. They need to be within twenty feet for me to banish them."

"Not a problem," I informed my friends. "Watch this... Hey, Juliet, you skanky shitbag. You're not getting anything except a visa to the bowels of Hell. You're stupid and shortsighted and you look like you've gained about ten pounds. Your ass is huge."

The shriek from the hill was insanity personified. Juliet was coming unhinged and the Trolls began to tremble with rage.

"I will kill you, you bitch," she screamed. "You're a worthless nothing. I should have eaten you when you were born."

"Now that's just fucking gross," I muttered then laughed, which sent Juliet into a psychotic break.

"Enough," one of the enormous Trolls bellowed.

Trees bent and snapped at the root from the sheer volume of his voice. The Wraiths shot up into the air and tore at each other in confusion. Juliet's plan seemed to be backfiring for her. However, we were still firmly in the crosshairs of the hell that was about to break loose.

"The woman is not in control here," the Troll grunted. "We are. We will kill her for you if you give us the child. We don't care about Raquel. She means nothing to us. We have come for the child. He is our Savior. We will not harm him."

"Shut your ugly mouth, you filthy beast," Juliet screeched. "The baby is mine and so are the rest of them. We have a deal and you will abide by it."

"The baby is ours," the Troll bellowed as smoke and fire blew from his nose. "You only get the one who dies... or you will die—violently."

"You stupid fucks," Juliet roared. "The Wraiths can kill you too. You watch what you say or it will be your bloodbath."

I shook my head as I listened. Clearly a thin thread connected our foes. This was interesting. No less deadly, but definitely interesting.

"Since when did people start showing up and thinking I would hand my child over?" I demanded, pissed as hell.

"I'm afraid this is just the beginning," Ethan said angrily.

"Well, they're smoking crack if they think this will be easy. And what in the hell is Sammy supposed to save the Trolls from? Being butt-ass fugly?" I ground out. "I can't believe I'm going to say this, but we might be safer if we lived in Hell. Satan would never put up with this bullshit."

"And neither will I," Ethan said.

"Astrid, shoot her with magic like you shot me in the ass. Piss her off enough to release the Wraiths. If the Troll kills her first, there's no telling what the Wraiths will do," Heathcliff directed urgently.

"My fucking pleasure," I replied. "You ready, Raquel?"

"I am," she said flatly.

“We gotta kill some shit now. Everyone with me?”

“Yep. Zap her ass,” Raquel hissed.

I did.

Then the gates of Hell opened.

As the Wraiths ripped through our bodies, it felt as if our veins turned to ice. Generally speaking, Vampyres were impervious to temperature, but the ghosts carried a blistering wind with them that shot through us like frozen daggers.

From a distance, they had looked like a swarm of bees. Up close was another story. Dead eyes and gaunt faces with papery skin and open wounds raced around and dove through our bodies. The nearly transparent specters screamed and moaned as they flew in circles with no goal other than to create as much pain as they were in. I repeatedly fought the urge to fall or slow down. I’d been run through several times by the Wraiths and was surprised to see open cuts on my body where they had entered and exited. How in the fuck did a spirit rip skin?

Opening my eyes, I ran my hands through my hair. Juliet had lost that battle. It had been her last murderous rampage. She didn’t get my son. Samuel didn’t save the Trolls. Eventually, he’d most likely have to deal with the abominations, but Ethan and I would be by our son’s side. Always.

Juliet didn’t get Raquel or Heathcliff either. They were both alive, in love and doing great. What she did get was a non-refundable ticket to the dungeon of the Cressida House. She’d been here for years now.

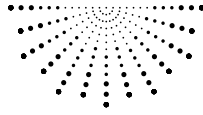
My monthly visits proved I was a glutton for punishment, but I slept well at night knowing I did the best I could do... even for a monster.

My sister didn’t deserve my compassion. Even so, it was my gift. It didn’t seem to matter if it was wanted or deserved, it was there. Even for someone like Juliet.

Desmond Tutu had said, “Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness.”

I chose to see the light even when the darkness threatened to consume me.

CHAPTER TWO



THE ROOM WE SAT IN WAS BASICALLY A JAIL CELL IN THE dungeon of the Cressida House where I lived, but it wasn't stark and depressing. Juliet's gilded cage had been set up as an apartment of sorts. Granted, there were no weapons handy or any way for her to communicate with anyone on the outside—not that anyone wanted to communicate with her. She'd tried to kill everyone, friends and family.

To say she'd been canceled and forgotten would be accurate. Not a single person, besides me, had visited her in years.

"If the truth about one's conduct paints one in a horrid light, the issue isn't with the truth. It's with one's conduct... or rather with my conduct," Juliet said, staring at her shaking hands.

I was speechless. Rare for me, but it could happen. Her statement was jarring, but I'd been deceived by the woman too many times to count. I wanted to buy it, but it was an absurdly tough sell. One that could end in mass decapitation.

Although Juliet's words made my undead heart ache. My compassion was showing. I kept it in check. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. Fool me three times, I would most likely end up minus a few limbs... or worse. While her remorse appeared sincere, I wasn't stupid.

I stared at the woman who was my sister. She stared back at me with what I could only describe as defiance or a mild hostility in her eyes. It was unsettling. Shockingly and

ironically, Juliet was also my mate's sister. The discovery had been a massive gas-inducing moment. It had thrown me for a terrified loop until I'd figured out that I was not related to the man I loved. It was complicated since both my Vampyre sister and mate, Ethan, were older than dirt—each in their fifth century. They shared a father, and Juliet and I shared a mother. It was an understatement to say my mother had been an awful piece of work. Juliet hadn't fallen far from that tree.

But she was still my sister. My sister who had tricked me and turned me from a living human into an undead creature. My sister who'd repeatedly tried to terminate me and those who I loved. My sister who was beyond batshit nuts. Thankfully, I had another sister and a brother, Tiara and Levi. They were from my asshole father's side and had no relation to Juliet. They were Demons and two of the best people I knew. I loved Tiara and Levi. Sadly, I didn't feel the same about the Vampyre in the dungeon, but blood didn't a family make.

Juliet had been banished to the dungeon for years. She was simply too deranged and dangerous.

But was she still? It was very easy to assume the answer was yes. She'd been fabulous at hiding her crazy for centuries. Had solitary confinement made her see the light? Had the army of therapists that I'd insisted on made her see the error of her ways?

Ethan didn't believe she was capable of change or redemption. I wasn't as sure. Although, I'd brought six guards with me to visit her even though I was basically unkillable and could end her with a wiggle of my pinkie finger. That was the reason I'd brought backup. I didn't want to be responsible for ending her if she came at me—even though she'd spent years trying to off me.

As a True Immortal, it was super difficult to end me. True Immortals were unkillable unless we chose to die by the Sword of Death.

There were thirteen of us in total. I represented Compassion. My uncles, God and Satan, embodied Good and

Evil, respectively. Mother Nature was Emotion, and Bill—Satan’s father, my grandfather and Mother Nature’s mate—was Wisdom. My Demon cousin Dixie manifested Balance and her mate, Hayden, the Angel of Death, represented Death. The Angel of Light, Elijah, epitomized Life. And the woman he pined for, Lucy—the daughter of the original Eve—was Temptation. The three Fates, including Satan’s mate Elle and her mother Sadie, personified Fate and that left Samuel.

Our son was Utopia, the most powerful of all the True Immortals. He was a combination of all of our gifts. His future terrified me. Keeping him safe as he matured into who he was to become was paramount to both Ethan and me. While I knew there would come a day when my child would have to spread his wings, I hoped it wasn’t anytime soon. He was truly my miracle.

All this meant that I hadn’t been truly worried Juliet would kill me, but that left a lot of people I cared about who weren’t True Immortals as fodder for her.

I couldn’t forget Juliet was broken. The mess of a Vampyre looked like a supermodel, beautiful on the outside—honey-blond hair, high cheekbones and emerald-green eyes. But the beautiful exterior belied her putrid insides.

“Words are nice,” I said in a neutral tone. “Actions speak far louder.”

She nodded and wrung her hands. “I agree, Astrid. Until I’m given the chance to show I’ve changed, words are all I have.”

If I could have sighed, I would have expelled the mother of all sighs. Since I didn’t breathe, it wasn’t an option. “It’s not my decision alone.”

My mind raced with all the unthinkable and shitty things she’d done. The list was too long and too horrible to really take in. However, the thought of her living for eternity in the dungeon didn’t sit well with me. Maybe I was as nuts as she was. The reports from her therapists had been promising in the last year. That could mean real growth or it could be attributed

to the fact that she was a very good actress. Juliet was also very smart.

Before she'd lost her debatably sane mind and went on multiple murderous rampages, she'd been an undead historian of sorts. Juliet was the foremost scholar on Vampyre behavior. She'd compiled volumes on the traits of Vamps and other magical species. Unfortunately, she'd used that knowledge to turn all sorts of unsavory monsters on us.

I stared at her. She stared back. There was a vacantness in her green eyes that concerned me. Unsure if it meant she was beyond repair or if she was truly repentant, I pressed my lips together and considered the options.

"I'll talk to Ethan," I finally said. "Tell me why you should be set free."

She pulled at her bottom lip. "I will never be free," she said flatly. "There's no coming back from what I've done. What I would like is a chance to make a difference in the future."

"How?" I pressed. For all I knew that could mean beheading all of us... or maybe not. My compassion was probably going to land me six feet under for real.

She shrugged and refused to make eye contact. "I won't know until the opportunity reveals itself."

I gave her a curt nod and stood up. The fact that she couldn't meet my gaze wasn't reassuring. My bullshit meter was dinging loudly. "I don't want to raise your hopes, but you have my word I'll discuss it with Ethan. However, it's a long shot—a really fucking long shot."

Juliet stood and bowed to me. I didn't like that. The whole royalty thing was absurd. It was the reason my mother had lost her mind and taken Juliet down with her.

"Thank you, Astrid," she said. "I don't deserve it, but would be indebted to you if you can help me."

I paused. There was one way that Ethan might agree to put Juliet on parole, so to speak. "Would you be willing to have your power bound?"

My sister's eyes narrowed. She looked alarmed then intrigued. "Is that possible?"

"It is," I replied.

It was something I'd discovered by accident when Ethan and I had played Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf. Of course, the naked wolf—Ethan—was chasing the naked Red Riding Hood—me—much to my delight. My shrieks of joy as he chased me all over our suite listing off the fabulously naughty things he was about to do were so loud, the entire compound had to have heard. I didn't care.

In the heat of the moment, I'd electrocuted the man of my dreams, which only turned him on more. That's when we discovered that eight consecutive electrocutions could bind power. It was shocking and a real cock block to the activities. Reversing it had been as easy as casting it. Eight more electrocutions in a row had been all it had taken to undo it.

I'd insisted that Ethan try it on me after his power had been restored. It hadn't worked. That was good and bad. It meant that others weren't capable of binding power. Only I had the ability. My bag of tricks was large and getting larger.

Thankfully, after the experiment had concluded, the cock got unblocked and Little Red Riding Hood and her Big Bad Wolf had a *very* good time.

Even so, the new discovery had been a dangerous one. One we didn't plan to advertise. I was already not well-liked in the undead community for my insistence that the bloodsuckers pay taxes. If it became known that I could bind power, they'd want my head for sure.

"What does binding power entail?" Juliet asked, fascinated.

Her question wasn't surprising. She was an expert in all things Vampyre. This was new. It was also none of her business. I didn't trust her. She'd given me a million reasons not to.

"It's not necessary for you to know. Answer the question," I said.

“Is it permanent?” she queried.

“Depends on you,” I shot back. “It’s a yes or no question, Juliet. If you truly want to make amends, it will make it more palatable to those you’ve repeatedly tried to kill. No one wants you freed to be able to slaughter more innocents.”

She blanched. I didn’t feel bad. It was the truth and the truth could suck hard. In her case it sucked really hard.

“I’m agreeable,” she whispered.

“Noted. It doesn’t mean that you’ll be released, but it might make it a possibility.”

I turned to leave. She put her hand on my arm. I tensed out of reflex. Having been the target, her psychopathic tendencies were embedded in my body and my brain.

The guards hissed and growled with fangs gnashing. When they drew weapons, Juliet immediately stepped back and cowered.

My instinct was to hug the damaged woman, but I didn’t.

I couldn’t.

Maybe someday, but not today.

CHAPTER THREE



WAS IT TOO MUCH TO ASK FOR JUST ONE DAY WITHOUT ANY dismemberment or bloodshed?

The discussion with Ethan about Juliet hadn't gone well. Ethan was against giving Juliet her freedom even with her power bound. While I didn't entirely disagree, I was more open to the prospect. However, we made decisions together. We treated each other as respected equals. On this point, we were just going to have to agree to disagree. Since we all freaking lived forever, there was plenty of time to discuss it again on a different day. We were now about to host yet *another* meeting with pissy and greedy Vamps, aka my subjects. Awesome.

The undead didn't want to pay taxes. No one actually wanted to pay taxes, but that was tough crap. If they were going to inhabit this world, they were damned well going to make it a better place. The pompous bloodsuckers had amassed ridiculous fortunes over the centuries upon centuries they'd been alive, or rather, dead, and they had never paid a single cent towards society. I was changing all of that.

Banging and mating with the Prince of the North American Dominion made me a Princess, and with that came some clout. I was also the Chosen One—not by choice. It was kind of foisted on me. But that meant I came with clout of my own. Apparently, the Vamps had been waiting around for the Chosen One for thousands of years. Not all of them were thrilled it was me. Change was difficult for people older than time. The tax decree was not popular and neither was I. I

didn't care. It was the right thing to do. Being incredibly hard to kill was a bonus. Vampyres were notorious for getting even.

After a recent financial consortium had turned into a bloodbath, as most undead gatherings tended to do, some of the obscenely rich cut a deal to give billions to charity so they could write it off. I found that slightly shitty, but since there had been substantial loss of limbs at the summit, I let it go. As long as the money went to the betterment of man and womankind, I was fine.

Today, I'd been advised by my beloved mate, Ethan, to leave the compound for a few hours. The undead heads of the different territories within the North American Dominion were meeting to further discuss the *bullshit taxation issue*. Their words, not mine. I'd electrocuted seventy uppity assholes last week when we'd had a discussion and it was thought to be prudent that I skipped this little get-together. My man completely had my back, but thought that my penchant for setting jerks on fire would not help our agenda.

I was all for it. An afternoon away from Vampyre politics was good by me. I didn't want to think about taxes or my sister. Target was my goal.

All I wanted to do was sniff candles, ooh and ahh over how cute travel-sized toiletries were, try on sale-rack bathing suits under fluorescent lighting in cramped dressing rooms, and buy things I didn't need just like I had when I was human.

While being dead had plenty of advantages, the one I couldn't stomach was the fact I couldn't eat food anymore. My diet was one hundred percent liquid and bloody. Initially, it made me want to off myself, but being dead already, it wasn't an option. So, instead, I went to Target once a month and stocked up on items I had no use for, like toilet paper and tampons. I no longer had bodily functions, but that didn't stop me.

My hotter-than-Hades mate was a great sport about my hobby and had even designated a room at the Cressida House for all the useless crap I acquired. At the end of each month, I donated my goodies to charity. Win-win.

The largest mistake I'd made today was letting the undead imbeciles, Martha and Jane, join me. I'd put my foot down and made them wear actual clothing instead of their normal uniforms of booty shorts and sequined boob tubes with black socks and sandals. I wasn't in the mood to see their sagging bosoms fall out of their barely there tops. After twenty minutes of bitching, they'd put on polyester tracksuits with black socks and sandals. The look made me itchy, but it was better than the hooker outfits they normally wore.

In a moment of weakness, I'd had the two eighty-something dumb-dumbs turned when they lay dying at my feet a few years back. While Vampyres in general were absurdly good-looking, Martha and Jane were not. They were sparsely haired, wrinkled nightmares. Having them turned had been a bad move that turned into a beautiful gift. They'd saved the life of my son and for that I'd forever be grateful. I'd protect the banes of my existence until the end of time and secretly loved them. However, I electrocuted them often. They heartily deserved it. It was a better option than decapitation. I was nice like that.

Thankfully, my odd little Vampyre buddy, Vinnie, had come as well. He'd never been to Target. That was unacceptable. Occasionally, Ethan and I would poof to a twenty-four-seven Target in a random city during the middle of the night and roam the aisles. Target wasn't his speed, considering he was more of an Armani kind of Vamp, but the man loved me enough to suffer my need to pretend I was human every now and then.

"Never again," I muttered under my breath, watching Martha and Jane fight over who was going to ride in the basket of the shopping cart.

Thinking the dead idiots could control their antics for a few hours had been a grave mistake—pun intended. Only Vinnie was behaving himself. Although, his floor-length black velvet cape with the enormous ruby clip at the neck had gotten many stares as we made our way through the store.

"I just wanted some normal for an hour," I said as I yanked Martha out of the shopping cart and zapped her ass since the

aisle was empty.

“Oh, I do so understand,” Count Vincent Gustav formerly of Bat Cave North Carolina said, patting my back. “This is such an exciting and lovely place! It’s positively dastardly how it’s laid out. One might come in for toothpicks and end up with new sheets, shoes they’ll never wear and potholders that look like chickens. Wonderful!”

I loved that the odd little guy got it. To me, Target was like Christmas on crack.

Vinnie was now residing at the Cressida House. Until he moved in, he’d led a lonely and solitary life. I adored him. His skin was so pale it was almost translucent and his eyes were jet black. There was very little color about him at all other than the ruby brooch. However, he delighted me to no end. Ethan and I had invested heavily in his bottled blood company—Really Good Bottled Blood. The name was uninspired, but the product was stellar. He used the proceeds to save puppies. I loved puppies, but the hot salsa and chips flavored blood had sold me.

“Where are the chicken potholders?” I asked, feeling the tingle I got when I was about to buy something useless. Since I didn’t eat food, I didn’t cook. Hence, I didn’t need oven mitts. Whatever. Chicken potholders were necessary.

“Aisle six,” Vinnie shared, catching my excitement and bouncing on his toes. “Absolutely adorable!”

Turning the cart around, I headed for aisle six like I was about to put out a five-alarm fire. I needed chicken potholders. Vinnie was sprinting right behind me with Martha and Jane on his heels. The gals were slapping each other and doing their best to make the other trip. I was tempted to run them down with the cart, but I had no clue how many chicken potholders were left and I’d lose my shit if I didn’t get them. I didn’t have time to mow the old biddies down.

It was becoming more common for the undead to move about in the daylight. That probably wasn’t wise, considering that most Vampyres under one hundred years old could burn to a crisp in the sun. Luckily, I didn’t fry in the sun. Of course, as

long as sunscreen was used, we didn't burst into flames. I'd slathered Martha and Jane up good and was living to regret it.

Next time, I'd think twice. I wouldn't be all that upset if Martha and Jane were engulfed in a raging inferno. The undead dumbasses were going to drive me to drink. Their nicknames for my boobs were reason enough.

"Yessss," I shouted, jerking the cart to a halt. There were ten chicken potholders with my name all over them.

"Who let the dogs out? Who? Who? Who?" Martha sang in the key of Z flat and danced as she tossed potholders into the basket.

"Nope," I told her, slapping my hands over my ears. The stupid song was now running on repeat in my brain. They tended to sing when excited. It was not good.

"Party pooper," Jane said with a cackle, doing a warped version of the running man. "How about, Baby Shark doodoodoodoodoo?"

"Worse," I said with a pained laugh as I zapped her ass. I was so glad my child had grown up before the baby shark had gotten popular.

The dummy just grinned and slapped out the fire on her butt.

"Did you bring money, Hooters McBoobland?" Martha asked, pawing through a sale bin of after-season men's Christmas underpants and women's bras that was next to the chicken potholders.

"That depends," I replied. "Are those for you?"

"Nah," Jane said, joining her cohort and holding up a particularly horrifying pair of boxers with the face of a cartoon reindeer where the junk resides. "Satan was moaning and groaning that no one got him a Christmas present. Whined like a little bitch. Said that since he and Santa have the same letters in their names it was very fuckin' unfair. I figure if we get him some Santa panties, he'll shut his cakehole."

The thought of Martha and Jane presenting my uncle with reindeer underwear was glorious. “If you give him a bra too, I’ll pay for it.”

“Done, Knockers McChesticles,” Jane said with a wide grin as she yanked out a light blue double D covered in smiling snowmen from the pile.

“Oh my!” Vinnie squealed, pointing to the shelves. “There are penguin potholders too!”

“Throw them in the cart,” I said. “And grab ten of the pig potholders too. One can never have too many potholders.”

“On it,” Vinnie said, levitating off the ground to reach the pigs.

I gently pulled him out of the air. Quickly scanning the area to make sure no one was watching, I set him back on the ground. “Vinnie, we can’t float when humans are nearby.”

“Oh dear! I’m so sorry.” The tiny Vamp fanned himself frantically with his pale hands. “I’m not used to the glorious rules of Target. I don’t get out much.”

I giggled. “Not to worry, my friend. Just keep the magic to the bare minimum.”

“There’s a jockstrap with red and green feathers on it,” Martha announced.

“Throw it in the cart,” I said with a laugh. “Uncle Fucker will hate it.”

“So exciting!” Vinnie squealed. “I LOVE TARGET and I’ve got the baby shark song stuck in my frontal lobe!”

“You’re welcome, motherfucker!” Jane said, slapping the little guy on the back.

He returned the favor and they both went down in a fit of giggles. I didn’t electrocute either one of them. They were having fun and there were no humans in the aisle.

“Target is the most wonderful place on Earth,” Vinnie exclaimed as he got back to his feet and helped Jane to hers.

“Now you’re talkin’,” I said with a grin as I picked out a lime green platter shaped like a pickle.

“Looks like a diseased pecker,” Martha commented with a nod of approval.

I put it back and grabbed one shaped like a radish.

“Deformed testicle,” Jane said, pointing to the platter.

“You’re fucking with my chi,” I snapped, putting it back and grabbing a mug with a lily on it.

“Vagina,” Martha pointed out. “Looks like one of them flower lily va-jay-jays like Georgia O’Keeffe painted.”

I wasn’t sure if I was more surprised that she knew who Georgia O’Keeffe was or that she was correct that the lily looked like abstract female genitalia.

“I say get all three,” Jane recommended. “Then you’d have a schlong, meat clackers and a hooha.”

This was not going as planned. It was time to move on to the candles and start sniffing. I placed the vagina mug back on the shelf then put both Martha and Jane into the cart with the potholders and Christmas undies. I didn’t trust them not to make a scene.

As I beelined for the scented candle aisle, Vinnie ran alongside the cart.

“I thought the vagina mug was lovely, Astrid. You should get it,” he said. “And the penis and ball platters are very good conversation starters at a luncheon.”

Again, I jerked the cart to a halt. Martha and Jane flew out of the cart and into a display of teddy bears.

“Do you really think so?” I asked Vinnie.

I didn’t ever have luncheons, but I did have relatives who could eat food—Uncle Fucker, Mother Nature, Bill and Levi, to name a few.

“I know so,” Vinnie assured me.

I wasn't sure why I was taking advice from a person who wore capes and brooches, but I had the Target fever. It was a real thing.

"You're right," I said, pulling the old dummies out of the stuffed animal pile and tossing them back into the cart. "I'm gonna have a luncheon!"

"Fucking A, Knockers LaTatas," Martha shouted as she untangled herself from Jane.

Racing back to aisle six where the precious items lived, I almost screamed when I got there.

There were others who wanted the weenie, nuts and vagina platters. The selfish assholes hadn't just taken one of each. Nope. They'd put all of them into their cart.

It was a showdown. There were six of them and they weren't human. However, I had no clue what they were. I also wasn't sure if they were male or female. They were incredibly nondescript. All were somewhat beige with beady black eyes and horn-rimmed glasses, but had no fangs I could detect. I would have sworn they were undead, but was second-guessing myself. If I closed my eyes, I couldn't have even described what they looked like. Bizarre.

Vinnie gasped and poofed away. That wasn't a good sign. However, as fast as the little dude had poofed away, he was back just as quickly with four bottles of blood in his hands.

"Drink," he insisted frantically, shoving the bottles into our hands. "NOW."

I didn't think twice. Neither did Martha or Jane. Gulping back the blood, I almost choked. "What the hell flavor was that?" I gagged out.

"Black Label by Devil Mountain blood. Highest caffeine content in the world," Vinnie said, wiping his mouth with his velvet cape and doing his best not to spew.

Not that he could. Vamps couldn't puke.

"Why?" I asked.

“Later,” he whispered as the six whatever-they-were warily approached with my dick, ball and vagina luncheon-ware in their cart.

“I have throwing stars in my pocket,” Jane whispered. “I can maim the motherhumpers real quick and get your cock and nuts back.”

“Don’t forget about the clam mug,” Martha reminded me. “Also, I’ve got a grenade in my ass crack. I can blow those fuckers up lickety-split.”

I winced. Who in their right mind carried a grenade in their crack?

“I was wondering if you wanted to chat about the weather,” one of the platter robbers inquired. “Or possibly mathematics? Or car insurance? Maybe traffic? Or Toledo?”

“Actually,” another chimed in. “I have a slight headache and a non-urgent medical condition that I would be happy to explain. It comprises an infected bunion and a scab that won’t heal due to my diet of dinner rolls and lard.”

“I’d love to discuss that,” a third said. “But I feel a hearty debate on glue would be beneficial.”

Martha yawned. Jane had curled up in the bottom of the basket. I felt a bit woozy. Vinnie gripped the shopping cart so he didn’t fall over. What the fuck was happening here?

Taking the final swig out of my bottle of heavily caffeinated blood, I eyed the strange group. While they didn’t seem dangerous in the *I’m going to decapitate you* kind of way, they were definitely menacing in an *I’m gonna bore you to tears then steal your genitalia cookware* kind of way.

Not happening.

“No can do,” I said in my outdoor voice, refusing to make eye contact. “Just hand over the crotch and groin plates and you can yack all you want about bunions, glue and math.”

They exchanged surprised and concerned glances. Clearly, I was going to have to bribe them for the plates. Not a problem. I had a thousand dollars in tens in my Prada bag. A

little much for useless items? Yes, but I had an addiction to feed.

“I can’t believe how much the price of bread has gone up,” the math guy or gal said.

Keeping my eyes open was getting difficult. How badly did I want the platters? I mean, they were great and all, but something was very wrong here.

“And milk. Oh my gosh, milk prices are terrible in Cleveland. But glue on the other hand is a viscous substance used to attach one thing to another thing. Nothing too exciting about it, but if you have a thing that needs a thing because it’s broken, glue can be a real lifesaver.”

Vinnie was now snoring on his feet. Jane was out and Martha was on her way. I had no clue what was going on, but the weenie, testicle and hoohoo plates and cups were not worth it. I was terribly sad to leave the chicken potholders behind, but my gut said to get the hell out of dodge... or Target, to be more accurate.

It took Herculean effort to throw Martha, Jane and Vinnie over my shoulders, but I did it. The feeling of dread that consumed me was real. The furious expressions on the bland platter-hoarders’ faces told me I was doing the right thing.

I vaguely heard the discussion turn to mucus and amoeba when I reached down deep for my magic and poofed the heck out of my favorite store with my friends. I was heartbroken that we didn’t get to sniff candles, but we’d do it another time. Not knowing what kind of Immortals I was dealing with was unsettling. It could be reckless at the least and deadly at the worst. While I might be hard to kill, Martha, Jane and Vinnie were vulnerable. They’d bored my little posse to sleep and I was getting close.

Of course, getting attacked—for lack of a better term—in my favorite store by some boring unknown Immortal jackasses hadn’t been on the agenda.

Agendas changed.

We were headed home.

Unfortunately, home was more of a shitshow than Target.

CHAPTER FOUR



WE LANDED IN A TANGLED PILE IN THE FOYER OF THE Cressida House. It was not a graceful transport. I'd never poofed while carrying three people. Mostly, I was happy they were awake. Although, Martha's saggy boob was dangerously close to my mouth. Vinnie's tiny and bony rear end was on my forehead and Jane was straddling me.

"Not working for me," I muttered, extracting myself from the heap of Vamps.

The foyer was eerily quiet and my stomach tightened in fear. My fingers began to shoot purple sparks and magical black glitter covered my arms and chest. I put my finger to my lips and waved my hand to let them know to get behind me.

Jane was holding throwing stars. Her aim sucked. She'd repeatedly almost decapitated her idiot sidekick too many times to count. It didn't matter. A weapon was a weapon. Also, the gals were fierce in battle. Slightly unconventional and definitely unhinged, but fierce. Martha reached into her pants and pulled the grenade out of her ass. I didn't say a word. I didn't even gag.

Vinnie was the surprise. For such a sweet and mild-mannered little dead guy, he had an enormous flaming sword under his velvet cape. The expression on his pale face was kind of scary. I was impressed.

"Vinnie, you recognized those things at Target?" I whispered.

My buddy looked perplexed. “I’m not sure,” he admitted. “I think they’re a myth.”

I didn’t have time to get into a myth versus reality discussion. We were all myth according to the human race. “Didn’t look like a myth to me. Also didn’t look like Vamps.”

“Definitely Vamps,” Vinnie said, paling.

Now I was confused. “Vamps without fangs?”

He nodded and began to speak, but was cut short by maniacal laughter coming from inside the ballroom where Ethan was hosting two hundred pissy Vampyres.

Thinking quick on my feet, I shoved Martha, Jane and Vinnie behind an enormous gold statue and joined them. Normally, I rolled my eyes at the over-the-top décor of the Cressida House. Right now, I was thrilled. We were completely hidden from sight.

As the mammoth doors flew open, ten beige-looking people in horn-rimmed glasses—almost identical to the bastards who’d stolen my genitalia luncheon-ware—ran through the foyer. The group chattered unintelligibly and continued to laugh. It was strangely terrifying. They formed a circle then disappeared in a blast of grayish-beige dust.

“Supercalifragilisticexpifuckingdocious!” Jane yelled.

I punched her in the head. Now I had baby shark, barking dogs and an x-rated version of Mary Poppins stuck in my head along with everything else going on.

“What in the ever-lovin’ fuck was that?” Martha shouted, jumping out from behind the statue and tossing throwing stars at the spot where the weirdos had vanished.

“Don’t know,” I snarled, racing into the silent ballroom. “What the actual F?” I bellowed as I sprinted across hundreds of prone bodies and directly to Ethan.

He was out like a light. All two hundred Vamps in the room were out as well. My body trembled and my heart felt like it was going to explode in my chest. It might not beat but

it could feel pain. Ethan was my everything—my mate, my lover, my best friend. This wasn't happening.

“Holy shit on a pointy stick,” Jane cried out. “Is everyone dead?”

“Check for pulses,” Martha shouted, flying around the room.

“No pulses,” Jane screamed on the verge of a freak out.

I automatically pressed my fingers to Ethan's neck then rolled my eyes. He didn't have a pulse. He was undead. Everyone the room was undead. No one had a pulse.

“We're all dead,” I reminded her, feeling the need to blow something up.

The only solace I had was that if Ethan was truly dead, he would have turned to dust. He was undead but not dead. I just needed to figure out how to wake him up. Gently shaking him didn't work.

“Right, my bad, Titty LaTaTas. Never been so happy to be dead in my whole fuckin' life,” Jane said, relieved.

I was not relieved. Two hundred of the most powerful Vampyres in North America including the Prince had been bested by a bunch of Immortal nerds. Granted, I didn't like most of the assholes in the room other than Ethan, but that was irrelevant. Had they been poisoned? Was that what had almost happened to us at Target? And if it was, how in the hell had it happened?

“Vinnie,” I called out. “Tell me the myth. Now.”

Vinnie scurried over and knelt in respect before the passed-out Prince.

“Many moons ago when I was in a mime troop in the South of France, I heard a tale of the fangless undead ones,” he said with a shudder.

I squinted at him and ignored the part about the mime troop. Mimes freaked me out. “How do they eat?”

“No one knows,” he replied.

I shook my head. His story didn't add up. There was no doubt that the horn-rimmed cock-and-ball-stealing assholes were something, but I didn't think they were Vamps. Plus, I'd be furious if there were Vamps who didn't have to drink blood.

"It seems like a spell of some sort," I said, gently brushing Ethan's blond hair off his forehead and kissing it. "Maybe they're witches and warlocks."

Jane waddled over. "Magical undead hermaphrodites. Heard about 'em a while back in LA when Martha and I were stalking the sex god Simon Cowell."

"I believe the term is intersexed now." I closed my eyes so I didn't electrocute her.

Yes, I wanted to kill all of the nerds, but making fun of the fact we couldn't tell if they were men or women or whatever was unnecessary. The comment about Simon Cowell, who had restraining orders out on Martha and Jane, I wasn't going to touch.

"Yes," Vinnie confirmed. "That's part of the legend."

"Wait," I said, pinching myself to test out if this was a dream. It wasn't, and I was going to have a nice bruise on my thigh. "Jane's correct?"

"Shocking," Martha said, tucking the grenade back into her ass crack. "That bald, skanky biddy is never right."

"How'd you like it if I pulled that fuckin' pin once you get that metal back into your asshole?" Jane huffed.

"Stop," I hissed, pressing my temples and trying to take in the crap that was being spewed out. "You're telling me that the beige weirdos are fangless intersexed Vamps? All of them?"

"Oh yes," Vinnie replied. "As the legend goes, they can fornicate with themselves to reproduce."

"Okay," I said, standing up. "I'm calling bullshit on all of that. I don't know of a Vampyre alive who can take Ethan down. Period. Vamps who can bang themselves don't exist. That's absurd."

No one said a word.

I looked around and felt ill. This was bad. Even the Elite Guards were out. Had everyone in the Cressida House been spelled to sleep? I didn't believe the *myth*, but I'd get to the bottom of it as soon as Ethan was okay.

I had to wake him up. The question was how?

"Vinnie, do you have more of the caffeinated blood?"

"Yes, Astrid! I do," he said. "Shall I get it?"

"Yep," I said, pacing back and forth. I needed help. Everyone seemed to be asleep and couldn't wake up. I'd never heard of or seen anything like this. I didn't want to owe Uncle Fucker any more favors, but I'd die for Ethan. Owing the Devil a favor was nothing. I was profoundly thankful that my son was in the Australian Dominion right now visiting Levi and Anastasia. My four Baby Demons, Rachel, Ross, Beyonce and Abe, were with Samuel and would keep him safe. "Get the blood and we'll try to get some down Ethan's throat. If it works, we'll do it with everyone."

"Wonderful! I'll be right back!" Vinnie said, poofing away.

"Martha and Jane, check the rest of the compound. See if anyone's awake. If they are, bring them to me."

"You got it, Melons DeMammaries!" Jane yelled as she and Martha hightailed it out of the ballroom.

I sat down next to Ethan and put his limp hand on my lap. His touch gave me strength... even if he wasn't aware I was here. Pulling out my cell phone, I made the call. It still was odd to me that Hell had a phone number, but no odder than everything else in my life.

"To what do I owe the honor, Astrid?" Satan demanded in a booming voice. "I'm quite busy right now playing fucking choo-choos with Luke. It's ridiculous, but he seems to enjoy it more than looking at my bank statements or my instruments of torture."

I could hear the smile in his voice. He adored pretending he cared for no one. It was utter bullshit. He was nuts for his mate, Elle, and his baby boy, Luke. And he loved me too. It pained him to admit it, but I was onto him.

“I need you,” I whispered, staring at Ethan. “Something bad is happening here.”

“Where are you?” he demanded. The lightness had left his tone. The Devil was all business.

“Cressida House.”

“Are you under attack?” he ground out.

If I didn’t know my uncle loved me, I’d be terrified. I wasn’t.

“No, not right now. The attack already happened,” I explained.

“By?” he questioned tersely.

I shook my head. “Magical fangless hermaphrovamps... I think.”

“What the fuck did you just say?” he asked, wildly confused.

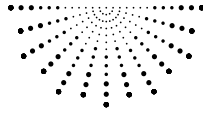
I didn’t blame him. “Just come please,” I begged.

“As you wish,” he replied.

The line went dead. If anyone would know of unusual beige Immortals, it was Uncle Fucker.

I hoped.

CHAPTER FIVE



THE CAFFEINATED BLOOD DIDN'T WORK. I DIDN'T EXPECT IT to, but it was worth a shot.

There were about a hundred Vamps in the compound who hadn't been at the meeting and were wide awake. They were as shocked as I was at the turn of events. However, no one but Martha, Jane and Vinnie had heard about the myth of the fangless Vamps. The *myth* was indeed bullshit. We were batting a big fat zero.

Cots, pillows and blankets had been brought down to the ballroom. All of the slumbering Vampyres had been made comfortable. I'd directed ten of our fully armed people to stand guard around Ethan. What was left of the Elite Guard were tasked with patrolling and defending the Cressida House. There had been mutterings about calling in backup from other areas in the North American Dominion. I quashed that shit fast. Until I knew who and what was responsible, no one I didn't know was coming in.

While Ethan was a beloved and trusted leader, Vamps were violent and power hungry. I didn't need a coup on my hands. It wouldn't end well... for those who challenged me. I was pretty sure Ethan wouldn't be ecstatic if I decapitated a shitload of Vamps while he was out, even if they deserved it.

My fingers sparked dangerously and most of my body was covered in shimmering black glitter. Even my own people were wary of me. Hell, I was kind of scared of myself right now. Martha and Jane were not. As much as the profane old

dummies ground my last nerve, they had my back no matter what.

“I say we go back to Target, hide in the shelves where the cock, balls and vaginas are and wait for the fuckers,” Martha grunted, armed to the teeth with swords, daggers, throwing stars and brass knuckles.

She’d obviously stopped by the weapons room and picked up a few items.

“When they show up, we jump out and whack their heads off with the testicle platters,” Jane added.

“Target has a porn aisle?” Paris Hilton asked, not following the absurd conversation of Martha and Jane. Her turquoise eyes squinted in confusion.

Paris was a sweet Vamp who I loved like a little sister. She was silly and kind, but could be as badass as the rest of us when pushed. Her past was beyond tragic. Ethan had saved her life, and her loyalty to me and Ethan was unbreakable.

My dear friend was now living in the Australian Dominion. She’d found her mate and a new home. I missed her, but loved when she visited. Paris Hilton and her Viking mate, Gunter the Demon, had built a 1970s-style split-level ranch Down Under in the outback. They’d taken Gene the mini-Demon pirate in as their surrogate son. I found Gene to be somewhat of a nightmare, but Paris loved him like he was her own. The pirate had turned out to be quite the gardener. He’d also stolen himself a ship and plopped it in the middle of the desert next to Paris and Gunther’s house. Strange but true. Apparently, my buddy and her Demon enjoyed watching Gene swing from the crow’s nest and maim himself. To each his or her own.

I was just grateful she was here. Her calming presence was a good thing right now in the disaster that was unfolding.

“No, there’s not a porn aisle at Target,” I said, running my hands through my hair. I didn’t want to explain the profane cookware, so I didn’t. “Is everyone sure they haven’t heard of

fangless Vamps? Very beige in color and incredibly boring? Undiscernible sexual identity?"

"Who can bang themselves," Martha added unhelpfully.

All the awake Vamps in the room shook their heads

Crap.

"What about a different species with those characteristics?" I tried again.

Still no takers. If I didn't know what or who the enemy was, I couldn't defeat them. Granted, decapitation seemed to work on most Immortals, but I needed an antidote to the spell they'd cast before I destroyed them. And I would definitely destroy them.

The phrase the devil is in the details danced in my frontal lobe. There was a dastardly mysterious element to what was happening. At face value it was clear that the beige people had done something, but it wasn't simple. My gut told me it was complicated and going to cause an ass-ton of problems. While I wouldn't change my life, I'd happily go for a few years without a shitshow of epic proportions. So far, that hadn't been in the cards.

And then of course the Devil himself showed up. My fondest wish was that he could make clear what was muddied. I'd owe my uncle any favor he wanted. I'd even offer to let him pilfer Ethan's office supplies on a weekly basis until the end of time.

In an explosion of black glitter that blew a huge hole in the back wall of the ballroom, Satan appeared. His eyes glowed red and he was dressed in black Hugo Boss from head to toe. The Devil was a terrifyingly beautiful sight. In one hand he held a sword and the other a toy train. Clearly, he hadn't thought his entrance through.

I was just happy and relieved to see him. The Vamps backed away in fearful respect. Only Martha, Jane and I didn't move.

Satan scanned the room. His brow quirked in surprise. It made my stomach drop.

“What kind of fresh hell is this?” he asked, as he walked around and examined the fallen Vampyres.

“I was hoping you could tell me,” I replied, close to losing it.

“Bad blood?” he inquired in a cheeky tone.

I electrocuted him. I needed him, but shitty jokes were not working for me.

The Devil had the grace to look chagrined for a brief moment. It was unheard of for him to apologize. He didn't. But he didn't retaliate. That was as close to an apology as he could get. “Facts,” he said flatly. “Lay them out.”

Pressing my lips together, I sat down on the edge of Ethan's cot and explained what I knew—even the mythical part. I felt like an idiot relaying the fiction about the fangless Vamps who could bang themselves and the genitalia luncheon-ware at Target, but at this point I wasn't leaving anything out, no matter how strange.

“I'd ask if I was being punked,” Satan said, glancing around then noticing he was carrying Thomas the Tank Engine in his hand. He put it into his pocket as his eyes narrowed to slits, daring anyone to comment that the Lord of Darkness played with toy trains. No one said a word. “However, it's quite clear that I'm not being punked.”

“No punking. Do you have any guesses?” I asked.

The Devil sighed dramatically. “I do not. Since I'm a genius, I find this appallingly shocking. It's damaging to my reputation, which annoys me.”

My freak-out was so close I could taste it.

“However, I do have a suggestion,” Uncle Fucker said. “One you will not like.”

“Don't care,” I said quickly. “If it helps me get Ethan back, I'll love it. I need help.”

I wasn't too proud to admit when I was lost. Most Immortals had egos so large that admitting they needed aid was the last thing they'd do. That was stupid. I was a lot of

things, but stupid wasn't one of them. When someone I loved was concerned, I'd go to extremes. Ethan's life was paramount. I'd go to the Basement of Hell and burn for him without question.

"Religions are like penises," Uncle Fucker announced grandly.

I had no clue where he was going with his analogy, but I was sure it wasn't good by the way it started. I hoped for some wisdom from the man. I wasn't sure how penises and religion were relevant, but stayed silent. It wasn't prudent to interrupt the Devil when he was on a roll—no matter how profane.

Jane wasn't prudent. At all.

"Not seein' how a cock and a church weigh in, Hot Ass McSexybuns," she said, scratching her balding head.

Satan rolled his eyes and zapped her. She just cackled and slapped out the fire.

"Getting there," he snapped.

Martha didn't read the room either. "Speaking of schlongs, we got you some presents."

Satan completely forgot what he was talking about and focused on Martha. "Did you steal them?"

She grinned and reached into the back of her pants. I was terrified that she was about to lob a grenade at the Devil. Right before I could launch myself at her to stop what was going to end all of us, she pulled out the reindeer boxers, feathered jockstrap and the double D snowman bra.

I winced in horror.

"You bet your fine ass I stole 'em, motherfucker!" she crowed as she tossed him the holiday undergarments.

Satan caught them and examined them. "They're disgusting."

"Welcome," Martha said, preening. "Elle's gonna love you in them grundies and bra."

Satan chuckled. “She’ll never see me in these heinous garments. However, God has man-boobs. I shall send them up to Heaven. He’ll shit a brick. Well done.”

God didn’t have man-boobs. My uncle God was as stunning as his brother Satan. They had a love-hate relationship. Mostly, they got along after Mother Nature had sent her sons on a recent road trip, but they still enjoyed sticking it to each other on the regular.

While I was happy Satan hadn’t beheaded Martha, we needed to get back on track.

“What’s the suggestion I’m not going to like?” I asked.

Satan stared at me for a long moment. The idiot was completely perplexed. “What were we speaking about?”

I almost electrocuted him again “Seriously?” I shouted, pointing at all the semi-lifeless Vampyres in the ballroom.

“No need to be pissy, Astrid,” he said, tucking the nasty boxers, jockstrap and bra into his pocket. “As I was saying, religions are like penises. You need consent before you shove either one of them down a throat.”

I was so fucking confused. “Would you care to be more specific?”

“About which part?” he inquired. “The religions or the penises?”

“Oh my God,” I muttered, regretting asking for his help. Maybe Mother Nature would be a better choice. Granted, she always arrived with a jungle and a stripper pole, but beggars couldn’t be choosers. “Forget it.”

“Wait! Son of a bitch,” Satan bellowed, smacking himself in the forehead. “The religion/dick metaphor was meant for God. My bad.”

“Done here,” I said. “You can leave now, Uncle Fucker.”

Vinnie raised his hand. I gave him a curt nod.

“While the metaphor might have been meant for God. It can apply to us as well. I do believe I might understand the

Lord of the Underworld, aka Blade Inferno,” Vinnie said, bowing his head respectfully to my idiot uncle.

“You do?” Satan asked, shocked but pulling it together quickly. “Of course, you do! I’m fucking brilliant.”

“Have at it,” I told Vinnie, feeling the need to crawl out of my skin. There was a chance that there was some kind of magical time frame on what had been done to Ethan and the others. I wasn’t sure, but everything was so messed up, nothing would surprise me.

“I would imagine that organized religion is repugnant to the Devil,” Vinnie began as Satan nodded his enthusiastic agreement. “Therefore, I’d surmise that we’re supposed to locate someone who might fall into the category of deplorable, abhorrent or even possibly vile to aid us. However, we must have their consent to help or all will be for naught. Something like shoving religion or a penis down a throat without authorization would be detrimental to getting the repulsive individual to give assistance.”

The Devil took a bow. “I am BRILLIANT!”

Had everyone lost their damn minds? I was ready to incinerate all of them. The fact that Vinnie could follow Uncle Fucker’s warped and cryptic advice was alarming. “I don’t know anyone like that,” I shouted.

“Ahhh,” Satan said, patting Vinnie on the head. “But you do. Think about it, Astrid.”

“I do?”

Uncle Fucker nodded. “And remember... respect goes both ways. If you want it, you must give it.”

“To who?” I pressed.

He shrugged and smiled. “Not the way it works, niece of mine.”

I despised the cryptic way of the Immortals. The guessing games were getting old.

“Find something you respect about even the basest individual,” Satan advised. “If you do, you will lead them to

become better than they are.”

Setting the Devil on fire wouldn't be helpful. He adored being aflame.

“Is that all you got?” I asked tightly.

“In the immortal words of Dr. Suess—whom I've gotten very familiar with due to my son's love of rhyming childish bullshit, ‘A person's a person no matter how small.’ Actually, I prefer Dr. Seuss to Luke's other terrifying obsession—those little bastards who sing with the oversized lollipops and represent the fucking lollipop guild. Goddamned nightmare.”

I now had yet another crappy song stuck in my head. What the hell was it with all the earworms today?

My uncle paused and stared at me. “I wish I had more, Astrid. I do not. Vampyres are a tedious species—very sneaky and underhanded. I much prefer the open violence of Demons. A vicious pummeling then a shot of fine bourbon is an excellent way to live.” He shrugged and sighed. “Look for the truth even if the definition isn't explicit. Destinations can be surprising. To lead... oh shit. I have to get back to Hell,” he said, checking his watch. “Thomas the Tank Engine is starting soon. And remember your gift is compassion. I shall now take my leave. Good luck. You shall need it.”

On those cryptic words, the Devil left the building in a blast of black glittering magic.

I was no closer to knowing who the beige freaks were and I had no a clue who the heck Uncle Fucker was speaking about. What I wanted was a cheeseburger and greasy fries. That was not in my future unless I wanted to be curled up in the fetal position for a week.

I just needed to think. Every piece of cryptic advice I'd ever been given eventually made sense. Saving Ethan was my goal. I wouldn't fail. I couldn't. My eternal life would be heartbreakingly empty without him.

CHAPTER SIX



I WANTED TO CRY. I SUCKED IT UP. I LIKED MY PRADA OUTFIT too much to ruin it with bloody tears.

The Cressida House had been fortified. The Elite Guards who were awake had secured the compound. Even if a fangless nerd of indiscernible sex poofed in, they'd be captured on the spot. I'd made it very clear that I needed information before they were destroyed. I'd also be the one to do the destroying.

I might be Compassion, but they'd fucked with my mate. Screw with me? Fine. Mess with the ones I loved... you were toast.

Paris Hilton sat down next to me on the edge of Ethan's cot and put her slim arm around my waist. "The pieces of the puzzle are there, Astrid," she said softly, resting her head on my shoulder. "We just need to put them together."

I nodded. If I spoke, I'd weep. It was bizarre. As one of the most powerful Immortals alive, I was at a total loss. The feeling was heinous.

"I say we look at the clues in a logical manner," Paris said.

"Not much logical about any of this," I pointed out. Magic, cryptic messages and mythical creatures defied logic.

"True, but we have to start somewhere. Who don't you trust? Who do you find vile?" she asked, gently wiping away a bloody tear that had escaped from my eye.

I laughed. It was thin and tinny. “Well, that list is kind of long.”

Paris smiled. “Let’s keep it close to home,” she suggested. “When cryptic advice is given the answer is usually close at hand.”

I glanced around the room and pointed at all of the slumbering Vamps who didn’t like me. “Them.”

“Given,” Paris agreed. “And I’m not saying one of them might not be involved. However, I’d surmise that they’re not. No pompous bloodsucker would do something that would cause themselves to be incapacitated. I believe we can rule them out.”

I sat up straight and decided my pity party was over. Ethan wouldn’t sit around and blubber if the situation was reversed. He’d make a plan then kick some ass. It was time to pull up my big girl La Perla thong and get to work. “Correct,” I said, getting to my feet. Pacing helped me think. I needed to freaking think. “Martha,” I called out. “Who do I hate?”

“You hate Jane,” she yelled as she walked around the room drawing mustaches on the ickiest of the passed-out Vamps with an indelible black marker.

It was all kinds of wrong, but I didn’t stop her. If my world wasn’t about to implode, I’d have joined her. I wished Vamps showed up on film. It would have been excellent blackmail material.

“Fuck you, Hooker,” Jane shouted at Martha, flipping her off. “Chesty MogoNipples hates *you!*”

Paris giggled. I just shook my head. “Hate’s a strong word,” I muttered.

“Then let’s go with intense dislike,” Paris said.

There were many who had challenged me. Many who wanted me out of the picture. None had bested me... yet. And I wasn’t going to be beaten now. The stakes were too high.

“I don’t like Trolls,” I said, putting a verbal list together. “I don’t like Wraiths.”

“They suck ass,” Martha said with a shudder as she moved on to giving the prone Vamps freckles and blacked-out fangs. “I don’t like over-the-shoulder boulder holders.”

“Me neither,” Jane agreed, grabbing her sagging breasts and shaking them. “My sexy gals need to breathe.”

“Amen to that shit,” Martha said. “I don’t like fuckers who don’t use blinkers, but I do like people who can recite the alphabet while burping.”

“Word,” Jane concurred. “I don’t like shitasses who won’t cop to farting and blame it on the dog, but I do like the doggie position.”

Vinnie jumped into the conversation. “I’m not fond of people who interrupt constantly or use the word moist. The word creamy is also unnecessary.”

This had gone way off the rails. Although, I hated the word moist too.

“I didn’t like my mother or father,” I said. The words made me sad, but the truth could hurt. In the case of my parents—for lack of a more appropriate term—the truth had been as violently ugly as it could get. “The rest of my family is fine,” I said—then slapped my hand over my mouth.

The rest of my family was *not* fine. Not fine at all.

My entire body tingled with both excitement and dread. A puzzle piece clicked into place. The puzzle was dangerous and possibly going to blow up in my face, but Uncle Fucker’s cryptic words now made a little more sense.

“Martha, Jane, Paris and Vinnie, you’re coming with me,” I yelled then kissed Ethan’s beautiful lips. “You’re not going to like what I’m about to do,” I whispered to him. “But my gut tells me it’s right. I love you so much.”

Standing back up, I nodded to the armed men and women who were protecting the love of my undead life and began to sprint toward the massive doors of the ballroom.

“Where we goin’, Sweatermeat Gazongas?” Martha asked, running alongside me.

“The dungeon,” I said as her eyes grew wide. “We’re going to the dungeon.”

“You’ve done gone and lost your dang mind, Lungmittens LaJugs,” Jane wheezed out.

“You’ve got that right, you old bald buzzard,” I agreed. “You jackasses in or out?”

“In, motherfucker,” Martha assured me. “We’re in with your crazy ass till the end of time.”

“What she said,” Jane agreed.

I grinned as I raced through the compound. They were insane, but they were my trusted friends. I just hoped that the end of time was coming later rather than sooner. I prayed the object of my mission hadn’t been affected by the fangless Vamps. One thing needed to go right today.



SITTING ACROSS THE TABLE FROM MY SISTER IN HER CELL, I explained the situation, leaving out Satan’s cryptic message. I was flanked on both sides by Martha, Jane, Paris and Vinnie. They were silent and menacing. Juliet listened with a bored expression. Although, her brow quirked up at the mention of the mythical fangless beige freaks.

Doing my best not to sound desperate, I continued. My sister was a tricky one. It wasn’t in my best interest to let her know she was my only option at this point, but her vast knowledge of Vampyres’ and other creatures’ traits was key. I felt it in my gut and it was all I had to go on.

“Horn-rimmed glasses?” Juliet asked, seated at the table and writing the information on a pad of paper.

“Correct.”

“Sexually ambiguous?”

I nodded.

The atmosphere in the cell was hostile. My sister was no longer behaving contritely and submissively. My frustration level was high, but my body language and expression were neutral. Juliet's vicious ugly was showing. Unfortunately, it seemed Ethan had been right that she couldn't be redeemed, but I had to try to make it work somehow. Of course, the fact that Jane and Martha were armed to the teeth and pointing weapons at her probably didn't help. Being maimed by Juliet wasn't on the list, so I let the old gals do their thing. Trusting my sister was beyond risky, but the options were rather limited and she was the only one who fit the clues that Uncle Fucker had spewed out.

"Do you know what they are?" I asked, eyeing the pad she'd written on. Her penmanship was awful, I couldn't make out a single word. My guess was that she'd taken notes in some random dead language that I didn't know. Not a real big surprise since she was older than dirt.

Her voice was icy and her expression was victorious. "I do."

I waited for the answer.

And waited.

And waited.

Headbutting her would be counterproductive. My profound relief that my dastardly sister hadn't been affected by the weird beige nerds was dissipating fast. The discussion was hitting brick walls.

"Are you going to share?" I asked, unable to keep the sarcasm out of my tone.

She smiled. It wasn't pretty. "What's in it for me?"

"Are you serious?" I demanded.

"Deadly," she replied coolly. "I finally have something you want, Astrid. I should get something in return. You know, an eye for an eye kind of thing."

My fingers began to spark and my red-streaked black hair began to blow around my head. I knew my eyes had turned

Demon since the room was bathed in an eerie red glow. Juliet had the wherewithal to look terrified. She stood up from the table and backed away.

“Let me think,” I said with a thin-lipped smile that came nowhere near to reaching my blazing eyes. “Not sure what I *owe* you after you’ve repeatedly tried to kill me. You brought Trolls and Wraiths to my territory and did your damndest to kill your sister Raquel, along with a whole bunch of others. The damage you caused lives on. You supported our despicable excuse for a mother and tried to kill your father and his mate, Pam. The most unforgivable was that you tried to steal my child.”

I glared daggers at her. She couldn’t meet my gaze. “You’re despised by everyone who has had the unpleasurable honor of knowing you, yet I insisted you live. And trust me, that was met with fury and revulsion. You’re making me regret my mercy. If you’d like to go with the eye-for-an-eye method, I’d be happy to oblige. I’ll even let you choose how to die. I’m nice like that. Maybe, we could call a few Trolls to tear you limb from limb... or maybe you’d prefer being shredded by Wraiths... or possibly Raquel might enjoy some retribution. Actually, I could probably call almost anyone to end you and they’d be thrilled.”

I felt sick to my stomach, but vile behavior was what she understood. Weakness and compassion made her feel powerful. She had no power with me. If she wouldn’t help, I’d find another way. The woman who shared my DNA was batshit crazy and beyond repair. Adding her to the equation had been a terrible plan.

She blanched and began to hiss. “You are nothing,” she snarled as her lovely face twisted into something hideous. “I created you. All your glory, all your riches... they’re mine. If you want your precious mate back, you will play by my rules. You OWE ME.”

Ripping her head off with my bare hands was beginning to sound awesome. I owed her nothing. I’d spared her life. That was pretty fucking large in the payback column. Everyone had thought I was insane. I was beginning to agree.

“Help me out here, Juliet. What exactly are you *owed*?”

“Respect,” she shouted, her face an unattractive blood red.

Satan’s words danced in my mind... *Find something you respect about even the basest individual. If you do, you will lead them to become better than they are.*

There was nothing I respected about my sister. Nothing. She definitely fit the basest individual description, but I could not for the undead life of me discern one thing to admire about the horrid woman. I might not be able to find it, but maybe she could point me in the right direction.

“Respect is earned,” I shot back. “Tell me how you’ve earned it?”

She was finally at a loss for words. Her silence made my stomach sink. There was only one way for her to take a baby step towards her unimaginable goal. Satan had said respect went both ways. If I wanted it, I had to give it. I’d give her the respect of letting her fight for her cause. The result would be up to her.

“You can earn a modicum of respect back by telling me what the species of the enemy is,” I said flatly. “You could earn more by explaining how to defeat them.”

I observed her as she considered my request. She pulled on her blonde hair then scratched her arms, leaving thin bloody welts. She paced the cell erratically and mumbled to herself. She walked over to the wall and banged her head violently against it. It was difficult to watch.

My instinct was to comfort. I bit that shit back. Fighting my need to hug her was difficult. She was so broken. Our mother was to blame, but at some point, Juliet had to own up to what she’d done, beg forgiveness and move ahead. Our mother was dead. She could no longer harm either of us. The question was, had irreparable damage been done to my sister? It was tragically looking like the answer was yes.

“I’ll have to come with you to defeat them,” she finally said cagily.

I didn't believe her. She didn't have a great track record with the truth. My intention wasn't to have her by my side. I simply needed information. However, if this was the game she was playing, I had a move to make.

"The only way that will happen is if your power is bound," I said. "Worrying about you trying to sabotage me isn't going to happen."

Martha tapped me on the shoulder. "Is that possible, Boobs McGee?"

I nodded curtly.

"Gnarly," Jane commented.

"You expect me to help you without being able to defend myself?" Juliet asked, her emerald-green eyes narrowed.

I rolled my eyes. "Just yesterday you wanted a chance at redemption," I reminded her. "The chance has arrived. Take it or leave it."

"Yes, well," she said, looking down her very attractive nose at me. "The terms don't work for me."

Paris growled. Vinnie was so upset he was floating and wringing his pale hands. Martha and Jane were pissed... and full of suggestions.

"How about this?" Martha grunted, glaring at Juliet. "Let her keep her power. I'll just fix up a remote on the grenade. We shove the bomb up the stinky hooker's ass then if she pulls some bullshit, I press the button and we rip her a gaping bunghole that will take months to recover from."

"I like it," Jane said, nodding at her violent and unhinged buddy. "But I say we up the fuckin' ante. Two grenades in the bunghole. That way if she turns on us, not only is her poop shoot gone, the entire bottom of her body is eliminated. That would take around six months to grow back. Win-win."

"Are they serious?" Juliet asked, paling in horror.

I winced. The plan was not great. It was disgusting and not happening. "They are."

“You’re mentally ill,” she snarled.

“Pot, kettle, black,” I shot back.

Time was ticking and this was going nowhere fast. There were other options. None that matched up with what Satan had said, but plans changed.

“This was a shitty idea,” I said, standing up. “We’re out of here.”

My abrupt change of tune shocked Juliet. She opened her mouth to speak. I held up my hand.

“Don’t,” I snapped. “Everyone was right about you. I was wrong. I’m sorry for what happened to you in the past even though it had nothing to do with me. You don’t deserve it, but I’ll try to make your life easier here. Maybe we can enlarge your cell. However, I’m done with you. Yes, my gift is compassion, but like one can kill love, compassion can die as well. For years I’d hoped that you would show a trace of remorse. But hope, like love and compassion, can die too. Your finesse with destroying everything you touch is outstanding. Congrats.”

Martha and Jane kept their weapons trained on Juliet as I turned my back on her and walked to the door of the cell. My mind raced forward. My concern was not the woman in the dungeon. She was a lost cause. It was for Ethan and the others who were under some kind of spell. The next stop was Nirvana. Mother Nature would be far less cryptic than her son and if she was at a loss, I would go to Heaven and ask God. I was related to the most powerful Immortals alive. Someone would know what to do.

“Emotional Vampyres,” Juliet ground out.

I kept walking. “If you’re trying to insult me, you’re going to have to do better than that.”

“I believe your enemy is a coven of Emotional Vampyres,” she repeated. “Energy Vampyre is another name they go by.”

I froze, but kept my back to her.

“Why does no one know of them?” I asked, beginning to feel hope.

“They were eliminated thousands of years ago,” she replied.

“Obviously not,” I said, slowly turning around.

She sat back down at the table and pointed to the chair opposite her. “Obviously.”

“Are you going to play games or give information?” I asked, not moving.

“Information,” she promised. “But I do have a request.”

I closed my eyes. Nothing came for free in the Immortal world. It was a lesson I’d learned over and over the hard way. “Of course, you do,” I replied as cold as ice. “Self-serving is your modus operandi.”

“Trust me,” she said in an emotionless tone. “You’ll be quite pleased with my request.”

I shrugged and sat back down. “Information first. Request after.”

“Fine,” she said, sullenly.

And we got down to business.

CHAPTER SEVEN



IT MADE SENSE. THEY WERE FANGLSS VAMPS. THEY DIDN'T drink blood, they stole energy. It was fucked up, but what in my life wasn't?

“So, basically they bore people into a trance and absorb their energy?” I asked, wanting to completely understand.

Juliet nodded. “It’s all hearsay since I’ve never come across one of them, but yes. Where a normal Vamp needs blood to stay alive, an Emotional Vampyre needs energy. From what I recall, they usually went after humans, but they’ve clearly advanced.”

“That’s one way to put it,” I said, pressing the bridge of my nose. “How were they supposedly eliminated?”

“Decapitation,” she replied. “It’s been told that a band of three hundred of the strongest undead warriors of the time went after them.”

“And?” I asked.

She glanced down at the table. “And only a hundred lived to tell and were sworn to secrecy.”

“The beige freaks ended two hundred Vampyres?” I questioned, squinting at her in disbelief.

Vampyre warriors were the baddest of the badasses. My guess was that a thousand years ago they were even more violent and crazier than they were now. How could a bunch of freaking nerds have dispatched two hundred of the undead’s finest?

My sister shrugged. “The legend is that the two hundred who didn’t come back still exist and are kept in a safe haven... in a trance.”

“What the actual fuck?” Martha shouted the words that were on the tip of my tongue.

“My only guess is that it was an embarrassment to the Vampyre world,” Juliet said. “They hid them away after the Emotional Vamps were eliminated. The illusion of strength is more important than the reality of weakness.”

“What is wrong with people?” I hissed, shoving the chair back and pacing the cell. Was Ethan destined to live in a trance for the rest of time? That was fucking unacceptable. I felt ill and I wanted to blow up the compound. “Why hasn’t a cure been found?”

“If they killed off the species, no cure could be found,” Vinnie pointed out.

“But they didn’t kill all of them,” I said. All I had to do was find the assholes.

“Well now,” Martha said, sitting down in my vacated chair and putting her black socks and sandal clad feet on the table. “Only one of the fuckers had to have survived.”

I knocked her feet off the table. Her manners sucked. “Not following.”

Jane joined in. “Them freaks can bang themselves according to the word on the street. I’m guessin’ the one who survived knocked him or herself up and then the rest is some weird-ass history.”

That was a tremendous amount to swallow. The logistics were bad and the optics were worse. “Juliet?” I asked with a wince.

She wrinkled her nose. “I wasn’t aware of that particular talent, but it’s the most logical way to look at it. There are species both natural and supernatural that can reproduce asexually, so it’s not out of the realm of possibilities that the Energy Vamps have the capability.”

The word logical was fast losing its meaning. “If they were eliminated a thousand years ago and have been procreating ever since, there could be a vast army of fangless freaks. I also find it suspect that Martha, Jane and Vinnie have heard about them. Seems like the beige bastards want others to know they exist.”

Everyone was silent as we mulled it over. If I thought too much about it, my mind went to seriously icky places. It didn’t matter how many existed. I would eliminate all of them. While they’d been able to put an absurd number of powerful Vamps into a trance, I’d stayed awake when I’d encountered them. Ethan hadn’t known what they were or what they were capable of.

I did. But I needed more information.

“How do you stop them?” I asked my sister.

She shrugged. “Decapitation. It seems to work on most Immortals.”

“Correct. Not what I asked. I know how to end them. How can I stop them from putting others into trances? I need an antidote to what they’ve done.”

Juliet shook her head. “I don’t know. I wasn’t alive when they were around. All that I’m telling you is from spotty notes written over a thousand years ago in a dead language.”

“Fuck,” I muttered. “Do you have any idea where to find them?”

She stood up and put a map of the US on the table. “Boring Immortals live in boring places. If they’re attacking in North America, they live in North America. They’re creatures of habit,” she said. “If I had to take a guess, I’d say Ohio.”

I scrubbed my hand over my mouth. “Umm... a guess isn’t going to work.”

Ohio was a big state and there were plenty of boring places in North America.

“I don’t know about that, Ladypecs McHonkers,” Jane said, staring at the map. “First place my eyes landed was

Ohio.”

“Makes sense,” Martha announced, pulling out a dagger and stabbing Ohio on the map. “Those pasty twats mentioned Toledo and Cleveland at Target.”

My mouth fell open. Martha was right. I grabbed the profane gal, swung her around and hugged her tight. “Never let anyone tell you that you’re a crappily dressed dumbass. You are brilliant, you old bag of bones!”

Martha cackled with delight. “That’s a dang fine compliment, Breasticles Magambos.”

Vinnie pointed a pale finger to the area between Cleveland and Toledo. “There’s a ley line in that region.”

Paris looked over his shoulder and nodded. “The humans believe ley lines to be hypothetical, but Immortals know differently.”

“Define,” I said. While I was aware of what a ley line was, I’d never come into contact with one as far as I knew.

“The Mammoth Caves are on a ley line,” Paris said.

I stood corrected. I knew the caves well. The magic there was monumental. “So, ley lines are where the portals between Heaven, Hell and Earth exist?”

“Sometimes, but not always,” Paris explained. “Think of them as thin lines of power that can be magical, magnetic or even psychic in nature. The weaker of the Immortals usually stay close to the ley lines. Many can draw power from them.”

“Bingo,” Juliet said. “All those centuries ago when they were reportedly eliminated, it was on a ley line in what’s now known as Europe.”

“The clues are adding up,” Paris said with a grin. “Puzzle pieces are clicking.”

I mentally went back over what Satan had so cryptically doled out. Missing something could mean life or death. As his words rang in my brain, my knees buckled and I dropped to the floor like a sack of potatoes. “It’s not *between* Cleveland and Toledo,” I whispered. Uncle Fucker knew far more than

he'd let on... *Look for the truth even if the definition isn't explicit. Destinations can be surprising. To lead... oh shit. I have to get back to Hell.*

Everyone stared at me. Surprisingly, it was Juliet who helped me to my feet.

“Satan laid it out. He said that destinations can be surprising,” I repeated. “Then he said, to lead... oh shit. The Emotional Vampyres are in Toledo.”

“That fine-assed hunk of sex told us Toledo in a farked-up way,” Martha screamed and did a dance that looked like she was taking a dump.

Jane joined her. I didn't electrocute either one of them. Paris giggled and Vinnie grinned from ear to ear. Only Juliet looked alarmed. She wasn't used to happiness. Granted, Martha and Jane's happiness took some getting used to, but it was beautiful in its own gross way.

“What do you want in return?” I asked my sister, who had backed away from the impromptu dance party. “You've earned it.”

I still didn't know how to stop the Emotional Vamps from their horrifying practice, but I knew where to find them. I'd pull the rest out of my ass. It was the way I rolled and it had worked so far.

Juliet pressed her back to the wall and pulled on her hair. The dancing ended abruptly. I was pretty sure all of us thought she was about to start clawing herself again.

“I want to go to Toledo with you,” she said, staring at the floor. “You can bind my power.”

My stomach dropped. “That could end really badly,” I said hesitantly. “You've helped a lot. It's safer for all of us for you to stay here.”

I felt bad pointing out that I still didn't trust her, but reality was harsh. Ethan's life was at stake along with the lives of a whole bunch of others. Babysitting Juliet, no matter how helpful the information had been, was not happening.

“That’s the point,” she said, raising her gaze to mine. “There’s no coming back from what I’ve done. Give me the honor of dying for you and Ethan to make some of it right. Use me as a decoy. The memories of me will not be as heinous if I die for a cause.”

I was speechless. Her wish was for me to let her die an honorable death. Strangely, I understood, but as much as I understood, I couldn’t knowingly lead her to her death. I shook my head. “No,” I whispered. “I won’t sacrifice you. I can’t.”

Her emerald eyes filled with bloody tears. They rolled slowly down her cheeks. “Please, Astrid,” she choked out. “Let me die with a shred of dignity. It’s all I have left.”

My heart didn’t beat, but it broke for the shattered woman who stood before me. I’d finally found something to admire about my sister. Her past actions couldn’t be forgotten, and in most cases, would never be forgiven, but Satan had advised me to find something to respect in even the basest individual. Only then could I lead them to become a better person. I was so torn, it physically hurt.

“I say we bring the crazy broad,” Jane said. “Me and Martha can watch and protect her ass.”

“I have a question, Juliet,” Paris said.

Juliet stared at the childish-looking Vamp who was anything but childish. I was fairly sure I knew where this was going. My body tensed. While the idea held merit, the outcome could be debilitating for Paris. My sweet friend had come a long way from the days when she used to freak out and cause extensive property damage if she thought she’d displeased someone she cared about. She was now a force to be reckoned with.

My pride in her was immense. The lovely Vampyre had singlehandedly put a kibosh on the sexism in the Australian Dominion—not an easy task with the sexist male undead. Paris had offered to fight anyone who believed women were lesser beings. The line of challengers had been long and vicious... and male. She’d been thrilled and beat the living

hell out of every shitass who dared to have an antiquated view of women. Her mate, Gunter, had been filled with pride at his partner's deadly and psychotic skills.

Paris might be a deadly warrior, but her kindness and sense of justice outweighed her fighting ability—and she was one heck of an ass-kicker.

“Ask,” my sister said.

Paris smiled at a very on-guard Juliet. “Do you think there might be a chance that you've forgotten some of what you learned about the Emotional Vampyres? How long ago did you study the lore?”

“Three hundred years ago,” she answered.

My stomach now roiled.

Paris nodded. “So, there's a chance that there's more information that you might not recall now?”

Juliet, nodded. She was confused by the line of questioning. I wasn't. Paris had an ability that when used, rendered her unconscious for at least a month. However, her loyalty to Ethan and me knew no bounds. She was able to search minds. The thought of her going into Juliet's memories was frightening.

“If you let me,” Paris continued in a friendly tone. “I can search your mind to see if there's more.”

“Holy fuck,” Jane shouted. “Couldn't pay me to do that. That's a dang shitshow in there.”

Paris zapped the out-of-line Vamp. “That was uncalled for, Jane.”

After Jane slapped out the blaze, she dropped to her knees. “I'm really fuckin' sorry, Paris. Sometimes my mouth moves before my brain says it's okay.”

“Sure does,” Martha agreed. “Like the time she told Simon Cowell she wanted to fondle his man tits. Or the time she told Bryant Gumble she had his face tattooed on her ass, which is a fucking lie. She has Regis Philbin inked on her ass. Or the time she stripped naked and challenged Satan to a Jell-O

wrestling match, which she won because he puked and ran away in terror.”

“I love me some red Jell-O,” Jane muttered.

“You done?” I asked Martha with a pained expression.

“Just gettin’ started, Hooters McNubbins,” she said.

Jane jumped her right before I almost set her ablaze. They proceeded to beat the hell out of each other. Vinnie picked them up and tossed them out of the cell. We could still hear the cussing, but at least we couldn’t see them.

“I can’t allow you to do that, Paris,” Juliet said. “Jane is correct. My mind is a horrible place to live.”

“I understand.” Paris shrugged. “I don’t care. This is for Ethan. He’s like a brother to me and I would die for him and Astrid. Nothing I could see in your mind could eclipse what happened in my human life.”

I put my hand on Paris’ shoulder. In life, she’d been a circus performer in a freak show in the thirties. The abuse she’d suffered was unspeakable and still made me want to lose my mind. As she lay dying a God-awful death, Ethan had found her and offered her a new life—an undead life and a promise that he would help her avenge the ones who had ruined her. She’d taken him up on it and never looked back.

“I don’t know,” Juliet whispered.

Paris approached Juliet and held out her hands. “If you focus on what you do remember about the Emotional Vampyres, it will be forefront in your mind. I can search that section.”

“Wait,” I said, feeling wildly uncomfortable. “Not sure this is a great plan. You pass out after you do this. Anything you find out, we won’t know for a month.”

“Not if Juliet speaks while I’m inside her head. I can push the memories forward,” Paris said with her hands still extended to Juliet. “She will talk. You will listen. If there’s anything of value, it’s worth it. If there isn’t, it’s still worth a

try. Too many pieces of the puzzle are missing and there's too much to lose."

I wasn't going to stop her. I would do the same if I had her ability. Paris was beautiful inside and out. My admiration and love for her was only matched by hers for me.

"Will this hurt you?" Juliet asked.

Again, Paris smiled. "Nothing worthwhile is without a price. Trust me, the joy that I have in my life because of Ethan and Astrid far outweighs some physical pain. I would lay down my life for my Prince and Princess. Taking on a burden to possibly ensure that Ethan is spared is a truly small price for me to pay."

Juliet's confusion at Paris' willingness to sacrifice for others made me sad. It also wasn't surprising. The only person my sister had made sacrifices for was our mother. She'd given up her sanity and self-respect for a woman incapable of loving anyone but herself. The price Juliet had paid was her own self-destruction.

I could see my sister was torn and leaning heavily toward declining. "I'm sorry. I can't," she whispered, shaking like a leaf.

Paris' comment about the price to be paid was key. Paris would pay a price, therefore I would as well.

"If you do this, you can come with me to Toledo," I said, praying hard I wouldn't live to regret my offer. "Your power will be bound because I still don't trust you, but you will not be offered up as a sacrifice. The fact that you are willing to fight for Ethan's life will earn back some respect from the ones you've harmed. Those are the terms. They're non-negotiable."

After a long moment that felt like an eternity, Juliet closed her eyes and extended her hands to Paris. If I had breath to hold, I would have held it. I didn't breathe, so I simply stayed still.

"Can I ask questions?" I inquired of Paris. "Will you be able to hear me when you're in Juliet's mind?"

I'd never witnessed Paris enter a mind. Ethan had and was blown away by her newfound gift.

"I won't be able to hear your voice, but I'll be able to help Juliet answer by what I see in her mind. I'll be her guide," she replied. "We need to sit, please. When we're done, lock me in the cell and advise the Elite Guard to leave me be. I'll wake up when I'm ready."

I pulled my phone from my pocket and texted The Kev and Gemma, asking them to protect Paris and giving them a bare-bones explanation of what had gone down. Gemma was the Fairy Queen and my BFF from all the way back to our human lives. The Kev was her mate and one of my nearest and dearest. He'd taught me to fight and was still a mentor to me. He was also one of the fiercest individuals in the Immortal world. The Kev was a teddy bear to me. Granted, one who could punch like an out-of-control freight train.

I also texted Gunter. The Viking Demon was all kinds of nuts, but there was no one who loved her more.

With everything going on, I couldn't risk that Paris' instructions weren't followed. They texted back immediately. Gemma was dealing with a Fairy issue that she could handle alone, but The Kev was on his way. Gunter would be arriving shortly as well.

"You'll be protected," I promised. "Gunter and The Kev will be here shortly."

Paris giggled. "I adore The Kev, and Gunter is my life. Thank you, Astrid."

"My pleasure," I told her, kissing the top of her head as she settled herself on the couch next to a wary Juliet.

"Are we ready to begin?" she asked Juliet.

My sister simply nodded and grasped Paris' hands tightly. Martha and Jane had finished their smackdown and rejoined the group. They were a bloody mess. Vinnie stood silently next to the couch on Paris' side to catch her when she finished.

I pictured Ethan's face and held back my tears with effort. Hoping I was doing everything right, I prayed again.

I prayed for Ethan to come out of the trance.

I prayed for Paris' safety.

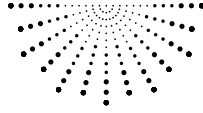
I prayed that I would get the antidote and end the terror of the beige fangless bastards.

And I prayed for Juliet. I prayed that I would have the strength and wherewithal to help her become a better person.

It was a tall order. But if I didn't have long-range plans, then no plan would come to fruition.

I had plans, and I was going to damned well see them through.

CHAPTER EIGHT



A SHIMMERING LAVENDER GLOW SURROUNDED PARIS AS SHE left our reality and entered Juliet's. It filled the cell and the scent reminded me of a rainy summer day—floral and clean. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head and her slim body trembled.

As outwardly pretty as the magic was, it was also potent and harsh. I felt the fiery sting in my bones. For me it wasn't too painful, but it certainly wasn't pleasant. I couldn't imagine how it felt for Paris and Juliet.

My body was wound tight as I sat at the table with the pad of paper and a pen in my hand. Martha and Jane sat on either side of me. For once they were quiet. That was good. I needed to concentrate and dealing with their crap wasn't on the agenda. My brain was like a steel trap for details, but I was taking no chances of missing anything. Taking notes wasn't my norm, but nothing about any of this was normal.

As the glow went from lavender to a deep glittering purple, Juliet's body jerked violently and her skin grew as pale as Vinnie's. I wasn't sure if both she and Paris were in pain, but from the looks of it, the answer was yes. Although, neither woman cried out.

“Testus in lation est,” Juliet said in a monotone.

Her eyes were unfocused and I wasn't sure if she was aware we were with her. When she spoke, tendrils of bright blue mist came from her mouth. It was unsettling and strange.

However, the language she spoke made me want to put my fist through a wall.

“Can you translate into English?” I asked calmly. Screaming would be bad form.

“Testus in lation est,” she repeated.

“It’s Latin,” Vinnie whispered. “The text she sees is in Latin.”

I pressed my lips together so I didn’t swear and crossed my fingers. “Do you speak Latin, Vinnie?”

He smiled and nodded. “For the most part, yes. I might be a bit rusty, but I can get by.”

The tension left my body. “Can you translate for me?”

“I can try,” he promised. “I might not nail it, but I’ll get close.”

“That’s better than I can do,” I told him with a grateful smile.

“Industira inmortui,” Juliet said in the same unchanging pitch.

“Energy undead,” Vinnie said.

I nodded. Paris had found the right part of my sister’s mind to search.

“How do I defeat them?” I asked.

Juliet didn’t answer.

“Shit,” I muttered. This wasn’t working like Paris had said it would.

“May I?” Vinnie asked.

I glanced over at him in confusion. “May you what?”

“May I try to translate both ways?” he clarified. “My guess is that Juliet might have trouble in her state going back and forth between languages. Just a hunch.”

“Oh my God,” I said with so much relief it made me dizzy. “Yes, please. Ask how I defeat them.”

“Umm... Quomodo eos vincere possum?” Vinnie inquired.

“Decapitatio,” she replied.

“Decapitation,” Vinnie confirmed what I’d already guessed from the way it sounded.

I needed to be more specific. “How do I stop them from putting me into a trance?”

Vinnie’s brow wrinkled in concentration for a moment before he spoke. “Quomodo me prohibeo quin me in ecstasem mittas?”

“Ignotus,” Juliet answered.

“Unknown,” Vinnie said.

My gut roiled. Maybe the clues were there. It might be the questions that were wrong. Being too specific could get me nowhere fast. “What else do you see?”

“Quid aliud vides?” Vinnie asked her.

“Fragmenta. Verbum fragmentorum.”

“She sees fragments. Word fragments,” Vinnie explained.

“Tell me,” I requested with the pen poised over the pad of paper.

“Narrate mihi,” Vinnie said.

“Scissa papers. Vetus papers.”

“Torn papers. Old papers,” Vinnie translated.

A tingle shot through me. Nothing in the Immortal world was straightforward or easy, but the answers were usually there if one searched hard enough. It was always a puzzle. If I had the pieces, I could put them together. Hopefully. “Do you see words?”

Vinnie helped me out. “Videsne verba?”

“Sic,” Juliet answered emotionlessly.

“Yes,” Vinnie said with a nod.

“Ask her to read them aloud, please.”

“Legit, quaeso,” Vinnie requested.

“Auditus.”

“Pertains to hearing,” Vinnie said as I scribbled it down.

“Auris,” she said.

“The same,” Vinnie said. “Pertains to hearing. I’m sure of that one.”

I squinted at the page. Did I have to jam their hearing? Strange. Would loud noises screw up their power?

“Repetere.”

“Repeat,” Vinnie supplied.

Shit. Yep. She’d repeated herself. My excitement began to wane.

“Dolor.”

“I believe that means pain,” Vinnie said.

“Got it,” I told him and waited for more.

“Vermis,” she stated.

“Latin for vermin... I think. Not quite sure,” Vinnie said, looking as confused as I felt. “It might be snakes or insects. I must look that up later.”

I wrote it down anyway. Having no clue if any of this would pertain, he’d gotten close enough considering I had no idea what she was saying.

“Interidu,” Juliet continued.

Vinnie pressed his lips together for a moment. “I believe that means daytime or daylight.”

I nodded and noted it.

“Mentis excessus.”

Vinnie spoke. “Trance.”

“Melodiam.”

“Melody.”

“Latinus,” she said.

“Latin,” Vinnie said.

I’d figured that one out myself, but didn’t comment. I just jotted it down.

“Canticum.”

Vinnie didn’t look hopeful. “Song. I’m pretty sure that means song.”

The words were just words. They had little meaning without context. The papers must have been in terrible shape.

“Cladem.”

“Defeat,” Vinnie said.

The word was appropriate. It’s what I felt right now.

Juliet’s body began to convulse and Paris let out a small scream. The purple magic swirled like a small tornado through the cell and pale pink crystals rained down from the ceiling, covering every surface. Paris collapsed into Vinnie’s waiting arms and Juliet fell forward.

As quickly and violently as the enchanted storm had started, it stopped. The silence in the room was loud.

Martha moved faster than I’d ever seen the old bag move and caught my sister in her bony arms. She gently placed her back on the couch and sat down next to her with her arms wrapped around her. Jane waddled over to where they sat and situated herself on the other side of Juliet.

They began to sing to her. Normally, I would electrocute them for singing. They were tone deaf, but the awful noise seemed to make Juliet happy. Of course, they’d chosen the children’s song “The Wheels on the Bus”. It was now freaking stuck in my head.

As Juliet came to, the old gals patted her and rocked her gently back and forth as they continued to warble softly about the damn bus. My sister clung to them like they were air and she was deprived of oxygen. The metaphor was real. She clearly craved physical touch with kindness behind it.

Juliet wept as she held on for dear life. It made me want to join her, and not because the horrible song was stuck in my brain. Therapy had not been enough. Love was what she needed. My sister had no self-worth and zero self-love. How could she? No one who had any value for themselves could have done the horrifying things she'd done. My discovery couldn't erase the violent harm she'd caused, but it gave me a modicum of hope that with kindness and care, she could move forward.

Whether she would accept it was ultimately up to her. Right now wasn't the time to get into it. Her road would be long.

I smiled at the sad and sweet scene. Martha and Jane were surprisingly maternal for gals who'd never had children. Samuel adored the old profane geezers. They'd even been tapped by Uncle Fucker and Elle to be the nannies for their son Luke. Luke thought they walked on water. I didn't, but I loved the nasty undead women. I supposed "The Wheels on the Bus" was better than "Baby Shark".

Fuck. I now had "Baby Shark, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo" raging in my frontal lobe.

A bright pop of warm golden yellow glitter filled the room and pulled me out of the nightmare in my head. The Kev arrived looking very much like John Stamos but a whole lot bigger. Rarely did my dear buddy use his true visage. His beauty was too intense for a person to look upon. Instead, he chose disguises. When I'd met him, he looked like Arnold Schwarzenegger. I was still fond of that façade.

"Krumecaca," he said, taking in the magic-filled cell. "What did I miss?"

"A lot," I said, hugging him.

I walked over to Vinnie and gently took Paris from his arms. Placing her on Juliet's bed, I covered her with a soft quilt. She looked so small and young. Kissing her forehead, I leaned in close. I was aware she couldn't hear me, but it didn't matter. "Thank you, Paris," I whispered. "I might not understand what I learned, but I promise you I'll figure it out. I love you."

While Martha and Jane continued to comfort Juliet, The Kev and Vinnie examined my notes. Unfortunately, the gals had moved on to “It’s a Small World” in the key of I didn’t even know what.

“Have you guys met?” I asked, joining the men.

“But of course,” The Kev said with a grin. “I learned impressive sword work from my compadre Count Vincent Gustav many moons ago!”

“And in return, The Kev taught me defensive fight moves.” Vinnie giggled. “Much bloody fun was had by all! So delightful!”

I laughed. I was surprised I could, but I’d grab a bit of levity wherever I could get it.

The Kev seemed entranced by the notes.

“Does any of that make sense to you?” I asked, staring at the page. “Paris went into Juliet’s mind to see if she recalled anything she might have forgotten about the Emotional Vampyres or Energy Vampyres. My sister studied them hundreds of years ago.”

“Ahh,” The Kev said. “There was a rumor around a thousand years back about a band of undead who destroyed others by stealing their energy. I was under the impression they were eliminated.”

“They were not,” I said flatly. “Ethan and about two hundred others are in a trance in the ballroom right now.”

The Kev’s eyes narrowed. “Who is protecting them?”

“All of my people who were unaffected. About a hundred. They’ve fortified the compound.”

“Not enough,” he ground out. “I’d like to call in backup from Zanthia.”

I wrinkled my nose. Fairies were notoriously violent and not real crazy about Vamps—and vice-versa. It wasn’t a great match.

The Kev winked at me. “How about Susu, LuLu and the gang?”

My eyes grew wide and I laughed again. Susu, Lulu and the gang were pint-sized Fairies with foul mouths and violent streaks that were legendary the Universe over. Susu had been instrumental in helping Ethan and I save Samuel when he’d been kidnapped by some shitty Fairies. She was a lot to take, but I adored and trusted her. She would watch over Ethan like a hawk on magical steroids. And my Vamps would accept them.

“Yes,” I agreed immediately.

“Done,” The Kev said, sending a quick text. “Now, may I take a crack at the cryptic notes?”

“Absolutely,” I told him.

As he eyed the paper, he looked up and glanced over Martha and Jane. They were still going balls to the wall with “It’s a Small World”. Sadly, they only knew the chorus.

“Sorry,” I muttered. “I think it’s making Juliet calm. The dang song is going to be with me for a while.”

Thankfully, Juliet had fallen asleep and the old nutbags quieted down.

“Nah,” The Kev said softly. “If you want to get a song out of your head, there’s a trick.”

I raised my brow and waited.

He grinned. “Would you like to know it, Krumecaca?”

“Does Satan own ten thousand custom Armani suits?” I shot back with a grin of my own.

“My guess is yes,” he replied.

“You would be correct.”

He leaned in. “All you have to do to remove an annoying song in your head is sing the commercial jingle, By Mennen. Boom. It’s gone.”

“Are you for real?” I asked. The Kev was a jokester and his suggestion sounded suspect.

He shrugged and chuckled. “Try it.”

I rolled my eyes. Embarrassing myself wasn't my favorite thing to do, but if there was a chance he wasn't pulling my leg, I was all in. “By Mennen,” I sang.

My voice wasn't great but it beat Martha and Jane's by miles.

“Holy shit,” I said, my eyes huge. “It worked!”

“Would The Kev lead you wrong?” he inquired.

“Nope. The Kev would not,” I said, delighted with the new trick.

He turned his attention back to the notes. He seemed as confused as Vinnie and I were. Although, he gave it a shot.

“It seems that you need to repeat to defeat,” he said. “Possibly with a song in Latin.”

That wasn't great news. I didn't speak Latin and I certainly didn't know any Latin songs. However, Vinnie and Juliet knew Latin. That was a plus. “What about the vermin?”

He sighed. “Not a clue. Maybe, they work with vermin? Or more possibly they were referred to as snakes or insects by others.”

I pursed my lips. They were definitely snakes, but my gut told me that wasn't what the clue meant. Working with bugs or creepy-crawlies would be an incredibly boring occupation for incredibly boring Immortals. “Interesting.” We were reaching for straws, but we had to start somewhere. “Vinnie, can you research if there are any businesses dealing with snakes in Toledo?”

“On it!” he said, typing away on his phone.

I turned and looked at the three Vampyres on the couch. Juliet had woken up and was contentedly sitting with the dumb-dumbs. But the show wasn't over.

In a blast of black mist, Gunter appeared. He sported a Viking helmet and a kilt. His expression was wild and he was ready to kill. He only calmed when he spotted Paris. His huge body sagged with relief and he moved quickly to the love of his demonic life.

I walked over and put my hand on his shoulder. “She’ll probably be like this for a month.”

He nodded. “Yes, I know,” he said, gently making sure she was comfortable. “My little one has enormous power and she loves you to the moon and back. Thank you for calling me. I will not leave her side until she is awake.”

I was very aware that he wouldn’t move from Paris’ side even if the fires of Hell tried to pull him away. A mate bond was the strongest of all the bonds. Gunter loved Paris in the same way I loved Ethan. I knew that Paris would be safe.

And now it was time to save my love.

“Are you all ready to go?” I asked.

“We poofin’ to Toledo, Tits La Shirt-Potatoes?” Jane asked.

I shook my head. “Nope. We’re driving. Poofing will announce our presence. We’re going in undercover, Jackass La Shit-for-Brains.”

Jane and Martha cackled at my comeback. Even Juliet cracked a small smile.

“It’s a little over a six-hour drive,” Vinnie volunteered. “And I’m deeply sorry to inform you that there are no large snake businesses in Toledo or the surrounding area.”

That wasn’t a huge surprise. I’d keep the vermin info in my pocket, so to speak. Eventually, I’d figure out how it was connected.

I had to. Taking down the Emotional Vamps was the short game. Finding the antidote was the end game. I needed to play smart. And I would. Ethan’s life was on the line.

But first I had to bind my sister’s power.

Shit.

CHAPTER NINE



NORMALLY, I ENJOYED ELECTROCUTING PEOPLE. NOT TODAY. The thought of electrocuting my sister made me feel mean and awful. I'd contemplated letting her keep her power, but in the end, I couldn't let my compassion get in the way of protecting Ethan. If Juliet snapped—which was a real possibility—I'd be screwed. Martha and Jane had volunteered to protect her. They were nuts but they were serious when it came to keeping people safe and they'd clearly created a bond with Juliet. They were glued to her side and she seemed good with it.

"It's not going to be pleasant," I said, moving everything flammable out of the way.

"I didn't expect it to be," Juliet replied, sounding resigned. "Just get it over with. The faster it's done, the faster we can leave."

The Kev had gone to assess the situation in the ballroom and be present when Susu, Lulu and the gang arrived. My wonderful Fairy mentor would stay at the Cressida House with Paris until we returned with the antidote.

And we *would* return with the antidote.

"Vinnie and Gunter, please stand near Paris," I instructed. "No residual flame can touch her."

Vinnie scurried over to Paris and gently placed his velvet coat over her. "Nothing can breach the cape."

Gunter nodded with respect to the little Vamp and lovingly covered Paris from head to toe.

I squinted at Vinnie. “Nothing? Not fire? Not even a weapon?”

Vinnie smiled shyly and nodded. “It’s another invention of mine!”

“Holy cow,” I said, wildly impressed. “Do you happen to have a few extra capes? Like at least one extra?” If he had more than one, we could all wear a cape. We would look like idiots, but since we didn’t show up on film, I didn’t care. I was vain but not stupid. If there was only one, it would be for Juliet. Without her power, it would provide an extra layer of protection.

Vinnie clasped his pale hands together with excitement. “I have twenty! I would be honored to share with my friends.”

“Your friends would be delighted to wear your fabulous invention,” I assured him.

“You got any assless capes? With sequins?” Martha asked.

“For the love of everything repulsive,” I muttered.

Vinnie tried not to laugh. He failed. “Umm... no. No assless capes. But I can design one for you at a later date.”

“Excellent!” Martha shouted. “My crack is smack!”

“More like a wrinkled sack,” Jane said with cackle.

Martha flipped off her buddy.

Jane wasn’t fazed. “I’m puttin’ in an order for a lime-green cape with yellow feathers and baby pink rhinestones,” she announced. “Low cut if you can make that happen. I like to expose my knockers.”

I rolled my eyes. Her knockers were terrifying. Vinnie looked appalled, but was such a nice guy, he just nodded politely.

“Wait,” I said. “Did your cape protect you from the beige fangless freaks?”

Vinnie shook his head. “Sadly, no.”

It was worth an ask. “We’ll take one for each of us, please.”

Vinnie was thrilled and poofed away to retrieve our scary but fabulous velvet disasters.

The atmosphere in the room was tense. Even Jane and Martha were antsy. Normally, I was decisive. Today, I was unsure of just about everything. It was unsettling.

“Can you tell me what you’re going to do?” Juliet asked, looking nervous.

I closed my eyes for a hot sec. She was going to find out soon enough. I may as well prepare her. “I’m going to electrocute you eight times.”

Juliet went ashen and began to cry. “You learned that from her.” Her voice was full of accusation.

I squinted at her. “From who?”

“You know who,” she choked out. “Are you going to beat me senseless after you do it?”

I was so confused. “Why in the hell would I beat you senseless?”

Now *she* was confused. “Because that’s the order—the way it always happened. You should know that.”

“Umm... I have no fucking clue what you’re talking about.”

“You learned the binding from Petra,” she whispered brokenly. “I didn’t realize that’s what it was, but it makes sense now. She would electrocute me then terrorize me. I was unable to fight back. However, if that’s what is necessary, just do it. I can take it.”

If I could have puked, I would have. I didn’t have the luxury. Had I gotten this gift from our mother? I sat down. My head was spinning. My days of binding power were over before they began. There was no way I could electrocute her now. Granted, I wouldn’t ever beat her. I was *not* my mother.

I shook my head and placed my hands flat on the table.
“Juliet, I can’t take you with me to Toledo.”

“You promised,” she said quickly.

“I changed my mind,” I told her. “I won’t do to you what she did to you. Ever.”

“Hang on a hot sec, Boob McNubbins,” Jane said. “You won’t be pullin’ a Petra on your sister.”

“How many brain cells do you have?” I snapped.

“She has about two,” Martha volunteered. “But I have four and I agree with the smelly ass. You’re just gonna zap her, not beat her after.”

I pressed the bridge of my nose. Not one damned thing was going right. “I can’t. It’s wrong.”

“Not so sure about that, Mammalian Protuberances,” Martha went on. “How in the fuck are you gonna lead her to be better than who she’s become if you just leave her locked up and rottin’ in a cell for eternity?”

Unfortunately, Martha had more than four brain cells. She’d successfully used Satan’s words against me. I was ready to set her on fire.

“Martha is stupid, but I concur, Ladybumps LeFunBags,” Jane chimed in. “Smexy McLickable Buns said respect goes both ways. If you wanna get it, you gotta give it. Just like oral. Respect Juliet enough to blast her ass so she can help us take down the fuckers who can bang themselves.”

“And for fuck’s sake, you can’t let Paris down,” Martha added.

So much of what she’d just said was wrong on every level, but there was a lot that was right.

“Astrid would never let Paris down,” Gunter said quietly with his eyes on his love.

The Viking was correct. Juliet said she could take it. I had to trust her. Keeping my hands on the table, I eyed my sister. “How triggering will this be for you?”

She pressed her lips together. “Why do you care?”

I rolled my eyes. “You make it seriously hard to be civil. Answer the question.”

“Why are you being nice after what I’ve done?” she demanded, perturbed.

“Because I’m not psychotic,” I ground out. “I don’t maim people for no reason.”

“But you have every reason to end me,” she countered.

“Tempting,” I muttered. “However, I’m better than that. Deal with it. Answer the question. I don’t have time to screw around.”

She didn’t hesitate. “As long as it’s not her, then I can take it.”

“I’m not her.” A shitty thought occurred to me. If I’d inherited the *gift*, then it was possible that Juliet did as well and I’d just told her how to do it. Fuck. One more notch in the crappy belt of a crappy day.

“Fine,” I said, standing up. At this point, I couldn’t risk that she wouldn’t try it on me before I tried it on her.

Without another word, I electrocuted her. I electrocuted her eight times. She didn’t slap out the fire. She was ablaze. Of course, her caretakers took her to the floor and rolled her.

I walked over and pulled her to her feet.

“Thank you,” she said.

It was so absurd, I laughed. “You’re welcome. Test it out,” I said. “Try to zap me.”

Juliet looked terrified. “And if I can?”

“If you can, I need to know,” I replied flatly. There was a possibility it wouldn’t work on her. If it didn’t, she wasn’t leaving the cell. She had too much ammo now.

She was wary. “Will you retaliate?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“What if I kill you?” she asked, still incredibly hesitant.

I laughed. It was humorless. “You know you can’t. I’m a True Immortal. You have thirty seconds,” I said. “And do not hold back. I’ll know.”

“I’m not sure,” she said.

“Twenty seconds.”

She pulled on her hair. If she started gouging herself, we were done. Juliet was stressed. I didn’t let it concern me. Ethan was my concern. If Juliet could zap me, she wasn’t coming. I’d deal with her after I’d taken care of business. Yes, I’d heard Uncle Fucker, but I was the boss and my word was the law.

“Ten.”

My sister raised her hands over her head and sliced them through the air.

Nothing happened.

My relief was as tremendous as her shock.

It worked.

“Oh my God,” she said, staring at her hands and then at me.

“Again,” I commanded.

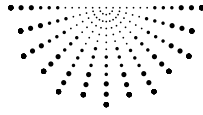
She obeyed to the same result. Martha and Jane clapped and hooted. The entire situation was beyond bizarre. However, my sister smiled. It was a real smile. I returned it.

Vinnie poofed back into the cell with a pile of scary velvet robes. I took the purple one. It was my color. Jane chose a red robe and Martha took gold, which left Juliet with navy blue.

I glanced around the cell. Paris was safe with Gunter. The Kev would be with them shortly. Ethan was protected. That left the rest up to me and I would get it done.

“Put on your robes,” I instructed in a brook-no-bullshit tone. “We’re going to Toledo.”

CHAPTER TEN



MY FINGERTIPS SHOT SPARKS OF LETHAL FIRE AND I WAS CLOSE to taking out some of my own. Not the best move, but I didn't have a choice if I was going with the Toledo plan. The ballroom was a shitshow. If time wasn't of the essence, I'd have thought the situation through better. It *was* of the essence and I hadn't. "Stand down," I shouted as every Vampyre who wasn't asleep pulled their weapons and aimed them at Juliet.

The fang gnashing and verbal threats were blood-chilling. Juliet stood tall, but her chin lowered in shame. I understood the ire of the Vamps, but it made me ill. Martha and Jane flanked my sister on either side and glared at the horrified crowd. Juliet might be on a course to redemption, but the road would be violent. She had destroyed so much. Vamps had excellent memories and held grudges. While I didn't blame them, they would not undermine me. Ethan's undead life was on the line and I was calling the shots. Yep, it was a risk, but my gut told me I needed my sister. My gut hadn't steered me wrong yet.

"This is unacceptable," a Vamp named Crispin snarled. "Trash belongs in the dungeon. The fact that she still lives is an abomination. I say we get the job done now. It's long overdue."

There were mutterings of agreement. It was not working for me. At all.

My eyes narrowed to slits. Black glitter covered my arms and chest and my hair began to blow wildly around my head. Crispin backed away in fear and all the others dropped to their

knees. “Did I miss something?” I asked so coldly, everyone in the room blanched. “When were you put in charge?”

Crispin sputtered and shifted back and forth nervously. He opened his mouth to speak then changed his mind.

“Seriously,” I said, walking up to the huge man and getting in his face. “Tell me when you were tasked with making the decisions?”

The silence was loud and I hoped I wasn’t going to have to rip off his appendages. I wouldn’t kill the asshole. When he wasn’t being an asshole, I liked him. Appendages grew back. Sadly, Vampyres understood violence. If that’s what it took, I’d happily dish it out for Ethan’s sake... and Juliet’s.

“Sphincters are gonna get torn out and shoved down some throats,” Martha growled.

The pint-sized Fairies who The Kev had called in shrieked with fury at the disrespect Crispin had shown. Susu was the loudest and the most vicious of the foursome.

I shook my head. “No, Susu. These are my people. I will deal with them”

“Shit,” she muttered. “For you, Astrid, I will not ingest anyone.”

They tended to eat people they didn’t like. The mechanics of that were difficult to understand, but impossible to unsee. I never wanted to witness it again. Susu, Lulu and the gang backed off immediately. At least some of my army acknowledged I was in charge. Now the rest needed to get onto the same page.

“Grenades are gonna get embedded in some bungholes,” Jane added for good measure. “BOOM goes the bunghole!”

I had the inappropriate urge to laugh. I didn’t. Shit was serious. I held up my hand to silence my profane and somewhat gross posse. “I’ve got this.”

“Yes, you do, Knockers LeMilkJugs,” Martha agreed.

My gaze had not left Crispin’s throughout the exchange with the old gals and Susu. He was the first to look away.

“My apologies,” he ground out. “I misspoke.”

“Correct,” I said acidly. “Ethan is my responsibility. Removing the fucked-up spell is my mission. Juliet’s also my responsibility and my problem. Not yours. She has knowledge of the fangless freaks and has offered her assistance. I accepted. That’s *all* you need to know. Am I clear?”

“Very,” Crispin said with a nod of respect. “Again, my apologies.”

I eyed him for a long moment then turned away. “The Kev?”

“Yes, my friend?” he asked with a raised brow and a hint of an impressed smile on his face.

“Crispin will go with you to protect Paris in the dungeon,” I instructed. “He will be under your watch.”

“As you wish,” he replied.

I turned back to Crispin and pointed to the door. If he bested me, the others would try. That would be incredibly shortsighted on their part since I would end them faster than I could blink. Apparently, Ethan being out of the picture made some people stupid.

The stupid Vamp in question bowed to me then left the ballroom. The Kev gently squeezed my shoulder and followed him. In a world where nothing was normal and safety was a relative word, it kicked ass to have trusted friends.

I glanced around the room and crossed my still sparking arms over my chest. “Does anyone else take issue? If so, speak now. We can solve it quickly.” My tone was emotionless even though my stomach roiled. Ethan was usually bad cop to my good cop. Today I was the heavy.

Juliet stepped forward and addressed the crowd. “My power has been bound. I am of no danger to your Princess or any of you.”

Eyebrows shot up. Tons of them.

I groaned inwardly. Juliet’s blabbing about her binding was the last thing I wanted and was an opening for more trouble.

“How is that possible?” a Vampyre in the back of the room called out in disbelief.

“Unnecessary information,” I replied, cutting off the line of questioning. “My sister speaks the truth, and that’s all you need to know.”

There was doubt on the faces of my people, but there was also fear and one hell of a lot of respect.

“If there are no more questions, then I’m out of here. You know what to do.” I scanned the room for my most trusted of the Elite Guard. My relief was absolute. Three of our most loyal badasses were present. “Spike, Talia and Leon are in charge in my absence. Protect Ethan and the others with your lives. If the enemy returns, cover their mouths, trap them quickly and put them into the soundproofed room in the dungeon. Do not engage. They suck energy to sustain themselves. Only destroy them if it’s a last resort. That will be my pleasure.”

The chuckles from my vengeance-happy people were a relief. Order was back to normal if abnormal was the definition of the word.

“Do not let Ethan or me down,” I said. “Or it will be the last thing you do.”

A few problems solved. So many more to go.



ETHAN KEPT AN EXPENSIVE ARRAY OF FANCY CARS IN THE gigantic underground garage at the Cressida House, so I had a ridiculous number of choices of what to drive. I adored the Porsche, but that would be dumb. Sticking out like a sore thumb in Toledo wasn’t prudent. In the end, I went with a black, midsized SUV. Martha, Jane and Juliet could sit in the back. Vinnie in the front passenger seat. And if need be, I’d tie Martha and Jane to the top of the truck with bungee cords. I wasn’t fucking around.

Vinnie loaded a few cases of blood into the back of the SUV.

“What flavor?” I asked, checking my weapons.

“The caffeinated kind,” he replied.

I nodded. It was icky, but I would drink a whole case if necessary. I turned my attention to the old biddies who were shoving each other out of the way to get into the car first. “There will be no singing,” I warned the idiots. Even though The Kev had given me a brilliant antidote to the heinous songs stuck in my head, I didn’t feel like singing By Mennen over and over on a six-hour drive.

“Roger. What about poetry?” Jane asked as she climbed over Martha and slapped her in the head.

“Nope,” I said. That was as terrifying as singing.

“Hand puppets?” Martha suggested, gut punching Jane.

“Nope. Sleeping would be a good activity,” I said.

“Not tired, Bumps McGee,” Martha informed me. “How about aerobics?”

“In the car?” I asked.

“Hmm,” she said, scratching her balding head. “I can see how that might not fucking work. We could masturbate.”

“Absolutely not,” I snapped, getting into the driver’s seat and starting the truck.

“Roger that,” Martha said. “What about jokes?”

“Ohhhh! I love jokes!” Vinnie said, handing out jeweled brooches to everyone.

“Jokes could be amusing,” Juliet said, joining the conversation.

It was looking like I was very outnumbered. The fact that Juliet was participating was a good sign. I was about to cave.

I winced. There was no way Martha and Jane could be silent the entire ride. Jokes were a maybe. I could use a laugh... However, the gals were fairly rank. Whatever. A

happy little army was a good thing. I didn't want them playing Slug-bug and beating the daylights out of each other.

"Fine," I said, knowing I would probably live to regret it.

"Excellent!" Jane crowed then leaned over to Martha and whispered in her ear.

Martha's cackle of glee was not reassuring. "Boob jokes it is!"

It was going to be a long six hours.



THE FIRST HOUR WAS BAD. THE SECOND WAS WORSE. I'D clearly been on crack when I'd agreed to the jokes. Even Juliet and Vinnie were appalled. Some of the jokes were mild. Most were not. And they just kept on coming. Why it surprised me that they had hours of boob jokes was a mystery. It made perfect sense.

"Where do bras go to eat lunch?" Martha asked.

"Not a clue," Vinnie said, being a great sport.

"A breastaurant!" she yelled.

"I got one," Jane bellowed.

"Of course, you do," I mumbled, checking the GPS. A little under four more hours of this crap was going to scar me for life.

"What do you call two sets of twin knockers?"

No one answered.

"Identititties," Jane squealed. "Get it?"

"Yep," I said. "Got it."

We'd left Kentucky and were in Ohio. Sadly, we were not close to Toledo yet.

"Are you fuckers gettin' tired of hooter jokes?" Martha inquired.

“Yes,” Juliet, Vinnie and I said in unison.

“Not. A. Problem,” Martha assured us. “We can move on to peckers.”

“Love it!” Jane bellowed in her outdoor voice. “What do you call a herd of bulls masturbating?”

“Beef stroganoff,” Martha chimed in with a grunt of laughter.

I groaned.

“Correct, jackass,” Jane said, slapping Martha on the back. “How did the Burger King knock up the Dairy Queen?”

“Don’t know,” Vinnie said, again being polite. The Vamp was a saint.

“The dumb bastard forgot to wrap his Whopper!” Jane said.

Okay, I kind of laughed at that one. I shouldn’t have. It simply encouraged them.

“What did Cinderella do when she got to the ball?” Martha asked with a naughty smirk.

“I don’t know that one,” Jane said.

“She choked,” Martha announced.

The two dummies laughed their bony asses off for about ten minutes. I was done. Singing didn’t even sound half bad anymore.

“Alrighty, we’re going to play the silent game now,” I said.

“Don’t think I know that one,” Jane said, wiping away her bloody tears of laughter.

“It’s a great one,” I told her. “You don’t say a word. And if you do, you get set on fire.”

“Harsh,” Martha commented.

“Totally,” I agreed with a smile. “And the winner will get twenty pairs of booty shorts.”

“Crotchless?” Jane asked.

I gagged. “Sure.”

“I’m in,” Martha said.

“Me too!” Jane added.

I wasn’t sure where I was going to find crotchless booty shorts, but if they didn’t talk, I’d find some.

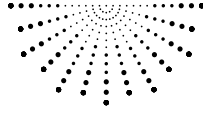
“How long do we have to clap the traps?” Jane inquired.

I checked the GPS. “Three hours and thirty-two minutes.”

“Done,” they shouted in unison.

Vinnie winked at me and Juliet gave me a covert thumbs up. The rest of the drive would be glorious. I hoped.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



THE SILENCE WAS INDEED GLORIOUS. UNFORTUNATELY, MY brain was still stuck on the Burger King knocking up the Dairy Queen. The TV commercials for Burger King showed a scary-looking dude with an enormous head and a crown. I had no clue what the Dairy Queen actually looked like, but if she was banging the Burger King, it couldn't be good.

I sternly reminded myself that they were fictional. However, Vampyres were *fictional*. Maybe the fast-food royalty truly existed. Shit. The images were horrible. Sadly, By Mennen wasn't going to work on a visual. It was also somewhat alarming that I was going to have to produce twenty pairs of crotchless booty shorts—Martha and Jane hadn't spoken a word since the game started.

I glanced over at Vinnie, who had leaned forward and politely raised his hand.

“You're not included in the silent game,” I told him with a smile. Chatting would be good. My imagination was on a collision course to Hell.

The Vampyre was calming and sweet. I'd chosen my tiny army well—especially Count Vincent Gustav formerly of Bat Cave, North Carolina. Juliet was the wild card. She'd fallen asleep in the backseat, but I was confident that she was needed to piece the puzzle together. It was mindboggling how innocent people looked while sleeping. Martha and Jane were not innocent and were not napping. They were antsy. It was painful for them to shut their cakeholes for five minutes. It had been several hours.

Their pain was my gain.

Vinnie giggled. “I wasn’t sure if the silent rules applied to all. Not that I want to win. The prize is not my cup of tea. Free balling it can be quite painful. I prefer a nice sturdy cotton protecting my testicles.”

Picturing Vinnie’s wrinkled pale balls was not good. It sucked. Getting back on track was imperative. I would be an asshole to set him on fire for implanting his junk in my frontal lobe. “Did you want to ask me something?”

“Oh yes, Astrid! Have you thought about accommodations in case we need to stay a few days?”

I hadn’t planned on staying a few days. I didn’t know if I had a few days. More importantly, I didn’t know if Ethan had a few days. Juliet had said the two hundred warriors who’d been defeated by the Energy Vamps a thousand years ago were still tranced and kept in a secret location, but that was hearsay—not fact. Acting slowly wasn’t going to happen. There was too much to lose. My plan was to pull it out of my ass and get it done today. Antidote first, bloodbath second. However, Vinnie had made an excellent point. By the time we arrived it would be too dark to stake out the area and find the fangless sons of bitches.

I was moving at a very fast pace and not thinking it out. That led to disasters. Screwing up had deadly repercussions.

“No.” I wasn’t happy with myself. I wasn’t behaving like a warrior. It didn’t seem possible to remove the truth that this was personal and I wanted blood. Like there was strength in stillness and numbers, there was an advantage to having at least a skeleton of a plan.

“Well, I have!” he said.

Count Vincent Gustav formerly of Bat Cave, North Carolina for the win.

“Spit it out,” I said, feeling a tiny bit of tension leave my body.

“I have some friends who live on the outskirts of Toledo,” he shared. “Haven’t seen them in a few centuries, but we do

correspond through silly cards and wonderful handwritten missives. So, even with the lack of face-to-face we're still quite bonded. All serious mimes take an oath to stick together for eternity. The boys are quite dear, but rather violent."

Fuck a duck. The tension was back with a vengeance. Mimes freaked me out. I was iffy on clowns, but mimes were terrifying.

My hands tightened on the steering wheel. "Umm... are they still miming?"

"Once a mime always a mime," he told me with great pride.

Double fuck. "Are they Vampyres?"

"Yes! One hundred percent undead," he assured me.

That might be to my advantage. As the Princess of the North American Dominion and the Chosen One, I could make the rules. Of course, showing up uninvited and electrocuting people for pantomiming was flat-out rude. And I couldn't let go of the thought that everything often happened for a reason and was connected. Maybe, they would know something about the Energy Vamps since they lived in the general area.

"Do they wear Marcel Marceau makeup?" I asked, doing my best not to shudder.

Vinnie was thrilled at the mention of the famous French mime. "In the olden days, yes! I'd surmise that the trio would wear the white pancake makeup only during performances, but they're very serious about the art of silence."

Satan had said respect was given when respect was shown. Uncle Fucker's cryptic hints usually had multiple meanings. They might apply to the situation. I would die for Ethan. Refraining from removing appendages of those who scared the shit out of me was a small price to pay. Silent communication would not end me. And what was so bad about a mime? I'd dealt with Wraiths, Trolls and all sorts of other unsavory and vicious characters. If I could do that, I could tolerate people who preferred to get trapped in invisible boxes and gesticulating instead of talking.

I wanted to sigh, but that wasn't in my bag of tricks. "Tell me about Marcel Marceau, please."

With a whole hell of a lot of luck and a dose of blind optimism, education might be the key to getting over my repulsion... or it would lead to unnecessary decapitation.

Vinnie dove in with gusto. I was regaled in great detail about the French actor and mime who was known for his most famous character, Bip the Clown. The combination of clown and mime was gas inducing, but I stayed quiet and listened. Making fun of a man who was clearly Vinnie's hero was unkind. Vinnie's admiration for the mime was contagious... kind of. More like getting hives that wouldn't kill me, but I knew I was opening my mind. Point for me. Also, it was impossible to be mean to someone as sweet as my strange little friend.

My compassion roared for the mime/clown when I learned that he had served in the French Resistance, which was composed of nine secret Jewish networks. I was sold on Marcel Marceau by the time Vinnie got to the part where he'd been instrumental in saving children and adults during the Holocaust in France. He'd used pantomime to amuse the children and keep them quiet when they rescued them. The beauty of the story was undeniable. It was also fascinating to know that because of Marceau's fluency in English, French and German, he had worked as a liaison officer with General George Patton's Third Army.

By the time Vinnie finished my crash course on Marcel Marceau, I wanted to be the mime's BFF. I didn't even care that he sported pore-clogging makeup and climbed invisible ropes. Risking one's life to save innocent people was badass. While I wasn't sure I'd ever completely get over my heebie-jeebies of mimes, I knew for a fact I no longer wanted to incinerate them. That would be a real—not mimed—slap in the face to a hero.

"Was Marcel Marceau a human?" I asked.

"Oh yes," Vinnie said with his pale hands clasped together in reverence. "One of the best of them."

I nodded and shot my friend a smile. My guess was that the man now resided in Heaven. I'd have to ask Uncle God for an intro. "Thank you. That was helpful."

"My pleasure," he replied with an adorable giggle. "It's easy to dismiss those who are different."

His statement gut-punched me. My shame was real. Tolerance was one of the cornerstones of compassion. Rejecting someone for their species, color of skin, sexuality or terrifying hobby was bullshit and stupid. While I had plenty of bad qualities, I wasn't stupid.

To get respect and love, you had to give it. Period. I wasn't sure I could love the mimes, but I was going to respect the hell out of them. Technically, I was their leader. A leader was only as good as her followers' trust and respect for her.

"Please text the mimes," I told Vinnie. "Let them know how many we are and that we're gearing up for a fight to the death." I winked at the small man. I was pretty sure my next statement would get me out of having to procure crotchless booty shorts. "Don't go into too much detail about Martha and Jane. I don't want them saying no."

"What the actual fuck?" Martha grunted.

Jane headbutted her. "Jackass," she shouted. "Do you realize how fuckin' close we were to gettin' booty shorts?"

Martha looked like a sad deer caught in the headlights of a Mack truck. I felt bad. I'd cheated. Shaking my head, I laughed. "You'll still get your disgusting crap. The fact that you didn't speak for hours is a win-win."

The old bags high-fived and began putting in orders for colors and hole sizes. I was repulsed. Juliet woke up due to the hoopla and gagged when Martha went into a descriptive diatribe about labium. When she offered to show her own as an example, I electrocuted her. There was only so much I could take.

"The boys have accepted our request and are excited about meeting the Chosen One!" Vinnie announced. "They have also offered their services in the battle."

I wasn't sure that miming decapitation was going to help. Whatever. We had a safe place to stay.

"Where do they live?" I asked.

"They used to live in Celeryville, Ohio, but the address on their last holiday card was from Toledo." Vinnie checked the text from the mimes. "Ohhhh! They have acquired an old monastery that was going to be destroyed for a strip mall. It looks quite posh from the pictures they sent."

It was a little much to stay in a monastery with mimes, but beggars could not be choosers.

"Do they talk?" I asked, wanting to prepare myself.

Vinnie slapped his head and giggled. "Yes, yes! Always full of ideas—most of them legal."

Well, that was a plus.

"However," he warned. "When extremely stressed, they tend to be gesticular."

"Can antibiotics cure that?" Martha asked.

"Cure what?" Vinnie asked, confused.

"Gesticles on the testicles," Martha said.

"Oh my God," I muttered. It had been so much better during the silent game.

"Umm... no," Vinnie said as diplomatically as he could without laughing at the dumbass.

"Dang shame." Martha shook her head in sorrow. "Hope it doesn't itch."

A change of subject was in order. Vinnie had put the mimes' address into the GPS. We were five minutes away. Reminding myself that I wasn't going to electrocute our hosts, I steeled myself to be a kind and good guest.

Fingers crossed I didn't have an anxiety attack anytime soon.



MIMES COULD TALK. HOLY SHIT, THEY COULD TALK. VINNIE had greatly understated when he said they spoke. They were so freaking verbose, I secretly wished they'd get trapped in a soundproofed imaginary glass box. All three were pale, short and bald like Vinnie. While Vinnie had wonderful social skills, his fellow mimes were seriously lacking. The Vamps weren't mean, they were just out of control.

Their excitement when we arrived reminded me of a pack of hungry puppies and we were their nursing mammas. The yipping and shrill shrieks of delight were almost as terrifying as if they were pulling on imaginary ropes that led to God only knew where. The hugs were fine. When they started rubbing their hairless heads on my stomach, I'd had enough.

It only took one small electrocution to get the shitshow under control. I felt kind of bad, but a pale bald head in my gut was a no-go. The mimes thanked me profusely for setting them aflame. They found it invigorating and very special to be set on fire by the Chosen One. Bizarre didn't begin to cover it.

Mark, Marco and Marky had names that honored their hero, Marcel Marceau. While sweet in a weird way, every time someone said Mark, they all answered. This comprised of constant interrupting and lots of slapping. It was loud and rowdy in the monastery. I considered sleeping in the SUV, but forced myself to stay. At least no one was wearing white pancake makeup.

"Oh, Chosen One," Mark squealed, bowing and offering me an imaginary flower. "We are so honored with your presence! Thrilling!"

Vinnie nodded to me with encouragement. It wasn't easy, but I took the phantom flower and put it in my hair. Mark was ecstatic. However, Marco and Marky were distraught. They violently headbutted Mark then presented me with what I guessed were imaginary bouquets. I could only assume that Marky's was larger than Marco's since he struggled under the

weight... of something that didn't exist. It was all I could do not to run screaming from the big, cold, stone and mostly empty monstrosity of a house.

Holding my shit together was hard. Martha and Jane were loving the show and offered up a pole-dancing performance. I quashed that shit fast. There was only so much I could take before an involuntary mass decapitation ensued. Juliet was subdued. She hadn't spoken much at all, but she'd slept most of the trip. It did occur to me that she might try to escape, but figured since she was powerless, she wouldn't be so shortsighted. However, she would be bunking with me tonight. Having to go after her wasn't part of the game plan.

Vinnie had supplied bottled blood for all and we sat down on stone benches in a torchlit room to exchange pleasantries. It wasn't exactly pleasant—more like alarmingly odd.

“Tell them, Marco!” Marky squealed. “It's so much fun!”

Marco preened and stood up to his full height of about five foot nothing. “I carve soap.”

Juliet glanced over at me with a small and somewhat suppressed smile. The evening had gone south, but her smile did something happy to my soul.

“But...” Marky said, grinning so wide his cheeks had to have hurt. “It's not just soap carving! Tell them what you do, Marco. Soooooo brilliant!”

“Oh yes! Of course,” Marco said, delighted with the attention—so delighted he got trapped in an imaginary box for a hot sec. I tamped back my horror and almost cried with relief when he got himself out of the box. “Picture this,” he whispered, with his hands in front of him framing the scene. “At the witching hour every third Tuesday, I hide under the cloak of darkness in the bushes.”

He paused for dramatic effect. It was difficult not to giggle.

“I case the neighborhood,” Marco continued.

“The one two-point-three miles down the street with the nice houses,” Mark chimed in.

“That’s correct!” Marco yelled. “Nice houses usually mean bar soap.”

I was so fucking confused.

“Although,” Marky chimed in, shaking his head in sorrow. “Many seemed to have moved on to liquid soap. So tragic.”

“Is anyone following this shit?” Martha asked, taking a huge noisy slurp from her bottle of caffeinated blood then spitting most of it right back into the bottle.

“Wait!” Marco bellowed. “It’s about to get good!”

We waited.

It didn’t.

“I pick the locks of the fancy doors with my fangs then slip into the abodes wearing only underpants and carrying my Exacto knife. Slowly, I make my way through the darkened residence and find the bathrooms. I love bathrooms!”

“Me too. Adorable!” Mark announced. “Even though I have no bodily functions, I find it delightful to sit on the commode and pretend. Thrilling!”

It obviously didn’t take much to thrill the little dudes.

Marco punched Mark in the head and sent him flying, barely missing a beat in his strange tale. “I then find the bar soap. I sniff it for two minutes and three seconds. If it’s an unopened bar, I carefully remove the packaging and sniff for a full three minutes. And then... I carve the soap into cute little turtles, beavers or bunnies and occasionally, if I’m feeling daring, I do a soapy lifelike reproduction of Jay Leno’s face. I leave the works of art in the soap dish as a gift!”

“Looks exactly like Jay Leno,” Marky assured everyone.

I was speechless. Juliet’s mouth hung open and Vinnie appeared a bit embarrassed by his buddies. Only Martha and Jane were into it.

“You ever thought about carving soap peckers?” Jane suggested.

“Or labias?” Martha added. “I’d pay good money for that.”

I cringed.

“I haven’t,” Marco said, rubbing his bald head in thought. “But now I shall! My artwork has been featured on the local news multiple times in the crime reports and there’s a darling rendering of a mugshot of me at the Toledo police station. Of course, no one has gotten photographic evidence since I don’t show up on film. Very handy being dead.”

“I’ll say,” Marky said with a sly grin. “Shall I regale our guests with my hobby?”

“You must,” Mark insisted, bouncing up and down while building what I guessed was an imaginary ice cream cone. “And then it will be my turn.”

“But of course,” Marky promised his roomie, taking a quick lick of the phantom dessert that his buddy had whipped up. After rubbing his little belly with glee and gushing over how chocolatey the ice cream was, he proceeded. “I enjoy playing dead in supermarkets at lunchtime.”

“I’m sorry. What?” I asked, squinting at him. I couldn’t have heard that right.

Marky repeated himself. I had not heard wrong. Maybe the fictional ice cream had given him a very real brain freeze...

“Yes! Since I have no heartbeat, it’s quite believable. The more dramatic the better. I usually die near the fruit. Sometimes I choose the seafood section and every once in a blue moon, I enjoy playing dead in the area of the store where they rotate the holiday merchandise.”

“Why?” I asked, appalled but trying not to laugh.

Marky giggled. “It’s fun! But the best part is that in the last two years, I have been instrumental in the retirement of forty-two coroners and twenty-five EMS personal.”

I closed my eyes and groaned. These guys needed more supervision. This was terrible.

“He comes back to life right before the embalming!” Marco announced. “It’s a real hoot!”

“Mmkay,” I said, pressing the bridge of my nose. “I’m going on record and saying that’s a very shitty thing to do. As your Princess, I’m putting an end to that.”

Marky nodded enthusiastically. “No problem! I also enjoy prank calling carwashes and starting arguments online. It will be no loss to obey my Princess!”

“Awesome,” I muttered as he handed me another imaginary flower. “Okay, Mark, let’s get this over with then I have a few questions.”

“As you wish!” he said, clasping his hands together with excitement. “I am a champion in extreme ironing!”

“He is!” Marco screamed so loudly I slapped my hands over my ears.

“What is extreme ironing?” Juliet inquired.

I wanted to know as well, but was too scared to ask.

Mark pulled several flyers from his pocket and handed them out. “You may read along if you would like, or you can keep the brochures as a souvenir! Extreme Ironing, also known as EI, is fabulous! You take your ironing board to remote places and iron items of clothing.”

Marky chimed in and read from the flyer. “According to the Extreme Ironing Bureau, ‘Extreme Ironing is the latest danger sport that combines the thrill of extreme outdoor activity with the satisfaction of a well-pressed shirt!’”

Martha clapped her hands. “Now that’s some fucked-up shit. Love it.”

Mark wasn’t finished. I didn’t expect him to be.

“I have ironed dress shirts in a canoe, skiing, snowboarding, on top of large statues, parachuting and under water!” he said. “In the process of becoming the champion, I have lost my left arm, right foot and three fingers on my left hand. They regenerated! I adore being undead.”

I wasn’t sure if I preferred the oversharing of appalling hobbies or if it would have been less scarring to watch a quick

mime show. It didn't matter. What was done was done. It was time to get back to business.

“That is really something,” I said, feigning enthusiasm while being as vague as possible. “Do you mind if I pick your brains for a bit?”

“We would be honored!” Marco gushed, bowing to me.

“What do you know about Energy Vampyres?” I asked.

The three hosts turned so ashen I thought they might have died for real.

Mark started to cry. Marco began to shudder and Marky pulled all the hair out of his eyebrows.

It was about to be a long night after a long day. It was a hot damned good thing that Vamps could go for days or even weeks without sleep.

CHAPTER TWELVE



“AND YOU THINK WE’RE CRAZY, MAGAMBOS LABOSOM,” Martha muttered as she watched the shitshow unfold.

She actually had a point. For twenty minutes, we’d been watching a meltdown of mimes. It wasn’t a good look on any of them.

Vinnie was finally able to get the boys to calm down after a vigorous pantomiming session of rope pulling and flower planting. When the trio of little guys walked over and handed me pretend bouquets, I knew we were ready to get back to business.

“I think we might have hit the jackpot,” Juliet whispered as she sat down next to me on the hard and uncomfortable concrete bench.

“From your mouth,” I said, handing off my invisible bouquets to her. Standing up, I rubbed my backside. The seating was awful. Whatever. My mind worked better when I moved around. “Okay, boys, from your reaction I’m going to surmise you know who I’m talking about.”

Marco nodded jerkily and huddled with his buddies. “Oh yes,” he said softly. “Very dangerous.”

“Very angry. Very jealous,” Marky said with a shiver.

“Jealous of what?” I asked.

“No one knows,” Mark whispered ominously. “From the lore of long ago, the color of their skin is due to agoraphobia.”

That didn't make a whole lot of sense. They weren't housebound. "But I saw them at Target," I said.

"Oh! I love Target," Marco squealed, then immediately cowered again when he remembered what we were discussing. "But I believe the great mime known as Mark is on point. The fangless ones are only ever seen indoors."

"And if I recall correctly," Marky said, leaning forward to share his secret. "They're day walkers."

The rumors were getting iffy. It seemed like the fangless enemy had a lot of the typical fictional Vamp traits... except for the blood drinking and the fangs, which were not fictional. However, daylight had been one of the clues from my sister's memories. I wasn't sure if that meant the Energy Vampyres were stronger during the day or only lived during the day. Didn't matter. It was information that might be true, therefore, potentially useful. Until we learned differently, we'd cautiously go with what we'd discovered no matter how unsubstantiated. The pieces of this puzzle were looking warped.

Vinnie joined the huddle of mimes and gently patted his friends on their backs. "Dearest Marco, Marky and Mark," he said. "Anything else you recall would be greatly appreciated. The fangless beige ones have harmed the Prince of the North American Dominion. We must find them and end their reign of terror."

It took a ten-minute session inside a massive invisible glass box to get the mimes back on track. There was no way in Hell I was taking them into any kind of battle. We'd all die.

"Guys," I said hesitantly. "I need you to stay with me here. Let's keep the meltdowns to a minimum."

"Of course, my Princess," Mark said, still looking terrified. "We have rarely spotted the energy suckers in our time. And only from a great distance."

I pressed the bridge of my nose. "So, you *have* seen them? Recently?"

They exchanged confused glances.

“Oh no, no, no, no, no,” Marky said. “It’s been eons since we’ve seen the dastardly breed.”

“We don’t get out much,” Marco admitted sheepishly. “With my mugshot posted on flyers around Toledo we must be careful. I would not do well in prison.”

I almost reminded him that he could poof right out of the pokey, but getting off track again could be disastrous.

“And I’ve caught wind that a band of furious coroners are after me,” Marky shared. “Simply horrible.”

Mark nodded spastically. “I’ve made many enemies due to my prowess with ironing. Mostly we just hang out in the monastery and mime.”

I pressed my lips together. The jackpot might be empty. “I see. Are you aware the Energy Vampyres live in this area?”

The news brought on another colossal mime panic attack. At least it was silent this time. I was certain Toledo was the right spot. Too many clues were falling together to start over from scratch. Satan had literally said Toledo in a roundabout, Uncle Fucker kind of way. Granted, the clues were shitty, but they were still clues.

“Those little fuckers are nuts,” Jane mumbled.

“They’re givin’ me gas and I can’t fart,” Martha agreed. “I say we get some shut-eye and case Toledo in the morning. This is bullcrap.”

“Not yet,” I said, walking over to the mimes, who I was pretty sure were swimming in an ocean of rough waves. Or possibly drowning in a pretend pond. “Enough,” I commanded. “Would Marcel Marceau lose his shit like this when he was scared?”

The panic attack stopped as abruptly as it had begun. The mimes hung their bald heads in shame.

“No,” Marky whispered. “The GOAT of mimes would face danger head on.”

“He would jump head first into the fray and fight until the bloody end,” Marco said.

“He would never cower in fear,” Mark added.

“Correct,” I told Mark, picking him up and seating him on a bench. I did the same with Marco and Marky. Vinnie winked at me and joined his insane little posse. “Marcel Marceau saved children from death. He didn’t hesitate to do what was right even in the face of grave danger. You mimes are named after him. Do him the honor of fighting for the right side of justice. Help me save your Prince.”

Marco raised his hand and waited to be acknowledged.

The raising of the hand must be a mime thing. I nodded at him.

“My real name is Fred, not Marco.”

“I’m Herm,” Marky said.

“And I’m Cecil,” Mark admitted.

I raised my brow. “Is that so?” I questioned. “The men I’m looking at are Mark, Marky and Marco—disciples of the GOAT of mime.” Their eyes grew huge and lit up with pleasure. They sat up straighter and held their chins high. I was on a roll so I might as well go all the way. “I see men who can escape a glass box with ease and pull on a rope like nobody’s business. I’m looking at artists who can make phantom ice cream cones that taste delicious and swim with sharks or some kind of shit like that. I see heroes. I need you to step up and be heroes. Now. Am I clear?”

“You are!” Marco screamed and pantomimed pulling his shit together by pretending to crap in his hand then putting it into his pocket.

I was positive Marcel Marceau would not have done that.

“Did you just shit in your hand?” Martha asked, clearly impressed.

“I did,” Marco announced. “I will not be scared shitless anymore. I mime-crapped the scared out and will carry it with me to remind myself that I am a HERO! I am a hero like my idol Marcel Marceau! I will trap the Energy Vampyres in a

glass box and destroy them! I will save Prince Ethan with the power of mime!”

I said not a single word as Marky and Mark also took fabricated dumps into their hands and tucked the phantom turds into their pockets. I was crazy thankful that Vamps had no bodily functions. If they’d truly just stunk up the room, I would have had no choice but to disembowel them.

It really was good to be dead.



THREE HOURS AND A WHOLE LOT OF BOTTLED BLOOD LATER WE hadn’t gotten very far. The mimes only knew a little more than we already did. At least they’d refrained from miming. I was seriously on edge.

“It’s fine,” I finally said, running my hands through my hair. “We’ll just wing it.”

Marky sprinted over and picked up the imaginary flower that had fallen from my hair and handed it back. I was shockingly proud of myself that I didn’t electrocute him. I was growing as a person. That felt great. Getting no closer to learning anything new about the fangless fuckers didn’t feel great.

“Did you say the notes from the beautiful Juliet were in Latin?” Marco asked, giving my sister a shy smile.

Uh oh... someone had a crush.

Juliet patted the little guy on head like a puppy and smiled. “Apparently, yes. But I don’t remember much of it.”

“None of it?” I asked, surprised.

She shrugged. “The pain at the beginning and the wave of exhaustion at the end,” she said. “Nothing else.”

Vinnie jumped to his feet and squealed. “Wait! This is marvelous! Do you have the notes, Astrid?”

My hand was already in my pocket. I couldn't believe I hadn't thought to have Juliet go over them. Pulling them out and laying them on a boulder the mimes used as a table, I beckoned her over. "Can you shed any light on this?"

Juliet studied the notes while Martha and Jane discussed soap peckers with Marco, Marky and Mark. It was all wrong, but something in my gut told me things were starting to go right.

They had to.

"Do you speak Latin?" Juliet asked me.

"Not a word," I admitted. "But Vinnie does."

Vinnie wrung his hands. "Not fluently, though."

Juliet stared at the paper. "I'm not fluent either—used to be, but not anymore. Some of this would be guessing on my part."

The mimes began to play drums... or they were pantomiming a toddler tantrum. I wasn't sure. However, when Martha and Jane began to dance to the imaginary beat and remove their clothes, I shut the concert down with a warning explosion that rocked the monastery.

"No exposed saggy boobs," I snapped, waving my hand and dressing them in parkas that zipped all the way up. I looked around and groaned. My tension was high and being in a room made of rocks wasn't helping. "Is there a more comfortable area in the monastery by chance?"

The boys began to gesticulate like mad. Granted, they'd ingested a shitload of caffeinated blood, but so had I, and I was holding it together.

I zapped them. There was no other choice. Thankfully, they were thrilled to be electrocuted by me and calmed immediately.

"How about we use our words for a little while?" I suggested gamely.

"But of course! And we do have a lovely rec room with more comfortable seating," Mark said. "I forget that the

language of silence can be confusing to a new mime.”

I closed my eyes and heard Juliet chuckle. If the boys thought I was going to become a mime they were as batshit nuts as my sister.

“Speaking of languages,” Marky announced. “We all three speak Latin!”

“Awesome,” I said with my first real smile in the last few hours as I grabbed the notes from Paris and Juliet’s session and put them back into my pocket. “Lead the way.”

Anything had to be better than the cavernous stone room with concrete benches and torches for lights.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



THERE WERE NO CONCRETE BENCHES OR BOULDER TABLES. However, I wasn't quite sure I could describe the rec room as *better*.

We'd stepped through a time warp.

My eyes grew huge and my mouth fell open when we entered. It was large and had bright blue shag carpet. That was bad, but the wallpaper was worse. From floor to ceiling, covering every inch of the walls and even the doors was the face, or rather, faces of Marcel Marceau—happy faces, sad faces, thoughtful faces, pissed-off faces. It was stupefying. I was pretty sure Marcel would be as alarmed as I was.

“Spiffy,” Martha commented, kicking off her black socks and sandals and digging her bony toes into the 1970s-style carpet. “Feels like I just took a hit of acid after waitin’ tables at Hooters. Fuckin’ impressive.”

Martha made no sense whatsoever—as usual, but neither did the room.

“Thank you! We do so love it!” Marco said, floating around the room and turning on all the fluorescent lights.

It felt like I'd stepped into a different era except for the impressive bank of high-end computers and security monitors along the back wall. They were state of the art. The cameras were set to patrol their entire property—inside and out. The mimes were tech savvy.

“How many acres do you have here?” I asked the boys.

“Fifty acres with monitors covering every inch,” Marky shared with pride. “Safety first!”

“Wow. Just wow,” Juliet said.

“Word,” I agreed as I laid out the papers on an avocado-green Formica table complete with chairs covered in plastic harvest-gold seat coverings with burnt-orange piping.

There was rattan everywhere—chairs, love seats and end tables. And to add insult to fabulous injury, the amount of macrame was astounding. Most of it I could live without for eternity, but the lava lamps were badass.

“Oh my!” Vinnie gushed, glancing around with delight. “Such bold colors. Thrilling!”

“That’s one way to put it,” Juliet mumbled.

I bit back a laugh. I was starting to actually enjoy my sarcastic sister.

“Alrighty,” I said. “Let’s get to work, boys. Come on over here and interpret for us, please.”

“As you wish,” Marco yelled as they scurried over and gathered around the table.

“Yes, yes,” Marky said, perusing the notes. “Oh my! Lovely penmanship, my Princess.”

I smiled and shook my head. “Thank you, Marky. Can you read it?”

“With pleasure!” he replied.

We’d been correct about almost everything. Almost.

Decapitatio meant decapitation. Both auris and auditus pertained to hearing. Repetere meant repeat and dolor did indeed mean pain. Interdui meant daylight. Mentis excessus meant trance and melodiam meant melody. And in another repeat move, canticum meant song.

The one we’d gotten wrong was vermis. It didn’t mean vermin or snakes or insects.

“Vermis means worms,” Marco told us.

The realization seemed important. I had no freaking clue as to why, but it didn't matter. "Vinnie, check the Toledo area for... umm... worm farms."

Vinnie flew to the bank of computers with his black velvet robe fluttering behind him. "On it! So exciting!"

"Or possibly a bait and tackle business," Juliet said.

"That too," I called out.

Marco, Marky and Mark looked confused.

"I would not think that the fangless ones would work with Platyhelminthes, also known as flat worms," Marco said.

"Or Annelida, more popularly known as segmented worms," Mark added.

"Or Nemertea, aka ribbon worms, or Nematoda, aka roundworms," Marky chimed in.

"And definitely not Sipuncula, more commonly known as peanut worms."

"Oh my God," I shouted, sitting on my sparking hands so I didn't incinerate the well-meaning trio. "I don't need a biology class on worms. Why do you think the fangless shits wouldn't work with worms?"

"That would require being outside and from the lore, they're inside creatures. Worms are of the earth and most definitely an outdoor species," Marky explained. "For me that doesn't connect."

I tilted my head and scrunched my nose. I agreed with him. The more we knew the less we knew. Hell, Trolls were easier to deal with than Energy Vampyres. What you saw was what you got—big, ugly and vicious. The beige weirdos were complicated.

"Those energy fuckers are freaks of nature," Martha commented, wearing a macrame plant hanger on her head.

"Kind of like undead mimes are freaks of nature," Mark said with a giggle.

“Nah,” Jane said, slapping the tiny guy on the back and sending him flying. “You three are badassess who play dead, carve peckers and iron shit. Not a freak of nature in my fuckin’ book.”

“And that old dumbass should know,” Martha said with a cackle. “Considering she’s a fugly freak of nature.”

When they began to pummel each other, I waved my pinky finger and hogtied them with the macrame. I didn’t have time for their shit.

“None of us are freaks of nature,” I stated firmly. “We are who we are. Period.”

“Tragic news,” Vinnie called out from across the room. “No worm farms.”

“Not surprising,” Juliet said. “Actually, I don’t think the worms have anything to do with their occupations.”

I stared at her and waited. She didn’t disappoint.

“What’s a boring job?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Cleaning?”

“Data processing?” Marco guessed.

“Toe fungus researcher?” Martha chimed in.

“The fucker who has to count the dimples on a golf ball?” Jane added.

“Is that a real a job?” I asked.

“Don’t know,” Jane admitted. “But it would be as boring as that time I watched the paint dry on Martha’s face after I spray painted the nasty hooker when she was sleeping.”

I didn’t comment on that. They were insane.

Vinnie squealed so loudly, everyone dropped and ducked for cover. The little Vamp was typing away on the keyboard of the computer at such a fast pace, it looked like he didn’t have hands. “I’ve got it.”

“Got what?” I asked, sprinting over.

“EV Accounting Services,” he said, opening up the website and enlarging the very blurry company rendering... not a photo since they didn’t show up on film.

“Holy shit,” Juliet muttered, looking over my shoulder. “How stupid are they?”

My grin was wide. Of course, they were accountants—Energy Vampyre Accounting Services. It made perfect sense. We’d finally hit some paydirt on the bastards. “Very stupid.”

They had used the initials of their species and had a crappy portrait done of them. Their egos were as large as their beige balls.

“Write down the address, please,” I instructed Vinnie, feeling lighter than I had all day. “We’re getting our taxes done.”

“When?” Juliet asked, her eyes alight with excitement.

I had a moment of spine-tingling trepidation. Letting my guard down with my sister had been natural... and possibly catastrophic. I closed my eyes and dug deep. Uncle Fucker was older than me. He was smarter than me. The man might be a vain, sticky-fingered, well-dressed nightmare, but he loved me and wouldn’t steer me wrong. To get respect, I had to give it. Juliet was doing all she could to earn a modicum back. I would do my best to honor her by giving her my trust and compassion. Doing the right thing was either going to save her and me or end both of us. I decided to stay positive since the alternative sucked.

“Now. We’re getting our taxes done now,” I said, staring at Juliet. “We’re going in the darkness and banking that they’re either less powerful or incapacitated at night.”

“Hell to the yes!” Martha crowed as she un-hogtied herself and slid into the splits.

Not wanting to be left out of the celebration, Jane sat on Martha’s shoulders and shimmied. “How much darkness do we have left, Titties McTatas?”

I checked my watch. “About four hours, give or take.”

The cheers from my bizarre posse were loud. In the rabid excitement, Marco, Mark and Marky built an imaginary snowman in a glass box and then helped him escape. Vinnie was all in with his buddies and the man made of snow.

That left me and my sister.

“You going to join them, Astrid?” Juliet inquired with a smirk.

“Absolutely not,” I shot back. “You?”

“Not until Hell freezes over,” she replied.

“You have five minutes to get the ants out of your pants,” I informed the crew of dumb-dumbs.

Juliet and I sat down on the beanbag chairs next to each other and watched the hot mess of happy play out. Not one thing about any of this was perfect, but somehow the moment was perfection. I’d gotten over my fear of miming for the most part by showing respect for the silly little guys. I hadn’t ripped any body parts off of Martha or Jane. That was a win.

I was sitting next to my sister, who I had truly found some respect for. Her past was reprehensible, but I’d decided to love the sinner and not the sin. I prayed that I would be able to lead her to be better than she was. There would always be a part of Juliet that was broken, but with love and care maybe it could be mended.

And most importantly, we knew where the enemy had set up shop. Saving Ethan was becoming a reality. Now it was time to make it real.



EV ACCOUNTING SERVICES WASN'T IN THE DOWNTOWN Toledo business district. It was on the outskirts of town in a shady area filled with abandoned warehouses. The sign was legit, but that was the extent of it. The parking lot was empty and the asphalt was pitted. While the large building was rundown, I also sensed a weak and menacing magic surrounding it. The enchantment wouldn't keep me out, but I

was very curious as to what they were protecting inside. Was it possible that the energy they stole was kept in some kind of storage unit? That would certainly make saving Ethan and the others easier. I'd just steal back what they'd stolen then decapitate each and every one of them.

I reminded myself nothing in our world was that easy. However, I kept the thought forefront in my mind, even though I didn't expect it to pan out.

"Do you believe this is a real company?" Vinnie whispered as we hid in the woods a few hundred yards away.

"Not for a minute," I replied, scanning the area.

The drive over had been tight. Marco, Marky and Mark sat on the laps of Martha, Jane and Juliet. I worried for a hot sec about the seat belt situation then had an extreme internal eye roll. We were all dead. We didn't need seat belts. Old habits died hard—no pun intended.

The mimes had insisted on coming. I didn't think that was the best plan, but went with it when they showed us their weapons room and offered to share everything they had. If the mimes, as odd as they were, owned an arsenal as impressive as they did, they knew how to use it. All of my fears were quashed when Marco—with his eyes closed—decapitated a life-sized stuffed version of Barney the purple dinosaur with throwing stars. The added plus was that they provided walkie-talkies that doubled as watches. Communication would not be an issue if we had to split up. Win-win.

Of course, the beheading of Barney led to Martha and Jane singing the Barney song in the key of Z. That ended with an electrocution and me having to sing By Mennen for two minutes and twelve seconds.

"Juliet, put on the cape," I instructed.

I waved my hand and created an illusion—a glamour of sorts. It tamped back the appearance of our power while not making us less strong. If we came upon the freaks, it would give them a false sense of confidence. We'd also downed three bottles of caffeinated blood apiece.

“Is there a plan, my Princess?” Marco asked, handing me an invisible rope.

I took it. Times, they were a-changin’. “Marco, Mark and Marky, you’ll stay on the outside and secure the perimeter. If anyone shows up, you will alert me immediately.”

“Oh yes!” Mark said, pulling out a sword that was bigger than him... and what I guessed was an invisible shield.

Sucking my bottom lip into my mouth, I considered being diplomatic then punted the thought. Misunderstandings in battle were deadly. “No miming during the mission. It won’t work on the enemy. While it’s... an... umm... incredible and admirable artform, I forbid it. Weapons if necessary. I need at least one taken alive.”

“Roger that,” Marky said with a salute.

As I began walking toward the warehouse, I stopped. There could be no misunderstandings.

None.

“Juliet, I think it would be better and safer if you stayed with the mimes,” I said, not entirely sure I meant it. Being torn wasn’t going to help Ethan and could end up killing one of my friends.

Juliet slowly approached me. Her gaze bored into mine. It didn’t scare me. Quite honestly, the opposite. I silently begged her to show me her balls. There were no guarantees in life, but I needed something.

“If,” she said flatly. “And I emphasize the word *if*... If everything had been different and Ethan’s and my positions were reversed, he would want the honor of saving me.”

I shook my head. There was no way in Hell any of what she’d done in her horrifying past could even be imagined onto Ethan. Her gaze dropped. She knew as well as I did it was a weak defense.

“Not a great argument,” I said, looking around the area to make sure we weren’t being watched. “What-ifs are useless.”

She tried again. “Agreed. There’s no argument I can win. There’s nothing I can say to erase the death and destruction I’ve caused.”

“Give me a reason, Juliet,” I ground out. Time was wasting. My head and my heart were at war. The final decision was mine, but...

“I have nothing, Astrid. Pity’s not what I’m in search of,” she said then quickly held up her hand to stop me from interrupting. “I deserve nothing. No one is more aware of that than me. Solitary confinement is an insidious place to live. It will either break you or make you.” She stared at the ground for a long moment. “I can only believe that I’ve not gone over the edge into complete madness because I’m meant for something. Help me make the something be noble.”

“She’s not completely broken, LaBambas Nipplicious,” Martha whispered to me. “Just bent.”

“Martha’s usually a shit-for-brains,” Jane added under her breath. “But not today. The hooker’s onto something. Bent shit can be straightened out and fixed up. Might not look as good as before, but looks ain’t everything. Just ask Martha.”

“Fuck you, dingleberry,” Martha shot back with a chuckle and a raised middle finger. “Juliet can’t get unbent if you don’t unbend her, Astrid.”

I squinted at her. “Did you just call me by my name?”

“Fuck, my bad,” she said with a grin. “Won’t happen again, Knockers McHooternubbins.”

I rolled my eyes. I fell right into that one.

“You unbent Martha,” Jane informed me, slapping the subject of her sentence in the head. “And that old cow was dang near broken. If you can do magic like that, think what you could do with your sister.”

Martha slapped Jane back. “The smelly stankhole is right,” Martha said. “You made us better people by killing us.”

The sentence was all kinds of wrong, but the sentiment wasn’t lost on me. I didn’t technically turn them into the

undead. I'd directed Paris to do it, but in the end, it had been my call. I didn't regret it for a moment even though I wanted to dismember them most of the time.

However, right now, I wanted to hug the nasty old bats. The observations and advice had been profane as usual, but it was also right... as usual.

"Look at me," I said to Juliet.

She did.

"There's nothing I want more than to be able to respect and trust you. I want that more than I want to eat nachos and extra-hot salsa," I said slowly, realizing that was true. I really was growing as a person. I could tolerate mimes and forego my insane desire for food when needed. "And trust me, I'd happily give away all my Prada bags to crunch on a damn tortilla chip. So, I'm changing my mind. You can join me. But there's a caveat."

Juliet nodded warily and waited.

"Ethan's my life—my mate. His safety comes before mine, which means it comes before yours." I began to pace. I didn't love the conversation, but it needed to be had. Juliet wasn't owed much due to the utter devastation she'd caused, but respect included honesty—even if it was harsh. I would respect my sister enough to tell her the truth. "If you do anything that jeopardizes the mission, even accidentally, I will end you. I won't want to, but I will."

"That is more than fair," she said. "And for what it's worth, I won't jeopardize anything."

I nodded curtly. Most of me believed her. A small part of me was unable to get there. Trust took time that I didn't have. Although, things happened for a reason. The people with me were supposed to be here. In the cryptic world of the Immortals, I'd learned there was very little left to chance. The right time and the right place seemed to be par for the course. Let's hope that still held true.

"I don't feel dressed for an ass-kicking," Martha said.

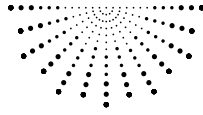
I glanced at my posse. The dummy was right. We were sporting all sorts of color. Snapping my fingers, I smiled at the result. All of us, including the boys, were now in head-to-toe black combat-wear.

We were dressed for success and success was the plan.

I eyed Martha, Jane, Vinnie and Juliet. “Stay with me unless I direct otherwise. We’re going to search the building. We don’t know if the beige shits are inside or not. My gut tells me there’s something important in there even if they’re not.”

I had no clue how true those words would turn out to be.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



WITH STEALTH THAT BELONGED ONLY TO THE UNDEAD, WE circled the building to find the entrances and exits. There was only one at the front. The words “fire hazard” came to mind as we soundlessly entered. Vinnie’s fangs had dropped in anticipation of picking the lock, but the door was open. The oversight was either stupidity, forgetfulness—which I doubted—or ego that their pathetic barrier of magic would keep people out.

We weren’t exactly people...

The interior was creepy. The walls, floors and every piece of furniture was the same beige as the skin of the Energy Vampyres. It was open in concept. Basically, one huge room with about thirty desks. On each desk was a pile of beige papers and a beige laptop.

On the far back wall was a door. That was where I wanted to be. I felt it in my undead bones.

“Just being here is making me sleepy,” Vinnie whispered as we kept close to the walls and cased the warehouse.

The little guy pilfered one of the laptops and put it under his cape. I gave him a thumbs up.

“If you get tired, I want you to leave,” I said.

He nodded, pulled a bottle of caffeinated blood from beneath his cape and downed it.

“Thirty desks could mean only thirty Energy Vamps,” Juliet pointed out, grabbing a few of the paper piles from the

desk and tucking them into her pants.

“Or they work in shifts of thirty,” I said, hoping Juliet was right and I was wrong.

“The twats come in at 7AM,” Martha whispered, armed with a grenade and throwing stars.

“How do you know that?” I asked, looking around for security cameras. There were none. I began to wonder if the Vamps even used the building. Had we screwed up and gone to the wrong place? I shook my head and reminded myself of the weak enchanted barrier. Until we knew otherwise, this was our target.

The overblown confidence of the Energy Vamps was unnerving. Was their power to trance all they needed? I didn’t spot any weapons. However, we hadn’t searched the back room yet.

“Big fuckin’ sign on the wall says arrive at 7AM or reap the consequences,” Martha said, pointing to a beige sign with darker beige lettering.

Everything was so monochromatic, I wasn’t surprised I’d missed it. I checked my watch. It was 5AM. “We have two hours. Back room. Now.”

I pressed my finger to my lips to end the chitchat. I felt an ominous tingle run through me. It was strange and didn’t bode well. It was entirely different than the feelings I’d had when we’d come upon the weird freaks in Target.

“Does anyone feel that?” I asked so quietly, my little army leaned in.

Juliet shuddered. “Yes. That door,” Juliet said, pointing to the back of the cavernous room. “Strange glow.”

I nodded and pulled a dagger from the sheath on my belt. Hopefully, the glow was the stored energy. How we’d transport energy was anyone’s guess, but I’d figure it out. “Bingo. Stay low and quiet. If the Energy Vamps are back there and they start trying to bore us into a trance, go for the tongues. If they can’t talk, they can’t mess with us.”

“How fast does a tongue grow back?” Jane asked, wielding a flame thrower.

“No fucking clue,” I said, making sure she was next to me instead of behind me. I didn’t need her setting me on fire. “If it grows back, remove it again.”

“Gnarly,” Martha said with a wide grin.

Light on our feet and faster than a human eye could follow, we headed for the back of the warehouse.

Again, the door was unlocked.

Again, that was odd.

We stood quietly as we stared at the door. My little army waited for my command. Something wasn’t right yet. In the silence, Vinnie spoke.

“I brought duct tape,” he whispered, handing out a roll to each of us.

“Why?” Juliet asked.

Vinnie winked at her. “If we can’t remove the tongues, we can dismember them then tape their mouths shut.”

“Love it,” Jane grunted. “And if they cause any more trouble, we can shove their arms up their asses.”

“Along with grenades,” Martha added, opening her cape and displaying about forty of the deadly bombs.

I swallowed my scream. Martha plus a bunch of grenades was a bloody disaster waiting to happen.

“Stick to the removal of tongues and duct taping the mouths,” I instructed. “Grenades are a last resort. I’d like to leave this place with my appendages intact.”

“Roger that,” Martha said.

We were armed and ready. Well, most of us were.

Closing my eyes, I had a vicious smackdown with my conscience. Yes, Juliet was wearing a cape that would protect her. Yes, she’d been given weapons. Yes, Martha and Jane had vowed to keep her from harm. But...

“Fuck me,” I muttered.

“You can do that?” Jane asked, impressed.

I zapped her. “No, I can’t.”

I stared at Juliet.

She stared back at me. It was like she could read my mind. She pulled a razor-sharp dagger out and sliced her palm. The bright red blood oozed from the wound and fell in droplets to the floor.

“Blood oath that I am your loyal servant,” she said, extending her hand. “I will follow your commands and fight alongside you and never make a move against you in my lifetime however long it may be.”

Vinnie gasped and clasped his hands over his non-beating heart. Martha and Jane were stunned to silence. Juliet had just made a monumental and unheard-of concession.

My shock was obvious. The oath was unbreakable and only real if it was offered, not forced. It was vastly different than a blood oath of trust between undead friends. From what I understood, the blood oath of servitude was rarely used to prove fealty anymore. Our kind had become more enlightened over time and believed it to be barbaric. It erased the free will of an individual. The gravity of what she proposed put her under my command and my whims for eternity. It was permanent.

It wasn’t a smart move on her part, but I no longer distrusted her.

Actually, it was the smartest move she could have made.

She had no way of knowing I wouldn’t play that game. I’d threatened to end her if she betrayed me within the last hour and she’d accepted. Now she wanted to make it impossible to disobey me. Juliet’s offer was sincere and tragic. Her sense of self-worth had been destroyed by our mother and carried forward to this day. My sister never stood much of a chance in this life... until now. She was stepping up to the plate.

I would never take hers or anyone's free will. Compassion was my gift. Unethical heartlessness wasn't in my wheelhouse. My sister might never earn back the respect of others who she'd harmed, but she had just earned back mine.

Pulling her away from the door and to the far side of the warehouse, I made sure we weren't near flammable objects. I didn't need to set the warehouse aflame.

"I won't make you my slave," I said flatly. "You've been at the mercy—or lack thereof—of our mother your entire life. What you offered is all I need. You showed me your balls."

"She has balls?" Martha asked.

"Metaphorical," I said. "Big ones. Everyone back up."

Juliet was astonished. "You don't have to do this."

"Yes, I do," I said, raising my arms and electrocuting her.

Eight times. I electrocuted my sister eight times. I gave her back her power. Ethan would have questioned my judgement. My people would have thought I'd finally gone and lost it.

I'd never felt more sure about anything.

Juliet waved her hands and extinguished the flames as the cut on her arm healed supernaturally fast. "I won't cross you or let you down, Astrid."

"No," I agreed, taking her in my arms and hugging her. "You won't. I'm not sure you believe in yourself, but I believe in you and second chances. Don't make me eat my words."

"You can't eat," she said with a crooked grin.

"Fine point. Well made," I replied. "Are we ready?"

"Fuck to the yes," Martha said.

"Yes! Oh yes! I am moved by the beauty of the redemption," Vinnie said, swiping away a bloody tear. "One more thing before we enter the backroom."

"What?"

He pulled my notes from the session with Paris and Juliet from his pocket. "The clues mean something that we haven't

yet discovered. I say we do a quick review.”

“The little fucker is badass,” Jane said, patting Vinnie on his bald head.

“Thank you!” Vinnie said, delighted. “Most others just think I’m weird.”

“I don’t trust any fucker who isn’t weird,” Martha told him. “The weirder the better. In fact, if I wasn’t committed to the sexy-assed Lizard, I’d definitely sit on your face.”

“I’m gonna second that,” Jane added.

Juliet gagged. I groaned at the disgusting overshare that was meant as a compliment. Vinnie looked horrified, but was as polite as ever.

“What a... umm, lovely and wildly unnecessary thing to offer,” he replied diplomatically.

“Welcome,” Jane said, slapping his little butt. “Me and Martha are gonna set you up with someone when all this shit is over. You need a hot chick like us.”

“Very kind of you, but not necessary. Ever,” Vinnie assured them. “I think we shall move on to the review.”

“Absolutely,” I agreed.

Vinnie went over the list as we listened.

Decapitation, hearing, repeating, daylight, trance, Latin, songs and worms. It didn’t make sense. Hopefully, sense would be revealed in some divine way before it was too late.

“I can’t help but think the worms are the key,” Juliet muttered as we quickly made our way back to the closed door.

I glanced around for worms. It was absurd, but nothing about any of this was ordinary. There were no worms. That was no surprise.

“I’ll go in first. Flank me and prepare to attack,” I said, staring at the eerie glow coming from beneath the door.

“You lead, we’ll fuckin’ follow, Tits LaGlobes,” Martha said.

I shook my head and smiled.

“To the bitter end,” Juliet added.

Some things, like Martha and Jane, would never change. That was good. And some things *would* change... like Juliet.

That was fucking fabulous.

“On three,” I whispered with my hand on the knob.

There was a fight ahead of us... just not the one we'd expected.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



THE FANGLSS UNDEAD WEIRDOS WERE NOT IN THE BACK room.

The room itself was almost the size of the office space we'd just left. The exterior of the building had been deceiving. It was so deathly quiet in the space it was eerie.

Martha and Jane were open mouthed but speechless. Vinnie wept silently at the hideous sight that greeted us. Juliet was horrified. I was pissed. How was this real?

The walls and the floor were beige. That was to be expected.

The rows upon rows of beige cots with Vampyres lying on them were unexpected. It was so wrong there were very few words to accurately describe it. There were two hundred of them. Their clothing was from a time long ago and they were all in stasis. They'd been tranced.

"I guess we know where they hid the warriors a thousand years ago," Juliet said, examining one of the men with intense curiosity.

They were all men—huge men. The one she was fixated on seemed to have been the leader. His clothing was more colorful than that of the others and his frame was larger. All of the Vamps were handsome, but the one who my sister stood next to was stunning even in his trance.

"Pretty sure this is the work of the Energy Vamps," I said, trying to take in the fact that these men had been out for a thousand years. "This crime is beyond the pale."

Slowly and methodically, we checked the warriors to see if there was any sign of life. Kind of an oxymoron since we were all technically dead, but it had to be done.

“All of them are out like a dang light,” Martha said, rejoining the group.

“We can’t leave them here like this,” Juliet said.

“We won’t,” I promised. “However, that’s secondary. Without the antidote, there’s little to nothing we can do for them... or Ethan.”

I mulled the situation over. With help, we could transport all of them back to the Cressida House. However, it would be incredibly tricky when they woke up. They wouldn’t recognize the world we lived in. From the stories told, the Vampyres of old were a vicious bunch. Their regard for human life didn’t exist. I’d hate to wake them up only to have to destroy them, but that would be their choice, not mine.

I refused to believe they would be like this forever. If they were, then Ethan would suffer the same fate. That was unacceptable. My fury at the fangless beige Vamps increased tenfold.

“We have about an hour give or take before the expected arrival of the fuckers,” Jane announced, checking her watch.

I quickly contacted the mimes to get them up to speed and to let them know when we thought the Energy Vamps would show up. They assured me that no one had arrived yet. That was good. What wasn’t good was that I was unsure what to do with the time on our hands.

Martha solved that issue.

“I say we practice cutting out each other’s tongues,” the idiot announced.

I winced and rolled my eyes.

“Are you brain dead?” Jane shouted. “How are we supposed to communicate with each other if we can’t talk, you asshat?”

“Shit,” Martha said, aiming her throwing star at Jane. “You got a point there, smelly ass crack. My bad.”

I was tempted to remove their tongues, but refrained. My army was small and I needed all of them.

“That’s not my bunghole crack you’re smellin’,” Jane informed her idiot cohort. “It’s your hairy upper lip.”

“Take that back, hooker,” Martha warned, tossing a handful of throwing stars at Jane.

Martha’s aim was as appalling as her vocabulary. One lodged itself in Juliet’s hand and the other into the forehead of the unconscious Vampyre next to her.

I seriously regretted letting the old bags come. Quickly electrocuting them, I walked over to inspect the damage.

“You okay?” I asked Juliet as I debated on whether to remove the weapon from the slumbering Vampyre’s head.

He’d most likely be put out that he was sporting a throwing star in his forehead, but until we found the antidote, it wasn’t a real issue. I had no intention of waking up any of the two hundred without Ethan by my side. Vampyres were still a sexist society today. I couldn’t begin to imagine how this group would view a woman in charge. There wasn’t a single female in their ranks. Ending them wasn’t in the plan unless necessary. I wasn’t going to make it necessary right now.

“I’m fine,” Juliet replied, removing the blade from her bloody palm. “It’s healing as I speak.”

“Leave him,” I said as she went to dislodge the other throwing star from the Vamp.

My sister shook her head in confusion. “I don’t think I can.”

I squinted at her. “Why?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know.”

My sister had definitely changed. I’d never seen her show compassion for anything or anyone. If she wanted to be kind, who was I to stop her?

Famous last words.

Juliet removed the throwing star with her bloodied hand. The explosion and blast of lightning that occurred rocked the room. Sleeping Vamps flew everywhere. I was knocked to the ground by the body of an enormous passed-out undead dude. Martha and Jane were buried under a pile of sleeping Vamps and Vinnie was busy digging his way out of another pile.

“What the Hell?” I grunted as I shoved the gigantic guy off of me. Had the Energy Vamps snuck up on us?

“No,” Juliet screamed.

The horrid sight before my eyes wasn't what I wanted to see. It wasn't clear what woke him, but it was not a pleasure to see him. The ancient Vamp had to be at least six-foot-five. His eyes were wild and his fangs were out. There was very little humanity to him. He was a killing machine. The bastard held my sister by the neck and was ready to snap it. I didn't understand why she didn't fight back. There was no time to ask.

I'd kill him for her.

“Let her go,” I ground out as my hands sparked dangerously, sparkling black glitter covered my arms and neck and my hair blew wildly around my head.

His eyes narrowed to slits as he examined me and calculated how much of a threat I was. His smirk of disgust made it clear that he didn't see me as an adversary.

He was so fucking wrong.

“I will repeat myself,” I snarled, letting my fangs drop and my eyes turn Demon red. “Let her go or you die.”

“What are you?” he demanded.

I winked at him. He wasn't sure what to do with that. “I'm your worst nightmare, dude.”

“What is a dude?” he roared, scanning the room. “Tell him to show himself and not let a woman fight his battles.”

“Done,” I said, wiggling my fingers and electrocuting the living Hell out of him.

As he went up in flames, Martha and Jane dove in and yanked Juliet from his grip. My sister fought them off and sprinted back to the man who’d tried to snap her neck.

“Don’t hurt him,” she begged, slapping out the fire that engulfed him.

“What the actual fuck?” Jane shouted as she dove back in and tried to pull my sister away.

It was too late. Gigantic Ass kicked them away and had Juliet in his clutches again. This time he meant business.

“I will kill the woman,” he hissed. “She dies unless you break the trance on my men.”

“Fuck you, asshole,” Martha shouted. “The woman you’re about to kill is the one who broke the trance on you.”

Gigantic Ass looked confused. “Is this true, woman?” he growled at Juliet as he shook her like a rag doll.

If he didn’t snap her neck on purpose, he was going to do it accidentally. She’d live through a broken neck, but it wasn’t going to happen while I was running the show. We had less than an hour before the next enemy showed up. I didn’t have the time or the patience for this misogynistic whack job.

“Hey you, dumbass,” I snapped. “Let her go or I’ll remove your head with my bare hands.”

He roared with laughter and tossed my sister aside. “Like you could, *woman*,” he hissed, crouching low in preparation for attack.

“I can take him,” Martha said, holding a grenade in each hand.

“Nope,” I told her. “This one is mine. Everyone, stand back. And I mean *everyone*.”

I glared at my sister, who nodded her head and followed my order. I had no clue as to why she wanted to save the

Vampyre, but I'd figure that out later. She may have gained my trust but her self-worth was clearly still in the toilet.

I turned my attention back to Gigantic Ass. "Try me, asshole," I challenged.

The enormous sexist jerk ran at me with a speed that almost made him disappear. Almost was the keyword. I dropped down to my right, extended my leg and tripped him, sending him flying into the wall. His roar of fury didn't bother me a bit. I had a whole lot more where that came from. Gigantic Ass landed on his back with a thud while swearing to tear me limb from limb.

"That's not nice," I said as I body-slammed him, pinned him and elbow-slammed his face. The crunch was glorious and his expression of shock would have been funny in a different and less life-threatening situation. "You give up?"

His blood spurted everywhere. "Never, you worthless woman," he bellowed, throwing an excellent left hook that most definitely broke my nose. "I am a man. I rule you."

"In your dreams." He was getting on my last nerve. I needed to incapacitate him enough to bind his power. Time was ticking. As he went to punch me again, I flipped him and pinned him to the floor. I snatched his arms and twisted them behind his back, pulling them out of the sockets in my fury. I dug my knees viciously into his hamstrings and heard them pop. His girly shriek was music to my ears.

"You sound like a *woman*," I whispered in his ear before I headbutted him.

It hurt like a motherfucker, but his groan of agony made the pain worth it.

"I will end you," he ground out.

"Good luck with that," I replied, getting to my feet and waiting for his next move.

He got to his feet with effort, shoved his gargantuan arms back into the sockets and came at me again. He was a glutton for punishment.

I flicked my fingers and sent him flying across the room at over a hundred miles an hour. He hit the wall so hard he should have fallen to pieces. He didn't. The asshole was one strong Vamp. I was surprised he wasn't using magic, but his ego was so large I guessed he didn't think he needed it against a *woman*. It was too bad he wasn't on my team. The idiot wouldn't give up.

Fine. I had another forty-five minutes.

He roared in rage and came at me for the next round. He was so furious it made him sloppy. It was very easy to sidestep him and gut punch him simultaneously. I hit my target. Hard.

He lay at the feet of Martha and Jane.

"Back away from him," I ordered.

They did, but it was too late. He'd grabbed a sharp dagger off of each of the gals. Gigantic Ass was now armed. Not exactly what I was hoping for.

Although, two could play that game. I pulled a katana from my belt and wielded it like a warrior. I saw the indecision in his eyes. He stupidly ignored it. I was actually impressed, but it was time to end this bullshit.

As he sprinted at me with the daggers aimed at my chest, I did an aerial cartwheel and scissor-kicked him in the head. I took him to the floor before he'd realized I'd even moved. I pierced his chest with my sword and smiled. "Do not move a fucking inch," I warned. "One little twist and you're dust. You understand, Gigantic Ass?"

He gave me a barely perceptible nod. "Who are you?"

"I'm the Chosen One."

"You lie," he hissed. "The Chosen One is not a woman."

I shook my head. "You have a really bad attitude. I don't like people with bad attitudes."

Juliet approached and stood about three feet away. "Don't kill him, Astrid. Please."

“Why?” I demanded, not letting my gaze leave my prisoner. “He tried to kill you and he tried to kill me. The beige fuckers will be here shortly and I don’t have time to deal with a psychotic loser.”

“The beige ones,” he muttered. “Where are they?”

“Arriving shortly,” I said. “And you’re fucking with my chi.”

He glared at me. “I didn’t understand a word of that. I demand you let me up. Wake my people immediately and leave. This is my battle. You are in my way.”

I laughed. “You’re delusional, buddy. This is not your battle. It’s mine. You tell me what made you wake up and I might not destroy you. I’m making the rules. You’re simply playing by them.”

Gigantic Ass wanted to kill me so badly, but if he moved even a centimeter, he was dust. Literally. He stayed still. He wasn’t as dumb as he looked.

“I do not know,” he ground out. “If it happened it was meant to be. You are a fool to disobey me. I will end you and when I do, it will not be pleasant.”

“Oh my God,” I said with an eye roll. “One, you have a sword in your heart. Two, if you annoy me anymore, I’ll twist it and laugh as you turn to dust. Get it through your thick and seriously fat head that you’re *not* in charge. It’s the twenty-first century, asshole. A lot has changed.”

He was stunned to silence. “How long? How long have I been out?”

I raised a brow. “A thousand years. You’ve been tranced for a thousand years. I’m sorry.”

Gigantic Ass closed his eyes for a moment. “And the rest of my men? Can you wake them?”

I shook my head. “Not now. I’m gonna go out on a limb and guess that they’re assholes like you. I don’t have time to kill that many people.”

“Like you could,” he muttered.

I leaned in close. “Listen to me,” I said so calmly, he looked alarmed. “I don’t like you. I feel compassion for your circumstances, but I will end you in a blink of an eye if necessary. I have ended Trolls, Wraiths and Demons to name a few. Ending a Vamp is easy. My name is Astrid Porter. I *am* the Chosen One and you’d better accept it fast. My mate, the Prince of the North American Dominion, has been tranced by the beige bastards and I need the antidote. After that, I will singlehandedly kill each and every one of the Energy Vamps. If you’d like to volunteer yourself as a practice asshole for me to kill, be my guest. You want to live until tomorrow? Tell me all you know about the beige ones.”

“My Princess,” Vinnie said. “It seems to me that Juliet’s blood awakened the beast. Shall we try it on another?”

Vinnie’s observation was the only one that made sense. If Juliet’s blood could break the trance, we didn’t need the Energy Vamps. I could wait until they arrived then do a mass decapitation. We could transport the warrior Vamps back to the Cressida House and wake them in a controlled environment. The explosions and lightning could be an issue, but if it solved the bigger problem, it would be a win.

“Try it with one,” I instructed. “Be prepared to behead him if he freaks out like Gigantic Ass. No mercy will be shown. Am I clear?”

Gigantic Ass growled, but with a sword piercing his heart there wasn’t much he could do about it. I didn’t like the thought of sacrificing someone at all. But the lives of hundreds were on the line and I couldn’t think of anything else.

“As you wish,” Vinnie said, leading Juliet, Martha and Jane to one of the passed-out men.

“Move him into my sightline,” I said, keeping my gaze on the idiot I had pinned to the floor. If I could see him, I’d be able to bind the newly awoken Vampyre’s power if necessary while still keeping Gigantic Ass at my mercy.

Quickly and quietly, my posse did as I’d instructed. Juliet made a deep cut in her hand and Jane sliced the forehead of the Vampyre. My sister placed her hand on his head and

waited. Gigantic Ass didn't like what was happening. I didn't care.

"Nothing," Juliet said.

"Try another," I insisted, deflated that it didn't work. My hopes of Juliet's blood breaking the trance were not looking good.

They tried three more to the same result.

"I don't get it," I muttered.

"I think I do," Vinnie said. "It's unnecessary to get into it right now. No time and not pertinent. Grill the prisoner. We have a little less than a half hour before the beige enemies return. We must know more. The puzzle is incomplete."

My lovely and strange little friend was correct. The puzzle wasn't just incomplete, it was a fucking mess.

"How many Energy Vamps did you battle a thousand years ago?" I asked.

"Twenty," he replied.

"Twenty of those bastards took out two hundred of you?" I asked, unable to believe it.

"Yes," he ground out.

"How did the others get away?" I asked. "The ones who survived?"

"There were survivors?" he asked.

"Yes, from the stories I've been told, a hundred survived and two hundred succumbed."

The man was silent as he took that in. "Are you truly going to save my men if you get the antidote?"

I didn't pause. I didn't miss a beat. "I am. I give you my word. What was done to you was wrong. It will be undone. However, all of you are going to have to swear fealty to me and my mate. We can start with you. Now."

Swearing fealty in the Vampyre world was as serious as it got. His expression was pained. Gigantic Ass was clearly

aware of what it meant.

“You’re a woman,” he snapped.

“Correct. You have one minute,” I snapped right back.

“And if I don’t?” he asked with ire in his expression.

I shrugged. “You die. I don’t have time for this shit. My mate’s life is far more important than yours.”

He didn’t respond as he seemed to ponder my words.

“Thirty seconds.”

More silence.

“Ten seconds,” I said.

Finally, he nodded on a grimace. “I swear my fealty to you, Chosen One.”

“If you break your word, your end will be terrifying,” I said calmly. “My uncle is Satan and he doesn’t suffer fools. He also owes me.”

“Are you serious?” he asked, paling considerably.

“As a fucking heart attack,” I assured him and let my eyes burn Demon red to make my point.

I watched as emotions raced across his handsome face. He wasn’t sure what to think. To be fair, it was a lot to take in. Juliet walked over and stood next to me. His gaze flicked to hers and he seemed to calm. I was relieved he didn’t want to kill her anymore.

“Trust my sister,” she said. “The Chosen One will show compassion even to those undeserving.”

After a long moment, the Vampyre spoke. “I wasn’t aware that anyone survived, but it had to have been the ones who chanted to the heavens in prayer.”

“Songs,” Vinnie said with excitement. “In Latin?”

“Yes,” Gigantic Ass confirmed.

I nodded. “What’s your name?” I was getting tired of calling him Gigantic Ass.

“Why does it matter?” he hissed.

I smiled. It was humorless. “Because I like to know who I kill. I keep a notebook.”

The man’s brow raised. I wasn’t sure if he was impressed or thought I was batshit nuts. “Rhys. My name is Rhys.”

“I’d say it’s nice to meet you, Rhys, but it’s not. What else can you tell me?”

“If you remove the silver from my chest, I can sniff around,” he replied.

“Do I look like I was born yesterday?” I asked.

“I have a gift,” he said flatly. “If you want me to use it, I need to search the area.”

“Your gift is super-smelling?” I inquired with sarcasm dripping off each word.

“Scents tell me stories. They show me pictures,” he said. “Take it or leave it, Chosen One. I do not care. This isn’t a world in which I wish to live.”

I glanced over at Juliet and Vinnie. They were both older than dirt “Has anyone heard of this gift?”

“I have,” Vinnie said. “Very rare indeed if Rhys tells the truth.”

“Twenty minutes,” Jane said, checking her watch. “I say we let Hottie McViolentAss sniff around. We ain’t got much to lose at this point. And if he pulls a fast one, we off his pretty ass.”

“If you so much as look at someone wrong, it will be the last thing you do,” I warned as I slowly and carefully slid the sword out of his chest. “I was going easy on you a little while ago. I’m not as inclined to be as nice the next time. Do you understand me?”

“I do,” Rhys replied coolly.

“I’m going to electrocute you and bind your power. If you retaliate, I’ll lop off your head.”

“You can do that?” he asked in disbelief.

“I can and I will,” I replied. “It’s reversible, but that part will depend on you.”

“How?” he demanded.

“You follow the rules, you win back your power. You don’t... bye-bye head.”

“You will save my men?” he asked again.

“I said I would and I don’t lie,” I shot back.

“Wait,” Juliet said. “Won’t binding his powers make his ability to see scent pictures go away?”

I eyeballed the mammoth man. “I can’t let him walk around at full capacity.”

“Your worry is needless,” Rhys said. “I had my gift before my undeath.”

I narrowed my gaze on him. “Good. Do you agree to the binding, then?”

“Do it,” he ground out.

I electrocuted Rhys the Gigantic Ass eight times. I heard Juliet whimper. I ignored it. The Vamp took the zaps with no emotion. He really was a badass.

“Test it,” I said.

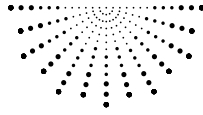
He raised his hands and tried to blow out the back wall. To his complete shock, he couldn’t.

Win-win.

“Start sniffin’, big boy,” I said.

He did.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



WE FOLLOWED RHYS BACK TO THE ROOM WITH THE DESKS AND computers. He paced the area like a bloodhound. I was on his ass. I didn't think he'd make a run for it since his men were still here and he had no power, but I wasn't taking chances. We were running out of time and still had no clue what to do to defeat the Energy Vamps and retrieve the antidote.

“What is this place?” Rhys inquired, examining a computer with curiosity.

“It's an accounting firm,” I told him.

The Vampyre looked at me blankly. It didn't compute.

“It's a business that deals with money—other people's money,” I explained. “When people make money in this century, they pay what's called taxes. Taxes pay for schools and roads and programs that make the world a better place for all people.”

“Humans?” he asked, shocked.

“Yep,” I said. “Humans are not just for dinner anymore.”

“My God, what has happened in my absence?” he muttered. “The world has gone to Hell.”

“Wrong,” I told the pompous and elitist ass. “We're enlightened. There's no need to kill to eat. It's punishable by death, just so you know. We live a very secret life in public. The times of being hunted down, staked and decapitated are over, dude.”

He looked genuinely shocked. “And all are in accordance with this unfathomable directive?”

I laughed. “Not by a long shot. However, if they want to exist in this time period, they have to obey the rules.”

“Or?” he asked.

“Or they can live six feet under with the earthworms,” I replied flatly. “So back to the original question. The Energy Vampires are accountants. Boring job for boring people.”

“Yes, seems quite tedious.” He sniffed the air. “There are thirty.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

The enormous jerk rolled his eyes. “I am. They have clearly procreated in the last thousand years.”

“Seems like there’d be more than thirty,” I said.

He rolled his eyes again. The Vamp was a damned good eye roller. He pinned me with his gaze and raised a brow. “Have you ever witnessed a Vampyre perform asexual reproduction?”

My stomach roiled. The need to puke was real, but the ability wasn’t there. It was one thing to know asexual reproduction was normal in the plant and animal world. It was altogether another to imagine the fangless freaks doing it. “I’m thrilled to be able to say no to that,” I replied. “Have you?”

He shook his head. “Not personally, but it’s known to take over a hundred years for success. Only one can reproduce at a time and is guarded by the others during the century-long gestation period. It makes perfect sense that there are now thirty. They’re similar to many annelid worms except for the timeframe of reproduction.”

“Worms,” Martha yelled. “The fucking worms keep popping their little slimy heads up.”

She was right. Worms were definitely connected. I just didn’t know how... yet.

Also, I was wildly curious about the unappetizing process and wanted to learn more, but that was for another time. Curiosity killed the cat. I wasn't about to let it kill any of us. My relief that there weren't thousands of the mind-bendingly boring Vamps was huge.

"What else do you smell?" I asked.

Rhys opened a drawer of one of the desks and held up a set of what looked like fat, orange nipples. He squished them between his fingers. "Strange. What are these?"

"Earplugs," Vinnie said, examining them. "Used."

"Gross," I muttered. "Do you think they wear them so they don't put each other into a trance?"

"Possibly," Vinnie said, a bit confused by the discovery.

"I find it unusual that there are no weapons," Rhys said, searching drawers.

"I don't think they need physical weapons," I said, joining him.

There were earplugs in all the desks.

"Destroy them," Juliet said. "There were clues about hearing and clues about songs. While bizarre, it sounds like they might be averse to music. It's possible that they need to protect their hearing. I think the earplugs are weapons... weapons of defense."

"Genius," I said. Rhys had told us he thought the Vamps who had survived a thousand years ago had been chanting to the heavens. That was as close to singing as one could get. "Pile all of the earplugs over here. Now."

My now slightly larger army raced to each desk and retrieved the earplugs. When we were sure we'd found all of them, I snapped my fingers and incinerated them.

"Ten minutes," Jane announced.

I never in my life thought I would make the request I was about to make, but when one was desperate, one went for it. "Jane and Martha, I want you in the supply closets. Jane, go to

the one on the right side of the room. Martha, go to the left. On my command, you'll sing like you've never sung before."

"Roger that," Jane said, puffing her saggy chest out in pride. "You have any requests, Jugs McHonkerBoobs?"

I grinned. As much as the names they called me made me want to set them on fire, I was growing fond of the horrifying monikers. My growth as a person was getting entirely out of control. As soon as this was over and we won—which we would—I was going on a shopping spree that would remind me of my fabulously materialistic ways. One could never have too much Prada. And speaking of Prada... "In honor of Uncle Fucker, who helped out in his own cryptic way, I'd like to request a Journey medley."

Both of the old bags cackled with glee and gave me a lewd shimmy and a thumbs up. Rhys seemed perturbed by the old gals, but smartly didn't comment. I smiled. They were disasters, but they were my disasters.

"Vinnie, do you have any more blood on you?" I asked. We needed the extra caffeine hit and Rhys had to be starving. The Vamp hadn't eaten in a thousand years.

"But of course," he replied, pulling bottles out of the pockets of his cape and quickly handing them out.

"What is this?" Rhys asked, confused.

"Bottled blood," Juliet told him, avoiding eye contact. She removed the cap and handed it back to him. "Drink it."

"What is your name, woman?" he demanded of Juliet.

She eyed the rude beast for a long moment. The air between them literally crackled with energy. I was terrified he was going to shake her again. I stepped in quickly before the crackle turned into an explosion.

My sister held up her hand to let me know she had it under control. "None of your concern, asshole," she told him. "Not today. Not tomorrow. Not ever."

My eyes grew wide and I held back my laugh. Old Rhys was shocked. He didn't like that one bit. It was obvious he

wasn't used to being denied much.

"Drink the blood," I advised him. "A mannerless idiot like you can't win an argument with a badass woman. Not today. Not tomorrow. Not ever."

I winked at my sister. She winked back.

The Vamp wasn't pleased by being bested by *women*, but took a swig and almost choked. "Appalling. Is this what Vampyres drink in the twenty-first century?"

"Kind of," I said, chugging back my own bottle and wincing. "This is one of the stronger flavors. It has a substance called caffeine in it that will help us stay awake."

Rhys gagged and nodded. "I demand another bottle of the putrid liquid. Immediately."

My lips compressed and I decided not to zap him. The fact that he hadn't tried to kill anyone or escape was going to have to be enough. Teaching the asshole manners was going to take more time than we had.

Vinnie, the sweetheart that he was, ignored the shitty ask and gave Rhys two more bottles.

"What is the war plan?" Rhys inquired, doing his best not to gag from the blood.

"We're winging it," I replied.

He glared at me like I was crazy. He wasn't wrong. "That is absurd."

"You have any ideas?" I shot back. I wasn't an egomaniac. If he had a better idea, then I'd go for it.

"Of course," he replied.

"Let's hear it."

"There are thirty of them and six of us," he began in a booming voice that he'd clearly used in the past to display his authority. He paced the room like a general going into battle. His demeanor was impressive. His idea? No so much.

"Correct," I said.

Rhys continued in a commanding tone. “That’s five beige devils apiece. We camouflage ourselves and attack when they are least suspecting it. I’d suggest immediate removal of the head followed by the ripping out of the innards. For good measure, we will shove the entrails into the mouths of the decapitated heads. After that is complete, we move onto the removal of appendages, which will be used flog the enemy. Peeling the skin off would show we mean business. If anyone is squeamish about this, I will happily skin all of the bastards. And of course, the mission will end in a bonfire of the rubbish. It would also be wise to detonate the building after the removal of my men. The plan is outstanding. I’d suggest you use it.”

Vinnie gulped and sat down at a desk. Juliet winced in horror and sat down next to Vinnie.

“Holy shit balls,” Martha muttered. “And I thought Jane was violent.”

“Word,” Jane agreed, a little green around the gills.

“The plan sucks and we’re not using it,” I said in a brook-no-bullshit tone.

“Because you are weak?” Rhys said condescendingly.

“Nope,” I said. “Because I’m not stupid. What we’re after is the antidote, jackass. If we end them before we have it then all is lost. Also, I have to say, you have some real pent-up anger issues.”

“Thank you,” he said.

“Wasn’t a compliment,” I told him.

He didn’t get it. I didn’t think he would. Whatever. We had seven minutes.

“If they start talking, which they will, remove their tongues,” I said, overriding the plan of absolute torture Rhys had volunteered. “If the tongues grow back quickly, rip off their arms and duct tape their mouths shut. If you have to kill, do it, but I need a few alive. Period.”

“Where are these ducks made of tape?” Rhys asked.

I shook my head and nodded to Vinnie. Vinnie stood up and handed Rhys a roll of duct tape.

“And what exactly am I supposed to do with this?” he bellowed in frustration, staring at the roll in his huge hand.

Juliet jumped up and demonstrated how to pull off a piece. She slapped it over his mouth then crossed her arms over her chest. “That’s what you do with it after you remove their appendages.”

Rhys ripped the tape off of his mouth and winced as it pulled out his five o’clock shadow. “I see,” he said. “Vicious.”

“Two minutes,” Martha said.

“Everyone conceal themselves,” I ordered. “We move on my word.”

“What is the word?” Rhys asked, grabbing Juliet, tossing her behind a tower of copy machines and joining her.

He was a really literal guy. But in his defense, he’d been passed out for centuries.

“Worm,” I said. “The word is worm.”

Everyone took their places. I sent a prayer up to Heaven and even one down to Hell. I needed some divine intervention. Worm was the key. My gut told me so. Now I just needed the metaphorical door to shove the key into. Whatever was behind the door was the answer.

I pictured Ethan’s beautiful face in my head as I took my place behind a beige filing cabinet. “I won’t let you down,” I whispered. “I promise.”

I always kept my promises. I wasn’t going to change that. Not today. Not tomorrow. Not ever.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



TWO MINUTES AND COUNTING.

“Melons LaKnockerNips,” Martha whispered from the supply closet next to where I hid. “Wanna hear a joke?”

I shushed her. She just kept going.

“Did you hear about the Zombie CPA?” she asked. “That fucker charges an arm and a leg.”

I smiled. A little bit of levity was not a bad thing.

“If you touch my ass again, I’ll remove your hand and shove it down your throat,” Juliet hissed.

“Most women beg me to touch them,” Rhys informed her haughtily.

“I am *not* most women,” she snarled.

I was pretty sure I knew why Juliet didn’t want me to end Rhys even if she hadn’t figured it out yet. That situation was a massive shitshow waiting to unfold. If they were each other’s True Mates it was going to end badly. Thankfully, not my problem.

“Quiet,” I called out. “One minute.”

If I had breath to hold, I would have held it. I didn’t, so I just waited. My mind raced. If we could dismember all of them and duct tape their mouths shut, they might be willing to negotiate. If not, I’d have to start picking them off in order to let them know I meant business. Ethan’s life was on the line along with a whole lot of others. I was not fucking around.

I checked my watch. It was showtime.

At 7AM sharp in a blast of dirty tan mist, they arrived—all thirty of them. They were indiscernible from each other. It was like they'd cloned themselves. Each wore horn-rimmed glasses and unisex oatmeal-colored suits. Their skin matched their attire and if I closed my eyes, I would have had a difficult time describing them.

It wasn't surprising that the Energy Vampyres were punctual. After a bizarre greeting ritual that consisted of fist bumping, awkward hugs and bowing, they scurried to their desks and seated themselves.

One Energy Vamp slowly walked the room and checked the work as the others typed away on their computers. I wondered if they were truly accountants. It didn't matter what they were. After I got the antidote, they were dead.

"I, your Grand Poobah, have an announcement," the pacing beige Vamp announced in a monotone that made me feel a little woozy.

I pinched my arm to stay awake. Getting covered in bruises was a small price to pay to save Ethan.

Of course, the leader was called the Grand Poobah. I wondered briefly if the idiot had ever seen the Gilbert and Sullivan Operetta, *The Mikado*, then decided he hadn't. The title was actually a joke. It was a mocking term for a self-important dumbass with an important title but little to no authority.

"But first we must discuss the weather, the stock market and the precise coordinates of the Battle of the Bulge," one of the thirty called out.

Oh my God. I pinched myself again. Couldn't get more mind-numbing than the coordinates of a battle.

"Earplugs!" Grand Poobah said.

The Vamps opened their desk drawers and began to flap their hands in distress.

"The earplugs are missing," a Vamp shrieked.

The Grand Poobah took off his or her glasses and began to cry. The tears were as brownish-yellow as the Vamp's skin. The others followed suit and sobbed with their boring bigwig. It was so pathetic, I kind of felt sorry for them.

That didn't last long.

"A human must have broken in. The barrier must be reinforced. More energy is needed," the Grand Poobah hissed, pulling his unexciting shit together. "We will punish the humans like we punished the Vampyres for ignoring us!"

The unhinged giggles and cheering were unsettling. Several stood up and did embarrassing version of the Running Man. I wasn't sure why they thought they'd been ignored, but legitimizing insanity wasn't on the agenda.

The chant that started softly and grew in volume was disgusting. "Suck them dry. Suck them dry. Suck them dry," they shouted.

They could suck my metaphorical dick. What was wrong with these people?

"Make appointments with humans—hundreds of them. Tell them we're giving discounts on tax preparation," the leader ordered, laughing manically. "We shall sip on the vitality of the mortal animal to mete out discipline. No one dares to breach the compound of the greatest undead beings alive!"

One bold, beige weirdo raised a hand. "But it seems wrong to punish those who have not committed crimes."

The chattering ceased abruptly. All eyes were on the one who dared to talk back to the Grand Piece of Poo.

"What did you say, Jerry?" the Grand Ass demanded.

Jerry stood up and adjusted his glasses. The man cleared his throat four times before he spoke. "We have lost sight of the goal. Humans are not inherently evil. We must keep that in mind."

Point for Jerry.

“We want to rule the undead world. Killing humans isn’t the way to do it. We must end the bloodsucking Vampyre race. We have accomplished so much. We must stay on track. All we need is the energy from the Chosen One and we shall break the North American Dominion. Her demise is our victory. We will add her to the trash pile of cretins in the back room. From there we move on to Europe.”

Jerry lost the point. Jerry would die first.

The Grand Poobah paced in tight circles and ground his teeth. The others copied him. The sound of thirty sets of teeth grinding was like nails on a chalkboard. It went on for a good five minutes.

“Jerry has made a fine point. We shall not eat him,” the Grand Poobah announced.

I winced. They ate each other? Wiping them off the planet would be no loss whatsoever.

“Do we have the details on the one who believes she is the Chosen One?” Poopface questioned.

The Vamps went back to work at their computers and began typing furiously.

“She is vain,” one yelled.

“Materialistic,” another yelled.

“Furious that she can no longer eat food,” a third announced. “We can trap her with a feast then suck her dry!”

“The false profit loves Target and goes often,” Jerry said.

“She is part Demon,” the Grand Poobah snarled. “Demons are the scourge of society. The woman is a freak of nature. She must be ended!”

Seriously? They thought I was a freak of nature? Plus, reducing me to my worst habits was bullshit. These people were jerks on top of being assholes.

“We must find her and destroy her. Does anyone happen to know where she is?” the Grand Poobah asked.

I knew how to make an entrance. With an intro like that, I'd be a fool to waste it. I was many things—not all of them good—but I wasn't a fool.

“Worm,” I shouted as I stepped out from behind the filing cabinet. “Was someone looking for me?”

The shrieks were loud. The Grand Poohbah jumped so high I would have thought someone had shoved a hot poker up the Vamp's ass. I laughed. It was impossible not to. This only served to infuriate the assholes.

Vinnie came barreling out of his hidey-hole wielding two massive swords. He went for tongues with a vengeance. Martha and Jane warbled “Who's Cryin' Now” in the key of W at the top of their lungs. Juliet didn't bother with tongues at all and went right to pulling arms off and duct taping mouths. Marco, Marky and Mark burst through the front door bellowing like they were extras in the big battle scene from the film *Braveheart*. For mimes, the little guys were loud. Not to mention they fought like deranged madmen.

But the kicker was Rhys. I'd thought my entrance was good... I was so wrong.

“I will kill you bastards,” Rhys bellowed so loudly the entire building shook with his wrath.

Without missing a beat, the raging Vamp lopped off the heads of ten of the cowering weirdos. Thankfully, he decapitated Jerry. Saved me a beheading.

“I need some alive,” I shouted over the screaming and the singing. “If you kill all of them, your ass is grass.”

“I shall obey the orders,” Rhys bellowed. “I just needed to take the edge off. My mistake.”

The Energy Vamps were terrified to see the warrior they'd tranced a thousand years ago. The chaos was insane.

However, once they'd assessed the situation, they went to work. One by one, the fangless freaks who still had the ability to make sound began to speak in a monotone about bunions, glue, opossums and all sorts of other mundane crap. It was almost paralyzing.

“Pick another song,” I yelled to Martha and Jane. “That one isn’t working.”

“Wheels in the Sky” was next in the medley. The Energy Vamps held their ears when the gals got to the chorus, but they kept expounding on tedious topics.

I wanted the Grand Poobah. If anyone knew the antidote, it was him. Trying to block out the repetitive monotony was difficult. I found myself unsteady on my feet as I shoved the talking heads out of my way and went for my goal.

Marco had succumbed and was passed out on the floor. Marky was barely holding on. I was now aware of the ingredients in glue and most of the colors of the crayons in the supersized crayon box. My limbs were sluggish and I felt like I was swimming through quicksand.

“Change songs,” I insisted.

Thankfully, Martha and Jane, while now on their bony knees and hanging on for dear life, were not tranced yet.

“To what?” Jane cried out.

For the life of me I couldn’t think of a single title of a song... except for the ones that had been stuck in my fucking head. “It’s a Small World,” I choked out as my vision began to grow blurry.

In the periphery, I saw Juliet go down. Rhys about lost his mind over that and a few more Energy Vamps lost their heads. Literally.

Vinnie was still cutting out tongues and Mark was by his side. They were still standing, but it wasn’t looking good for Team Astrid.

Until it was...

Martha and Jane couldn’t recall any part of the song other than “It’s a small world after all.” They repeated the phrase over and over. The Energy Vamps began to spasm uncontrollably. With every off-key repetitive note, the fangless enemy twitched and shuddered with convulsions.

The solution hit me like a ton of bricks in the face.

Vermis hadn't been about flat worms, round worms, or earth worms. It had been about the kind of worms that get stuck in your brain.

I could've kicked myself. The answer had been right in front of us the entire time. It was earworms. Earworms were the way to defeat them.

"Keep singing the same phrase," I ordered the gals. "Earworms are the key."

I joined them. The louder I sang the words "it's a small world after all", the more paranoid and skitzed out the fangless Vamps grew. Their seizures were difficult to observe, but far easier than seeing Ethan in a trance. Play stupid games. Win stupid prizes.

The clues finally made sense... and not a minute too soon. The Energy Vamps could barely function. It was a beautiful sight—until they started exploding.

"Dammit," I said, wiping the guts of a beige freak off of my face. Looking around, I saw that Rhys, Vinnie, Mark, Jane and Martha were still conscious. "Tape their mouths. NOW."

We were all sluggish, but as determined as we could be. I kept singing until I knew we were safe. One by one, we muted the enemy. There were only fifteen alive. Rhys had been pretty busy, but thankfully hadn't offed all of them.

"Shit," I said as another beige Vamp exploded. "Fourteen." It didn't matter. All I needed was one.

"It's a small world after all. It's a small world after all," Jane sang as she grew stronger now that the Energy Vamps could no longer suck us dry. "It's a small world, motherfucker, it's a small fucking, small fucking world. MOTHERFUCKER."

"Who let the dogs out? Who, who, who?" Martha sang. "I did, motherfuckers. That's who."

Jane was on a roll and wasn't done by a long shot. "I like to move it, move it. I like to move it, move it. That's right, sphincter holes. I like to MOVE IT!"

Another Energy Vampyre exploded. At this rate there would be no one left to interrogate. I held up my hand. “Enough.”

The earworms were stuck in my head, but I had the antidote. The Energy Vamps were still seizing violently even though we were no longer singing. The Grand Poobah was writhing in agony. I felt nothing. I’d stopped them from trancing us, but I still didn’t have what I wanted and needed. I had no plans to leave without it.

I watched dispassionately as the Grand Piece of Shit jerked and contorted. He needed the cure... I threw my head back and laughed. My small band of loyal warriors who were still awake thought I’d lost it. They were wrong. I’d found it.

“Vinnie and Mark, tend to Juliet, Marco and Marky,” I instructed. “Martha, Jane and Rhys, remove the arms and pile up the fangless fuckers except for that one.” I pointed to the leader.

The Grand Poobah’s eyes grew huge and the Vamp tried to crawl away. I stepped on the pathetic excuse for a Vampyre’s oatmeal-colored jacket and stopped the convulsing leader.

“You’re not going anywhere, Grand Jackass,” I said with a cold smile that scared the Hell out of the freak. “We’re going to have a little chat.”

I handed Grand Piece of crap a pad of beige paper and a pen. I wasn’t going to risk being bored into a trance. I was now in charge.

“Pile of armless thrashing turds assembled,” Martha told me.

“Thank you,” I said, then turned my attention back to the shuddering idiot at my feet. I pulled up a beige chair and made myself comfortable. “What’s your real name, Grand Piece of Poo?”

He shakily jotted down his answer and handed it to me.

“Newton,” I said, looking at the paper. “Fitting. So, Newton, I have something that you want and you have

something that I want. Would you like to exchange information, *Newton*?”

He began to write furiously on the pad of paper, but his seizures prevented it from being legible.

Not a problem.

“Rhys,” I said. “In a moment, remove the tape from Newton’s mouth. Martha and Jane, stand over him and be prepared to sing.”

“Sing what?” Jane asked.

“Baby Shark,” I replied. “Just the chorus.”

“Roger that,” Martha said with a wide grin.

“Rhys, if Newton utters anything other than the answers to my questions, you are free to lop off his beige head.”

Rhys’ smile was terrifying. “Nothing... and I mean, *nothing* would give me greater pleasure, Chosen One.”

Rhys was a hot mess of violence and fury, but he’d stayed true to his oath of loyalty. Plus, I didn’t blame him. Being tranced for a thousand years was criminal. He’d proven his fealty to me. It was time to show him the respect of trusting him.

I extended my hand to the enormous Vampyre warrior. Instead of taking it, he dropped to his knee and bowed his head. The pomp and circumstance were a little over the top, but his respect was obvious even though I was *only* a woman.

“Rise. I’m going to unbind your power,” I told him as he stood back up. “It will be the same process as when I bound it.”

He nodded and stood as still as a statue. I wasted no time. I electrocuted the Vampyre eight times. He took it stoically and didn’t make a sound.

“Test it,” I told him.

“On what?” he asked.

I glanced around. “Which one of those Vamps tranced my sister?”

“The dead one over there,” he replied, pointing to a pile of limbs minus a head.

“Mmmkay,” I said, going in a different direction. “Incinerate the sign on the wall.”

Rhys nodded curtly, raised his arms and slashed them down to his sides. Not only did he destroy the sign, but the entire side of the building fell in an impressive and out-of-control display of aggression.

“Thank you,” Rhys said. “That was cathartic.”

“Welcome. Are we ready?”

“Hell to the yes,” Martha said, making a shark fin with her hand and wiggling it over her head.

I eyed Newton. He wasn’t doing well. “Let the negotiations begin.”

If he didn’t play ball, he would regret it. I had quite a few earworms up my sleeves.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



RHYS RIPPED THE TAPE FROM NEWTON'S LIPS, AND HE HAD not been gentle. That was expected. The ancient Vamp warrior wasn't a real gentle kind of guy. Newton's bravado was unexpected and wildly shortsighted. He'd immediately launched into the nuances of being stuck in traffic and fine distinctions of what happens in the brain while standing in a long line in the hot sun.

It took three rounds of Baby Shark and the explosive demise of several more Energy Vamps to make Newton understand he wasn't going to win. While it was strange to find humor at a time like this, Rhys' effusive admiration of the Baby Shark song made me laugh so hard, bloody tears ran down my cheeks.

"How do I reverse the trance?" I demanded.

"You can't," Newton spat, still contorting from the earworms stuck in his head.

"Not the right answer," I said as I zapped him.

"It's the truth," he screamed. "You can't."

I ran my hands through my hair in frustration and got grossed out when I realized I was wearing Vamp guts. With a snap of my fingers, I removed the goop and cleaned myself up. My vanity was showing. I didn't care. While I did indeed have shitty qualities, I had outstanding ones as well. Defending those I loved was at the top of the list. I wasn't giving up until I had the antidote.

“If the answer doesn’t satisfy, change the question,” Vinnie said.

“Or slide bamboo shoots underneath the enemy’s fingernails while peeling the skin from the right side of the body,” Rhys suggested.

Rhys was going to be an issue. Fitting the man into polite and law-abiding society would be a challenge, but I needed to deal with Newton first. Vinnie for the win this time.

“Why are you stealing energy?”

“To wipe out the bloodsuckers,” Newton ground out.

“Why?” I repeated.

“Because they show us no respect,” he snarled.

I stared at him. He held his beige chin high and stared right back at me. Uncle Fucker’s words were lodged in my frontal lobe. I wanted to ignore them, but as hard as I tried, I couldn’t.

“Find something you respect about even the basest individual,” he had advised. *“If you do, you will lead them to become better than who they are.”*

“Not possible,” I muttered to myself, pressing the bridge of my nose. I’d gotten so close to the goal and now it seemed lifetimes away.

“What are you talkin’ about, Tits McGhee?” Martha asked. “Lemme help you out.”

“Martha’s got a good idea for once,” Jane added. “I know people don’t think we’re real smart since we’re so fuckin’ sexy, but we’ve been around the block a few times—especially Martha.”

I glanced at the nutjobs. Having deep and meaningful conversations with numbskulls who wore booty shorts and sequined tube tops wasn’t my normal go-to in a crisis, but this was far more than a crisis.

“I need to find something about Newton to admire.”

“Holy fuck,” Jane said, scratching her sparsely haired head. “Tall order.”

Martha smacked Jane. “No one thought we would win *American Idol*—said it was impossible.”

Vinnie was shocked. He’d heard them sing. “You won *American Idol*?”

“In Zanthia,” I explained. “Fairies are tone deaf.”

“Don’t matter,” Martha announced with pride. “We won!”

She was correct. They had done the impossible. It had been an incredibly terrifying event to watch and listen to, but they’d done it. If Martha and Jane could do it, I could do it too. Maybe if I got to know Newton, I could find something that wasn’t repulsive about the man.

I had to.

“What’s your favorite color?” I asked the fangless Vamp.

“Tan,” he replied, confused by the new line of interrogation.

I was a little confused as well, but I had to start somewhere.

“Do you have a mate?”

“I am my mate,” Newton replied.

“Mmkay,” I said, trying not to wince. “How have the Vampyres disrespected you?”

Newton’s pale beige face turned blood red with fury and spittle flew from his lips as he snarled at me. “A blood drinker damned us to this hell.”

“Explain,” I said, feeling very left of center. “Who damned you?”

“Why do you care?” Newton shrieked.

“I don’t,” I snapped. “But I’m trying to and you’re making it really difficult.”

“Sekhmet,” he finally answered woodenly. “Sekhmet damned us.”

I squinted at him. “Who the hell is Sekhmet?”

“She’s a myth,” Rhys scoffed. “A story. She never existed.”

“NO, not a myth,” Newton bellowed as he spasmed violently. “She lived and harmed for thousands of years. I am the product of her insanity. I am a freak. A joke. And I will make you pay.”

I tamped back the absurd desire to comfort the irate man. He might have been harmed by a woman I’d never heard of, but the devastation he’d wrought on people who’d had nothing to do with it was heinous.

I turned to Rhys. “Tell me the myth of Sekhmet.”

He nodded respectfully. “The folklore is that she’s the oldest of the Vampyres—a warrior goddess in ancient Egypt. She was a feline monster sent by her father to slaughter mankind for disobedience. As the fable goes, she drank human blood to give herself power. She showed no mercy and delighted in the ruination of the human race.”

“Sounds like a real hooker bitch,” Jane commented.

Turning my attention back to Newton, I looked at him—really looked at him. “Were you once a blood drinker?”

“I was,” he said during a painful spasm.

I walked over to the man and placed his shuddering body on a chair. I moved Martha and Jane to either side of him so he wouldn’t fall off during a seizure. “Tell me your story.”

Newton clasped his beige hands together so tightly, they turned white. “My tribe questioned the methods of Sekhmet. We didn’t believe in the destruction of all mankind. She was displeased.”

Well, there was something to admire, although their way of dealing with it was horrifyingly misplaced. “Details,” I said. “You’re leaving them out.”

“What difference does it make?” he shouted. “What was done is done.”

I ignored the outburst and went a different way. “I can stop the pain in your head. I can remove the earworm, but you have

to play it my way. Nonnegotiable.”

Newton’s colorless lips compressed tightly.

My uncontrollable need to be compassionate led me to help the man out. “So, you need energy to live instead of blood now?”

“No. We eat food.”

“What the actual fuck?” I yelled. “You can eat? I call bullshit. I would give my left boob, which is the bigger one, to eat a freaking pizza. Excuse me for a sec.”

I marched over to the right side of the building, clapped my hands together and reduced it to rubble. Of course, I didn’t want to be beige, boring and wear horn-rimmed glasses, but the fact that the Energy Vamps could eat nachos was really fucking hard to swallow.

Vinnie gently tapped me on the shoulder. “My dearest Princess, I believe we might have gotten a little off track here.”

I sucked it up, metaphorically pulled up my big girl thong and nodded curtly. “Correct. I just needed to get that out.”

“Perfectly acceptable behavior,” he replied kindly.

It wasn’t, but I was happy for the support of my tantrum. However, I had more questions for Newton. The story wasn’t adding up.

I walked back over to the interrogation area. Turning my chair around, I straddled it. I eyed Newton like he was a bug I wanted to step on. “If you don’t need the energy to survive, why are you stealing it?”

“Retribution.”

“Let me get this straight. You’re taking revenge on people who had absolutely nothing to do with what Sekhmet did to you? You’re trying to destroy an entire species because you were damned by a sicko?”

Newton was taken aback and didn’t know how to answer.

“You’re scum. Heartless trash,” I said coldly. “You’re no better than the woman who damned you.”

“Take that back,” Newton roared as he convulsed in agony.

“I won’t,” I said. “If you want respect you have to give it and earn it, you slimy little asshole. Nothing you’ve told me deserves my compassion. Your existence is a waste. You’re like a tick—a disease-carrying waste of space.”

Newton’s chin fell to his chest and he began to cry. It didn’t sway me. He was truly awful. Yes, Sekhmet was an abomination, but the Energy Vampyres were just as bad.

“You need to start talking, Newton,” I ground out. “You said that I wouldn’t be able to reverse the trance. Are you able to do it?”

“Excellent inquiry,” Vinnie said.

Newton wasn’t budging. Not working for me.

“Wheels on the Bus,” I commanded Martha and Jane.

They went for it. A few more of the Energy Vamps in the pile exploded.

“I will talk,” Newton screamed as he watched the numbers of his people decrease.

I stared at him and waited.

“We tried to stop Sekhmet from her murderous sprees,” he said in a broken voice. “We tried reasoning. We tried force. It was to no avail. She was after an innocent tribe of human women and children—wanted their blood in the worst way. The beast had already drained and killed the men in the clan. It was too much... just too much. We hid the tribe within our own homes for three new moons... and then she discovered our deception.”

The story was God-awful and inhumane. I waited for more. It came.

“Suffice it to say, the women and children did not survive,” he whispered. “She made us watch as she drained each and every one dry. The ghastly visions still live in my dreams. In

retaliation for our deceit, she cast a spell. My people could no longer drink blood but we were still undead. We could no longer mate. We could not truly live yet we could not die. Our vitality and light disappeared. The color of our skin mutated and our conversation skills went to Hell.”

“How did you discover you could steal energy?” I asked.

“By accident,” he admitted, looking ashamed. “We tried to find others of the Vampyre kind to aid us, but we were shunned. In our desperation, we tried to talk to them and plead our case, but ended up sending them into a trance. It was upon that discovery that we realized we were stealing their life force like Sekhmet had stolen ours.”

“So, two revolting wrongs make it right in your warped mind?” I questioned.

Newton shook his head. “No. We tried to find help once again a thousand years ago, but were met with revulsion and death. We did what we had to do.”

I glanced over at Rhys. He was torn. So was I.

Newton continued to shake and shudder. It was getting harder to watch, but I didn’t have what I needed.

“Newton, look at me,” I requested. He did. “I have the antidote to the earworms. I believe you know how to break the trance. Am I correct?”

He nodded jerkily. My relief was overwhelming.

“I’d like to make a trade,” I said.

“And after the trade is complete?” he pressed.

It was a good question. My plan had been to eliminate them. Their skill was debilitating to blood-drinking Vampyres and humans. But... plans could change.

“Would you be willing to have your power bound?” I asked.

He looked confused. “That’s possible?”

“Everything’s possible when Globes LaSweaterMeat is runnin’ the fuckin’ show,” Jane assured the perplexed Vamp.

I closed my eyes for a second and tried not to laugh at the horrifying nickname. I failed.

“I can bind your power and the powers of the ones in the pile,” I said, needing him to understand. “It will be permanent. However, that being said, you and your people will be welcomed and protected by me.”

“Why?” Newton asked. “Why would you do that? We’ve done our best to destroy you.”

“Because I’m Compassion,” I told him. It was as simple as that. “What was done to you was beyond wrong, but at one time there was goodness in you. It’s still there. I feel it. You have to embrace it and live it.”

“I lied to you,” he choked out.

I tensed up like a bomb about to go off. My fingers sparked dangerously.

Newton sensed my rage and spoke quickly. “Not about Sekhmet or our past. I lied when I said you couldn’t reverse the trance.”

It took me setting all the desks on fire to calm down. Vinnie and Mark followed behind me and doused all the flames. They were great guys.

“Tell me how to reverse it,” I said when I’d regained my composure.

“Cold water,” he replied. “Dump ice-cold water over the tranced Vampyres and they will awaken.”

I made a face. “That’s it?”

“That’s it. It was a discovery made by accident,” he explained. “It has been tested and confirmed.”

“On who?” Rhys demanded.

“Your people,” Newton admitted, cowering away from Rhys’ well-placed rage. “We re-tranced them immediately after we woke them up.”

“Vinnie, can you get ice water? A lot of it?” I asked, staring at the floor. I wanted to tear Newton apart. His and his

people's lack of empathy was very difficult to reckon with.

“Oh yes!” Vinnie replied as he poofed away.

Rhys paced the room like a caged tiger. He kept his eye on Juliet the entire time. There was definitely something there.

“We'll wake Juliet, Marco and Marky,” I said. “We'll transport the others back to the Cressida House and wake them up in a controlled environment. It's too risky to do it here.”

I looked at the man who had caused so much pain due to the pain caused to him. I'd made a promise. I didn't break those. “Repeat after me,” I said flatly, then sang the antidote to the earworm. “By Mennen.”

Newton sang it. His eyes grew wide in shock. The convulsions ceased and he slumped forward in his chair. Martha and Jane held him up and patted his beige head. The pile of prisoners sang the antidote as well and all the seizures ended.

“I'm going to bind you now,” I warned as I raised my hands high.

“Thank you,” Newton replied with tears of joy leaking from his eyes. “Thank you so very much.”

I wasted no time. I electrocuted Newton and the others who'd survived. Eight times. Every single one of them. They all dropped to their knees and prostrated themselves before me. It was alarming since most of them fell over due to not having arms, but the intention was clear. The arms would grow back.

“Test it,” I told Newton. “Martha and Jane, stand by with duct tape as a precaution.”

Newton tried his best. He failed miserably. Instead of the components of glue, all he could talk about were adorable puppies and the beautiful scent of roses. His joy was pure. It made me feel good, but we weren't finished.

His people were fine. Mine were not.

In a poof of sparkling silver dust, Vinnie appeared with a massive refrigerator filled with buckets of ice water. Rhys

shoved everyone out of his way and grabbed a bucket in each of his huge hands. Not missing a beat, he dumped about ten gallons of freezing-cold water on Juliet. She woke up with a scream that I was pretty sure busted one of my eardrums.

Rhys took her into his arms and kissed her soundly. My sister punched him in the face then electrocuted him. He laughed with joy and tried to grab her ass. Suffice it to say, he almost lost a testicle.

Marco and Marky were less violent when awoken, but Rhys hadn't tried to shove his tongue down either of their throats.

My relief was intense. However, there was still work to be done. "Martha, Jane, Rhys, you're tasked with transporting the tranced Vamps back to the Cressida House."

"Where do you want them, Nugas Badoinkies?" Jane asked.

"Take them to the training facility and stand guard over them," I instructed, then eyed Rhys. "None will be awoken until I'm present. Am I clear?"

"You are," Rhys said.

"Rhys, after all the Vamps are safe in the training facility, I want you to come back here and level the building," I added.

"It would be my pleasure," Rhys said. "I thank you for keeping your word about my men."

Martha slapped the big Vamp on the back and sent him lurching forward. The gals were a whole lot stronger than they looked. "ShirtPotatoes LeJiggleJoggers always keeps her word."

The backup was nice. The name was horrible. I ignored it and kept going.

"Vinnie, I want you, Marco, Marky and Mark to be in charge of Newton and his people. Bring them back to the Cressida House for debriefing and to figure out the next step."

"Wonderful!" Vinnie said.

I would no longer use the term Energy Vampyre, beige freak or fangless weirdo. Henceforth, they were Vampyres—odd Vamps, but none of us were what could be described as normal.

“Juliet, you’re with me,” I told her, snapping my fingers and drying her, Marky and Marco off.

My sister wrung her hands. “Am I going back to the dungeon?”

“No,” I told her. “That’s no longer your home.”

Juliet looked stricken. “Where is my home?” she asked, sounding so childlike, it made my heart hurt.

“Wherever you want it to be,” I told her, knowing that it would take a very long time for her to be accepted anywhere in the world. The damage she’d caused couldn’t be washed away with ice water, but she was on the right track. “For now, I’d be honored if you would make the Cressida House your home. We could use an Immortal historian in our ranks.”

Juliet bowed her head. “The honor would be mine.”

“Is everyone clear on what to do?” I asked.

My little posse nodded. Even Newton and his people looked thrilled to be included.

Taking Juliet’s hand in mine, we left EV Accounting Services in a blast of shimmering golden mist.

It was time to save the day.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



I'D ARRIVED HOME TO THE EXACT SCENE I'D LEFT. AFTER clearing the ballroom of the guards, I sat down next to Ethan with an enormous bucket of ice water at my feet. Juliet had excused herself to check on Paris. Everyone at the compound was still wary of my sister, but I'd given a truncated account of what had gone down and no one seemed to feel the need to decapitate her anymore. She had earned back a little of what she'd lost by helping to save Ethan. I also made it abundantly clear that Juliet was to be tolerated with respect as she worked her way back into the good graces of those who might be willing to forgive her.

Some would never forgive her and some would find it in their non-beating hearts to show mercy. Only time would tell how that would play out. Juliet had a lot to atone for.

I cried harder than I'd ever cried in my life when Ethan opened his eyes. Since I was undead, my tears were bloody. Ethan and I were both covered in my blood. It looked like a murder scene. Didn't bother me a bit. The love of my life was alive and well. He was also wildly confused.

I didn't blame him.

"Energy Vampyres did this?" he asked for the third time as he shook the water out of his thick blond hair. "They're a myth."

I kissed his bloody lips. He was the hottest man in the Universe and he was mine. "Yes, Energy Vampyres. Not a myth. No longer energy stealers. I bound their power

permanently. They're accountants... I think. Not actually sure on that one. Oh... and they're going to live with us for a while."

My mate looked pained at my admission, but he trusted and loved me. "You've collected more strays?" he asked, scanning the room that was still full of tranced Vamps.

"Yep," I told him. "And I also made friends with some undead mimes. You'll love them."

His brow shot up. "Now I know you're pulling my leg. You're terrified of mimes."

"Used to be," I corrected him.

"This is a lot to absorb, Astrid," he said, pulling me close and resting his chin on my head.

I was very happy my hair wasn't covered in Vamp guts. Being close to him made my world a better place.

"What about the others?" he asked.

I looked around the room at the tranced Vamps who'd given me so much shit about paying taxes. "We'll wake them up shortly."

"And all it takes to reverse the spell is cold water?" Ethan asked.

"Shockingly, yes. And there's more." I snapped my fingers and replaced his sopping-wet custom Armani suit with a new one. I dressed myself in a sexy Prada cocktail dress for good measure. I considered stripping the suit off of him and having my naughty way with my Vampire, but the thought of getting busted by Martha, Jane and the gang was a lady-boner killer. However, I had naked plans that I was going to put into action very soon.

"There's always more with you," he said with a chuckle, running his hands suggestively over my body. "Why don't you share?"

My body tingled from head to toe as his strong hands roamed my backside. I almost forgot what I'd been saying. Hell, I almost forgot my name. "There are a hundred and

ninety-nine warrior Vamps who were tranced a thousand years ago in the training facility.”

Ethan’s hands dropped from my waist and he squinted at me. “Come again?”

“It’s fine,” I assured him. “They were put into stasis by the former Energy Vamps a thousand years ago and have been that way ever since. Juliet woke the leader up by accident, which is a whole other interesting story for later, and after I beat the shit out of him, we worked it out and became allies. I promised that we would wake and acclimate his men to this time period. I wanted them here just in case we have to smack down on them before they accept their new reality.”

“Holy shit,” Ethan muttered, shaking his head and laughing. “You were really busy while I was sleeping.”

“Understatement,” I said, grabbing his hands and putting them back on me. “And you weren’t sleeping. You were in a freaking trance. I’ve never been so scared in my life.”

He pushed my hair back and off my shoulder. “And you’ve faced a lot of scary things.”

“Uh-huh,” I agreed, running my hands over his squeezable tush.

He kissed my neck. “Anything else?”

I leaned my head back to give him better access. “Juliet is free. She helped save you and I invited her to live with us. She needs a safe place to heal and to try to make amends with a shitload of people.”

My statement had clearly killed the mood. Ethan leaned back and groaned. “That sounds very iffy to me.”

I nodded. “I hear you. However, I need you to trust me on this. You don’t have to forgive her... ever. But I’d like you to try. No one will forget what she’s done, but I believe in second chances.”

Ethan rubbed his chiseled jawline. “That will take time,” he said in a tight tone.

“I know.” I rested my head on his shoulder. “We live forever. We have plenty of that.”

“Hooties McJubbies!” Martha yelled as she and Jane ambled into the ballroom. “All orders have been completed.”

They were accompanied by Vinnie and the mimes, along with Juliet and Rhys. Rhys stuck close to my sister’s side, much to her annoyed displeasure. Newton and his posse of eleven others stood in the arched doorway of the ballroom looking scared and unsure.

Ethan took in the group with curiosity, although, he was definitely leery of Juliet.

“Enter,” he said, pointing to the beige brigade of Vampyres.

They warily crossed the room, trying not to look at all of the undead who they had entranced so recently.

One by one they dropped to their knees before Ethan and me.

“Declare your loyalty,” Ethan demanded, sounding every bit the Vampyre leader of the North American Dominion.

“We pledge our fealty to you and the Chosen One,” Newton said as the others nodded their agreement.

Ethan pulled a dagger from his boot and beckoned them forward. He sliced his hand then offered the dagger to Newton. They all took turns slicing their own palms then clasping hands with their new prince. Each swore their allegiance to us during the age-old ritual.

“May I be so bold as to ask for a turn?” Rhys said, stepping forward.

Ethan eyed the ancient warrior for a long beat. “Name?”

“Rhys. I’m at your service. Your woman is impressive. I would very much like to be part of this army.”

“Dude,” I said with an eye roll. “I have a name. Use it. Calling females *woman*, as if we’re personal property, is going to end seriously badly for you.”

Rhys looked shocked by my words. “But you are a woman,” he pointed out.

“I am so much more than my private parts,” I told the idiot. “And if you’d like to keep your private parts intact, I’d suggest you eliminate the word woman from your vocabulary.”

Rhys was still confused, but nodded his head to me. “While I am unclear what I’m apologizing for, I offer my regrets.”

“I accept,” I said with an eye roll and a laugh.

Ethan chuckled, and I thought I saw a hint of a smile on Juliet’s face.

Ethan reopened the cut on his hand and offered the dagger to Rhys. “Welcome to the North American Dominion.”

He clasped hands with Ethan then bowed in respect. “The pleasure is all mine.”

“What are we gonna do about those fuckers?” Jane asked, referring to the nasty Vamps who were still in a trance.

“We’re going to wake them up,” I told her.

“Ummm... Milksacks McBiggins,” Martha said with a wicked grin on her wrinkled face. “I heard that it’s extra insurance that the spell is broken if you wallop the fuckers in the face real good after you douse them in ice water.”

“And where did you hear that?” I asked, failing to conceal my grin that matched hers.

“Jane,” she replied.

Jane gave me a thumbs up and a waggle of her brows. They were big fat liars and I loved every profane inch of them.

“Works for me,” I said. “Let’s do it!”

It took two hours for Martha, Jane and me to douse and smack all the slumbering Vamps in the ballroom. It was glorious to see their shocked and horrified expressions as I thwacked their pompous, snooty faces. I’d quickly explained it was part of breaking the spell and that if they retaliated, I’d

have to remove all of their appendages. Only two slapped me back. They wouldn't be slapping or walking for a few months.

Juliet and Ethan had a quiet and serious conversation as Rhys stood a short distance away and kept his gaze fixed on Juliet. It was a start. I was unsure if what Juliet had done would ever be water under the bridge with Ethan, but I knew in my heart he would try... and she would too.

We'd agreed on waking up Rhys' men tomorrow. We needed our people up to speed on what was going to go down so they could aid in the acclimation of the ancient warriors. Rhys had agreed and thanked us again for aiding him.

Much to my delight, Paris had woken up while we were gone. She was weak, but she was fine. Gunter wouldn't let her out of his sight. They were going to stay with us until she was back to full strength. The Kev, Susu and the gang left after paying respects to Ethan. There were some Fairy shenanigans in Zanthia that needed to be addressed, but they promised to visit soon with my BFF Gemma in tow.

As it turned out, Newton and his people were actually very skilled and certified CPAs. I insisted that they be in charge of auditing the wealthy Vamps who'd been angrily bitching about my tax plans. Ethan agreed. Our newest additions to the North American Dominion were shown fear and respect immediately. The expressions of pride and excitement on their beige faces warmed my dead heart.

They were also offered all kinds of bribes. No surprise there.

Vinnie and the mimes entertained the awakening Vamps with a show that I was able to watch. They were planning a mime tour in the near future. Martha and Jane offered to open for them. The boys were too polite for their own good and accepted the terrifying offer. I would not be seeing the show. While I was no longer petrified of people escaping imaginary glass boxes, there was no way in Hell I could listen to a full set from Martha and Jane.

I looked around the ballroom and smiled. Ethan took my hand in his and squeezed. Everything was going to be fine...

for now. Now was all I had, so I'd take it.

Uncle Fucker's words had been sage. If one wants respect they have to give it. For a Demon, he was a really good guy. I wouldn't tell him since that would piss him off, but it was the truth. The Devil was and always would be one of my favorite people.

"Get your hand off my ass," Juliet yelled at Rhys.

"Is there something I should know?" Ethan whispered as we watched Juliet knee Rhys in the nuts.

The Vampyre warrior went down like a sack of potatoes and moaned and groaned.

"It's a developing story," I told him with a giggle. "I have a great idea. Wanna hear it?"

"Is clothing optional?" he asked with a lopsided grin that made my girly bits tingle with excitement.

"Actually, it is optional," I replied with a coy smile.

"Is screaming and moaning allowed?" he asked, pulling me toward the door of the ballroom at a quick pace.

"Absolutely," I assured him. "And five orgasms are guaranteed."

"Ten," he countered, tossing me over his shoulder and taking the steps up to our suite three at a time.

"I like the way you negotiate."

Ethan's laugh filled me up in unexplainable ways. He was my everything.

"If you love the way I wheel and deal, you're going to love all the additional things I have planned for you shortly," he informed me.

"Right back at you, big guy," I promised.

I never broke my promises. Ever. And I wasn't about to start now.

My man was as good as his word, and so was I. Sex was great. Sex plus love was otherworldly. We were a lucky pair.

For now, our world was calm. A few good things had come out of the past couple of days. We had Newton and the boys as our very own IVRS, Internal Vampyre Revenue Service. In the process of taming the beige, fangless wonders, I'd lost a nemesis and gained a real sister. On top of that, we had a brand-new, seriously old army to help protect our Dominion. Their general, however, was going to need a lot of lessons on modern etiquette, and I knew just the *woman* to teach him. Juliet and Rhys were going to be a fascinating disaster to watch. Who knew how Rhys' men would adapt to the twenty-first century. For that matter, who knew what tomorrow would bring. Every day seemed to birth a new catastrophe.

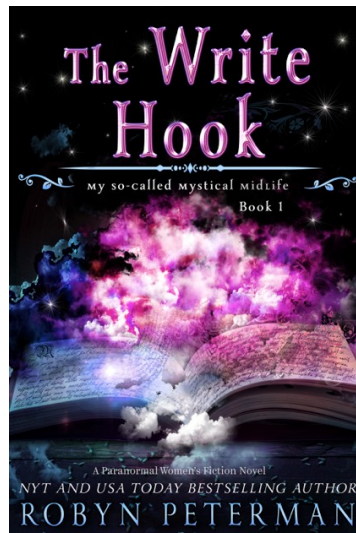
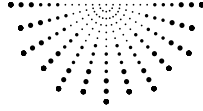
Whatever. Bring it on.

Give me a Prada mini-dress and some Jimmy Choo stilettos and I was good to go. I was a fashionable disaster ready to take on anything thrown in my path and that would never change. With Ethan by my side, we could conquer the world.

I just hoped we didn't have to. I preferred orgasms. They were way more fun.

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 Shuied 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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Warning: Pirate Dave Contains Romance Satire, Spoofing, and Pirates with Two Pork Swords.

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

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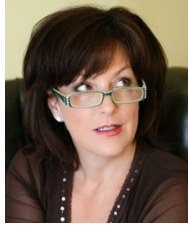
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ABOUT ROBYN PETERMAN



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.

