

CHAPTER

1



It was half past dawn when the phone rang. It shattered the first dream of the night into a thousand pieces so that I couldn't even remember what the dream had been about. I woke gasping and confused, asleep just long enough to feel worse but not rested.

Nathaniel groaned beside me, mumbling, "What time is it?"

Micah's voice came from the other side of the bed, his voice low and growling, thick with sleep. "Early."

I tried to sit up, sandwiched between the two of them where I always slept, but I was trapped. Trapped

in the sheets, one arm tangled in Nathaniel's hair. He usually braided it for bed, but last night we'd all gotten in late, even by our standards, and we'd just fallen into bed as soon as we could manage it.

"I'm trapped," I said, trying to extract my hand from his hair without hurting him or tangling worse. His hair was thick and fell to his ankles; there was lots of it to tangle.

"Let the machine pick up," Micah said. He'd raised up on his elbows enough to see the clock. "We've had less than an hour of sleep." His hair was a mass of tousled curls around his face and shoulders. His face was dim in the darkness of the blackout curtains.

I finally got my hand free of Nathaniel's warm, vanilla-scented hair. I lay on my side, propped on my elbow, waiting for the machine to kick in and let us know whether it was the police for me or the Furry Coalition hotline for Micah. Nathaniel, as a stripper, didn't get emergency calls much. Just as well; I wasn't sure I wanted to know what a stripper emergency call would be. The only ideas I could come up with were either silly or nefarious. Ten rings, and the machine

finally kicked on. Micah spoke over the sound of his own voice on the machine's message. "Who set the machine on the second phone line to ten rings?"

"Me," Nathaniel said. "It seemed like a better idea when I did it."

We'd put in the second phone line because Micah was the main help for a hotline that new wereanimals could call and get advice or a rescue. You know, *I'm at a bar and I'm about to lose control, come get me before I turn furry in public*. It wasn't technically illegal to be a wereanimal, but new ones sometimes lost control and ate someone before they came to their senses. They'd probably be shot to death by the local police before they could be charged with murder. If the police had silver bullets. If not . . . it could get very, very bad.

Micah understood the problems of the furred, because he was the local Nimir-Raj, their leopard king.

There was a moment of breathing on the message, too fast, frantic. The sound made me sit up in bed, letting the sheets pool into my lap. "Anita, Anita, this is Larry. You there?" He sounded scared.

Nathaniel got the receiver before I did, but he said, “Hey, Larry, she’s here.” He handed me the receiver, his face worried.

Larry Kirkland—fellow federal marshal, animator, and vampire executioner—didn’t panic that easily anymore. He’d grown, or aged, since he’d started working with me.

“Larry, what’s wrong?”

“Anita, thank God.” His voice held more relief than I ever wanted to hear in anyone’s voice. It meant he expected me to do something important for him. Something that would take some awful pressure or problem off their hands.

“What’s wrong, Larry?” I asked, and I couldn’t keep the worry out of my own voice.

He swallowed hard enough for me to hear it. “I’m okay, but Tammy isn’t.”

I clutched the receiver. His wife was Detective Tammy Reynolds, member of the Regional Preternatural Investigation Squad. My first thought was that she’d been hurt in the line of duty. “What happened to Tammy?”

Micah leaned in against me. Nathaniel had gone very quiet beside me. We'd all been at their wedding. Hell, I'd been at the altar on Larry's side.

"The baby. Anita, she's in labor."

It should have made me feel better, but it didn't, not by much. "She's only five months pregnant, Larry."

"I know, I know. They're trying to get the labor stopped, but they don't know . . ." He didn't finish the sentence.

Tammy and Larry had been dating for a while when Tammy ended up pregnant. They'd married when she was four months pregnant. Now the baby that had made them both change all their plans might never be born. Or at least not survive. Shit.

"Larry, I'm . . . Jesus, Larry, I'm so sorry. Tell me what I can do to help." I couldn't think of anything, but whatever he asked, I'd do it. He was my friend, and there was such anguish in his voice. He'd never mastered that empty cop voice.

"I'm due on an eight a.m. flight to raise a witness for the FBI."

“The federal witness who died before he could testify,” I said.

“Yeah,” Larry said. “They need the animator that brings him back to be one of us who’s also a federal marshal. Me being a federal marshal was one of the reasons the judge agreed to allow the zombie’s testimony.”

“I remember,” I said, but I wasn’t happy. I wouldn’t turn him down or chicken out, not with Tammy in the hospital, but I hated to fly. No, I was afraid to fly. Damn it.

“I know how much you hate to fly,” he said.

That made me smile, that he was trying to make me feel better when his life was about to break apart. “It’s okay, Larry. I’ll see if the flight has some empty seats. If not I’ll get a later flight, but I’ll go.”

“All my files on the case are at Animators, Inc. I’d stopped by the office to get them and load up the briefcase when Tammy called. I think my briefcase is just sitting on the floor in our office. I got all the files in it. The agent in charge is . . .” And he hesitated. “I

can't remember. Oh, hell, Anita, I can't remember." He was panicking again.

"It's okay, Larry. I'll find it. I'll call the Feds and tell them there's been a change of cast."

"Bert's going to be pissed," Larry said. "Your rates are almost four times what mine are for a zombie raising."

"We can't change the price in midcontract," I said.

"No"—and he almost laughed—"but Bert is going to be pissed that we didn't try."

I laughed, because he was right. Bert had been our boss, but he'd been reduced to business manager because all the animators at Animators, Inc., had gotten together and staged a palace coup. We'd offered him business manager or nothing. He'd taken it when he realized his income wouldn't be affected.

"I'll get the files from the office. I'll get a flight. I'll be there. You just take care of yourself and Tammy."

"Thanks, Anita. I don't know what I . . . I've got to go—the doctor's here." And he was gone.

I handed the phone to Nathaniel, who placed it gently in the cradle.

“How bad is it?” Micah said.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t think Larry knows, not really.” I started to crawl out of the covers and the nest of warmth that their bodies made.

“Where are you going?” Micah asked.

“I’ve got a plane to schedule and files to find.”

“Are you thinking of going out of town on a plane by yourself?” Micah asked. He was sitting up, knees tucked to his chest, arms encircling them.

I looked back at him from the foot of the bed. “Yeah.”

“When will you be back?”

“Tomorrow, or the day after.”

“Then you need to book at least two seats on the plane.”

It took me a moment to understand what he meant. I raised the dead and was a legal vampire executioner. That’s what the police knew for certain. I was a federal marshal because all the vamp executioners who could pass the firearms test had been

grandfathered in so that the executioners could both have more powers and be better regulated. Or that was the idea. But I was also the human servant of Jean-Claude, the master vampire of St. Louis. Through ties to Jean-Claude I'd inherited some abilities. One of those abilities was the *ardeur*. It was as if sex were food, and if I didn't eat enough I got sick.

That wasn't so bad, but I could also hurt anyone that I was metaphysically tied to. Not just hurt, but potentially drain them of life. Or the *ardeur* could simply choose someone at random to feed from. Which meant the *ardeur* raised and chose a victim. I didn't always have a lot of choice in who it chose. Ick.

So I fed from my boyfriends and a few friends. You couldn't feed off the same person all the time, because you could accidentally love him to death. Jean-Claude held the *ardeur* and had had to feed it for centuries, but my version was a little different from his, or maybe I just wasn't as good at controlling it yet. I was working on it, but my control wasn't perfect, and it would be a bad thing to lose control on an airplane full of strangers. Or in a van full of federal agents.

“What am I going to do?” I asked. “I cannot take my boyfriend on a federal case.”

“You aren’t going as a federal marshal, not really,” Micah said. “It’s your skills as an animator that they want, so say that I’m your assistant. They won’t know any different.”

“Why do you get to go?” Nathaniel asked. He lay back on the pillows, the sheets just barely covering his nakedness.

“Because she fed on you last,” Micah said. He moved enough to touch Nathaniel’s shoulder. “I can feed her more often than you can without passing out or getting sick.”

“Because you’re the Nimir-Raj and I’m just a regular wereleopard.” There was a moment of sullenness in his voice, and then he sighed. “I don’t mean to be a problem, but I’ve never stayed here with both of you gone.”

Micah and I looked at each other and had one of those moments. We’d all been living together for about six months. But he and Nathaniel had both

moved in at the same time. I'd never dated either of them alone, not really. I mean I'd gone out with them individually, and sex wasn't always a group activity, but the sleeping arrangements were.

Micah and I both had a certain need for personal time, alone time, but Nathaniel didn't. He didn't much like being alone.

"Do you want to stay at Jean-Claude's place while we're gone?" I asked.

"Will he want me there without you?" Nathaniel asked.

I knew what he meant, but . . . "Jean-Claude likes you."

"He won't mind," Micah said, "and Asher won't mind at all."

There was something about the way he said that last that made me look at him. Asher was Jean-Claude's second in command. They'd been friends, enemies, lovers, enemies, and shared a woman that they both loved for a few decades of happiness in centuries of unhappiness.

“Why’d you say it like that?” I asked.

“Asher likes men more than Jean-Claude does,” Micah said.

I frowned at him. “Are you saying that he made a pass at you or Nathaniel?”

Micah laughed. “No, in fact, Asher is always very, very careful around us. Considering that we’ve both been naked in a bed with Asher, Jean-Claude, and you more than once, I’d say that Asher’s been a perfect gentleman.”

“So why the comment about Asher liking men more than Jean-Claude?” I asked.

“It’s the way Asher watches Nathaniel when you aren’t looking.”

I looked at the other man in my bed. He appeared utterly at home half-naked in my sheets. “Does Asher bother you?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“Have you noticed him looking at you the way Micah just said?”

“Yes,” Nathaniel said, face still peaceful.

“And that doesn’t bother you?”

He smiled. "I'm a stripper, Anita. I get a lot of people looking at me like that."

"But you don't sleep naked in a bed with them."

"I don't sleep naked in a bed with Asher either. He takes blood from me so he can fuck you. It may be sensual, but it's not about sex; it's about blood."

I frowned, trying to think my way through the tangle that had become my love life. "But Micah's implying that Asher sees you as more than food."

"I'm not implying," Micah said. "I'm stating that if Asher didn't think you and Jean-Claude would be pissed, he'd have already asked Nathaniel to be more than friends."

I stared from one to the other of them. "He would?"

They both nodded in unison, as if they'd practiced.

"And you both knew this?"

They nodded again.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because you, or I, were always there to protect Nathaniel," Micah said. "Now we won't be."

I sighed.

“I’ll be okay,” Nathaniel said. “If I’m really that worried about my virtue, I’ll bunk in with Jason.” He smiled even wider.

“What’s so funny?” I asked. I sounded angry, because I had totally missed the whole Asher-liking-Nathaniel thing. Sometimes I felt slow, and sometimes I felt totally unprepared for dealing with the men in my life.

“The look on your face, so worried, so surprised.” He bounced up off the bed, leaving the sheet behind him. He crawled toward me, naked and beautiful. I was at the end of the bed and had nowhere to go. But he came at me so fast that I tried to back up and ended up falling off the bed. I sat naked on the floor, trying to decide if I had any dignity left to save.

Nathaniel leaned over the bed and grinned at me. “If I tell you that was really cute, will you be mad at me?”

“Yes,” I said, but I was fighting not to smile.

He leaned his upper body off the bed, toward me. “Then I won’t say it,” he said. “I love you, Anita.” He leaned down, but if we were going to kiss I’d have to come to my knees and meet him halfway.

I moved into the kiss he was offering and whispered against his lips, “I love you, too.”

“Tell me what city we’re flying to,” Micah said from the bed, “and I’ll see about flights.”

I broke the kiss enough to mumble, “Philadelphia.”

Nathaniel leaned in to me again, one hand holding on to the bedpost to keep him in place. The muscles of his arm flexed effortlessly as he used the other hand to smooth hair away from my face. “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you, too,” I said, and I realized that I meant it. But one “assistant” I might be able to explain to the FBI, not two. Two and they’d begin to wonder who they were and exactly what they were assisting me with. Or that’s what I told myself. Staring into the startling lavender of Nathaniel’s eyes, I wondered if I cared what the FBI thought of me enough to leave him behind. Almost not. Almost.



CHAPTER

2



We picked up Larry's files on the way to the airport. Micah drove so I could find a phone number to call and let everyone in Philly know that there'd been a change of cast. The business card read, *Special Agent Chester Fox*.

He answered on the second ring. "Fox." Not even a hello. What was it about police work that made you have bad phone manners?

"This is Federal Marshal Anita Blake. You're expecting Marshal Kirkland this morning?"

"He's not coming," Fox guessed.

“No, but I am.”

“What happened to Kirkland?”

“His wife is in the hospital.” I wondered how much I owed him on the phone. I decided not much.

“I hope she’s going to be all right.” His voice had lost some of its edge. He sounded almost friendly. It made me think better of him.

“She probably will, but they’re not sure about the baby.”

Silence for a moment. I’d probably over-shared. That girliness again. Harder to be terse.

“I didn’t know. I’m sorry that Marshal Kirkland couldn’t make it and even sorrier for the reason. I hope things work out for them.”

“Me, too. So I’m filling in.”

“I know who you are, Marshal Blake.” He was back to not sounding entirely happy. “Your reputation precedes you.” That last was definitely not happy.

“Are we going to have a problem here, Agent Fox?”

“Special Agent Fox,” he said.

“Fine, are we going to have a problem here, Special Agent Fox?”

“Are you aware that you have the highest kill count of any legal vampire executioner in this country?”

“Yeah, actually, I am aware of that.”

“You’re coming here to raise the dead, Marshal, not execute anyone. Is that clear?”

Now I was getting pissed. “I don’t kill people for the hell of it, Special Agent Fox.”

“That’s not what I’ve heard.” His voice was quiet.

“Don’t believe all the rumors you hear, Fox.”

“If I believed them all, I wouldn’t let you step foot in my city, Blake.”

Micah touched my leg, just to be comforting, while he drove one-handed. We were already on 70, which meant we’d be at the airport in moments.

“You know, Fox, if you’re this unhappy with me, we can turn around and not come. Raise your own damn zombie.”

“We?”

“I’m bringing an assistant,” I said, voice angry.

“And exactly what does he assist you with?” And his voice was full of that tone, that tone that men have been using against women for centuries. That

tone that manages to imply we're sluts without ever saying so.

"I'm going to be very clear here, Special Agent Fox." My voice held that calm, cold anger that I used in place of screaming. Micah's hand tightened on my thigh. "Your attitude makes me think we won't be able to work together. That you've listened to so many rumors that you wouldn't know truth if it bit you on the ass."

He started to say something, but I cut him off.

"Think very carefully about the next thing you say, Special Agent Fox, because depending on what it is, I may or may not be seeing you in Philly today, or ever."

"Are you saying if I don't play nice, you won't play at all?" His voice was as cold as mine had been.

"Nice, hell. Fox, I'd just take professional at this point. What has got your panties in a twist about me?"

He sighed over the phone. "I researched the federal marshals who are also animators. It's a short list."

"Yeah," I said, "it is."

“Kirkland comes in, does the job, leaves. Every time you get involved in a case, it all seems to go to hell.”

I took a deep breath and counted to twenty. Ten didn't do it. “Go back through and look at the kind of cases that I get called in on, Fox. No one calls me in unless things have already gone south. It's not cause and effect.”

“You have worked some rough shit. I'll grant that, Marshal Blake.” He sighed again. “But you've got a reputation for killing first and asking questions later. As for rumors, you're right—they don't paint a very flattering picture of you.”

“You might bear in mind, Fox, that any man you've heard dirty stories about me from didn't get to fuck me.”

“You're sure of that.”

“Absolutely.”

“So you're saying that it's sour grapes, because he didn't get the prize.”

“So we are talking about someone specific. Who?”

He was quiet for a second or two. “You worked a serial killer case in New Mexico about two years ago. Do you remember it?”

“Anyone who worked that case will remember it, Agent Fox. Special Agent Fox. Some things you don’t forget.”

“Did you date anyone while you were out there?”

The question puzzled me. “You mean in New Mexico?”

“Yes.”

“No, why?”

“There was a cop named Ramirez.”

“I remember Detective Ramirez. He asked me out, I said no, and he didn’t trash me.”

“How can you be sure of that?”

“Because he was a good guy, and good guys don’t trash you just because you turned them down.”

Micah was idling in front of one of the parking garages on Pear Tree Lane. We’d turned off of 70, and I hadn’t really noticed. “Are we parking?” he asked. What Micah was asking was, Are we going to Philadelphia?

“Did any of the agents on scene ask you out?” His voice was serious and not hostile now.

“Not that I remember.”

“Did you have a problem with anyone while you were there?”

“Lots of people.”

“You admit it.”

“Fox, I am female, I clean up well, have a badge and a gun, raise the dead for a living, and slay vampires. A lot of people have issues with some of the above. Hell, a lieutenant in New Mexico quoted the Bible at me.”

“What quote?”

“‘Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.’”

“He did not.” He sounded shocked, something you don’t hear much from the FBI.

“Yeah, he did.”

“What did you do?”

“I planted a big kiss right on his mouth.”

He made a startled sound that could have been a laugh. “You really did?”

“It bothered him a hell of a lot more than hitting him would have, and it didn’t get me dragged out in

cuffs. But I'm betting the other cops who saw me do it gave him hell."

Fox was laughing now.

There were cars behind us, honking. "Anita, are we going?" Micah asked.

"My assistant wants to know if we're going to Philly today. Are we?"

Fox's voice still held that edge of laughter. "Yeah, come on down."

I said to Micah, "We're going to Philly."

Fox said, "Marshal Blake, I am going to do what I never do, and if you tell anyone I did, I'll deny it."

"What are you going to do?"

Micah pressed the big red button on the little stand-up ticket machine. He waited for our parking ticket to pop out. I'd told him to do valet. When you drag your ass in at zero-dark-thirty, valet was worth it.

"I apologize," Fox said. "I listened to someone who was there in New Mexico. His version of your run-in with the lieutenant was different from yours."

"What did he say?"

We were in the dimness of the parking garage now.

“He said you hit on a married man and got pissy when he said no.”

“If you’d ever met Lieutenant Marks, you’d know that wasn’t true.”

“Not cute enough?”

I hesitated. “I guess physically he wasn’t that bad, but looks aren’t everything. Personality, good manners, sanity—all nice things to have.”

Micah had pulled around the little glass building.

The attendant was coming toward us. We were moments away from needing to get out of the car. “If we’re going to make the flight, I gotta go.”

“Why’d you turn down Detective Ramirez?” he asked.

I wasn’t sure it was any of his business, but I answered. “I was dating someone back home. I didn’t think it was fair to any of us to complicate things.”

“Someone said you were all over him at the last crime scene.”

I knew what he was referring to. “We hugged each other, Agent Fox, because after seeing what was in that house I think we both needed to touch something

warm and alive. I let one man hold my hand and all the other men think I'm fucking him. God, there are times when I really hate being the only woman around this kind of shit."

I was out of the car. Micah was getting our bags from the back.

"Now that's not fair, Marshal. If I'd hugged Ramirez or let him hold my hand, there'd be rumors, too."

It stopped me for a second, and then I laughed. "Well, damn, I guess you're right."

Micah had traded the key for a little ticket stub. He popped the handles on the carry-on bags so they'd roll. I took one of them but let him take my briefcase, since I was still on the phone. The little bus was waiting for us and a few more passengers.

"I look forward to meeting you, Marshal Blake. Time I stopped listening to secondhand stories."

"Thanks, I guess."

"See you on the ground." And he was gone.

I folded the phone shut and was already going up the bus steps before the attendant tried to take my

bag. It was the skirt outfit and the heels. I always had more offers to help with luggage when I was dressed like a girl.

Micah came up behind me, mostly ignored, though he was dressed up, too. We'd chosen his most conservative suit, but there's only so much you can do with a black Italian-cut designer suit. It looked like what it was: expensive.

No one would mistake him for a Fed of any kind. We'd pulled his thick, curly hair back in a tight French braid, which almost gave the illusion of short hair. He'd put on a white shirt with the suit and a conservative tie.

We settled into the back row of seats. He'd kept his sunglasses on even in the darkened parking garage, because behind those dark glasses was a pair of leopard eyes. A very bad man had forced him into animal form long enough, and often enough, that he couldn't return completely to human form. His eyes were yellow-green, chartreuse, and not human. They were beautiful in the tan of his skin, but they tended to freak people out, hence the glasses.

I wondered how the FBI would take the eyes. Did I care? No. Things had worked out with Special Agent Fox, or seemed to be working out. But someone who had been in New Mexico was trashing me. Who? Why? Did I care? Yeah, actually, I did.