
1

MOST PEOPLE DON'T stare at the scars. They'll look, of course, then do the eye slide. You know, the quick look, then drop the gaze, then just have to have that second look. But they make it quick. The wounds aren't like freak show bad, but they are interesting. Captain Pete McKinnon, firefighter and arson investigator, sat across from me, big hands wrapped around a glass of iced tea that our secretary, Mary, had brought in for him. He was staring at my arms. Not the place most men look. But it wasn't sexual. He was staring at the scars and didn't seem a bit embarrassed about it.

My right arm had been sliced open twice by a knife. One scar was white and old. The second was still pink and new. My left arm was worse. A mound of white scar tissue sat at the bend of my arm. I'd have to lift weights for the rest of my life or the scars would stiffen and I'd lose mobility in the arm, or so my physical therapist had said. There was a cross-shaped burn mark, a little crooked now because of the ragged claw marks that a shapeshifted witch had given me. There were one or two other scars hidden under my blouse, but the arm really is the worst.

Bert, my boss, had requested that I wear my suit jacket or long-sleeved blouses in the office. He said that some clients had expressed reservations about my ah . . . occupationally acquired wounds. I hadn't worn a long-sleeved blouse since he made the request. He'd turned the air conditioner up a little colder every day. It was so cold today I had goose bumps. Everyone else was bringing sweaters to work. I was shopping for midriff tops to show off my back scars.

McKinnon had been recommended to me by Sergeant Rudolph Storr, cop and friend. They'd played football in college

together, and been friends ever since. Dolph didn't use the word "friend" lightly, so I knew they were close.

"What happened to your arm?" McKinnon asked finally.

"I'm a legal vampire executioner. Sometimes they get pesky." I took a sip of coffee.

"Pesky," he said and smiled.

He sat his glass on the desk and slipped off his suit jacket. He was nearly as wide through the shoulders as I was tall. He was a few inches short of Dolph's six foot eight, but he didn't miss it by much. He was only in his forties, but his hair was completely grey with a little white starting at the temples. It didn't make him look distinguished. It made him look tired.

He had me beat on scars. Burn scars crawled up his arms from his hands to disappear under the short sleeves of his white dress shirt. The skin was mottled pinkish, white, and a strange shade of tan like the skin of some animal that should shed regularly.

"That must have hurt," I said.

"It did." He sat there meeting my eyes with a long steady look. "You saw the inside of a hospital on some of that."

"Yeah." I pushed the sleeve up on my left arm and showed the shiny place where a bullet had grazed me. His eyes widened just a bit. "Now that we've proven we're big tough he-men, can you just cut to the chase? Why are you here, Captain McKinnon?"

He smiled and draped his jacket over the back of his chair. He took the tea off my desk and sipped it. "Dolph said you wouldn't like being sized up."

"I don't like passing inspections."

"How do you know you passed?"

It was my turn to smile. "Women's intuition. Now, what do you want?"

"Do you know what the term firebug means?"

"An arsonist," I said.

He looked expectantly at me.

"A pyrokinetic, someone who can call fire psychically."

He nodded. "You ever seen a real pyro?"

"I saw films of Ophelia Ryan," I said.

"The old black-and-white ones?" he asked.

"Yeah."

“She’s dead now, you know.”

“No, I didn’t know.”

“Burned to death in her bed, spontaneous combustion. A lot of the firebugs go up that way, as if when they’re old they lose control of it. You ever see one of them in person?”

“Nope.”

“Where’d you see the films?”

“Two semesters of Psychic Studies. We had a lot of psychics come in and talk to us, demonstrate their abilities, but pyrokinesis is such a rare ability, I don’t think the prof could find one.”

He nodded and drained the rest of his tea in one long swallow. “I met Ophelia Ryan once before she died. Nice lady.” He started to turn the ice-filled glass round and round in his large hands. He stared at the glass and not at me while he talked. “I met one other firebug. He was young, in his twenties. He’d started by setting empty houses on fire, like a lot of pyromaniacs. Then he did buildings with people in them, but everybody got out. Then he did a tenement, a real firetrap. He set every exit on fire. Killed over sixty people, mostly women and children.”

McKinnon stared up at me. The look in his eyes was haunted. “It’s still the largest body count I’ve ever seen at a fire. He did an office building the same way, but missed a couple of exits. Twenty-three dead.”

“How’d you catch him?”

“He started writing to the papers and the television. He wanted credit for the deaths. He set fire to a couple of cops before we got him. We were wearing those big silver suits that they wear to oil rig fires. He couldn’t get them to burn. We took him down to the police station, and that was the mistake. He set it on fire.”

“Where else could you have taken him?” I asked.

He shrugged massive shoulders. “I don’t know, somewhere else. I was still in the suit, and I held onto him. Told him we’d burn up together if he didn’t stop it. He laughed and set himself on fire.” McKinnon sat his glass very carefully on the edge of the desk.

“The flames were this soft blue color almost like a gas fire, but paler. Didn’t burn him, but somehow it set my suit on fire.

The damn thing is rated for something like 6,000 degrees, and it started to melt. Human skin burns at 120 degrees, but somehow I didn't melt into a puddle, just the suit. I had to strip it off while he laughed. He walked out the door and he didn't think anyone would be stupid enough to grab him."

I didn't say the obvious. I let him talk.

"I tackled him in the hallway and slammed him into a wall a couple of times. Funny thing, where my skin touched him, it didn't burn. It was like the fire crawled over a space and started on my arms, so my hands are fine."

I nodded. "There's a theory that a pyro's aura keeps them from burning. When you touched his skin, you were too close to his own aura, his own protection, to burn."

He stared at me. "Maybe that is what happened, because I threw him hard up against the wall over and over. He was screaming, 'I'll burn you. I'll burn you alive.' Then the fire changed color to yellow, normal, and he started to burn. I let him go and went for the fire extinguisher. We couldn't put the fire on his body out. The extinguishers worked on the walls, everything else, but it wouldn't work on him. It was as if the fire was crawling out of his body from deep inside. We'd dampen some of the flames, but there was just more of it until he was made of fire."

McKinnon's eyes were distant and horror-filled as if he was still seeing it. "He didn't die, Ms. Blake, not like he should have. He screamed for so long and we couldn't help him. Couldn't help him." His voice trailed off. He just sat there staring at nothing.

I waited and finally said, gently, "Why are you here, Captain?"

He blinked and sort of shook himself. "I think we've got another firebug on our hands, Ms. Blake. Dolph said that if anyone could help us cut the loss of life, it was you."

"Psychic ability isn't technically preternatural. It's just talent like throwing a great curve ball."

He shook his head. "What I saw die on the floor of the station that day wasn't human. It couldn't have been human. Dolph says you're the monster expert. Help me catch this monster before he kills."

“He or she hasn’t killed yet? It’s just property damage?” I asked.

He nodded. “I could lose my job for coming to you. I should have bucked this up the line and gotten permission from the chain of command, but we’ve only lost a couple of buildings. I want to keep it that way.”

I took in a slow breath and let it out. “I’ll be happy to help, Captain, but I honestly don’t know what I can do for you.”

He pulled out a thick file folder. “Here’s everything we’ve got. Look it over and call me tonight.”

I took the folder from him and sat it in the middle of my desk blotter.

“My number’s in the file. Call me. Maybe it’s not a firebug. Maybe it’s something else. But whatever it is, Ms. Blake, it can bathe in flames and not burn. It can walk through a building and shed fire like sprinkling water. No accelerant, Ms. Blake, but the houses have gone up as if they’ve been soaked in something. When we get the wood in the lab, it’s clean. It’s like whatever is doing this can force the fire to do things it shouldn’t do.”

He glanced at his watch. “I’m running late. I am working on getting you on this officially, but I’m afraid they’ll wait until people are dead. I don’t want to wait.”

“I’ll call you tonight, but it may be late. How late is too late to call?”

“Any time, Ms. Blake, any time.”

I nodded and stood. I offered my hand. He shook it. His grip was firm, solid, but not too tight. A lot of male clients that wanted to know about the scars squeezed my hand like they wanted me to cry “uncle.” But McKinnon was secure. He had his own scars.

I’d barely sat back down when the phone rang. “What is it, Mary?”

“It’s me,” Larry said. “Mary didn’t think you’d mind her putting me straight through.” Larry Kirkland, vampire executioner trainee, was supposed to be over at the morgue staking vampires.

“Nope. What’s up?”

“I need a ride home.” There was just the slightest hesitation to his voice.

“What’s wrong?”

He laughed. “I should know better than to be coy with you. I’m all stitched up. The doc says I’ll be fine.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“Come pick me up and I’ll tell all.” Then the little son of a gun hung up on me.

There was only one reason for him to not want to talk to me. He’d done something stupid and gotten hurt. Two bodies to stake. Two bodies that wouldn’t have risen for at least another night. What could have gone wrong? As the old saying goes, only one way to find out.

Mary rescheduled my appointments. I got my shoulder holster complete with Browning Hi-Power out of the top desk drawer and slipped it on. Since I’d stopped wearing my suit jacket in the office, I’d put the gun in the drawer, but outside the office and always after dark I wore a gun. Most of the creatures that had scarred me up were dead. The majority I’d done personally. Silver-plated bullets are a wonderful thing.

2

LARRY SAT VERY carefully in the passenger seat of my Jeep. It's hard to sit in a car when your back has fresh stitches in it. I'd seen the wound. It was one sharp puncture and one long, bloody scrape. Two wounds, really. He was still wearing the blue T-shirt he'd started in, but the back of it was bloody and ragged. I was impressed he'd kept the nurses from cutting it off of him. They had a tendency to cut off clothing that stood in their way.

Larry strained against the seat belt, trying to find a comfortable position. His short red hair had been freshly cut, tight enough to his head that you almost didn't notice the curls. He was five foot four, an inch taller than me. He'd graduated with a degree in preternatural biology this May. But with the freckles and that little pain wrinkle between his clear blue eyes, he looked closer to sixteen than twenty-one.

I'd been so busy watching him squirm that I'd missed the turnoff to I-270. We were stuck on Ballas until we got to Olive. It was just before lunch, and Olive would be packed with people trying to shove food in their mouths and rush back to work.

"Did you take your pain pill?" I asked.

He tried to sit very still, one arm braced on the edge of the seat. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because stuff like that knocks me out. I don't want to sleep."

"A drugged sleep isn't the same thing as regular sleep," I said.

"No, the dreams are worse," he said.

He had me there. "What happened, Larry?"

“I’m amazed you’ve waited this long to ask.”

“So am I, but I didn’t want to ask in front of the doctor. If you start asking questions of the patient, the docs tend to wander off and treat somebody else. I wanted to know from the doctor who stitched you up just how serious it was.”

“Just a few stitches,” he said.

“Twenty,” I said.

“Eighteen,” he said.

“I was rounding up.”

“Trust me,” he said. “You don’t need to round up.” He grimaced as he said it. “Why does this hurt so much?” he asked.

It might have been a rhetorical question, but I answered it anyway. “Every time you move an arm or a leg you use muscles in your back. Moving your head and muscles in your shoulders makes muscles in your back move. You never appreciate your back until it goes out on you.”

“Great,” he said.

“Enough stalling, Larry. Tell me what happened.” We were stopped behind a long line of traffic leading up to the light on Olive. We were stuck between two small strip malls. The one on our left had fountains and V.J.’s Tea and Spice, where I got all my coffee. To our right was Streetside Records and a Chinese buffet. If you came up Ballas at lunch time, you always had plenty of time to study the shops on either side.

He smiled, then grimaced. “I had two bodies to stake. Both vamp victims that didn’t want to rise as vampires.”

“They had dying wills, I remember. You’ve been doing most of those lately.”

He nodded, then froze in mid-gesture. “Even nodding my head hurts.”

“It’ll hurt more tomorrow.”

“Gee, thanks, boss. I needed to know that.”

I shrugged. “Lying to you won’t make it hurt less.”

“Anybody ever tell you your bedside manner sucks?”

“Lots of people.”

He made a small *hmph* sound. “That I believe. Anyway, I’d finished the bodies and was packing up. A woman rolled in another body. Said it was a vamp with no court order attached.”

I glanced at him, frowning. "You didn't do a body without paperwork, did you?"

He frowned back. "Of course not. I told them, no court order, no dead vampire. Staking a vamp without a court order is murder, and I'm not going to be up on charges because someone screwed the paperwork. I told them both that in no uncertain terms."

"Them?" I asked. I eased up the line of traffic, a little closer to the light.

"The other morgue attendant had come back in. They went out in search of the misplaced paperwork. I was left with the vampire. It was morning. He wasn't going anywhere." He tried to look away and not meet my eyes, but it hurt. He ended up staring at me, angry.

"I went out for a cigarette."

I looked at him and had to slam on the brakes when the traffic just stopped. Larry was flung into the seat belt. He groaned, and when he was finished writhing on the seat, he said, "You did that on purpose."

"No, I didn't, but maybe I should have. You left a vampire body alone. A vampire that might have had enough kills to deserve a court order of execution, alone in the morgue."

"It wasn't just the cigarette, Anita. The body was just lying there on the gurney. It wasn't chained or strapped. There were no crosses anywhere. I've done executions. They plaster the vamps with silver chains and crosses until it's hard to find the heart. It just didn't look right. I wanted to talk to the medical examiner. She has to approve all vampires before execution, or somebody does. Besides the ME smokes. I figured we could have one together in her office."

"And," I said.

"She wasn't in, and I went back to the morgue. When I got there, the woman attendant was trying to pound a stake through the vamp's chest."

It was lucky we were at a dead stop in traffic. If we'd been moving, I'd have plowed into someone. I stared at him. "You left your vampire kit unattended."

He managed to look embarrassed and angry at the same time. "My kit doesn't include shotguns like yours does, so I figured, who would bother it."

"A lot of people will steal things out of the bag for souvenirs, Larry." Traffic started to creep forward and I had to watch the road instead of his face.

"Fine, fine, I was wrong. I know I was wrong. I grabbed her around the waist and pulled her off the vampire." His eyes slid downward, not looking at me. This was the part that bothered him, or the part he thought would bother me. "I turned my back on her to check the vampire. To make sure she hadn't hurt him."

"She did your back," I said. We inched forward. We were now trapped between Dairy Queen and Kentucky Fried Chicken on one side, and an Infiniti car dealership and a gas station on the other. The scenery was not improving.

"Yeah, yeah. She must have thought I was down for the count because she left me and went back to the vampire. I disarmed her, but she was still trying to get to the vampire when the other attendant came in. It took both of us to pin her. She was crazy, manic."

"Why didn't you draw your gun, Larry?" His gun was sitting in his vampire kit because a shoulder holster and his back wound did not mix. But he went armed. I'd taken him out to the shooting range, and out on vampire hunts until I trusted him not to shoot his foot off.

"If I'd drawn my gun, I might have shot her."

"That's sort of the point, Larry."

"It's exactly the point," he said. "I didn't want to shoot her."

"She could have killed you, Larry."

"I know."

I gripped the steering wheel tight enough to mottle my skin, white and pink. I let out a long breath and tried not to yell. "You obviously don't know, or you would have been more careful."

"I'm alive, and she's not dead. The vampire didn't even get a scratch. It worked out all right."

I pulled out onto Olive and started creeping towards 270. We needed to head north towards St. Charles. Larry had an apartment over there. It was about a twenty-minute drive, give or take. His apartment looked out over a lake where geese nested in the spring and congregated in the winter. Richard Zeeman,

junior high science teacher, alpha werewolf, and at that time, my boyfriend, had helped him move in. Richard had really liked the geese nesting just under the balcony. So had I.

“Larry, you are going to have to get over this squeamishness or you’re going to get killed.”

“I’ll keep doing what I think is right, Anita. Nothing you can say will change my mind.”

“Dammit, Larry. I don’t want to have to bury you.”

“What would you have done? Shot her?”

“I wouldn’t have turned my back on her, Larry. I could have probably disarmed her or kept her busy until the other attendant arrived. I wouldn’t have had to shoot her.”

“I let things get out of control,” he said.

“Your priorities were screwed. You should have neutralized the threat before you checked on the victim. Alive, you could help the vamp. Dead, you’re just another victim.”

“Well, at least I’ve got a scar you don’t have.”

I shook my head. “You’ll have to try harder if you want a scar I don’t have.”

“You let a human shove one of your own stakes into your back?”

“Two humans with multiple bites, what I used to call human servants, before I knew what the term really meant. I had one pinned and was stabbing him. The woman came at my back.”

“So yours wasn’t a mistake,” he said.

I shrugged. “I could have shot them when I first saw them, but I didn’t kill humans as easily back then. I learned my lesson. Just because it doesn’t have fangs doesn’t mean it can’t kill you.”

“You used to be squeamish about shooting human servants?” Larry asked.

I turned onto 270. “No one’s perfect. Why did the woman have a hard-on to kill the vampire?”

He grinned. “You’re going to love this one. She’s a member of Humans First. The vampire was a doctor in the hospital. He’d tucked himself into a linen closet. It was where he always slept the day away if he’d had to stay too late in the hospital to drive home. She just popped him on a gurney and wheeled him down to the morgue.”

“I’m surprised she didn’t just push him out into the sunlight.

The last sunlight of the day works as well as noonday.”

“The linen closet he used was on the basement floor just in case someone opened the door at the wrong time of day. No windows. She was afraid someone would see her before she could get him up in the elevator and outside.”

“She really thought you would just stake him?”

“I guess so. I don’t know, Anita. She was crazy, really crazy. She spit at the vampire and us. Said we’d all rot in hell. That we had to cleanse the world of the monsters. The monsters were going to enslave us all.” Larry shivered, then frowned. “I thought Humans Against Vampires was bad enough, but this splinter group, Humans First, is genuinely scary.”

“HAV tries to work within the law,” I said. “Humans First doesn’t even pretend to care. They claimed they staked that vampire mayor in Michigan.”

“Claimed? You don’t believe them?”

“I think someone near and dear to his household did it.”

“Why?”

“The cops sent me a description and some photos of the security precautions he’d taken. Humans First may be radical, but they don’t seem very well organized yet. You’d have had to plan and be very lucky to get to that vampire during the day. He was like a lot of the old ones, very serious about his daytime safety. I think whoever did it is happy to let the right-wing radicals take the blame.”

“You tell the police what you think?”

“Sure. That’s why they asked.”

“I’m surprised they didn’t have you come down and see it in person.”

I shrugged. “I can’t go personally to every preternatural crime. Besides, I’m technically a civilian. Cops are sort of leery about involving civilians in their cases, but more importantly, the media would be all over it. The Executioner Solves Vampire Murder.”

Larry grinned. “That’s a mild headline for you.”

“Unfortunately,” I said. “Also, I think the killer is a human. I think it’s just someone he was close to. It’s like any well-planned murder except for the victim being a vampire.”

“Only you would make a locked-room vampire murder sound ordinary,” Larry said.

I had to smile. "I guess so." My beeper went off, and I jumped. I pulled the damn thing off my skirt and held it where I could see the number. I frowned at it.

"What's wrong? Is it the police?"

"No. I don't recognize the number."

"You don't give out your beeper number to strangers."

"I'm aware of that."

"Hey, don't get grumpy at me."

I sighed. "Sorry." Larry was slowly wearing me down on my aggression threshold. He was, by sheer repetition, teaching me to be nicer. Anybody else and I would have fed them their head in a basket. But Larry managed to push my buttons just right. He could caution me to be nicer and I didn't slug him. The basis of many a successful relationship.

We were only minutes from Larry's apartment. I'd tuck him into bed and answer the call. If it wasn't the police or a zombie-raising, I was going to be pissed. I hated being beeped when it wasn't important. That's what beepers are for, right? If it wasn't important stuff, I was going to rain all over somebody's parade. With Larry asleep, I could be as nasty as I wanted to be. It was almost a relief.