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IT WAS TWO weeks before Christmas. A slow time of year for raising the dead. My last client of the night sat across from me. There had been no notation by his name. No note saying zombie raising or vampire slaying. Nothing. Which probably meant whatever he wanted me to do was something I wouldn't, or couldn't, do. Pre-Christmas was a dead time of year, no pun intended. My boss, Bert, took any job that would have us.

George Smitz was a tall man, well over six feet. He was broad shouldered, and muscular. Not the muscles you get from lifting weights and running around indoor tracks. The muscles you get from hard physical labor. I would have bet money that Mr. Smitz was a construction worker, farmer, or something similar. He was shaped large and square with grime embedded under his fingernails that soap would not touch.

He sat in front of me, crushing his toboggan hat, kneading it in his big hands. The coffee that he'd accepted sat cooling on the edge of my desk. He hadn't taken so much as a sip.

I was drinking my coffee out of the Christmas mug that Bert, my boss, had insisted everyone bring in. A personalized holiday mug to add a personal touch to the office. My mug had a reindeer in a bathrobe and slippers with Christmas lights laced in its antlers, toasting the merry season with champagne and saying, "Bingle Jells."

Bert didn't really like my mug, but he let it go, probably afraid of what

else I might bring in. He'd been very pleased with my outfit for the evening. A high-collared blouse so perfectly red I'd had to wear makeup to keep from looking pale. The skirt and matching jacket were a deep forest green. I hadn't dressed for Bert. I had dressed for my date.

The silver outline of an angel gleamed in my lapel. I looked very Christmasy. The Browning Hi-Power 9mm didn't look Christmasy at all, but since it was hidden under the jacket, that didn't seem to matter. It might have bothered Mr. Smitz, but he looked worried enough to not care. As long as I didn't shoot him personally.

"Now, Mr. Smitz, how may I help you today?" I asked.

He was staring at his hands and only his eyes rose to look at me. It was a little-boy gesture, an uncertain gesture. It sat oddly on the big man's face. "I need help, and I don't know who else to go to."

"Exactly what kind of help do you need, Mr. Smitz?"

"It's my wife."

I waited for him to continue, but he stared at his hands. His hat was wadded into a tight ball.

"You want your wife raised from the dead?" I asked.

He looked up at that, eyes wide with alarm. "She's not dead. I know that."

"Then what can I possibly do for you, Mr. Smitz? I raise the dead, and am a legal vampire executioner. What in that job description could help your wife?"

"Mr. Vaughn said you knew all about lycanthropy." He said that as if it explained everything. It didn't.

"My boss makes a lot of claims, Mr. Smitz. But what does lycanthropy have to do with your wife?" This was the second time I'd asked about his wife. I seemed to be speaking English, but perhaps my questions were really Swahili and I just didn't realize it. Or maybe whatever had happened was too awful for words. That happened a lot in my business.

He leaned forward, eyes intense on my face. I leaned forward, too, I couldn't help myself. "Peggy, that's my wife, she's a lycanthrope."

I blinked at him. "And?"

"If it came out, she'd lose her job."

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I didn't argue with him. Legally, you couldn't discriminate against lycanthropes, but it happened a lot. "What sort of work is Peggy in?"

"She's a butcher."

A lycanthrope that was a butcher. It was too perfect. But I could see why she'd lose her job. Food preparation with a potentially fatal disease. I don't think so. I knew, and the health department knew, that lycanthropy can only be transferred by an attack in the animal form. Most people don't believe that. Can't say I blame them entirely. I don't want to be fuzzy, either.

"She runs a specialty meat store. It's a good business. She inherited it from her father."

"Was he a lycanthrope, too?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No, Peggy was attacked a few years back. She survived . . ." He shrugged. "But, you know."

I did know. "So your wife is a lycanthrope and would lose her business if it came out. I understand that. But how can I help you?" I fought the urge to glance at my watch. I had the tickets. Richard couldn't go in without me.

"Peggy's missing."

Ah. "I am not a private detective, Mr. Smitz. I don't do missing persons."

"But I can't go to the police. They might find out."

"How long has she been missing?"

"Two days."

"My advice is to go to the police."

He shook his head stubbornly. "No."

I sighed. "I don't know anything about finding a missing person. I raise the dead, slay vampires, that's it."

"Mr. Vaughn said you could help me."

"Did you tell him your problem?"

He nodded.

Shit. Bert and I were going to have a long talk. "The police are good at their job, Mr. Smitz. Just tell them your wife is missing. Don't mention the lycanthropy. See what they turn up." I didn't like telling a client to withhold information from the police, but it beat the heck out of not going at all.

“Ms. Blake, please, I’m worried. We’ve got two kids.”

I started to say all the reasons I couldn’t help him, then stopped. I had an idea. “Animators, Inc., has a private investigator on retainer. Veronica Sims has been involved in a lot of preternatural cases. She might be able to help you.”

“Can I trust her?”

“I do.”

He stared at me for a long moment, then nodded. “All right, how do I get in touch with her?”

“Let me give her a call, see if she can see you.”

“That would be great, thank you.”

“I want to help you, Mr. Smitz. Hunting missing spouses just isn’t my specialty.” I dialed the phone as I talked. I knew Ronnie’s number by heart. We exercised at least twice a week together, not to mention an occasional movie, dinner, whatever. Best friends, a concept that most women never outgrow. Ask a man who his best friend is and he’ll have to think about it. He won’t know right off the top of his head. A woman would. A man might not even be able to think of a name, not for his best friend. Women keep track of these things. Men don’t. Don’t ask me why.

Ronnie’s answering machine clicked in. “Ronnie, if you’re there, it’s Anita, pick up.”

The phone clicked, and a second later I was talking to the genuine article. “Hi, Anita. I thought you had a date with Richard tonight. Something wrong?”

See, best friends. “Not with the date. I’ve got a client here who I think is more up your alley than mine.”

“Tell me,” she said.

I did.

“Did you recommend he go to the police?”

“Yep.”

“He won’t go?”

“Nope.”

She sighed. “Well, I’ve done missing persons before but usually after the police have done everything they can. They have resources I can’t touch.”

"I'm aware of that," I said.

"He won't budge?"

"I don't think so."

"So it's me or . . ."

"Bert took the job knowing it was a missing person. He might try giving it to Jamison."

"Jamison doesn't know his butt from a hole in the ground on anything but raising the dead."

"Yeah, but he's always eager to expand his repertoire."

"Ask him if he can be at my office . . ." She paused while she leafed through her appointment book. Business must be good. "At nine tomorrow morning."

"Jesus, you always were an early riser."

"One of my few faults," she said.

I asked George Smitz if nine o'clock tomorrow was all right.

"Couldn't she see me tonight?"

"He wants to see you tonight."

She thought about that for a minute. "Why not? It's not like I have a hot date, unlike some people I could mention. Sure, send him over. I'll wait. Friday with a client is better than Friday night alone, I guess."

"You've just hit a dry spell," I said.

"And you've hit a wet spell."

"Very funny."

She laughed. "I'll look forward to Mr. Smitz's arrival. Enjoy *Guys and Dolls*."

"I will. See you tomorrow morning for our run."

"You sure you want me over there that early in case dream boat wants to stay over?"

"You know me better than that," I said.

"Yeah, I do. Just kidding. See you tomorrow."

We hung up. I gave Mr. Smitz Ronnie's business card, directions to her office, and sent him on his way. Ronnie was the best I could do for him. It still bothered me that he wouldn't go to the police, but hey, it wasn't my wife.

I've got two kids, he'd said. Not my problem. Really. Craig, our

nighttime secretary, was at the desk, which meant it was after six. I was running late. There really wasn't time to argue with Bert about Mr. Smitz, but . . .

I glanced at Bert's office. It was dark. "Boss man gone home?"

Craig glanced up from his computer keyboard. He has short, baby-fine brown hair. Round glasses to match a round face. He's slender and taller than I am, but then who isn't? He's in his twenties with a wife and two babies.

"Mr. Vaughn left about thirty minutes ago."

"It figures," I said.

"Something wrong?"

I shook my head. "Schedule me some time to talk to the boss tomorrow."

"I don't know, Anita. He's booked pretty solid."

"Find some time, Craig. Or I'll barge in on one of the other appointments."

"You're mad," he said.

"You bet. Find the time. If he yells about it, tell him I pulled a gun on you."

"Anita," he said with a grin, as if I were teasing.

I left him riffling through the appointment book trying to squeeze me somewhere. I meant it. Bert would talk to me tomorrow. December was our slowest season for raising zombies. People seemed to think you couldn't do it close to Christmas, as if it were black magic or something. So Bert scheduled other things to take up the slack. I was getting tired of clients with problems I could do nothing about. Smitz wasn't the first this month, but he was going to be the last.

With that cheerful thought I bundled into my coat and left. Richard was waiting. If traffic cooperated, I might just make it before the opening number. Traffic on a Friday night, surely not.

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THE 1978 NOVA that I'd been driving had died a sad and tragic death. I was now driving a Jeep Cherokee Country. It was a deep, deep green that looked black at night. But it had four-wheel drive for winter and enough room to carry goats in the back. Chickens were what I used for zombie raising most of the time, but occasionally you needed something bigger. Carrying goats in the Nova had been a bitch.

I pulled the Cherokee into the last parking space in the lot on Grant. My long, black winter coat billowed around me because I had only buttoned the bottom two buttons. If I buttoned all the buttons I couldn't get to my gun.

My hands were shoved into the coat pockets, arms huddling the cloth around me. I didn't wear gloves. I've never been comfortable shooting with gloves on. The gun is a part of my hand. Cloth shouldn't interfere.

I ran across the street in my high-heeled pumps, careful on the frosty pavement. The sidewalk was cracked, with huge sections broken out of it, as if someone had taken a sledgehammer to it. The boarded-up buildings were as dilapidated as the sidewalk. I'd missed the crowd, being nearly late, so I had the shattered street to myself. It was a short but lonely walk on a December night. Broken glass littered the ground and in heels I had to be very careful where I stepped. An alley cut the buildings. It looked like the natural habitat of *Muggerus americanus*. I watched

the darkness carefully. Nothing moved. With the Browning I wasn't too worried, but still . . . You didn't have to be a genius to shoot someone in the back.

The wind gusted cold enough to take my breath away as I neared the corner and relative safety. I wore a lot of sweaters in the winter, but tonight I'd wanted something dressier, and I was freezing my patooties off, but I was hoping that Richard would like the red blouse.

At the corner there were lights, cars, and a policeman directing traffic in the middle of the street. You never saw this many police in this section of St. Louis unless the Fox was on. A lot of wealthy people came down here in their furs, diamonds, Rolex watches. Wouldn't do for a friend of the city council to get mugged. When Topol came to reprise his role in *Fiddler on the Roof*, the audience was very crème de la crème and the place crawled with cops. Tonight there was just the usual. Mostly in front of the theater, mostly doing traffic, but also taking peeks at the seedy backs of buildings in case someone with money wandered away from the light.

I went through the glass doors into the long, narrow entryway. It was brightly lit, shiny somehow. There's a little room to the right where you can pick up your tickets. People streamed out of it, hurrying to the inner glass doors. I wasn't as late as I thought if there were this many people still getting tickets. Or maybe everyone else was as late as I was.

I caught a glimpse of Richard standing in the far right corner. At six foot one he is easier to spot across a crowded room than I am, at my own five foot three. He stood quietly, eyes following the crowd's movement. He didn't seem bored or impatient. He seemed to be having a good time watching the people. His eyes followed an elderly couple as they walked through the glass doors. The woman used a cane. Their progress was painfully slow. His head turned slowly with them. I scanned the crowd. Everyone else was younger, moving with confident or hurried stride. Was Richard looking for victims? Prey? He was, after all, a werewolf. He'd gotten a bad batch of lycanthropy vaccine. One of the reasons I never get the shots. If my flu shot accidentally backfires, that's one thing, but being furry once a month . . . No, thanks.

Did he realize he was standing there searching the crowd like a lion

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staring at a bunch of gazelles? Or maybe the elderly couple had reminded him of his grandparents. Hell, maybe I was giving him motives that were only in my suspicious little brain. I hoped so.

His hair was brown. In sunlight it gleamed with strands of gold, hints of copper. I knew the hair was shoulder length, nearly my length, but he'd done something to it, pulled it back somehow so it gave the illusion of being very short and close to his head. Not easy with hair as wavy as his.

His suit was some rich shade of green. Most men would have looked like Peter Pan in a green suit, but on him it looked just right. As I walked closer, I could see his shirt was a pale almost gold, tie a darker green than the suit, with tiny Christmas trees done in red. I would have made a smart remark about the tie, but dressed in red and green with a Christmas angel on my lapel, who was I to complain?

He saw me and smiled. The smile was very bright against his permanently tanned skin. His last name, Zeeman, is Dutch, but somewhere back in his ancestry was something not European. Not blond, not fair, not cold. His eyes were a perfect, chocolate brown.

He reached out and took my hands, gently, drawing me to him. His lips were soft against my mouth, a brief, nearly chaste kiss.

I stepped back, taking a breath. He kept hold of my hand, and I let him. His skin was very warm against my cold hand. I thought about asking him if he'd been thinking about eating that elderly couple, but didn't. Accusing him of murderous intent might spoil the evening. Besides, most lycanthropes weren't aware of doing nonhuman things. When you pointed it out, it always seemed to hurt their feelings. I didn't want to hurt Richard's feelings.

As we went through the inner doors into the crowded lobby, I asked, "Where's your coat?"

"In the car. Didn't want to carry it, so I made a dash for it."

I nodded. It was typical Richard. Or maybe lycanthropes didn't get cold. From the back I could see he'd braided his hair tight to his scalp. The tip of the braid trailed over his collar. I couldn't even figure out how he'd done it. My idea of fixing my hair is to wash, smear a little hair goop through it, then let it dry. I was not into high-tech hair design. Though it

might be fun to figure out the knots in a leisurely fashion after the show. I was always willing to learn a new skill.

The main lobby of the Fox is a cross between a really nice Chinese restaurant and a Hindu temple, with a little Art Deco thrown in for flavor. The colors are so dazzling, it looks like the painter ground up stained glass with bits of light trapped in them. Pit bull-size Chinese lions with glowing red eyes guard a sweep of stairs that lead up to the Fox Club balcony, where for fifteen thousand dollars a year you can eat wonderful meals and have a private box. The rest of us peons mingled nearly shoulder to shoulder in the carpeted lobby, with offerings of popcorn, pretzels, Pepsi, and on some nights, hot dogs. A far cry from chicken cordon bleu or whatever they were serving up above.

The Fox treads that wonderfully thin line between gaudiness and the fantastic. I've loved the building since I first saw it. Every time I come, there is some new wonder. Some color, or carving, or statue that I didn't notice before. When you realize that it was originally built to be a movie theater, you realize how much things have changed. Movie theaters now have the souls of unwashed socks. The Fox is alive as only the best buildings are alive.

I had to let go of Richard's hand to unbutton my coat the rest of the way, but hey, we weren't attached at the hip. I stood close to him in the crowd without touching, but I could feel him, like a line of warmth against my body.

"We're going to look like the Bobsey twins when I take my coat off," I said.

He raised his eyebrows.

I spread the coat like a flasher, and he laughed. It was a good laugh, warm and thick like Christmas pudding.

"Tis the season," he said. He gave me a one-armed hug, quick like you'd give a friend, but his arm stayed over my shoulders. It was still early enough in our dating that touching each other was new, unexpected, exhilarating. We kept looking for excuses to touch each other. Trying to be nonchalant about it. Not fooling each other. Not sure we cared. I slipped my arm around his waist and leaned just a bit. It was my right arm. If we were attacked now, I'd never draw my gun in time. I

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stayed there for a minute thinking it just might be worth it. I moved around him, offering my left hand to him.

I don't know if he caught a glimpse of the gun or just figured it out, but his eyes widened. He leaned close to me, whispering against my hair. "A gun here, at the Fox? You think the ushers will let you in?"

"They did last time."

He got a strange look on his face. "You always go armed?"

I shrugged. "After dark, yes."

His eyes were puzzled, but he let it go. Before this year I'd sometimes gone out after dark unarmed but it had been a rough year. A lot of different people had tried to kill me. I was small even for a woman. I jogged, lifted weights, had a black belt in judo, but I was still outclassed by most professional bad guys. They tended to also lift weights, know martial arts, and outweigh me by a hundred pounds or more. I couldn't arm-wrestle them, but I could shoot them.

Also a lot of this year I'd been up against vampires, and other preternatural creepie-crawlies. They could lift large trucks with a single hand or worse. Silver bullets might not kill a vampire, but it certainly slowed them down. Enough for me to run like hell. To get away. To survive.

Richard knew what I did for a living. He'd even seen some of the messy parts. But I still expected him to blow it. To start playing the male protector and bitch about the gun or something. It was almost a permanent tightness in my gut, waiting for this man to say something awful. Something that would ruin it, destroy it, hurt.

So far, so good.

The crowd started flowing towards the stairs, parting on either side to the corridors leading into the main theater. We shuffle-stepped with the crowd, holding hands to keep from being separated. Sure.

Once free of the lobby, the crowd flowed towards the different aisles like water searching for the quickest route downstream. The quickest route was still pretty slow. I dug the tickets out of the pocket of my suit jacket. I didn't have a purse. There was a small brush, a lipstick, lipliner, eye shadow, ID, and my car keys stuffed in my coat pockets. My beeper was tucked in the front of my skirt, discreetly to one side. When not dressed up, I wore a fanny pack.

The usher, an older woman with glasses, shone a tiny flashlight on our tickets. She took us to our seats, motioned us in, and went back up to assist the next group of helpless people. The seats were good, near the middle, sort of close to the stage. Close enough.

Richard had scooted in to sit on my left without being asked. He's a quick study. It's one of the reasons we're still going out. That and the fact that I lust after his body something terrible.

I spread my coat over the seat, spreading it out so it wouldn't be bulky. His arm snaked across my chair, fingers touching my shoulder. I fought the urge to lay my head on his shoulder. Too hokey, then thought, what the hell. I snuggled into the bend of his neck, just breathing in the scent of his skin. His aftershave was clean and sweet, but underneath was the smell of his skin, his flesh. It made it so the aftershave would never smell the same on anyone else. Frankly, without a drop of aftershave I loved the smell of Richard's neck.

I straightened up, pulling just a little away from him. He looked at me questioningly. "Something wrong?"

"Nice aftershave," I said. No need to confess that I'd had an almost irresistible urge to nibble his neck. It was too embarrassing.

The lights dimmed and the music began. I'd never actually seen *Guys and Dolls* except in the movies. The one with Marlon Brando and Jean Simmons. Richard's idea of a date was caving, hiking, things that required your oldest clothes and a pair of good walking shoes. Nothing wrong with that. I like the outdoors, but I wanted to try a dress-up date. I wanted to see Richard in a suit and let him see me in something frillier than jeans. I was after all a girl, whether I liked to admit it or not.

But having proposed the date, I didn't want to do the usual dipsy-duo of dinner and a movie. So I'd called up the Fox to see what was playing and asked Richard if he liked musicals. He did. Another point in his favor. Since it was my idea, I bought the tickets. Richard had not argued, not even to pay half. After all, I hadn't offered to pay for our last dinner. It hadn't occurred to me. I was betting paying for the tickets occurred to Richard, but he'd let it go. Good man.

The curtain came up and the opening street scene paraded before us,

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bright colors, stylized, perfect and cheerful, and just what I needed. “The Fugue for Tinorns” filled the bright stage and flowed out into the happy dark. Good music, humor, soon to be dancers, Richard’s body next to mine, a gun under my arm. What more could a girl ask for?