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THE MAIN PIECE of the body lay on the ground, on its back in the middle of a smooth grassy field. In the predawn gloom everything looked gray, but there were scuffed and paler places around the field; I think we were in standing in the middle of a softball field. The “we” was Edward, U.S. Marshal Ted Forrester, and me, U.S. Marshal Anita Blake. Edward was his real name, the real him. Forrester was his secret identity, like Clark Kent for Superman, but to the other marshals he was good ol’ boy Ted, once a bounty hunter, now a marshal, grandfathered in under the Preternatural Endangerment Act just like me. I’d been a vampire executioner, not a bounty hunter. But either way, there we stood with real badges; legally we were real cops. Edward still took assassination jobs if the pay was high enough, or the hit interesting enough. He specialized in killing only dangerous things, like wereanimals and vampires. Crime fighting had actually begun to take up most of his time. Work does interfere with your hobbies.

There were other marshals over talking to the local police, but it was just Edward and me standing in the middle of the scattered body parts. Maybe the others had gotten tired of looking at them; we had come straight from the airport in Tacoma to the crime scene. The other cops had been here longer. Dismembered bodies did lose their charm pretty fast.

I fought the urge to huddle in my Windbreaker with *U.S. Marshal* in big letters on it. It was fifty freaking degrees here. Whoever heard of fifty being the regular temperature in August? It was a hundred-plus with heat index at home in St. Louis. The stop before this one had been Alabama. Fifty degrees felt amazingly cold after all that heat and humidity. The light softened around us and I could see the body parts better. It didn’t make me like them any better.

“Is the body lying on its back, or its ass?” I asked.

“You mean because it’s bisected at midchest and the parts are about ten feet away?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Does it matter?” he asked. He pushed his hand toward a cowboy hat that he’d left in the car that brought us from the airport. Ted wore a wellloved, well-creased cowboy hat, and the fact that the hat gesture had become habitual said just how much time Edward was spending as his legal alter ego. He settled for running his hand through his short blond hair. He was five foot eight, which seemed tall to me at five- three.

“I guess not.” In my head I thought, *Problems like that are what you think about when you stare down at a dismembered body, because otherwise you want to run screaming, or throw up.* I hadn’t thrown up on a body in years, but the St. Louis police had never let me live it down.

“They can’t find the heart,” he said, voice as unemotional as his face.

The light was strong enough that I could see that his eyes were blue rather than just pale. He had a summer tan, light gold, but better than I tanned. It seemed wrong that the blond, blue-eyed WASP tanned

darker than I did with my mother's black hair and brown eyes. I was half Hispanic—shouldn't I tan darker than white-bread boy?

"Anita," he said, and he moved so I couldn't see the body. "Talk to me."

I blinked at him. "They won't find the heart. Just like they didn't find the last three hearts. The killer, or killers, is taking the heart as a trophy, or proof of the kill. Like the woodsman in Snow White taking the heart back to the Wicked Queen in a box, or something."

"I need you here, working this case, not lost in your head."

"I'm here." I frowned at him.

He shook his head. "I've seen you look at worse than this and be better about it."

"Maybe I'm tired of looking at shit like this. Aren't you?"

"You don't mean just this case," he said.

I shook my head.

"Are you asking if looking at things like this bothers me?"

"I would never ask that, it's against the guy code," I said, and just saying it that way made me smile a little.

He smiled back, but more like it was reflex. It never reached his eyes. They stayed cold and empty as a winter sky. Once the other marshals joined us he'd make his eyes sparkle, or fill with some emotion; he didn't bother when it was just us. We knew each other too well; there was no need to hide.

"No, it doesn't bother me."

I shrugged, and finally let myself huddle in the thin Windbreaker. At least with my main gun at the small of my back instead of in the shoulder holster, I was able to zip it and not compromise my gun. I still had my backup gun in the shoulder holster and a big-ass knife down my back that attached to the specially made shoulder rig.

"It's more that I'd rather be home."

"With your men," he said, and again it was totally neutral.

I nodded. I missed the men in my life when I was away too long, and this was our fourth crime scene in a fourth city. I was tired of planes, tired of other cops, tired of being away.

"I'm missing Becca in *Music Man*. She's just in the chorus, but she's one of the youngest they've ever cast."

"She must be really good."

"She is." He nodded, smiling, and this time it reached all the way up to his eyes. His face was warm and happy thinking about his almost stepdaughter. He'd been living with and engaged to Donna for years, but never quite married, but the kids thought of him as their dad. Becca had been only six when he and her mother started dating. Edward, whom the vampires had nicknamed "Death," had taken Becca to dance class and sat in the waiting room with the moms for years now. It made me smile just to think about it.

"It was more fun to hunt monsters before we had someone to go home to," I said.

The smile faded and he turned cold eyes to look at where the head lay to one side of the field. "I can't argue that. I don't mind the bodies. It doesn't bother me, but I hope we get home before the musical is over."

"How many nights does it run?"

"Two weeks," he said.

"Two weeks, starting today?"

"Yes."

"I don't want to be out here another two weeks," I said.

"Me, either," he said, and this time he sounded tired.

The real trouble with this case for me was that I knew exactly why these victims had been chosen. I even knew what was killing them. The trouble was I couldn't tell anyone but Edward, because if I told the police everything I knew, the killers would come after me and every policeman that I told, and everyone that they told. The Harlequin were the vampire equivalent of police, spies, judge, jury, and executioner. They were also some of the greatest warriors to ever live, or unlive. Some of them were vampires and some of them were wereanimals, which was how they were slicing apart the bodies of the weretigers they were killing across the country. The body at our feet looked like a human man. Before he died he'd been able to shift to a big-ass tiger, but it hadn't helped him against the Harlequin, just as it hadn't helped any of the others. If two people were equally fast, equally strong, but one was better trained at fighting, the better trained one would win. So far, none of the weretigers had been anything but ordinary people who just happened to turn into weretigers.

"We're here to work the scene," Edward said, "so we do."

I sighed, squared my shoulders, and stopped huddling in my thin jacket. "It's partly that we know so much the other police need to know."

"We settled this, Anita. The . . . ones who can't be named—" He glared at me. "I really hate that we can't even say their names out loud. It feels like we're in a Harry Potter book talking about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

"You know the deal, Edward; if you mention their name without their invitation they hunt you down and kill you for it. If I told the other police, everyone who said their name would be hunted down and slaughtered. I don't know about you, but these guys are scary good, and they seem to have knowledge of modern forensics."

"They're wearing cloaks, gloves, and hoods that cover their hair, Anita. The outfits that keep them hidden from the other of these . . . guys help them not leave forensic evidence behind."

"Fair enough."

"And the Whatever's that are on your side don't know the faces of the others. They wear masks when they meet, like some terrorist cells, so they can spy on each other if they need to."

"So we have no faces to give them, no names except nicknames, and those match the masks they wear."

"I don't think assassins this good wear Venetian carnival masks in downtown Tacoma, so the nicknames and masks don't help," he said.

"So we know everything and nothing useful," I said.

"If I'd taken the contract to kill the Queen vampire, she'd be dead right now."

"Or you would and I'd be talking to Peter about why he's lost a second dad."

Edward gave me the full weight of his cold gaze. "You know how

good I am at my job.”

I'd had years of practice meeting that cold gaze. I met it now. “You don't understand, Edward. She's the darkness, the night itself made alive.”

“I wouldn't have just blown her body up and called the job done,” he said. “Something that supernatural needed magic to kill it for good.”

“What—you would have brought a witch along?”

“No, but I would have gone to one and gotten charms, a blessed weapon, something. The mercenaries the vampire council hired to kill her treated her like just another mark and now we're all in the shit because of it.”

I couldn't argue with him; he was too right. The Harlequin had been the law of the vampire council in Europe for thousands of years, but their original job had been as bodyguards to their Dark Queen. Half of them had broken with the vampire council and were back to taking orders from the Mother of All Darkness.

“They thought fire would destroy her,” I said.

“Would you have assumed that?”

I thought about it. “No.”

“What would you have done?”

“I'd have plastered myself with holy items, thrown more holy items on the body so her spirit couldn't leave the body she's in, and taken her head and heart, then I'd have burned it all separately down to ash, and put the ashes of the head, the heart, and the body in different bodies of running water.”

“You really think she could come back if you put the ashes in the same body of water?”

I shrugged. “She survived the total destruction by fire of her body and was able to send her spirit out to take over the body of other vampire council members. I wouldn't put anything past her.”

“So even if we find Morte d'Amour, the Lover of Death, and destroy him, she'll just jump to another host.”

“She can survive as a disembodied spirit, Edward; I'm not sure she can be killed.”

“Everything dies, Anita. The universe will die eventually.”

“I'm not going to sweat what happens five billion years from now, Edward; the universe can take care of itself. How do we stop them from killing innocent weretiger citizens, and the bigger question, how do we stop her?”

“You're the necromancer, I'm just a humble killer,” he said.

“Which means, you don't know either,” I said.

“Why doesn't your boyfriend know? Jean-Claude is Master of the City of St. Louis, and what's left of the European power structure is trying to make him head of a new vampire council here in the States. Why aren't the vampires and all the other wereanimals you're hanging out with helping to stop this?”

“The other . . . whatever's are hunting these guys. They'll be traveling as they hear about the bodies, but they're behind us, Edward. We've been first on the ground in the last three cities.”

“For preternaturals that are supposed to be the greatest spies and assassins ever, they suck at anything useful.”

"We're not doing much better," I said.

"So the vampires can't help us. We're cops, let's be cops," he said.

"What does that mean?"

"We work the scene. This is the kill site. This is where we can learn new things about these bastards. Things that aren't legends, but what they did only a few hours ago. It can help us catch them."

"You really believe that?"

"I have to believe that, and so do you."

I took in a deep breath and wished I hadn't. There was a faint bitter smell because we were standing near the end of the body. Death isn't neat, or pretty, or clean; it's all outhouse smells as your body does everything it can do all at once, one last time.

"Fine," I said, and I squatted beside the body on the balls of my feet.

I made myself look at the body, really look at it.

"This body was sliced, neat, very few cuts, very efficient."

"So why tear the body into pieces?"

"Because they wanted to do it, and were strong enough to do it," I said.

"You know that doesn't feel right; try again." He stood over me, and for the first time in a long time I felt like the inexperienced newbie and he was the mentor again, telling me how to kill the monsters. He was one of the few people on the planet I would have taken that attitude from.

"They wanted the bodies to match the other bodies, at least superficially. They hoped the police would think it was the same killers."

"But it's not," Edward said.

"The first body and the third were savaged. They were literally torn apart. There were internal organs and guts everywhere. It was like a disorganized killer with maybe an organized partner directing, or controlling him. This is all organized. He, or they, are doing the kills like they've been told to, matching the first kill, but their heart isn't in it."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"This was a cold kill like the second one. The other two kills, the murderer took joy in it."

He came down beside me on the balls of his feet, too. "My kills are neat and clean, but I enjoy my work."

"You enjoy the planning and being faster, stronger, just better than whoever you're hunting, but do you actually enjoy the kill?"

"Yes," he said, and he was looking at the body as he said it.

I studied his profile. I asked him something I'd never asked him before. "What is it you enjoy about it?"

He turned those pale blue eyes to me. They'd faded so the blue was grayish. It was never a good sign when his eyes changed to that cold winter sky color.

"I like watching the light die in their eyes," he said, his voice as cold and unemotional as his own eyes.

I met that winter gaze and said, "That's why you like a close kill."

He nodded, still holding that winter gaze on me. I don't know what my face showed. We'd started out with him being my teacher, and then he'd paid me the ultimate compliment. He'd told me a few years ago that he wanted to see which of us was better. He wasn't sure anymore, and it was a fantasy of his to have us hunt each other, so we could settle

the debate once and for all. When he first told me, I'd been convinced I'd be the one that would die; now I wasn't so sure, maybe I would win. Maybe I could call Donna and the kids and tell them . . . Tell them what? That their family was destroyed because Edward and I had had the ultimate guy moment and I was the better man?

"So you think the killers enjoyed the kill?" My voice was as empty and neutral as any I had, just two killers talking shop over someone else's kill.

"I think they might have enjoyed the killing. There's no way to tell when a killer is this controlled," he said.

"How does any of this help us catch them?"

He shook his head and looked back at the biggest part of the body.

"I don't know." He sounded tired again.

I looked down at the body. There was still enough of his chest and stomach left to show that he'd had muscle tone. He'd hit the gym, and it had done him no good at all. He would be another clanless tiger, a survivor of an attack rather than one born into a family group. The Harlequin were killing only the clanless right now, because they were searching for certain tigers. They were searching for gold tigers. A bloodline supposedly destroyed during the reign of the First Emperor of China, but hidden in secret by some of the Harlequin. Hidden from the other Harlequin and from the Mother of All Darkness; the fact that they'd managed to hide them from her when she was at the height of her powers said just how good the Harlequin were at subterfuge. They would have run the world's best witness protection program ever. We'd hoped they'd stop slaughtering the clanless tigers when the gold tigers made their public debut to the other tiger clans, but though we'd made it public that we had all colors of the tigers with us in St. Louis, the Harlequin were still hunting and killing the weretigers. It seemed so pointless.

I stood up, waiting for my bad knee to protest squatting too long, but it didn't. I realized my "bad knee" hadn't been bad in a while. I was Jean-Claude's human servant and metaphysically tied to several wereanimals. I healed faster than human-normal, but I hadn't realized I'd lost the old aches and pains from past injuries. When had that happened?

Edward stood beside me, and he favored one leg a little. He had an injury on that one from a hunt that went bad. I thought, *How old is Edward? Will he age and I won't? Will my ties to the supernatural keep healing me?* It was a weird thought to think that Edward might grow older faster than I did.

"You've thought of something, what?" he asked.

I opened my mouth, closed it, and tried to think of something else to say out loud. "Why keep killing the tigers?" I said.

"You mean now that they know you and Jean-Claude have your own gold tigers in St. Louis?"

"Yes. They were supposed to kill the clanless tigers to keep us from getting the gold tigers to bond with metaphysically. It's too late, Edward, we've already done that, so why keep killing the other tigers?"

"Maybe they're looking for a specific weretiger."

"Maybe, but why, or who, and again why? There's nothing to be gained by it."

"I can think of one thing they've gained," he said.

"Okay, what?"

"They've separated you from Jean-Claude and all the other people you're metaphysically tied to. In St. Louis you have enough bodyguards to make up a small army. Here, it's just you and the police."

"You think they'd risk attacking me with the cops around? I mean, the whole concept of these guys is that no one knows they exist. They're really invested in being this big dark secret."

"If Mommie Darkest told them to kill you, would they risk being outed to the human police?"

"Maybe," I said, and then I had another idea. I wasn't sure it was worse, but it scared me more. "Her first idea was to take over my body. She wanted to kill me only after she realized I was too powerful for her to move into me."

"Are you as powerful out here hundreds of miles away from Jean-Claude and the rest?"

I thought about it, really made myself look at it. "Metaphysically, no. I'm safer if I can touch my master and animals to call."

"Maybe they're killing the tigers to keep you out here."

"You think they'll try to kidnap me?" I asked.

"If she still wants your body, yes."

"And if she just wants me dead, then that works better out here, too," I said.

"It does," he said. He was looking out at the edge of the field. He was checking the perimeter for danger, trying to see the Harlequin hiding in the trees along the edge of the green, summer field.

"I don't sense any wereanimals," I said, "and walking in full daylight is incredibly rare. I've only met three vampires that could do it."

"If they're these ultimate spies, would you be able to sense them?"

"I think so," I said.

He glanced at me, then went back to scanning the area. "That's pretty arrogant."

"Maybe, but I'd still know if there was a preternatural close to us."

He spoke without looking at me, "Please, tell me this isn't the first time you wondered if this was a trap for you."

"I thought they didn't know the gold tigers were in St. Louis. They should have stopped killing the others after they learned that. It's one of the reasons we made it public."

"So either it's a trap to keep you away from St. Louis or Mommie Darkest forgot to rescind her order."

"What do you mean?"

"Would they slaughter the weretigers until she ordered them to stop, even if it made no sense?"

I thought about it. "The ones that are loyal to her are fanatically loyal, so I think they might."

"So either she forgot to tell them to stop, because she's busy doing something else . . ."

"Or she's just that crazy," I said.

He nodded. "Or she's that crazy, or they're waiting to either kidnap you, or kill you."

"Fuck," I said.

"You need to talk to Jean-Claude."

"I thought you didn't like him," I said.

"You don't like Donna either," he said.

"So we each don't like the people that the other one loves." I shrugged.

"You need bodyguards, Anita."

"Why not just go home to St. Louis?" I said.

"The Marshals Service frowns on us leaving a case in the middle of it, but that's not the problem."

The other marshals were moving toward us. I moved closer to Edward, and asked, "Then what is the problem?"

"How would you go home?"

I frowned, but answered. "I'd get on the first plane I could catch and go home."

"The police would drop you off at the airport, and then you'd be alone."

"What?"

"You'd be in the airport, and on the plane alone, Anita. If I really wanted to take you and it was important to not be seen doing it, that's what I'd be waiting for, you alone, away from the other police, and Jean-Claude."

I leaned close, speaking low. "So what do I do?"

"Have some guards come in from St. Louis."

"How do I explain that to the other cops?"

"We'll think of something." And then I knew the other marshals were too close to talk more, because Edward's face folded into a grin. His face lit with that charm that Ted always seemed to have. If there was an Emmy award for hired killers, Edward would so have won. I wasn't nearly that good, but I managed a pleasant blank face to my fellow marshals. They asked, "See anything that'll help us catch these bastards?"

Edward and I dutifully said, "No."