

“I want you to raise my wife from the dead, Ms. Blake,” Tony Bennington said, in a voice that matched the expensive suit and the flash of the Rolex on his right wrist. It probably meant he was a lefty. Not that his handedness mattered, but you learn to notice primary hands when people try to kill you on a semiregular basis.

“My condolences,” I said automatically, because Bennington didn’t display any grief. His face was composed, almost blank, so that if he was handsome in that gray-haired, I’m-over-fifty-but-keep-in-good-shape way, the lack of expression took all the fun out of it. Maybe the blankness was his way of showing grief, but his gray eyes were steady and cold as they met mine. It was either some steely control of grief, or he didn’t feel anything about his wife’s

1S
R
1L

LAURELL K. HAMILTON

death; that would be interesting. “Why do you want me to raise your wife from the dead, Mr. Bennington?”

“At the rates you charge, does it matter?” he asked.

I gave him the long blink and crossed my legs, smoothing the skirt over my thighs as automatically as I’d said my condolences. I gave him the edge of a smile that I knew didn’t reach my eyes. “It does, to me.”

An emotion filled his eyes then; anger. His voice held barely a hint of the emotion that turned his eyes a darker shade of gray. Maybe it was steely self-control after all. “It’s personal, and you don’t need to know it to raise her as a zombie.”

“This is my job, Mr. Bennington, not yours. You don’t know what I need to raise a zombie.”

“I did my research, Ms. Blake. My wife wasn’t murdered, so she won’t rise as a vengeful flesh-eating monster. She wasn’t psychic, or a witch, and had never gone near any other religion that might make her more than a normal zombie. There’s nothing in her background that makes her a bad candidate for the ceremony.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I’m impressed; you did do your research.”

He nodded, once, manicured hands smoothing his tailored lapel. “Then you’ll do it?”

I shook my head. “Not without a reason.”

He frowned at me, that flash of anger back in his eyes. “What kind of reason do you want?”

“One good enough to make me disturb the dead.”

1S

R

1L

FLIRT

“I’m willing to pay your rather exorbitant fee, Ms. Blake; I would think that would inspire you.”

“Money isn’t everything, Mr. Bennington. Why do you want her raised from the dead? What do you hope to gain from it?”

“Gain,” he said, “I don’t know what you mean by that.”

“I don’t, either, but you keep not answering my original question; I thought maybe if I rephrased it you would.”

“I don’t want to answer either question,” he said.

“Then I won’t raise your wife. There are other animators at Animators Inc. who will be happy to take your money, and they don’t charge my rates.”

“Everyone says you are the best.”

I shrugged. I was never sure what to say to things like that, and found silence worked best.

“They say you are a true necromancer and have power over all types of undead.”

I kept my face blank, which I’d gotten better at over the years. He was right, but I didn’t think it was commonly known. “You’ll turn a girl’s head with talk like that.”

“You have the highest number of executions of any member of the U.S. Marshals preternatural branch. Most of them were rogue vampires, but some of them were wereanimals.”

I shrugged. “That’s a matter of record, so yeah, but it has no bearing on what you want from me, Mr. Bennington.”

“I suppose it has as little to do with my request as your reputation as a sort of female Casanova.”

1S
R
1L

LAURELL K. HAMILTON

“My love life really has nothing to do with my ability to raise the dead.”

“If you can truly control all manner of undead, then it might explain how you can slay vampires and still date them.”

Jean-Claude, one of the vampires in question, was a little iffy on who wore the pants in our relationship sometimes because of my powers; just as I was iffy on how much of our relationship was my idea because of his vampire powers over me. We had a sort of metaphysical detente. “Jean-Claude and I were in the papers recently, so that didn’t take much research.”

“One of St. Louis’s hottest couples, I believe was the article.”

I tried not to squirm with embarrassment, and managed it. “Jean-Claude is pretty enough that anyone on his arm looks hot.”

“That much modesty doesn’t become a woman,” Bennington said.

I blinked at him, frowning. “Sorry, I don’t know what you mean by that.”

He studied my face, then said, “You really don’t, do you?”

“I just said that.” I felt like I had missed something, and didn’t like it. “I am sorry for your pain, but you’re not winning me over.”

“I need to know if your reputation is real, or just talk, like so many of the tall tales about you.”

“I’ve earned my reputation, but if you really did your research on me then you also know that I don’t raise zombies for kicks, or thrill seekers, or tormented relatives unless they have a plan.”

“A plan, what kind of plan?”

FLIRT

“You tell me. Why—do—you—want—your—wife—raised—
as—a—zombie?”

“I understood the question, Ms. Blake; you don’t have to say it
slowly.”

“Then answer the question, or this interview is over.”

He glared at me, that anger darkening his eyes to a nice storm-
cloud gray. His hands made fists on the chair arms, and a muscle in
his jaw flexed as he ground his teeth in frustration. Iron self-control
it was.

I stood up, smoothing my skirt down in back, out of habit. I’d
been polite because I knew how much money he’d paid just to talk
to me, and since I was going to refuse I wanted him to feel he’d
gotten something for his money, but I’d had enough.

“I need you because there isn’t much left of her body. Most
animators need a nearly intact body to do the job; I don’t have an
intact body to work with.” He wouldn’t look at me as he said it, and
there was a flinching around his mouth, a tension to those eyes he
was hiding from me. Here was the pain.

I sat back down and my voice was gentler. “How did she die?”

“It was an explosion. Our vacation home had a gas leak. She’d
gone up ahead of me. I was going to join her the next day, but that
night . . .” His fists tightened, mottling the skin, and that muscle in
his jaw bulged as if he were trying to bite through something hard
and bitter. “I loved my wife, Ms. Blake.” He sounded like the words
choked him. His dark gray eyes gleamed when he raised them back
to me. He held onto his unshed tears the way he held onto every-
thing else: tightly.

1S
R
1L

LAURELL K. HAMILTON

“I believe you, and I really am sorry for your loss, but I need to know what you think you’ll get out of raising her like this. She will be a zombie. Mine look very human, Mr. Bennington, very human, but they aren’t. I don’t want you to believe that I can raise her up and you can keep her with you, because you can’t.”

“Why can’t I?”

I made my voice soft as I told him the truth, “Because eventually she’ll start to rot, and you don’t want that to be your last visual of your wife.”

“I heard you raise zombies that don’t even know they’re dead.”

“Not at first,” I said, “but eventually the magic wears off, and it’s . . . not pretty, Mr. Bennington.”

“Please,” he said, “no one else can do this but you.”

“If I could raise her from the dead for real for you, maybe I would. I won’t debate the whole religious/philosophical problem with you, but the truth is that even I can’t do what you want. I raise zombies, Mr. Bennington, and that is not the same thing as resurrection of the dead. I’m good, maybe the best there is in the business, but I’m not that good, no one is.”

A tear began to slide down each cheek, and I knew from my own hatred of crying that the tears were hot, and his throat hurt with holding it all in. “I don’t beg, Ms. Blake, ever, but I’ll beg you now. I’ll double your fee. I’ll do whatever it takes for you to do this for me.”

That he was willing to double my fee meant he had as much money as he seemed to have; a lot of people who wore designer suits and Rolex watches were wearing their money. I stood again.

1S

R

1L

FLIRT

“I am sorry, but I don’t have the ability to do what you want. No one on this earth can bring your wife back from the dead in the way you want.”

“It’s too late for her to be a vampire, then?”

“First she’d have to have been bitten before she died to have any chance of raising her as a vampire. Second, you say she died in an explosion.”

He nodded, his face ignoring the tears, except for the pain in his eyes and the hard line of his jaw.

“Fire is one of the few things that destroy everything, even the preternatural.”

“One of the reasons I’m here, Ms. Blake, is that most animators have trouble raising the dead when there’s just burned bits left. I thought that was because of how little they had to work with, but is it because of the fire itself?”

It was a good question, an intelligent question, but I didn’t have a good answer to give back to him. “I’m honestly not sure. I know that most animators need a nearly complete body to raise from the dead, but I’m not sure I’ve ever seen an article on whether death by fire impedes the process.” I stood up and walked around the desk to offer him my hand. “I am sorry that I can’t help you, Mr. Bennington, but trust me that what I could do for you, you don’t really want.”

He didn’t stand up, just looked at me. “You’re the girlfriend of the Master Vampire of St. Louis. Isn’t he powerful enough to overcome all that and raise her as a vampire?”

I was a lot more than just Jean-Claude’s girlfriend. I was his

1S
R
1L

LAURELL K. HAMILTON

human servant, but we tried to keep that out of the media. The police that I worked with as a U.S. Marshal already mistrusted me because I was having sex with a vampire; if they were certain of our mystical connection they'd like it even less.

I lowered my hand and tried to explain. "I'm sorry, truly, but the Master of the City is still bound by some of the same laws of metaphysics as all vampires. Your wife would have to have been bitten several times before death, and the explosion would have destroyed her even if she had been a vampire."

I put my hand back out and hoped he'd take it this time.

He stood up then, and shook my hand. He held on to my hand and gave me serious eye contact. "You could raise her as a zombie that wouldn't know it was dead, and wouldn't look dead."

I didn't pull my hand back, but let him hold it, though I didn't like it. I never liked being touched by strangers. "I could, but in a few days she'd begin to deteriorate. If her mind went first then she'd just stop being your wife, but if the body began to rot before the mind went, then she'd be trapped in a decaying body, and she'd know it." I put my hand over both of ours. "You don't want that for her, or for yourself."

He let go of my hand then, and stepped back. His eyes were lost rather than angry. "But a few days to say good-bye, a few days to be with her, might be worth it."

I almost asked if by "be with her," he meant sex, but I did not want to know. I didn't need to know because I wasn't raising this zombie. There had been cases of other animators raising deceased spouses and having that happen, which is why most of us make the

1S

R

1L

FLIRT

client understand that the zombie goes back in the grave the same night it comes out. It avoided a whole host of problems if you just put the dead person back in its grave immediately. Problems that made me have to fight off visuals I did not need in my head. I'd seen way too many zombies to think sex was ever a good idea with the shambling dead.

I walked him to the door, and he came, no longer arguing with me. I wasn't sure I'd actually won the argument. In fact, I would bet he'd try to find someone else to raise his wife from the dead. There were a couple of animators in the United States who could do it, but they would probably refuse on the same grounds I had. The creep factor was entirely too high.

The door opened and he went through. Normally, that would have meant I got to close the door and be done with him, but I got a glimpse of someone who made me smile in spite of my client's grief. But then I'd learned a long time ago that if I bled for every broken heart in my office, I'd have bled to death from other people's wounds long ago.

Nathaniel had his back to us, and in the overlarge tank top with those boy-cut sleeves, a lot of muscle showed. His auburn hair was tied in a thick braid that traced down almost every inch of his five-foot, seven-inch frame. The braid trailed over wide, muscular shoulders down that back, to the narrow waist, and the tight rise of his ass, to fall down the muscled length of his thighs, calves, until the end of his braid stopped just short of his ankles. He had the longest hair of anyone I'd ever dated. His hair was darker than normal, still damp from the shower that he'd caught between dance

1S
R
1L

LAURELL K. HAMILTON

class and picking me up for lunch. I tried to look reasonably intelligent before he turned around, because if just seeing him from behind made me stupid-faced, the front view was better.

It was Jason who peeked out from around Nathaniel's wider shoulders, to grin at me. He had that look in his eyes, that mischievous look that said he was going to push his luck in some way. There was no malice to Jason, just an overly developed sense of fun. I gave him the frown that should have told him, *Don't do anything that I'll regret*. It did no good to say he would regret it, because he wouldn't.

He was handsome, too, but he, like me, was not the prettiest person in the room with Nathaniel standing there. He was Nathaniel's best friend, and I lived with the prettiest boy in the room, so we were used to it. What made Jason appealing—than the blue eyes, the yellow-blond hair now long enough that he'd started having Nathaniel French-braid it for dance class, which was where they'd been, which explained the almost-not-there tank tops and shorts, which showed that he had his own muscular and very nice body, all packed into a nice five-foot, four-inch frame—wasn't the packaging, it was that grin, that light of mischief that made his eyes bright with thinking naughty thoughts. Not sex, though that was in there, but just a host of things he knew he shouldn't do, but so wanted to do.

To forestall whatever he had planned, I said, "I'm sorry for your loss, Mr. Bennington, and sorry I can't help you more."

Jason's a good guy at heart, and his face sobered, and I knew he'd take the hint. Nathaniel turned at the sound of my voice, but

1S
R
1L

FLIRT

his face was sober, too. He knew what kind of work I did, and knew that I dealt with more grieving relatives than most police.

I had a moment to see those huge violet eyes, like an Easter surprise in a face that was somewhere between beautiful and handsome. I could never decide if it was the eyes or all that hair, then he'd put the hair back so you could see the face, and I'd gazed at him often enough asleep to know that he just was that beautiful.

I was still trying to get Bennington to the door, but he stopped, looking at the two men. "Aren't you going to introduce me?" He was climbing back into his blank face, all that anger and disappointment shoved down behind the iron of his will.

I wasn't, actually. "Maybe they're not mine to introduce," I said.

Bennington looked back at Nathaniel and Jason. "You're dancers at Guilty Pleasures. The website says you're a wereleopard and a werewolf. My wife went on a shapeshifter night. She said it was extraordinary watching you slip your skin and change shape."

I sighed and said, "Mr. Bennington, this is Brandon and Ripley." I used their stage names automatically, because once someone recognizes someone from the club, it's just safer to continue to be that persona. All the dancers had their share of overzealous fans. It was doubly problematic when they were one of the shapeshifters who danced. Hate crimes are alive and well. Hell, there are still some western states where varmint laws cover wereanimals, so you can kill one and all you have to say is they attacked me, and have a blood test prove that the dead human body was a lycanthrope of some kind. Nathaniel was also my leopard to call, and Jason my

1S
R
1L

LAURELL K. HAMILTON

wolf to call. Through Jean-Claude's vampire marks and my own necromancy, I'd become a sort of living vampire with some of the powers of a master. Jean-Claude was descended from Belle Morte's line of vampires. They fed on love and lust as well as blood, and I'd inherited the need to feed through sex and love. If I didn't feed periodically I began to die. I might have been stubborn enough and embarrassed enough to simply let it happen, but long before I died Nathaniel would die, drained to death by his "master," and Damian would die, my vampire servant, and now Jason. Suicide was selfish enough, but that would have been ridiculous. I was still making peace with the metaphysical mess my life had become.

Once upon a time I'd have sensed their beasts through the office door, but I was getting more control and so were they, so it was like normal folks. They could surprise me if they wanted to.

Jason, aka Ripley, smiled, and it filled his face with that cheerful hail-fellow-well-met that he could turn on and off. "I don't remember seeing you at the club, Mr. Bennington."

"I haven't been, but as I said my wife visited you once or twice." He hesitated, then got his phone out of the inside pocket of his suit coat. It was one of those phones with the big screen so you could watch video on it, if you didn't mind having the picture be the size of your palm. Bennington pushed some buttons and held the phone out to Jason. "Do you remember her?"

Jason smiled, but shook his head. "It must have been on a night I wasn't working. I'd have remembered her."

Bennington held it out to Nathaniel. He didn't touch the phone,

1S

R

1L

FLIRT

but looked at it, face solemn. He shook his head. “She’s very beautiful.”

“Was, Brandon, was beautiful.” He held the phone out to me. The woman was blond, and beautiful in that Hollywood way, so that she was truly beautiful but there was nothing to make her stand out from a dozen other blond beauties. It was a type of attractiveness that always seemed artificial, as if they were all made at the same factory and sent out into the world to seduce and marry well.

Nathaniel said, “I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?” he asked, and that flash of anger was back.

“Anita said she was sorry for your loss; isn’t your wife who you lost?”

Bennington nodded.

“Then I am sorry.” I knew Nathaniel well enough to know that his emotion was a little stronger than just normal condolences, but I’d ask later when Tony Bennington was far away.

I was actually opening the door to usher him out, but I had one last boyfriend outside the door. Micah had been planning to join us for lunch, if he could, and there he was, joining us. He stepped in, my height with brown hair that curled past his shoulders, tied back in a ponytail that had too many curls to make his hair lie flat. His eyes were green and yellow, and not human. That beautiful face—and for Micah it truly was beauty, not handsome, more delicate jawline, more slender—was only just masculine. The leopard eyes

1S
R
1L

LAURELL K. HAMILTON

in that lovely face just added to the impact. He wore sunglasses most of the time to hide the eyes. He started to get the glasses out automatically as he glimpsed the man behind me.

“Don’t bother hiding the eyes,” Bennington said, “I saw the interview you did for the news. You’re the head of the Coalition for Better Understanding between Humans and Lycanthropes, and I know you’re a wereleopard.”

Micah stopped trying to fish his glasses out of his suit jacket pocket and just stepped in with a smile. “I believe if we keep hiding what we are, it just adds to the fear factor.” He didn’t offer his hand, because some humans didn’t want to touch any part of you once they knew you were a shapeshifter. Bennington put his hand out, and Micah took it.

“Tony Bennington, this is Micah Callahan,” I said.

They shook hands just like normal folks. It got Bennington a brownie point.

“Again, Mr. Bennington, I am sorry that I can’t help you, but I urge you not to try to find someone else to raise your wife.”

“It’s my money; I can find someone who will take it.”

“Yes, but no one will be able to give you back your wife. Trust me; a zombie is not the same thing, Mr. Bennington.”

He nodded, and there was that glimpse of pain again. “I’ve already asked around, Ms. Blake; everyone said that if anyone can raise my Ilsa so she looks like herself and doesn’t know she’s dead, you are the only one to go to, and you’ve turned me down.” He bit his jaw again, that swell of muscle showing his control beginning to slip.

1S
R
1L

FLIRT

Micah said, “I am sorry for your loss, Mr. Bennington, but Anita is the expert on the undead; if she says it would go badly, I’d trust her.”

His gaze went straight to anger. He turned and put that gaze on Micah. “It’s a terrible thing to lose the one you love, Mr. Callahan.”

“Yes, it is,” Micah said.

The two men looked at each other, Micah exuding that calm that helped him talk new shapeshifters down when they were about to lose control, and Bennington giving off that tightly wound rage. He turned back to me. “Is that your final answer: that you won’t help me bring her back?”

“It’s the only answer I have, Mr. Bennington. I’m sorry that I can’t help you.”

“Won’t help, you mean.”

“I said what I meant—I can’t.”

He shook his head, over and over; his face was bleak, as if some light had gone out of him. Maybe it was hope; maybe I’d been his last hope and now it was gone. I would have given him back his hope, if I could have, but I honestly couldn’t do what he wanted; no one could.

He turned and looked at the three men, slowly, then back to me. “Do you love them?”

I thought about telling him it was none of his business, but in the face of such pain, I told the truth. “Yes.”

“All three of them?”

I thought about quibbling, that I *love*-loved Micah and Nathaniel, but loved Jason as a friend. The fact that I had sex with all of them

1S

R

1L

LAURELL K. HAMILTON

sort of muddied the waters for most people, but the four of us were clear on how we felt about each other, and all of us knew that Jason was my friend first and everything else second. We were secure, so I gave the short answer: “I do.”

He looked at all of us again, nodded once, and then opened the door. “I’ve never been able to love more than one person at a time. It would be easier if I could.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I didn’t bother. I tried to put my sympathy into my face, and let it go at that.

“Their being here with you proves that at least some of the tallest tales about you are true.”

“You keep leaving me not knowing what to say, Mr. Bennington.”

“I thought women always knew what to say.”

“I don’t.”

“My wife was a very different kind of woman than you, Ms. Blake.”

“I hear that a lot,” I said.

“Please, help me get her back.”

“I can’t give her back to you, Mr. Bennington. No human being could do what you truly want, no matter how psychically gifted they might be.”

“And what do I truly want?”

“You want resurrection of the body and mind and soul. I’m good, Mr. Bennington, maybe the best, but no one, not even me, is that good.”

He left then without another word, closing the door carefully behind him. Micah hugged me. “That was unpleasant.”

1S

R

1L

FLIRT

I raised my face for a kiss, which he gave, and hugged him back. “Unpleasant,” I said, “that’s one word for it.”

Nathaniel hugged me from behind, and I was suddenly sandwiched between my two live-in sweeties. Nathaniel kissed the top of my head. “Come to lunch, and Jason and I will flirt outrageously, and make you smile.”

“As long as I’m left out of the flirting,” Micah said.

“It’s okay that you don’t flirt in public,” Nathaniel said, “you do fine at home.”

Jason came to stand beside us. “If four’s a crowd I can take a hint.”

It was Micah who opened his arm and brought Jason into the group hug, which let Nathaniel do the same. We snuggled together for a moment, and Jason put his face against mine. “I don’t know how you deal with clients all day, Anita.”

“I could do without the grieving relatives, that’s for sure,” I said.

“One of these days,” Mary said from behind us, “you have to tell me how you do that.”

We broke from the hug enough for me to look at her. “Do what?”

She waved her hands at us all. “Three of the sexiest men I’ve seen in weeks and they’re all here to take you to lunch. If you find one over thirty, throw him my way.” It made me laugh, which is what she meant it to do. Mary had worked here as long as I had, and she’d seen worse displays of grief than Tony Bennington’s.

I smiled to let her know it worked, and tried to shake the

1S
R
1L

LAURELL K. HAMILTON

depressing feeling that I'd failed Bennington. I had told him the truth, but sometimes the last thing you want when you're grieving is truth.

"I have a couple that are way over thirty, Mary, but I didn't think you were into vampires."

She made a girlish squeal, which was a sound that should have been outlawed once you hit the other side of fifty, but Mary could still pull it off. I was under thirty and still couldn't do the squeal without feeling like an idiot. It was never a voluntary sound for me.

"See you after lunch, Mary."

"If I had all three of them with me, I would make it a long lunch."

I grinned, and then felt the blush start. I always had blushed easily, damn it.

Mary laughed, until Jason walked over to her and kissed her cheek, and then it was her turn to blush. We left the office laughing with Mary joining us. "Go on with you, cheeky kid," she said to Jason, but was still bright-eyed with the attention.

"Cheeky, hmm," Jason said. I grabbed his arm and pulled him out the door before he could do whatever was behind that gleam in his eyes. I wasn't sure if Mary would thank me later, or be disappointed.

1S

R

1L