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# 1

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I WAS COVERED in blood, but it wasn't mine, so it was okay. Not only was it not my blood, but it was all animal blood. If the worst casualties of the night were six chickens and a goat, I could live with it, and so could everyone else. I'd raised seven corpses in one night. It was a record even for me.

I pulled into my driveway at a quarter 'til dawn with the sky still dark and star-filled. I left the Jeep in the driveway, too tired to mess with the garage. It was May, but it felt like April. Spring in St. Louis was usually a two-day event between the end of winter and the beginning of summer. One day you were freezing your ass off and the next day it'd be eighty plus. But this year it had been spring, a wet gentle spring.

Except for the high number of zombies I'd raised, it had been a typical night. Everything from raising a civil war soldier for a local historical society to question, to a will that needed a final signature, to a son's last confrontation with his abusive mother. I'd been neck deep in lawyers and therapists most of the night. If I heard, "How does that make you feel, Jonathan (or Cathy, or whoever)?" one more time tonight, I'd scream. I did not want to watch one more person "go with his or her feelings" ever. At least with most of the lawyers the bereaved didn't come to the graveside. The court-appointed lawyer would ascertain that the zombies raised had enough cognitive ability to know what they were signing, then he would sign off on the contract as a witness. If the zombie couldn't answer the questions, then no legal signature. The corpse had to be of "sound" mind to sign a legally binding signature. I'd never raised a zombie that couldn't pass the legal definition of soundness, but it happened sometimes. Jamison, a fellow animator at

Animator's Inc., had a pair of lawyers come to blows on top of the grave. What fun.

The air was cool enough to make me shiver as I walked down the sidewalk to my door. I could hear the phone ringing as I fumbled the key into the lock. I hit the door with my shoulder because no one ever calls just before dawn unless it's important. For me that usually meant the police, which meant a murder scene. I kicked the door closed and ran for the phone in the kitchen. My answering machine had clicked on. My voice died on the machine and Edward's voice came on.

"Anita, it's Edward. If you're there, pick up." Silence.

I was running full out and skidded on my high heels, grabbing the receiver as I slid into the wall and nearly dropped the phone. I yelled into the receiver as I juggled the phone, "Edward, Edward, it's me! I'm here!"

Edward was laughing softly when I could finally hear him.

"Glad I could be amusing. What's up?" I asked.

"I'm calling in my favor," he said quietly.

It was my turn for silence. Once upon a time Edward had come to my aid, been my backup. He'd brought a friend, Harley, with him as more backup. I'd ended up killing Harley. Now, Harley had tried to kill me first, and I'd just been quicker, but Edward had taken the killing personally. Picky, picky. Edward had given me a choice: either he and I could draw down on each other and find out once and for all which of us was better, or I could owe him a favor. Some day he would call me up and ask for me to be his backup like Harley. I'd agreed to the favor. I never wanted to come up against Edward for real. Because if I did, I was pretty sure I'd end up dead.

Edward was a hit man. He specialized in monsters. Vampires, shapeshifters, anything and everything. There were people like me that did it legal, but Edward didn't sweat the legalities, or hell, the ethics. He even occasionally did a human, but only if they had some sort of dangerous reputation. Other assassins, criminals, bad men, or women. Edward was an equal opportunity killer. He never discriminated, not for sex, religion, race, or even species. If it was dangerous, Edward would hunt it and kill it. It's what he lived for, what he was—a predator's predator.

He'd been offered a contract on my life once. He'd turned it down and had come to town as my bodyguard, bringing Har-

ley with him. I'd asked him why he hadn't taken the contract. His answer had been simple. If he took the contract, he only got to kill me. If he protected me, he thought he'd get to kill more people. Perfect Edward reasoning.

He's either a sociopath or so close it makes little difference. I may be one of the few friends that Edward has, but it's like being friends with a tame leopard. It may curl on the foot of your bed and let you pet its head, but it can still eat your throat out. It just won't do it tonight.

"Anita, you still there?"

"I'm here, Edward."

"You don't sound happy to hear from me."

"Let's just say I'm cautious," I said.

He laughed again. "Cautious. No, you're not cautious. You're suspicious."

"Yeah," I said. "So what's the favor?"

"I need backup," he said.

"What could be so terrible that Death needs backup?"

"Ted Forrester needs backup from Anita Blake, vampire executioner."

Ted Forrester was Edward's alter ego, his only legal identity that I was aware of. Ted was a bounty hunter who specialized in preternatural creatures that weren't vampires. As a general rule vamps were a specialty item, which was one of the reasons that there were licensed vamp executioners but not licensed anything else executioners. Maybe vampires just have a better political lobby, but whatever, they get the most press. Bounty hunters like Ted filled in the blanks between the police and the licensed executioners. They worked mostly in rancher-run states where it was still legal to hunt down varmints and kill them for money. Varmints still included lycanthropes. You could shoot them on sight in about six states as long as later a blood test proves they were lycanthropes. Some of the killings had been taken to court and were being contested, but nothing had changed yet on a local level.

"So, what does Ted need me for?" Though truthfully I was relieved that it was Ted asking and not Edward. Edward on his own probably meant illegal, maybe even murder. I wasn't quite into cold-blooded murder. Not yet.

"Come to Santa Fe and find out," he said.

"New Mexico? Santa Fe, New Mexico?"

“Yes.”

“When?” I asked.

“Now.”

“Since I’m coming as Anita Blake, vamp executioner, I can flash my executioner’s license and bring my arsenal.”

“Bring what you want,” Edward said. “I’ll share my toys with you when you arrive.”

“I haven’t been to bed yet. Do I have time to get some sleep before I get on a plane?”

“Get a few hours’ sleep, but be here by afternoon. We’ve moved the bodies, but we’re saving the rest of the crime scene for you.”

“What sort of crime scene?”

“I’d say murder, but that’s not quite the right word. Slaughter, butcher, torture. Yes,” he said, as if trying the word over in his mind, “a torture scene.”

“Are you trying to scare me?” I asked.

“No,” he said.

“Then stop the theatrics and just tell me what the hell happened.”

He sighed, and for the first time I heard a dragging tiredness in his voice. “We’ve got ten missing. Twelve confirmed dead.”

“Shit,” I said. “Why haven’t I heard anything on the news?”

“The disappearances made the tabloids. I think the headline was, ‘Bermuda Triangle in the Desert.’ The twelve dead were three families. Neighbors just found them today.”

“How long had they been dead?” I asked.

“Days, nearly two weeks for one family.”

“Jesus, why didn’t someone miss them sooner?”

“In the last ten years almost the entire population of Santa Fe has changed. We’ve got a huge influx of new people. Plus a lot of people have what amounts to vacation homes up here. The locals call the newcomers Californicators.”

“Cute,” I said, “but is Ted Forrester a local?”

“Ted lives near the city, yeah.”

A thrill went through me from the soles of my feet to the top of my head. Edward was the ultimate mystery man. I knew almost nothing about him, really. “Does this mean I get to see where you live?”

“You’ll be staying with Ted Forrester,” he said.

"But you're Ted Forrester, Edward. I'll be staying at your house, right?"

He was quiet for a heartbeat, then, "Yes."

Suddenly, the whole trip seemed much more attractive. I was going to see Edward's house. I was going to be able to pry into his personal life, if he had one. What could be better?

Though one thing was bothering me. "When you said families were the victims, does that include kids?"

"Strangely, no," he said.

"Well, thank goodness for small blessings," I said.

"You always were a soft touch for the kiddies," he said.

"Does it really not bother you to see dead children?"

"No," he said.

I just listened to him breathe for a second or two. I knew that nothing bothered Edward. Nothing moved him. But children . . . every cop I knew hated to go to a scene where the vic was a child. There was something personal about it. Even those of us without children took it hard. That Edward didn't, bothered me. Funny, but it did.

"It bothers me," I said.

"I know," he said, "one of your more serious faults." There was an edge of humor to his voice.

"The fact that you're a sociopath, and that I'm not, is one of the things I take great pride in."

"You don't have to be a sociopath to back me up, just a shooter, and you are that, Anita. You kill as easily as I do, if the circumstances are right."

I didn't try and argue, because I couldn't. I decided to concentrate on the crime instead of my moral decay. "So Santa Fe has a large transient population."

"Not transient," Edward said, "but mobile, very mobile. We have a lot of tourism, and a lot of people moving in and out on a semi-permanent basis."

"So no one knows their neighbors," I said, "or what their schedules should be."

"Exactly." His voice was bland, empty, with that thread of tiredness underneath, and under that was something else. A tone—something.

"You think there's more bodies that you haven't found yet," I said. I made it a statement.

He was quiet for a second, then said, "You heard it in my voice, didn't you?"

"Yeah," I said.

"I'm not sure I like that. You being able to read me that well."

"Sorry. I'll try to be less intuitive."

"Don't bother. Your intuition is one of the things that's kept you alive this long."

"Are you making a joke about women's intuition?" I asked.

"No, I'm saying that you're someone who works from your gut, your emotions, not your head. It's a strength for you, and a weakness."

"Too tenderhearted, am I?"

"Sometimes, and sometimes you're just as dead inside as I am."

Hearing him state it like that was almost scary. Not that he was including me in the same breath as himself, but that Edward knew something had died inside of him.

"You ever miss the parts that are gone?" I asked. It was the closest thing to a personal question I'd ever asked him.

"No," he said. "Do you?"

I thought about that for a moment. I started to say yes, automatically, then stopped myself. Truth, always truth between us. "No, I guess I don't."

He made a small sound, almost a laugh. "That's my girl."

I was both flattered and vaguely irritated that I was "his girl." When in doubt, concentrate on the job. "What kind of monster is it, Edward?" I asked.

"I've no idea."

That stopped me. Edward had been hunting preternatural bad guys years longer than I had. He knew monsters almost as well as I did, and he'd traveled the world killing monsters, so he had firsthand knowledge of things I'd only read about.

"What do you mean, you have no idea?"

"I've never seen anything kill like this, Anita." I heard an undercurrent in his voice that I'd almost never heard—fear. Edward, whose nickname among the vamps and shapeshifters was Death, was afraid. It was a very bad sign.

"You're shook, Edward. That's not like you."

"Wait until you see the victims. I've saved you photos of the other scenes, but the last one I kept intact, just for you."

“How did the local law enforcement like putting a ribbon around a crime scene and wrapping it up just for little ol’ me?”

“The local cops all like Ted. He’s a good ol’ boy. If Ted tells them you can help, they believe him.”

“But you’re Ted Forrester,” I said, “and you’re not a good ol’ boy.”

“But Ted is,” he said, voice empty.

“Your secret identity,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Fine, I’ll fly into Santa Fe this afternoon, or early evening.”

“Fly into Albuquerque instead. I’ll meet you at the airport. Just call me and give me the time.”

“I can rent a car,” I said

“I’ll be in Albuquerque on other business. It’s not a problem.”

“What aren’t you telling me?” I asked.

“Me, keeping secrets?” There was a thread of amusement in his voice again.

“You’re the original mystery man, Edward. You love keeping secrets. It gives you a sense of power.”

“Does it?” he made it a question.

“Yeah, it does.”

He laughed softly. “Maybe it does. Make the ticket reservations and call me with the flight times. I’ve got to go.” His voice went low as if someone else had come into the room.

I hadn’t asked what the urgency was. Ten missing, twelve confirmed dead. It was urgent. I hadn’t asked if he’d be waiting for my call. Edward, who never spooked, was scared. He’d be waiting for my call.

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IT TURNED OUT that the only flight I could get that wasn't full was a noon flight, which meant I got about five hours of sleep before I had to get up and run for the airport. I also missed Kenpo class, a type of karate that I'd just started a few weeks ago. I'd have much rather been in class than on a plane. I hate to fly. I'd driven to as many of the out of town appointments as possible, but I'd been doing a lot of flying lately. It had lessened the actual terror, but I was still phobic. I hated to be in a plane being flown by someone I didn't know, who I had not personally drug tested. I just wasn't the trusting sort.

Neither are the airlines. Carrying a concealed weapon on a plane was a pain in the ass. I'd had to take the two-hour FAA course on carrying concealed on a plane. I had a certificate to prove I'd taken the course. I could not get on the plane without the certificate. I also had a letter stating that I was on official business that required me to carry a gun. Sergeant Rudolf (Dolf) Storr, head of the Regional Preternatural Investigation Team, had faxed me the letter on taskforce letterhead, always impressive. Someone who was a real policeperson had to give me something to legitimize my status. If it were real police business, even if Dolf weren't directly involved, he'd usually give me what I needed. If Edward had called me in to help in an unofficial case, i.e., illegal, I would have avoided Dolf. Mr. Law and Order wasn't real fond of Edward, a.k.a. Ted Forrester. "Ted" was around a lot when there were bodies on the ground. It made Dolf not trust him.

I did not look out the window. I read and tried to pretend I was on a very cramped bus. I'd finally figured out that one of the reasons I didn't like to fly was that I also have claustrophobia. A 727 full of people was close enough to make it hard



to breathe. I turned the little fan above my seat on high and read. I was reading Sharon Shinn. She was an author that I trusted to hold my attention even hundreds of feet above the ground with a thin metal sheet between me and eternity.

So I can't tell you what Albuquerque looks like from the air, and the little walkway that led into the airport was like every other one I'd ever walked through. Even in the tunnel you could feel the heat pressing like a giant hand hovering over the thin plastic. It may have been spring in St. Louis, but it was summer in Albuquerque. I scanned the crowd for Edward and actually looked past him once before realizing it was him. Part of it was the fact that he was wearing a hat, a cowboy hat. There was a fan of feathers tucked into the front of the hat band, but it had the look of a hat that had been worn well. The brim was curved back on both sides as if he'd worked at the stiff material until the brim had formed a new shape under the constant run of his hands. His shirt was white and short-sleeved like something you'd get at any department store. It was matched with dark blue jeans that looked new and a pair of hiking boots that weren't.

Hiking boots? Edward? He'd never impressed me as a country boy. No, definitely a city fellow, but there he stood, looking sort of down-homey and comfortable. It didn't look like Edward at all until I met his eyes. Wrap him up in whatever disguise you want, you could dress him like Prince Charming on a Disney float, but as long as you could glimpse his eyes, you would still run screaming.

His eyes are blue and cold as winter skies. He is the epitome of WASP breeding with his blond hair and slender paleness. He can look harmless if he wants to. He is the consummate actor, but unless he works at it, his eyes give him away. If the eyes are the mirror to the soul, then Edward's in trouble because no one is home.

He smiled at me, and it thawed his eyes to something close to warmth. He was glad to see me, genuinely glad. Or as glad as he ever was to see anyone. It wasn't comforting. In a way it was unnerving because one of the main reasons Edward liked me was that together we always got to kill more than we did apart. Or at least I did. For all I knew, Edward might have been mowing down entire armies when he wasn't with me.

"Anita," he said.

“Edward,” I said.

The smile turned into a grin. “You don’t seem happy to see me.”

“You being this happy to see me makes me nervous, Edward. You’re relieved I’m here, and that scares me.”

The grin faded, and I watched all the humor, all the welcome, drain out of his face like water leaving a glass through a crack—empty. “I’m not relieved,” he said, but his voice was too bland.

“Liar,” I said. I would have liked to say it softly, but the noise of the airport was like the crash of the ocean, a continuous roar.

He looked at me with those pitiless eyes and gave one small nod. An acknowledgment that he was relieved I arrived. Maybe he would have verbalized it, but suddenly a woman appeared at his side. She was smiling, her arms sliding around him until she cuddled against him. She looked thirtyish, older than Edward appeared, though I wasn’t sure of his actual age. Her hair was short, brown, a no-nonsense style, but flattering. She wore almost no makeup, but was still lovely. There were lines at her eyes and mouth that made me jump her from thirty to forty something. She was smaller than Edward, taller than me, but still petite, though she didn’t look soft. She was tanned darker than was healthy, which probably explained the lines on her face. There was a quiet strength to her as she stood there smiling at me, holding Edward’s arm.

She wore jeans that looked so neat they must have been pressed, a white short-sleeved shirt that was sheer enough that she’d put a spaghetti strap tank top under it, and a brown leather purse almost as large as my carry-on bag. I wondered for a second if Edward had picked her up from a plane, too, but there was something too fresh and unhurried about her. She hadn’t come off a plane.

“I’m Donna. You have to be Anita.” She held out her hand, and we shook. She had a firm handshake, and her hand wasn’t soft. She’d worked, this one had. She also knew how to shake hands. Most women never really got the knack of it. I liked her instantly, instinctively, and mistrusted the feeling just as quickly.

“Ted’s told me so much about you,” Donna said.

I glanced up at Edward. He was smiling, and even his eyes

were full of humor. The entire set of his face and body had changed. He slouched slightly, and the smile was lazy. He vibrated with good ol' boy charm. It was an Oscar-winning performance, as if he'd traded skins with someone else.

I looked at Edward/Ted and said, "He's told you a lot about me, has he?"

"Oh, yes," Donna said, touching my arm while still holding onto Edward. Of course, she would be a casual toucher. My shapeshifter friends were getting me accustomed to touchie-feelie stuff, but it still wasn't my best thing. What the hell was Edward—Ted—doing with this woman?

Edward spoke, but there was a slight Texas-like drawl to his voice like an old accent almost forgotten. Edward had no accent whatsoever. His voice was one of the cleanest and hardest to place I'd ever heard, as if even his voice was never touched by the places and people he saw.

"Anita Blake, I'd like you to meet Donna Parnell, my fiancée."

My jaw dropped to the carpet, and I just gaped at him. I usually try and be a little more sophisticated than that, or hell, more polite. I knew that astonishment, nay shock, showed, but I couldn't help it.

Donna laughed, and it was a good laugh, warm and chuckly, a good mom laugh. She squeezed Edward's arm. "Oh, you were right, Ted. Her reaction was worth the trip."

"Told ya, honey-pot," Edward said, hugging her and planting a kiss on the top of her head.

I closed my mouth and tried to recover. I managed to mumble, "That's . . . great. I mean really . . . I . . ." I finally extended my hand and said, "Congratulations." But I couldn't manage a smile.

Donna used the handshake to draw me into a hug. "Ted said you'd never believe he'd finally agreed to tie the knot." She hugged me again, laughing. "But, my god, girl, I've never seen such pure shock." She retreated back to Edward's arms and his smiling Ted face.

I am not nearly as good an actor as Edward. It's taken me years to perfect a blank face let alone outright lying by facial expression and body language. So I kept my face blank and tried to tell Edward with my eyes that he had some explaining to do.

With his face slightly turned from Donna, he gave me his close, secretive smile. Which pissed me off. Edward was enjoying his surprise. Damn him.

“Ted, where are your manners? Take her bag,” Donna said.

Edward and I both stared at the small carry-on bag I had in my left hand. He gave me Ted’s smile, but he said Edward’s line. “Anita likes to carry her own weight.”

Donna looked at me for confirmation as if this couldn’t possibly be true. Maybe she wasn’t as strong and independent as she appeared, or maybe she was a decade older than she appeared. A different generation, you know.

“Ted’s right,” I said, putting a little too much emphasis on his name. “I like to carry my own bags.”

Donna looked like she’d have liked to correct my obviously wrong thinking but was too polite to say it out loud. The expression, not the silence, reminded me of my stepmother Judith. Which made me push Donna’s age over fifty. She was either a mightily well preserved fifty-something, forty-something, or a sun-aged thirty-something. I just couldn’t tell.

They walked ahead of me through the airport, arm in arm. I followed behind them, not because my suitcase was too heavy but because I needed a few minutes to recover. I watched Donna bump her head against Edward’s shoulder, her face turning to him, smiling, glowing. Edward/Ted bent over her, face tender, whispering something that made her laugh.

I was going to be sick. What the hell was Edward doing with this woman? Was she another assassin, as good an actor as he was? Somehow I didn’t think so. And if she was exactly what she appeared—a woman in love with Ted Forrester, who didn’t exist—I was going to kick Edward’s metaphorical ass. How dare he involve some innocent woman in his cover story! Or—and this was a very strange thought—was Edward/Ted really in love? If you’d asked me ten minutes ago, I’d have said he wasn’t capable of such depth of emotion, but now . . . now I was just plain confused.

The Albuquerque airport broke my rule that all airports look nearly identical and you can’t really tell what part of the country, or even the world, that you’re in just from the airport. If there are decorations, they’re usually from a different culture entirely, like inland bars having seaside motifs. But not here. Here there were hints of a southwestern flavor everywhere.

Multi-colored tile or paint leaning to turquoise and cobalt blue lined most of the shops and store fronts. A small covered stand sold silver jewelry in the middle of the large hallway leading from the gates to the rest of the airport. We'd left the crowd behind and with it the noise. We moved in a world of nearly ringing silence, heightened by the white-white walls and the large windows on either side. Albuquerque stretched outside those windows like some great flat plain with a ring of black mountains at the edge, like the backdrop to a play, somehow unreal. The heat pressed down even through the air conditioning, not really hot, but letting you know it was going to be. The landscape was totally alien, adding to my sense of having been cut adrift. One of the things I liked about Edward is that he never changed. He was what he was, and now Edward, dependable in his own psychotic way, had thrown me a curve ball so wild I didn't even know how to swing at it.

Donna stopped and turned, drawing Edward with her. "Anita, that bag is just too heavy for you. Please let Ted carry it." She gave him a little good-natured push in my direction.

Edward walked towards me. Even his walk was a rolling sort of gait like someone who spent a lot of time on horseback or on a boat. He kept Ted's smile on his face. Only his eyes slipped and showed through the mask. Dead, those eyes, empty. No love shone in them. Damn him. He actually leaned over, his hand started to close over mine and the handle.

I hissed, "Don't." I let that one word hold all the anger I was feeling.

His eyes widened just a bit, and he knew I wasn't talking about just the carry-on bag. He straightened up and called back to Donna, "She doesn't want my help." He put emphasis on the "my."

She tsked under her breath and walked back to us. "You're just being stubborn, Anita. Let Ted help you."

I looked up at her and knew my face wasn't neutral, but I couldn't drain all the anger out of my face.

Donna's eyes widened just a bit. "Have I offended you in some way?" she asked.

I shook my head. "I'm not upset with you."

She looked at Edward. "Ted, dear, I think she's angry with you."

"I think you're right," Edward said. His eyes had gone back to sparkling with love and good humor.

I tried to salvage the situation. "It's just that Ted should have told me about the engagement. I don't like surprises."

Donna put her head to one side, giving me a long considering look. She started to say something, then seemed to think better of it. "Well, I'll try and make sure you don't get any more surprises from me." She settled herself a little more securely on Edward's arm, and the look in her brown eyes was just a tad less friendly than it had been before.

I realized with a sigh that Donna now thought I was jealous. My reaction wasn't normal for a mere friend and business acquaintance. Since I couldn't tell her the real reason I was upset, I let it go. Better she think Ted and I had been an item once, than know the truth. Though Heaven knew she'd probably prefer we'd been lovers to the real truth about her "Ted." She was in love with a man who did not exist, no matter how real the arm she was holding happened to be.

I tightened my grip on my bag and moved up so I was walking on the other side of Donna as we moved up through the airport. She wasn't comfortable with me trailing behind so I'd keep up. I'm not good at small talk at the best of times, but now, I couldn't think of a damn thing to say, so we moved in a silence that grew progressively uncomfortable for me, and for Donna. Her, because she was a woman and naturally friendly. Me, because I knew silence would make her uncomfortable. I didn't want to make her more uncomfortable.

She broke first. "Ted tells me you're an animator and vampire hunter."

"I prefer vampire executioner, but yeah." In a desperate attempt to be polite I asked, "What do you do?"

She flashed me a brilliant smile that showed the smile lines on either side of her mouth like a frame for her thin, oh-so-slightly lipstick mouth. I was glad I'd worn no makeup. Maybe that would help her realize I wasn't after Edward/Ted. "I own a shop in Santa Fe."

Edward added, "She sells psychic paraphernalia." He gave me a smile over her head.

My face hardened, and I fought to keep it blank. "What sort of paraphernalia?"

“Crystals, tarot decks, books, everything and anything that catches my fancy.”

I wanted to say, “But you’re not psychic,” but I didn’t. I’d met people before that were convinced they had psychic gifts when they didn’t. If Donna was one of the successfully deluded, who was I to burst her bubble? Instead, I said, “Is there much of a market for that sort of thing in Santa Fe?”

“Oh, there used to be a lot of shops like mine. The new age was really big in Santa Fe, but the property taxes have skyrocketed and most of the new psychics have moved farther into the mountains to Taos. Santa Fe’s energy has changed in the last five years, or so. It’s still a very positive place, but Taos has better energy now. I’m not sure why.”

She talked about “energy” like it was an accepted fact, and didn’t try to explain it, as if I would understand her. She was assuming, like so many people did, that if you raised the dead for a living you were psychic in other areas, too. Which was often true, but not always. What she called “energy,” I called the “feel” of a place. Some places did have a “feel” to them, good or bad, energizing or draining. The old idea of *genius loci* was alive and well in the new age movement under a different name.

“Do you read cards?” I asked. It was a polite way of finding out if she believed she had powers.

“Oh, no,” Donna said. “My gifts are very small. I’d love to be able to read cards or crystals, but I’m only a proprietor. My talent in this life is helping others discover their strengths.”

It sounded like something a therapist who believed in past lives would have said. I’d been meeting enough of them at graveside to know the lingo. “So you’re not a psychic,” I said. I just wanted to be sure she knew it.

“Oh, heavens no.” She shook her head for emphasis, and I noticed her small gold earrings were ankhs.

“Most people who go into the business usually are,” I said.

She sighed. “The psychic I’m going to now says that I’m blocked in this life because of misuse of my gifts last time around. She says I’ll be able to work magic next time.”

Again, she assumed I believed in reincarnation and past life therapy, probably because of what I did for a living. Either that or Edward/Ted had been lying to her about me just to amuse himself. But I didn’t point out that I was a Christian and didn’t

believe in reincarnation. There are, after all, more religions on the planet that believe in reincarnation than ones that don't. Who am I to quibble?

I just couldn't help the next question. "And have you met Ted before in a past life?"

"No, actually he's brand new to me, though Brenda says he is a very old soul."

"Brenda, your psychic?" I asked.

She nodded.

"I'll agree with the old soul part," I said.

Edward gave me a look over her head where she couldn't see him. It was a suspicious look.

"You've felt it, too, then, the way he resonates. That's what Brenda calls it, like a great heavy bell in her head whenever he's around."

Alarm bells more likely, I thought. Aloud I said, "Sometimes you can make your soul heavy in one lifetime."

She gave me a puzzled look. She wasn't stupid. There was intelligence in those brown eyes, but she was naive. Donna wanted to believe. It made her an easy mark for a certain kind of liar, like would-be psychics and men like Edward. Men who lied about who and what they were.

"I'd like to meet Brenda before I go home," I said.

Edward's eyes widened where she couldn't see them.

Donna smiled delightedly. "I'd love to introduce the two of you. She's never met an animator before. I know she'd get a kick out of meeting you."

"I'll bet," I said. I did want to meet Brenda, because I wanted to see if she was truly a psychic or just a charlatan. If she was professing to abilities she didn't possess, it was a crime, and I'd turn her in. I hated seeing supposed psychics take advantage of people. It was always amazing to me with the number of genuine talents around, how many fakes still managed to prosper.

We were passing a restaurant decorated in more blue and fuschia tiles with small daisy-like flowers painted in the edges. There was a mural on one wall showing Spanish conquistadors and breechcloth-clad Native Americans as we came down the escalators. I was still managing to balance my carry-on without any trouble. All that weightlifting I guess.

There was a bank of pay phones set to one side. "Let me try



to get hold of the kids one more time,” Donna said. She kissed Edward’s cheek and moved off towards the phones before I could react.

“Kids?” I said.

“Yes,” he said, voice careful.

“How many?” I asked.

“Two.”

“Ages?”

“Boy, fourteen; girl, six,” he said.

“Where’s their father?”

“Donna is a widow.”

I looked at him, and the look was enough.

“No, I didn’t do it. He died years before I met Donna.”

I stepped close to him, turning my back so that Donna wouldn’t see my face from the phones. “What are you playing at, Edward? She has children and is so in love with you, it makes me gag. What on God’s green earth could you be thinking?”

“Donna and Ted have been dating for about two years. They’re lovers. She expected him to propose so he did.” His face was still smiling Ted, but the voice was matter of fact and totally unemotional.

“You’re talking like Ted’s a third person, Edward.”

“You’re going to have to start calling me Ted, Anita. I know you. If you don’t make it a habit, you’ll forget.”

I stepped into him in the relative silence, lowering my voice to a furious whisper.

“Fuck that. He is you, and you’re fucking engaged. Are you going to marry her?”

He gave a small shrug.

“Shit,” I said. “You can’t. You cannot marry this woman.”

His smile widened, and he stepped around me holding his hands out to Donna. He kissed her and asked, “How are the munchkins?” He turned her in his arms so he was half-hugging her, and had her turned away from me. His face was Ted, relaxed, but his eyes were warning me, “Don’t screw this up.” It was important to him for some reason.

Donna turned so she could see my face, and I fought to give blank face. “What were you two whispering about so urgently?”

“The case,” Edward said.

“Oh, pooh,” she said.

I raised eyebrows at Edward. Oh, pooh. The most dangerous man I’d ever met was engaged to a mother of two that said things like, “Oh, pooh.” It was just too weird.

Donna’s eyes widened. “Where is your purse? Did you leave it on the plane?”

“I didn’t bring one,” I said. “I knew I’d have the bag and pockets.”

She looked at me as if I’d spoken in tongues. “My god, I wouldn’t know what to do without my monstrosity in tow.” She pulled the huge purse around in front of her. “I’m such a pack rat.”

“Where are your kids?” I asked.

“With my neighbors. They’re a retired couple and are just great with my little girl, Becca.” She frowned. “Of course, nothing seems to make Peter happy right now.” She glanced at me. “Peter’s my son. He’s fourteen going on forty, and seems to have hit his teenage years with a vengeance. Everyone told me a teenager was hard, but I never dreamed how hard.”

“Has he been getting into trouble?” I asked.

“Not really. I mean he’s not into anything criminal.” She added the last a little too quickly. “But he’s just stopped listening to me. Two weeks ago he was supposed to come home from school and watch Becca. Instead, he went to a friend’s house. When I came home after the shop closed, the house was empty, and I didn’t know where either of them were. The Hendersons had been out so Becca wasn’t there. God, I was frantic. Another neighbor had taken her in, but if they hadn’t been home, she’d have just had to wander the neighborhood for hours. Peter came home and just wasn’t sorry. By the time he came home, I’d convinced myself he’d been abducted by someone and was lying dead in a ditch somewhere. Then he just comes strolling in as if nothing’s wrong.”

“Is he still grounded?” I asked.

She nodded, face very firm. “You bet he is. Grounded for a month, and I’ve taken every privilege I can think of away from him.”

“What does he think of you and Ted getting married?” It was a sadistic question, and I knew it, but I just couldn’t help myself.

Donna looked stricken, truly stricken. "He's not too keen on the idea."

Keen? "Well, he's fourteen, and a boy," I said. "He's bound to resent another male coming into his turf."

Donna nodded. "Yes, I'm afraid so."

Ted hugged her. "It'll be all right, honeypot. Pete and I will come to an understanding. Don't you worry."

I didn't like Edward's phrasing on that. I watched his face but couldn't see anything behind his Ted mask. It was as if for minutes at a time he just vanished into his alter ego. I hadn't been on the ground an hour and his Jekyll/Hyde act was already beginning to get on my nerves.

"Do you have any other bags?" Edward asked.

"Of course, she does," Donna said. "She's a woman."

Edward gave a small laugh that was more his own than Ted's. It was a small cynical sound that made Donna glance at him and made me feel better.

"Anita isn't like any other woman I've ever met."

Donna gave him another look. Edward had phrased it that way on purpose. He'd caught her jealous reasoning just as I had, and now he was playing to it. It was one way to explain my strange reaction to the engagement news without risk of blowing his cover. I guess I couldn't blame him, but in a way I knew it was payback for my lack of social skills. His cover was important enough to him to let Donna think we'd been a couple, which meant it was pretty important to him. Edward and I had never had a single romantic thought about each other in our lives.

"I've got luggage," I said.

"See," Donna said, tugging on his arm.

"The carry-on bag wouldn't hold all the guns."

Donna stopped in the middle of saying something to Edward, then turned slowly to stare at me. Edward and I stopped walking because she had stopped. Her eyes were a little wide. She seemed to have caught her breath. She was staring at me, but not at my face. If it had been a guy, I might have accused him of staring at my chest, but that wasn't exactly what she was looking at. I followed her gaze and found that my jacket had slipped back over my left side exposing my gun. It must have happened when I readjusted the bag coming off the escalator. Careless of me. I'm usually pretty careful about exposing my

arsenal in public. It tends to make people nervous, just like now. I shifted the bag so that my jacket slid back over the shoulder holster like a curtain dropping back in place.

Donna drew a quick breath, blinked, and looked at my face. "You really do carry a gun." Her voice held a sort of wonderment.

"I told you she did," Edward said in his Ted voice.

"I know, I know," Donna said. She shook her head. "I've just never been around a woman that . . . Do you kill as easily as Ted does?"

It was a very intelligent question, and meant that she'd been paying more attention to the real Edward than I'd given her credit for. So I answered the question truthfully. "No."

Edward hugged her to him, eyes warning me over her head. "Anita doesn't believe shifters are animals. She still thinks the monsters can be saved. It makes her squeamish sometimes."

Donna stared at me. "My husband was killed by a werewolf. He was killed in front of me and Peter. Peter was only eight."

I didn't know what reaction she expected so I didn't give her one. My face was neutral, interested, far from shocked. "What saved you?"

She nodded slowly, understanding the question. A werewolf tore her husband apart in front of her and her son, yet they were still alive and the husband wasn't. Something had interceded, something had saved them.

"John, my husband, had loaded a rifle with silver shot. He'd dropped the gun in the attack. He'd wounded it but not enough." Her eyes had gone distant with remembering. We stood in the bright airport, three people huddled in a small circle of silence and hushed voices and Donna's wide eyes. I didn't have to look at Edward to know that his face was as neutral as mine. She'd fallen silent, the horror still too fresh in her eyes. The look was enough. There was worse to come, or worse to her. Something she felt guilty about at the very least.

"John had just showed Peter how to shoot the week before. He was so little, but I let him take that gun. I let him shoot that monster. I let him stand his ground in the face of that thing, while I just huddled on the floor, frozen."

That was it. That was the true horror for Donna. She'd allowed her child to protect her. Allowed her child to take the adult role of protector in the face of a nightmare. She'd failed

the big test, and little Peter had passed into adulthood at a very tender age. No wonder he hated Edward. Peter had earned his right to be man of the house. He'd earned it in blood, and now his mother was going to remarry. Yeah, right.

Donna turned those haunted eyes to me. She blinked and seemed to be drawing herself back from the past as if it were a physical effort. She hadn't made peace with the scene, or it wouldn't have remained so vivid. If you can begin to make peace, you can tell the most horrible stories as if they happened to someone else, unemotional. Or, maybe you haven't made peace, but you still tell it like it was an interesting story that happened a long time ago, nothing important. I've seen cops that had to get drunk before the pain spilled out into their stories.

Donna was hurting. Peter was hurting. Edward wasn't hurting. I looked up at him, past Donna's softly horrified face. His eyes were empty as he looked at me, as waiting and patient as any predator. How dare he step into their lives like this! How dare he cause them more pain! Because whatever happened, whether he married her or didn't, it was going to be painful. Painful for everyone but Edward. Though maybe I could fix that. If he fucked up Donna's life, maybe I could fuck up his. Yeah, I liked that. I'd spread the rain around all over his parade.

It must have shone in my eyes for a second or two, because Edward's eyes narrowed, and for a moment I felt that shiver he could send down my spine with just a glance. He was a very dangerous man, but to protect this family I'd test his limits, and mine. Edward had finally found something that pissed me off enough to maybe press a button that I'd never wanted to touch. He had to leave Donna and her family alone. He had to get out of their lives. I'd see him out of their lives, or else. And there is only one "or else" when you're dealing with Edward. Death.

We stared at each other over Donna's head while he hugged her to his chest, stroking her hair, mouthing soothing words to her. But his eyes, his face were all for me, and I knew as we stared at each other that he knew exactly what I was thinking. He knew the conclusion I'd come to, though he might never understand why his involvement with Donna and her kids was the straw that broke the camel's back. But the look in his eyes was enough. He might not understand why, but he knew the

camel was broken in fucking two and there was no way to fix it except to do what I wanted him to do, or die. Just like that, I knew I'd do it. I knew I could look down the barrel of a gun and shoot Edward, and I wouldn't aim to wound. It was like a cold weight inside my body, a surety that made me feel stronger and a little lonelier. Edward had saved my life more than once. I'd saved his more than once. Yet . . . yet . . . I'd miss Edward, but I'd kill him if I had to. Edward wonders why I'm so sympathetic to the monsters. The answer is simple. Because I am one.