
1

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL corpse I'd ever seen was sitting behind my desk. Jean-Claude's white shirt gleamed in the light from the desk lamp. A froth of lace spilled down the front, peeking from inside his black velvet jacket. I stood behind him, my back to the wall, arms crossed over my stomach, which put my right hand comfortably close to the Browning Hi-Power in its shoulder holster. I wasn't about to draw on Jean-Claude. It was the other vampire I was worried about.

The desk lamp was the only light in the room. The vampire had requested the overheads be turned out. His name was Sabin, and he stood against the far wall, huddling in the dark. He was covered head to foot in a black, hooded cape. He looked like something out of an old Vincent Price movie. I'd never seen a real vampire dress like that.

The last member of our happy little group was Dominic Dumare. He sat in one of the client chairs. He was tall, thin, but not weak. His hands were large and strong, big enough to palm my face. He was dressed in a three-piece black suit, like a chauffeur except for the diamond stickpin in his tie. A beard and thin mustache lined the strong bones of his face.

When he'd entered my office, I'd felt him like a psychic wind tripping down my spine. I'd only encountered two other people who had that taste to them. One had been the most powerful voodoo priestess I'd ever met. The second had been the second most powerful voodoo priest I'd ever met. The woman was dead. The man worked for Animators, Inc., just like I did. But Dominic Dumare wasn't here to apply for a job.

"Ms. Blake, please be seated," Dumare said. "Sabin finds it most offensive to sit when a lady is standing."

I glanced behind him at Sabin. "I'll sit down if he sits down," I said.

Dumare looked at Jean-Claude. He gave a gentle, condescending smile. "Do you have such poor control over your human servant?"

I didn't have to see Jean-Claude's smile to know it was there. "Oh, you are on your own with *ma petite*. She is my human servant, so declared before the council, but she answers to no one."

"You seem proud of that," Sabin said. His voice was British and very upper crust.

"She is the Executioner and has more vampire kills than any other human. She is a necromancer of such power that you have traveled halfway around the world to consult her. She is my human servant without a mark to hold her to me. She dates me without the aid of vampire glamor. Why should I not be pleased?"

Listening to him talk you'd have thought it was all his own idea. Fact was, he'd tried his best to mark me, and I'd managed to escape. We were dating because he'd blackmailed me. Date him or he'd kill my other boyfriend. Jean-Claude had managed to make it all work to his advantage. Why was I not surprised?

"Until her death you cannot mark any other human," Sabin said. "You have cut yourself off from a great deal of power."

"I am aware of what I have done," Jean-Claude said.

Sabin laughed, and it was chokingly bitter. "We all do strange things for love."

I would have given a lot to see Jean-Claude's face at that moment. All I could see was his long black hair spilling over his jacket, black on black. His shoulders stiffened, hands sliding across the blotter on my desk. Then he went very still. That awful waiting stillness that only the old vampires have, as if, if they held still long enough, they would simply disappear.

"Is that what has brought you here, Sabin? Love?" Jean-Claude's voice was neutral, empty.

Sabin's laughter rode the air like broken glass. It felt like the very sound of it hurt something deep inside me. I didn't like it.

"Enough games," I said, "let's get it done."

"Is she always this impatient?" Dumare asked.

“Yes,” Jean-Claude said.

Dumare smiled, bright and empty as a lightbulb. “Did Jean-Claude tell you why we wished to see you?”

“He said Sabin caught some sort of disease from trying to go cold turkey.”

The vampire across the room laughed again, flinging it like a weapon across the room. “Cold turkey, very good, Ms. Blake, very good.”

The laughter ate over me like small cutting blades. I’d never experienced anything like that from just a voice. In a fight, it would have been distracting. Heck, it was distracting now. I felt liquid slide down my forehead. I raised my left hand to it. My fingers came away smeared with blood. I drew the Browning and stepped away from the wall. I aimed it at the black figure across the room. “He does that again, and I’ll shoot him.”

Jean-Claude rose slowly from the chair. His power flowed over me like a cool wind, raising goose bumps on my arms. He raised one pale hand, gone nearly translucent with power. Blood flowed down that gleaming skin.

Dumare stayed in his chair, but he, too, was bleeding from a cut nearly identical to mine. Dumare wiped the blood away, still smiling. “The gun will not be necessary,” he said.

“You have abused my hospitality,” Jean-Claude said. His voice filled the room with hissing echoes.

“There is nothing I can say to apologize,” Sabin said. “But I did not mean to do it. I am using so much of my power just to maintain myself that I do not have the control I once did.”

I moved slowly away from the wall, gun still pointed. I wanted to see Jean-Claude’s face. I needed to see how badly he was hurt. I eased around the desk until I could see him from the corner of my eye. His face was untouched, flawless and gleaming like mother of pearl.

He raised his hand, one thin line of blood still trailing down. “This is no accident.”

“Come into the light, my friend,” Dumare said. “You must let them see, or they will not understand.”

“I do not want to be seen.”

“You are very close to using up all my good will,” Jean-Claude said.

“Mine, too,” I added. I was hoping I could either shoot Sabin or put the gun down soon. Even a two-handed shooting

stance is not meant to be maintained indefinitely. Your hands start to waver just a bit.

Sabin glided towards the desk. The black cloak spilled around his feet like a pool of darkness. All vampires were graceful, but this was ridiculous. I realized he wasn't walking at all. He was levitating inside that dark cloak.

His power flowed over my skin like icy water. My hands were suddenly steady once more. Nothing like having several hundred years worth of vampire coming at you to sharpen your nerves.

Sabin stopped on the far side of the desk. He was expending power just to move, just to be here, as if like a shark, if he stopped moving he'd die.

Jean-Claude glided around me. His power danced over my body, raising the hair at the back of my neck, making my skin tight. He stopped almost within reach of the other vampire. "What has happened to you, Sabin?"

Sabin stood on the edge of the light. The lamp should have cast some light into the hood of his cloak, but it didn't. The inside of the hood was as smooth and black and empty as a cave. His voice came out of that nothingness. It made me jump.

"Love, Jean-Claude, love happened to me. My beloved grew a conscience. She said it was wrong to feed upon people. We were once people, after all. For love of her, I tried to drink cold blood. I tried animal blood. But it was not enough to sustain me."

I stared into that darkness. I kept pointing the gun, but I was beginning to feel silly. Sabin didn't seem at all afraid of it, which was unnerving. Maybe he didn't care. That was also unnerving. "She talked you into going vegetarian. Great," I said. "You seem powerful enough."

He laughed, and with the laughter, the shadows in his hood faded slowly, like a curtain lifting. He threw it back in one quick flourish.

I didn't scream, but I gasped and took a step back. I couldn't help myself. When I realized I'd done it, I stopped and made myself take back that step, meet his eyes. No flinching.

His hair was thick and straight and golden, falling like a shining curtain to his shoulders. But his skin . . . his skin had rotted away on half his face. It was like late-stage leprosy, but worse. The flesh was puss-filled, gangrenous, and should have

stunk to high heaven. The other half of his face was still beautiful. The kind of face that medieval painters had borrowed for cherubim, a golden perfection. One crystalline blue eye rolled in its rotting socket as if in danger of spilling out onto his cheek. The other eye was secure and watched my face.

“You can put up the gun, *ma petite*. It was an accident, after all,” Jean-Claude said.

I lowered the Browning, but didn’t put it up. It took more effort than was pretty to say calmly, “This happened because you stopped feeding off of humans?”

“We believe so,” Dumare said.

I tore my gaze away from Sabin’s ravaged face and looked back at Dominic. “You think I can help cure him of this?” I couldn’t keep the disbelief out of my voice.

“I heard of your reputation in Europe.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“No modesty, Ms. Blake. Among those of us who notice such things, you are gaining a certain notoriety.”

Notoriety, not fame. Hmm.

“Put the gun away, *ma petite*. Sabin has done all the—what is your word—grandstanding he will do tonight. Haven’t you Sabin?”

“I fear so, it all seems to go so badly now.”

I holstered the gun and shook my head. “I honestly don’t have the faintest idea how to help you.”

“If you knew how, would you help me?” Sabin asked.

I looked at him and nodded. “Yes.”

“Even though I am a vampire and you are a vampire executioner.”

“Have you done anything in this country that you need killing for?”

Sabin laughed. The rotting skin stretched, and a ligament popped with a wet snap. I had to look away. “Not yet, Ms. Blake, not yet.” His face sobered quickly; the humor abruptly faded. “You school your face to show nothing, Jean-Claude, but I read the horror in your eyes.”

Jean-Claude’s skin had gone back to its usual milky perfection. His face was still lovely, perfect, but at least he’d stopped glowing. His midnight blue eyes were just eyes now. He was still beautiful, but it was a nearly human beauty. “Is it not worth a little horror?” he asked.

Sabin smiled, and I wished he hadn't. The muscles on the rotted side didn't work, and his mouth hung crooked. I glanced away, then made myself look back. If he could be trapped inside that face, I could look at it.

"Then you will help me?"

"I would aid you if I could, but it is Anita you have come to ask. She must give her own answer."

"Well, Ms. Blake?"

"I don't know how to help you," I repeated.

"Do you understand how dire my circumstances are, Ms. Blake? The true horror of it, do you grasp it?"

"The rot probably won't kill you, but it's progressive, I take it?"

"Oh, yes, it's progressive, virulently so."

"I would help you if I could, Sabin, but what can I do that Dumare can't? He's a necromancer, maybe as powerful as I am, maybe more. Why do you need me?"

"I realize, Ms. Blake, that you don't have something specifically for Sabin's problem," Dumare said. "As far as I can discover, he is the only vampire to ever suffer such a fate, but I thought if we came to another necromancer as powerful as myself—" he smiled modestly "—or nearly as powerful as myself, perhaps together we could work up a spell to help him."

"A spell?" I glanced at Jean-Claude.

He gave that wonderful Gallic shrug that meant everything and nothing. "I know little of necromancy, *ma petite*. You would know if such a spell were possible more than I."

"It is not only your ability as a necromancer that has brought us to you," Dumare said. "You have also acted as a focus for at least two different animators, I believe that is the American word for what you do."

I nodded. "The word's right, but where did you hear I could act as a focus?"

"Come, Ms. Blake, the ability to combine another animator's powers with your own and thus magnify both powers is a rare talent."

"Can you act as a focus?" I asked.

He tried to look humble but actually looked pleased with himself. "I must confess, yes, I can act as a focus. Think of what the two of us could accomplish together."

“We could raise a hell of a lot of zombies, but that won’t cure Sabin.”

“True enough.” Dumare leaned forward in his chair. His lean, handsome face flushed, eager, a true convert looking for disciples.

I wasn’t much of a follower.

“I would offer to teach you true necromancy, not this voodoo dabbling that you’ve been doing.”

Jean-Claude made a soft sound halfway between a laugh and a cough.

I glared at Jean-Claude’s amused face but said, “I’m doing just fine with this voodoo dabbling.”

“I meant no insult, Ms. Blake. You will need a teacher of some sort soon. If not me, then you must find someone else.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Control, Ms. Blake. Raw power, no matter how impressive, is not the same as power used with great care and great control.”

I shook my head. “I’ll help you if I can, Mr. Dumare. I’ll even participate in a spell if I check it out with a local witch I know first.”

“Afraid that I will try and steal your power?”

I smiled. “No, short of killing me, the best you or anyone else can do is borrow.”

“You are wise beyond your years, Ms. Blake.”

“You aren’t that much older than I am,” I said. Something crossed over his face, the faintest flicker, and I knew.

“You’re his human servant, aren’t you?”

Dominic smiled, spreading his hands. “*Oui.*”

I sighed. “I thought you said you weren’t trying to hide anything from me.”

“A human servant’s job is to be the daytime eyes and ears of his master. I am of no use to my master if vampire hunters can spot me for what I am.”

“I spotted you.”

“But in another situation, without Sabin at my side, would you have?”

I thought about that for a moment. “Maybe.” I shook my head. “I don’t know.”

“Thank you for your honesty, Ms. Blake.”

Sabin said, “I am sure our time is up. Jean-Claude said you

had a pressing engagement, Ms. Blake. Much more important than my little problem.” There was a little bite to that last.

“*Ma petite* has a date with her other beau.”

Sabin stared at Jean-Claude. “So you are truly allowing her to date another. I thought that at least must be rumor.”

“Very little of what you hear about *ma petite* is rumor. Believe all you hear.”

Sabin chuckled, coughing, as if struggling to keep the laughter from spilling out his ruined mouth. “If I believed everything I heard, I would have come with an army.”

“You came with one servant because I allowed you only one servant,” Jean-Claude said.

Sabin smiled. “Too true. Come Dominic, we must not take more of Ms. Blake’s so valuable time.”

Dominic stood obediently, towering over us both. Sabin was around my height. Of course, I wasn’t sure if his legs were still there. He might have been taller once.

“I don’t like you, Sabin, but I would never willingly leave another being in the shape you’re in. My plans tonight are important, but if I thought we could cure you immediately, I’d change them.”

The vampire looked at me. His blue, blue eyes were like staring down into clear ocean water. There was no pull to them. Either he was behaving himself or, like most vampires, he couldn’t roll me with his eyes anymore.

“Thank you, Ms. Blake. I believe you are sincere.” He extended a gloved hand from the voluminous cloak.

I hesitated, then took it. His hand squished ever so slightly, and it took a lot not to jerk back. I forced myself to shake his hand, to smile, to let go, and not to rub my hand on my skirt.

Dominic shook my hand as well. His was cool and dry. “Thank you for your time, Ms. Blake. I will contact you tomorrow and we will discuss things.”

“I’ll be expecting your call, Mr. Dumare.”

“Call me, Dominic, please.”

I nodded. “Dominic. We can discuss it, but I hate to take your money when I’m not sure that I can help you.”

“May I call you Anita?” he asked.

I hesitated and shrugged. “Why not?”

“Don’t worry about money,” Sabin said, “I have plenty of that for all the good it has done me.”

“How is the woman you love taking the change in your appearance?” Jean-Claude asked.

Sabin looked at him. It was not a friendly look. “She finds it repulsive, as do I. She feels immense guilt. She has not left me, nor is she with me.”

“You’d lived for close to seven hundred years,” I said. “Why screw things up for a woman?”

Sabin turned to me, a line of ooze creeping down his face like a black tear. “Are you asking me if it was worth it, Ms. Blake?”

I swallowed and shook my head. “It’s none of my business. I’m sorry I asked.”

He drew the hood over his face. He turned back to me, black, a cup of shadows where his face should have been. “She was going to leave me, Ms. Blake. I thought that I would sacrifice anything to keep her by my side, in my bed. I was wrong.” He turned that blackness to Jean-Claude. “We will see you tomorrow night, Jean-Claude.”

“I look forward to it.”

Neither vampire offered to shake hands. Sabin glided for the door, the robe trailing behind him, empty. I wondered how much of his lower body was left and decided I didn’t want to know.

Dominic shook my hand again. “Thank you, Anita. You have given us hope.” He held my hand and stared into my face as if he could read something there. “And do think about my offer to teach you. There are very few of us who are true necromancers.”

I took back my hand. “I’ll think about it. Now I really do have to go.”

He smiled, held the door for Sabin, and out they went. Jean-Claude and I stood a moment in silence. I broke it first. “Can you trust them?”

Jean-Claude sat on the edge of my desk, smiling. “Of course not.”

“Then why did you agree to let them come?”

“The council has declared that no master vampires in the United States may quarrel until that nasty law that is floating around Washington is dead. One undead war, and the anti-vampire lobby would push through the law and make us illegal again.”

I shook my head. "I don't think Brewster's Law has a snowball's chance. Vampires are legal in the United States. Whether I agree with it or not, I don't think that's going to change."

"How can you be so sure?"

"It's sort of hard to say a group of beings is alive and has rights, then change your mind and say killing them on sight is okay again. The ACLU would have a field day."

He smiled. "Perhaps. Regardless, the council has forced a truce on all of us until the law is decided one way or another."

"So you can let Sabin in your territory, because if he misbehaves, the council will hunt him down and kill him."

Jean-Claude nodded.

"But you'd still be dead," I said.

He spread his hands, graceful, empty. "Nothing's perfect."

I laughed. "I guess not."

"Now, aren't you going to be late for your date with Monsieur Zeeman?"

"You're being awfully civilized about this," I said.

"Tomorrow night you will be with me, *ma petite*. I would be a poor . . . sport to begrudge Richard his night."

"You're usually a poor sport."

"Now, *ma petite*, that is hardly fair. Richard is not dead, is he?"

"Only because you know that if you kill him, I'll kill you." I held a hand up before he could say it. "I'd try to kill you, and you'd try to kill me, etc." This was an old argument.

"So, Richard lives, you date us both, and I am being patient. More patient than I have ever been with anyone."

I studied his face. He was one of those men who was beautiful rather than handsome, but the face was masculine; you wouldn't mistake him for female, even with the long hair. In fact, there was something terribly masculine about Jean-Claude, no matter how much lace he wore.

He could be mine: lock, stock, and fangs. I just wasn't sure I wanted him. "I've got to go," I said.

He pushed away from my desk. He was suddenly standing close enough to touch. "Then go, *ma petite*."

I could feel his body inches from mine like a shimmering energy. I had to swallow before I could speak. "It's my office. You have to leave."

He touched my arms lightly, a brush of fingertips. "Enjoy your evening, *ma petite*." His fingers wrapped around my arms, just below the shoulders. He didn't lean over me or draw me that last inch closer. He simply held my arms, and stared down at me.

I met his dark, dark blue eyes. There had been a time not so long ago that I couldn't have met his gaze without falling into it and being lost. Now I could meet his eyes, but in some ways, I was just as lost. I raised up on tiptoe, putting my face close to his.

"I should have killed you a long time ago."

"You have had your chances, *ma petite*. You keep saving me."

"My mistake," I said.

He laughed, and the sound slid down my body like fur against naked skin. I shuddered in his arms.

"Stop that," I said.

He kissed me lightly, a brush of lips, so I couldn't feel the fangs. "You would miss me if I were gone, *ma petite*. Admit it."

I drew away from him. His hands slid down my arms, over my hands, until I drew my fingertips across his hands. "I've got to go."

"So you said."

"Just get out, Jean-Claude, no more games."

His face sobered instantly as if a hand had wiped it clean. "No more games, *ma petite*. Go to your other lover." It was his turn to raise a hand and say, "I know you are not truly lovers. I know you are resisting both of us. Brave, *ma petite*." A flash of something, maybe anger, crossed his face and was gone like a ripple lost in dark water.

"Tomorrow night you will be with me and it will be Richard's turn to sit at home and wonder." He shook his head. "Even for you I would not have done what Sabin has done. Even for your love, there are things I would not do." He stared at me suddenly fierce, anger flaring through his eyes, his face. "But what I do is enough."

"Don't go all self-righteous on me," I said. "If you hadn't interfered, Richard and I would be engaged, maybe more, by now."

"And what? You would be living behind a white picket

fence with two point whatever children. I think you lie to yourself more than to me, Anita.”

It was always a bad sign when he used my real name. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means, *ma petite*, that you are as likely to thrive in domestic bliss as I am.” With that, he glided to the door and left. He closed the door quietly but firmly behind him.

Domestic bliss? Who me? My life was a cross between a preternatural soap opera and an action adventure movie. Sort of *As the Casket Turns* meets *Rambo*. White picket fences didn’t fit. Jean-Claude was right about that.

I had the entire weekend off. It was the first time in months. I’d been looking forward to this evening all week. But truthfully, it wasn’t Jean-Claude’s nearly perfect face that was haunting me. I kept flashing on Sabin’s face. Eternal life, eternal pain, eternal ugliness. Nice afterlife.

2

THERE WERE THREE kinds of people at Catherine's dinner party: the living, the dead, and the occasionally furry. Out of the eight of us, six were human, and I wasn't sure about two of those, myself included.

I wore black pants, a black velvet jacket with white satin lapels, and an oversized white vest that doubled for a shirt. The Browning 9mm actually matched the outfit, but I kept it hidden. This was the first party Catherine had thrown since her wedding. Flashing a gun might put a damper on things.

I'd had to take off the silver cross that I always wore and put it in my pocket because there was a vampire standing in front of me and the cross had started glowing when he entered the room. If I'd known there were going to be vamps at the party, I'd have worn a collar high enough to hide the cross. They only glow when they're out in the open, generally speaking.

Robert, the vampire in question, was tall, muscular, and handsome in a model-perfect sort of way. He had been a stripper at Guilty Pleasures. Now he managed the club. From worker to management: the American dream. His hair was blond, curly, and cut quite short. He was wearing a brown silk shirt that fit him perfectly and matched the dress that his date was wearing.

Monica Vespucci's health club tan had faded around the edges, but her makeup was still perfect, her short auburn hair styled into place. She was pregnant enough for me to have noticed and happy enough about it to be irritating.

She smiled brilliantly at me. "Anita, it has been too long."

What I wanted to say was, "Not long enough." The last time

I'd seen her, she had betrayed me to the local master vampire. But Catherine thought she was her friend, and it was hard to disillusion her without telling the whole story. The whole story included some unsanctioned killing, some of it done by me. Catherine's a lawyer and a stickler for law and order. I didn't want to put her in a position where she had to compromise her morals to save my ass. So Monica was her friend, which meant I had been polite all through dinner, from appetizer all the way to dessert. I'd been polite mainly because Monica had been at the other end of the table. Now, unfortunately, we were mingling in the living room and I couldn't seem to shake her.

"It doesn't seem that long," I said.

"It's been almost a year." She smiled up at Robert. They were holding hands. "We got married." She touched her glass to the top of her belly. "We got knocked up." She giggled.

I stared at them both. "You can't get knocked up by a hundred-year-old corpse." Okay, I'd been polite long enough.

Monica grinned at me. "You can if the body temperature is raised for long enough and you have sex often enough. My obstetrician thinks the hot tub did us in."

This was more than I wanted to know. "Have you had the amnio yet?"

The smile faded from her face, leaving her eyes haunted. I was sorry I'd asked. "We've got another week to wait."

"I'm sorry, Monica, Robert. I hope the test comes back clean." I did not mention Vlad syndrome, but the words hung on the air. It was rare but not as rare as it used to be. Three years of legalized vampirism and Vlad syndrome was the highest rising birth defect in the country. It could result in some really horrible disabilities, not to mention death for the baby. With that much at stake, you'd think people would be more cautious.

Robert cradled her against him, and all the light had faded from her face. She looked pale. I felt like a heel.

"The latest news was that a vampire over a hundred was sterile," I said. "They should update their information, I guess." I meant for it to be comforting, like they hadn't been careless.

Monica looked at me, and there was no gentleness in her eyes when she said, "Worried?"

I stared at her all pale and pregnant and wanted to slap her

anyway. I was not sleeping with Jean-Claude. But I was not going to stand there and justify myself to Monica Vespucci—or anyone else, for that matter.

Richard Zeeman entered the room. I didn't actually see him enter. I felt it. I turned and watched him walk towards us. He was six foot one, nearly a foot taller than me. Another inch and we couldn't have kissed without a chair. But it would have been worth the effort. He wove between the other guests, saying a word here and there. His smile flashed white and perfect in his permanently tanned skin as he talked to these new friends that he'd managed to charm at dinner. Not with sex appeal or power but with sheer good will. He was the world's biggest boy scout, the original hail fellow, well met. He liked people and was a wonderful listener, two qualities that are highly underrated.

His suit was dark brown, his shirt a deep orangey gold. The tie was a brighter orange with a line of small figures down the middle of it. You had to be standing right next to him to realize the figures were Warner Brothers cartoons.

He'd tied his shoulder-length hair back from his face in a version of a french braid, so the illusion was that his brown hair was very short. It left his face clean and very visible. His cheekbones were perfect, sculpted high and graceful. His face was masculine, handsome, with a dimple to soften it. It was the kind of face that would have made me shy in high school.

He noticed me watching him and smiled. His brown eyes sparkled with the smile, filling with heat that had nothing to do with room temperature. I watched him walk the last few feet, and felt heat rise up my neck into my face. I wanted to undress him, to touch his bare skin, to see what was under that suit. I wanted that very badly. I wouldn't, because I wasn't sleeping with Richard, either. I wasn't sleeping with the vampire or the werewolf. Richard was the werewolf. It was his only fault. Okay, maybe one other: he'd never killed anybody. That last fault might get him killed someday.

I slid my left arm around his waist, under the unbuttoned jacket. The solid warmth of him beat like a pulse against my body. If we didn't have sex soon, I was simply going to explode. What price morals?

Monica stared at me very steadily, studying my face. "That's a lovely necklace. Who got it for you?"

I smiled and shook my head. I was wearing a black velvet choker with a cameo, edged by silver filigree. Hey, it matched the outfit. Monica was pretty sure Richard hadn't given it to me, which meant, to Monica, that Jean-Claude had. Good old Monica. She never changed.

"I bought it to match the outfit," I said.

She widened her eyes in surprise. "Oh, really?" like she didn't believe me.

"Really. I'm not much into gifts, especially jewelry."

Richard hugged me. "That's the truth. She's a very hard woman to spoil."

Catherine joined us. Her copper-colored hair flowed around her face in a wavy mass. She was the only one I knew with curlier hair than mine, but its color was more spectacular. If asked, most people described her from the hair outward. Delicate makeup hid the freckles and drew attention to her pale, grey green eyes. Her dress was the color of new leaves. I'd never seen her look better.

"Marriage seems to agree with you," I said, smiling.

She smiled back. "You should try it sometime."

I shook my head. "Thanks a lot."

"I have to steal Anita away for just a moment." At least she didn't say she needed help in the kitchen. Richard would have known that was a lie. He was a much better cook than I was.

Catherine led me back to the spare bedroom where the coats were piled in a heap. There was one real fur coat draped over the pile. I was betting I knew who owned it. Monica liked being close to dead things.

As soon as the door was shut, Catherine grabbed my hands and giggled, I swear. "Richard is wonderful. My junior high science teachers never looked like that."

I smiled, and it was one of those big, dopey smiles. The silly kind that say you're in horrible lust if not love, maybe both, and it feels good even if it is stupid.

We sat down on the bed, pushing the coats to one side. "He is handsome," I said, my voice as neutral as I could make it.

"Anita, don't give me that. I've never seen you glow around anyone."

"I don't glow."

She grinned at me and nodded. "Yes, you do."

“Do not,” I said, but it was hard to be sullen when I wanted to smile. “All right, I like him, a lot. Happy?”

“You’ve been dating him for nearly seven months. Where’s the engagement ring?”

I did frown at her then. “Catherine, just because you’re deliriously happily married doesn’t mean everyone else has to be married, too.”

She shrugged and laughed.

I stared into her shining face and shook my head. There had to be more to Bob than met the eye. He was about thirty pounds heavier than he should have been, balding, with small round glasses on a rather nondescript face. He did not have a sparkling personality, either. I’d been ready to give her the thumbs down until I saw the way he looked at Catherine. He looked at her like she was the whole world, and it was a nice, safe, wonderful world. A lot of people are pretty, and clever repartee is on every television set, but dependability, that’s rare.

“I didn’t bring Richard here to get your stamp of approval; I knew you’d like him.”

“Then why did you keep him such a secret? I’ve tried to meet him a dozen times.”

I shrugged. The truth was because I knew she’d get that light in her eyes. That maniacal gleam that your married friends get when you’re not married and you’re dating anyone. Or worse yet, not dating, and they’re trying to fix you up. Catherine had the look now.

“Don’t tell me you planned this entire party just so you could meet Richard?”

“Partly. How else was I ever going to?”

There was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” Catherine said.

Bob opened the door. He still looked ordinary to me, but from the light in Catherine’s face, she saw something else. He smiled at her. The smile made his whole face glow and I could see something shining and fine. Love makes us all beautiful. “Sorry to interrupt the girl talk, but there’s a phone call for Anita.”

“Did they say who it is?”

“Ted Forrester; says it’s business.”

My eyes widened. Ted Forrester was an alias for a man I

knew as Edward. He was a hit man who specialized in vampires, lycanthropes, or anything else that wasn't quite human. I was a licensed vampire hunter. Occasionally, our paths crossed. We might even on some level be friends, maybe.

"Who's Ted Forrester?" Catherine asked.

"Bounty hunter," I said. Ted, Edward's alias, was a bounty hunter with papers to prove it, all nice and legal. I stood and went for the door.

"Is something wrong?" Catherine asked. Not much got past her, which was one of the reasons I avoided her when I was ass deep in alligators. She was smart enough to figure out when things were off-center but she didn't carry a gun. If you can't defend yourself, you are cannon fodder. The only thing that kept Richard from being cannon fodder was that he was a werewolf. Although refusing to kill people made him almost cannon fodder, shapeshifter or not.

"I was just hoping not to have to do any work tonight," I said.

"I thought you had the entire weekend off," she said.

"So did I."

I took the phone in the home office they'd set up. They'd divided the room down the middle. One half was decorated in country with teddy bears and miniature gingham rockers, the other half was masculine with hunting prints and a ship in a bottle on the desk. Compromise at its best.

I picked up the phone and said. "Hello?"

"It's Edward."

"How did you get this number?"

He was quiet for a second. "Child's play."

"Why did you hunt me down, Edward? What's up?"

"Interesting choice of words," he said.

"What are you talking about?"

"I was just offered a contract on your life, for enough money to make it worth my while."

It was my turn to be quiet. "Did you take it?"

"Would I be calling you if I had?"

"Maybe," I said.

He laughed. "True, but I'm not going to take it."

"Why not?"

"Friendship."

"Try again," I said.

"I figure I'll get to kill more people guarding you. If I take the contract, I only get to kill you."

"Comforting. Did you say guard?"

"I'll be in town tomorrow."

"You're that sure someone else will take the contract?"

"I don't even open my door for less than a hundred grand, Anita. Someone will take the hit, and it'll be someone good. Not as good as me, but good."

"Any advice until you get into town?"

"I haven't given them my answer yet. That'll delay them. Once I say no, it'll take a little time to contact another hitter. You should be safe tonight. Enjoy your weekend off."

"How did you know I had the weekend off?"

"Craig is a very talkative secretary. Very helpful."

"I'll have to speak to him about that," I said.

"You do that."

"You're sure that there won't be a hitter in town tonight?"

"Nothing in life is sure, Anita, but I wouldn't like it if a client tried to hire me and then gave the job to someone else."

"You lose many clients at your own hands?" I asked.

"No comment," he said.

"So one last night of safety," I said.

"Probably, but be careful anyway."

"Who put the hit out on me?"

"I don't know," Edward said.

"What do you mean, you don't know? You have to know so you can get paid."

"I go through intermediaries most of the time. Keeps down the chance that the next client is a cop."

"How do you find wayward clients if they piss you off?"

"I can find them, but it takes time. Anita, if you've got a really good hitter on your tail, time is something you won't have."

"Oh, that was comforting."

"It wasn't supposed to be comforting," he said, "Can you think of anyone who hates you so badly and has this kind of money?"

I thought about that for a minute. "No. Most of the people that would fit the bill are dead."

"The only good enemy is a dead enemy," Edward said.

"Yeah."

“I heard a rumor that you’re dating the master of the city. Is that true?”

I hesitated. I realized I was embarrassed to admit the truth to Edward. “Yeah, it’s true.”

“I had to hear you say it.” I could almost hear him shake his head over the phone. “Damn, Anita, you know better than that.”

“I know,” I said.

“Did you dump Richard?”

“No.”

“Which monster are you with tonight, bloodsucker or flesh-eater?”

“None of your damn business,” I said.

“Fine. Pick the monster of your choice tonight, Anita, have a good time. Tomorrow we start trying to keep you alive.” He hung up. If it had been anybody else, I’d have said he was angry about me dating a vampire. Or maybe *disappointed* would be a better word.

I hung up the phone and sat there for a few minutes, letting it all sink in. Someone was trying to kill me. Nothing new there, but this someone was hiring expert help. That was new. I’d never had an assassin after my butt before. I waited to feel fear wash over me, but it didn’t. Oh, in a vague sort of way, I was afraid, but not like I should have been. It wasn’t that I didn’t believe it could happen. I did believe. It was more that so much else had happened in the last year that I couldn’t get too excited yet. If the assassin jumped out and started shooting, I’d deal with it. Maybe later I’d even have an attack of nerves. But I didn’t get many attacks of nerves anymore. Part of me was numbing out like a combat veteran. There was just too much to take in, so you stop taking it in. I almost wished I had been scared. Fear will keep you alive; indifference won’t.

Somewhere out there, by tomorrow, someone would have my name on a to-do list. Pick up dry cleaning, buy groceries, kill Anita Blake.