

1

IT WAS AN October wedding. The bride was a witch who solved preternatural crimes. The groom raised the dead and slew vampires for a living. It sounded like a Halloween joke, but it wasn't.

The groom's side wore traditional black tuxedos with orange bow ties and white shirts. The bride's side wore orange formals. You don't see Halloween orange prom dresses all that often. I'd been terrified that I was going have to shell out three hundred dollars for one of the monstrosities. But since I was on the groom's side I got to wear a tux. Larry Kirkland, groom, coworker, and friend, had stuck to his guns. He refused to make me wear a dress, unless I wanted to wear one. Hmm, let me see. Three hundred dollars, or more, for a very orange formal that I'd burn before I'd wear again, or less than a hundred dollars to rent a tux that I could return. Wait, let me think.

I got the tux. I did have to buy a pair of black tie-up shoes. The tux shop didn't have any size seven in women's. Oh, well. Even with the seventy-dollar shoes that I would probably never wear again, I still counted myself very lucky.

As I watched the four bridesmaids in their poofy orange dresses walk down the isle of the packed church, their hair done up on their heads in ringlets, and more makeup than I'd ever seen any of them wear, I was feeling very, very lucky. They had little round bouquets of orange and white flowers with black lace and orange and black ribbons trailing down from the flowers. I just had to stand up at the front of the church with my one hand holding the wrist of the other arm. The wedding coordinator had seemed to believe that all the groomsmen would pick their noses, or something equally embarrassing, if they didn't keep their hands busy. So she'd

informed them that they were to stand with their hands clasped on opposite wrists. No hands in pockets, no crossed arms, no hands clasped in front of their groins. I'd arrived late to the rehearsal—big surprise—and the wedding coordinator had seemed to believe that I would be a civilizing influence on the men, just because I happened to be a girl. It didn't take her long to figure out that I was as uncouth as the men. Frankly, I thought we all behaved ourselves really well. She just didn't seem very comfortable around men, or around me. Maybe it was the gun I was wearing.

But none of the groomsmen, myself included, had done anything for her to complain about. This was Larry's day, and none of us wanted to screw it up. Oh, and Tammy's day.

The bride entered the church on her father's arm. Her mother was already in the front pew dressed in a pale melon orange that actually looked good on her. She was beaming and crying, and seemed to be both miserable and deliriously happy all at the same time. Mrs. Reynolds was the reason for the big church wedding. Both Larry and Tammy would have been happy with something smaller, but Tammy didn't seem to be able to say no to her mother, and Larry was just trying to get along with his future in-law.

Detective Tammy Reynolds was a vision in white, complete with a veil that covered her face like a misty dream. She, too, was wearing more makeup than I'd ever seen her in, but the drama of it suited the beaded neckline, and full, bell-like skirt. The dress looked like it could have walked down the isle on its own, or at least stood on its own. They'd done something with her hair so that it was smooth and completely back from her face, so that you could see just how striking she was. I'd never really noticed that Detective Tammy was beautiful.

I was standing at the end of the groomsmen, me and Larry's three brothers, so I had to crane a little to see his face. It was worth the look. He was pale enough that his freckles stood out on his skin like ink spots. His blue eyes were wide. They'd done something to his short red curls so they lay almost smooth. He looked good, if he didn't faint. He gazed at Tammy as if he'd been hit with a hammer right between the eyes. Of course, if they'd done two hours' worth of makeup on Larry, he might have been a vision, too. But men don't have to

worry about it. The double standard is alive and well. The woman is supposed to be beautiful on her wedding day, the groom is just supposed to stand there and not embarrass himself, or her.

I leaned back in line and tried not to embarrass anyone. I'd tied my hair back while it was still wet so that it lay flat and smooth to my head. I wasn't cutting my hair so it was the best I could do to look like a boy. There were other parts of my anatomy that didn't help the boy look either. I am curvy, and even in a tux built for a man, I was still curvy. No one complained, but the wedding coordinator had rolled her eyes when she saw me. What she said out loud was, "You need more makeup."

"None of the other groomsmen are wearing makeup," I said.

"Don't you want to look pretty?"

Since I'd thought I already looked pretty good, there was only one reply, "Not particularly."

That had been the last conversation the wedding lady and I had had. She positively avoided me after that. I think she'd been mean on purpose, because I wasn't helping her keep the other groomsmen in line. She seemed to believe that just because we both had ovaries instead of balls that we should have joined forces. Besides, why should I worry about being pretty? It was Tammy and Larry's day, not mine. If, and that was a very big if, I ever got married, then I'd worry about it. Until then, screw it. Besides, I was already wearing more makeup than I normally did. Which for me meant any. My stepmother, Judith, keeps telling me that when I hit thirty I'll feel differently about all this girl stuff. I've only got three years to go until the big 3-0; so far panic has not set in.

Tammy's father placed her hand in Larry's. Tammy was three inches taller than Larry, in heels, she was more. I was standing close enough to the groom to see the look that Tammy's father gave Larry. It was not a friendly look. Tammy was three months, almost four months pregnant, and it was Larry's fault. Or rather it was Tammy and Larry's fault, but I don't think that's how her father viewed it. No, Mr. Nathan Reynolds definitely seemed to blame Larry, as if Tammy had been snatched a virgin from her bed and brought back deflowered, and pregnant.

Mr. Reynolds raised Tammy's blusher on her veil to reveal all that carefully made-up beauty. He kissed her solemnly on the cheek, threw one last dark look at Larry, and turned smiling and pleasant to join his wife in the front pew. The fact that he'd gone from a look that dark, to pleasant and smiling when he knew the church would see his face, bothered me. I didn't like that Larry's new father-in-law was capable of lying that well. Made me wonder what he did for a living. But I was naturally suspicious, comes from working too closely with the police for too long. Cynicism is so contagious.

We all turned toward the altar, and the familiar ceremony began. I'd been to dozens of weddings over the years, almost all Christian, almost all standard denominations, so the words were strangely familiar. Funny, how you don't think you've memorized something until you hear it, and realize you have. "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to join this man and this woman in Holy Matrimony."

It wasn't a Catholic or Episcopalian wedding, so we didn't have to kneel, or do much of anything. We wouldn't even be getting communion during the ceremony. I have to admit my mind began to wander a bit. I've never been a big fan of weddings. I understand they're necessary, but I was never one of those girls who fantasized about what my wedding would be like someday. I don't remember ever thinking about it until I got engaged in college, and when that fell through, I went back to not thinking about it. I'd been engaged very briefly to Richard Zeeman, junior high science teacher, and local Ulfric, Wolf-King, but he'd dumped me because I was more at home with the monsters than he was. Now, I'd pretty much settled into the idea that I would never marry. Never have those words spoken over me and my honeybun. A tiny part of me that I'd never admit to out loud was sad about that. Not the wedding part, I think I would hate my own wedding just as much as anyone else's, but not having one single person to call my own. I'd been raised middle-class, middle America, small town, and that meant the fact that I was currently dating a minimum of three men, maybe four, depending on how you looked at it, still made me squirm with something painfully close to embarrassment. I was working on not being uncomfortable about it, but there were issues that needed to be worked out. For instance, who do

you bring as your date to a wedding? The wedding was in a church complete with holy items, so two of the men were out. Vampires didn't do well around holy items. Watching Jean-Claude and Asher burst into flames as they came through the door would probably have put a damper on the festivities. That left me with one official boyfriend, Micah Callahan, and one friend, who happened to be a boy, Nathaniel Graison.

They'd come to the part where the rings were exchanged, which meant the maid of honor and the best man had something to do. The woman got to hold Tammy's huge spill of white flowers, and the man got to hand over the jewelry. It all seemed so terribly sexist. Just once I'd like to see the men have to hold flowers and the women fork over the jewelry. I'd been told once by a friend that I was too liberated for my own good. Maybe. All I knew was that if I ever did get engaged again I'd decided either both of us got an engagement ring, or neither of us did. Of course, again, that not getting married part meant that the engagement was probably off the board, too. Oh, well.

At last, they were man and wife. We all turned and the reverend presented them to the church as Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence Kirkland, though I knew for a fact that Tammy was keeping her maiden name, so really it should have been Mr. Lawrence Kirkland and Ms. Tammy Reynolds.

We all fell into two lines. I got to offer my arm to Detective Jessica Arnet. She took the arm, and with her in heels, I was about five inches shorter than she was. She smiled at me. I'd noticed she was pretty about a month ago, because she was flirting with Nathaniel, but it wasn't until that moment that I realized she could be beautiful. Her dark hair was pulled completely back from her face, so that the delicate triangle of her cheeks and chin was all you saw. The makeup had widened her eyes, added color to her cheeks, and carved pouting lips out of her thin ones. I realized that the orange that made most of the bridesmaids look wan, brought out rich highlights in her skin and hair, made her eyes shine. So few people look good in orange, it's one of the reasons they use it in so many prisons, like an extra punishment. But Detective Arnet looked wonderful in it. It almost made me wish I'd let the wedding lady talk me into the extra makeup. Almost.

I must have stared, because she frowned, and only then did I start forward, and take our place in line. We filed out like good little wedding party members. We'd already endured the photographer for group shots. He'd be hunting the bride and groom for those candid moments: cutting the cake, throwing the bouquet, removing the garter. Once we got through the receiving line, I could fade into the background and no one would care.

We all stood in a line as we'd been drilled. Bride and groom at the front of the line, because, let's face it, that's who everyone is really here to see. The rest of us strung out behind them along the wall, waiting to shake hands with mostly strangers. Tammy's family were locals, but I'd never met any of them. Larry's family were all out-of-towners. I knew the policemen that had been invited; other than that, it was all nod and smile, nod and smile, shake a hand, or two, nod and smile.

I must have been concentrating very hard on the people I was meeting, because it surprised me when Micah Callahan, my official date, was suddenly in front of me. He was exactly my height. Short for man or woman. His rich, brown hair was nearly as curly as mine, and today his hair fell around his shoulders loose. He'd done that for me. He didn't like his hair loose, and I understood why. He was already delicate looking for a man, and with all that hair framing him, his face was almost as delicate a triangle as Detective Arnet's. His lower lip was fuller than his upper lip, which gave him a perpetual pout, and being wider than most women's mouths didn't really help. But the body under his black tailored suit, that definitely helped make it clear he was a man. Wide shoulders, slender waist and hips, a swimmer's body, though that wasn't his sport. From the neck down you'd never mistake him for a girl. It was just the face, and the hair.

He'd left his shirt open at the neck so that it framed the hollow in his throat. I could see myself reflected darkly in his sunglasses. It was actually a little dim in the hallway, so why the sunglasses? His eyes were kitty-cat eyes, leopard, to be exact. They were yellow and green all at the same time. What color predominated between the two depended on what color he wore, his mood, the lighting. Today, because of the shirt, they'd be very green, but with a hint of yellow, like dappled light in the forest.

He was a wereleopard, Nimir-Raj of the local pard. By rights he should have been able to pass for human. But if you spend too much time in animal form sometimes you don't come all the way back. He didn't want to squeak the mundanes, so he'd worn the glasses today.

His hand was very warm in mine, and that one small touch was enough, enough to bring some of the careful shielding down. The shielding that had kept me from sensing him all through the ceremony like a second heartbeat. He was Nimir-Raj to my Nimir-Ra. Leopard King and Queen. Though my idea of the arrangement was closer to queen and consort, partners, but I reserved presidential veto. I'm a control freak, what can I say?

I was the first human Nimir-Ra in the wereleopards' long history. Though since I raise the dead for a living and am a legal vampire executioner, there are people who'll argue the human part. They're just jealous.

I started to pull him in against me for a hug, but he gave a small shake of his head. He was right. He was right. If just holding his hand sped my pulse like candy on my tongue, then a hug would be bad. Through a series of metaphysical accidents, I held something close to the beast that lived in Micah. That beast and Micah's beast knew each other, knew each other in the way of old lovers. That part of us that was not human knew each other better than our human halves. I still knew almost nothing about him, really. Even though we lived together. On a metaphysical level we were bound tighter than any ceremony or piece of paper could make us; in real everyday life, I was wondering what to do with him. He was the perfect partner. My other half, the missing piece. He complemented me in almost every way. And when he was standing this close, it all seemed so right. Give me a little distance and I would begin to wonder when the other shoe would drop and he would stop being wonderful. I'd never had a man in my life yet that didn't spoil it somehow. Why should Micah be different?

He didn't so much kiss me as lay the feel of his breath against my cheek. He breathed, "Until later." That one light touch made me shiver so violently that he had to steady me with a touch on my arm.

He smiled at me, that knowing smile that a man gives when

he understands just how much his touch affects a woman. I didn't like that smile. It made me feel like he took his time with me for granted. The moment I thought it, I knew it wasn't true. It wasn't even fair. So why had I thought it at all? Because I am a master at screwing up my own love life. If something works too well, I've got to poke at it, prod it, until it breaks, or bites me. I was trying not to do that anymore, but old habits, especially bad ones, die hard.

Micah moved off down the line, and Detective Arnet gave me a questioning look out of her heavily painted but lovely eyes. She opened her mouth as if to ask if I were alright, but the next person in line distracted her. Nathaniel was distracting, no doubt about that.

Jessica Arnet was a few inches taller than Nathaniel's 5' 6", so she had to look down to meet that lavender gaze. No exaggeration on the color. His eyes weren't blue, but truly a pale purple, lavender, spring lilacs. He wore a banded-collar shirt that was almost the same color as his eyes, so the lavender was even more vibrant; drowningly beautiful, those eyes.

He offered his hand, but she hugged him. Hugged him, because I think for the first time she was in a public situation where no one would think it was strange. So she hugged him, because she could.

There was a fraction of a moment's hesitation, then he hugged her back, but he turned his head so he could look at me. His eyes said clearly, Help me.

She hadn't done that much yet, just a hug where a handshake would have done, but the look in Nathaniel's eyes was much more serious than what she'd done. As if it bothered him more than it should have. Since in his day job he's a stripper, you'd think he'd be used to women pawing him. Of course, maybe that was the point. He wasn't at work.

She stayed molded to his body, and he stayed holding, with only that mute look in his eyes to say he was unhappy. His body seemed happy and relaxed in the hug. He never showed Jessica Arnet his confused eyes.

The hug had gone on longer than was polite, and I finally realized what part of the problem was. Nathaniel was the least dominant person I'd ever met. He wanted out of the hug, but he could not be the first one to pull back. Jessica had to let him

go, and she was probably waiting for him to move away, and getting all the wrong signals from the fact that he wasn't moving away. Shit. How do I end up with men in my life who have such interesting problems? Lucky, I guess.

I held out my hand toward him, and the relief on his face was clear enough that anyone down the hall would have seen it, and understood it. He kept his face turned so Jessica never saw that look. It would have hurt her feelings, and Nathaniel didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings. Which meant that he didn't see her shining face, all aglow with what she thought was mutual attraction. Truthfully, I'd thought Nathaniel liked her, at least a little, but his face said otherwise. To me, anyway.

Nathaniel came to my hand like a scared child who's just been saved from the neighborhood bully. I drew him into a hug, and he clung to me, pressing our bodies tighter than I would have liked in public, but I couldn't blame him, not really. He wanted the comfort of physical contact, and I think he'd figured out that Jessica Arnet had gotten the wrong idea.

I held him as close as I could, as close as I'd wanted to hold Micah. With Micah, it might have led to embarrassing things, but not with Nathaniel. With Nathaniel I could control myself. I wasn't in love with him. I caressed the long braid of his auburn hair that fell nearly to his ankles. I played with the braid, as if it were other more intimate things, hoping that Jessica would take the hint. I should have known that a little extra hugging wouldn't have done the job.

I drew back from the hug first, and he kept his gaze on my face. I could study his face and understand what she saw there, so handsome, so amazingly beautiful. His shoulders had broadened in the last few months, from weight lifting, or just the fact that he was twenty and still filling out. He was luscious to look at, and I was almost certain he would be nearly as luscious in bed. But though he was living with me, cleaning my house, buying my groceries, running my errands, I still hadn't had intercourse with him. I was really trying to avoid that, since I didn't plan on keeping him. Someday Nathaniel would need to find a new place to live, a new life, because I wouldn't always need him the way I did now.

I was human, but just as I was the first human Nimir-Ra the leopards had ever had, I was also the first human servant of a

master vampire to acquire certain . . . abilities. With those abilities came some downsides. One of those downsides was needing to feed the *ardeur* every twelve hours or so. *Ardeur* is French for flame, roughly translates to being consumed, being consumed by love. But it isn't exactly love.

I stared up into Nathaniel's wide lilac eyes, cradled his face between my hands. I did the only thing I could think of that might keep Jessica Arnet from embarrassing them both at the reception to follow. I kissed him. I kissed him, because he needed me to do it. I kissed him because it was strangely the right thing to do. I kissed him because he was my *pomme de sang*, my apple of blood. I kissed him because he was my food, and I hated the fact that anyone was my food. I fed off Micah, too, but he was my partner, my boyfriend, and he was dominant enough to say no if he wanted to. Nathaniel wanted me to take him, wanted to belong to me, and I didn't know what to do about it. Months from now the *ardeur* would be under control and I wouldn't need a *pomme de sang*. What would Nathaniel do when I didn't need him anymore?

I drew back from the kiss and watched Nathaniel's face shine at me the way Jessica Arnet's face had shone at him. I wasn't in love with Nathaniel, but staring up into that happy, handsome face, I was afraid that I couldn't say the same for him. I was using him. Not for sex, but for food. He was food, just food, but even as I thought it, I knew it was partly a lie. You don't fall in love with your steak, because it can't hold you, can't press warm lips in the bend of your neck, and whisper, "Thank you," as it glides down the hallway in the charcoal gray slacks that fit its ass like a second skin and spill roomy over the thighs that you happen to know are even lovelier out of the pants than in. When I turned to the next smiling person in line, I caught Detective Jessica Arnet giving me a look. It wasn't an entirely friendly look. Great, just great.

2

THE HALLOWEEN THEME continued into the reception hall. Orange and black crepe paper streamers dangled everywhere; cardboard skeletons, rubber bats, and paper ghosts floated overhead. There was a fake spiderweb against one wall big enough to hang someone from. The table centerpieces were realistic looking jack-o-lanterns with flickering electric grins. The fake skeletons were long enough to be a hazard to anyone much taller than I was. Which meant most guests were having the tops of their hair brushed by little cardboard skeleton toes. Unfortunately, Tammy was 5' 8" without heels, with heels she got her veil tangled with the decorations. The bridesmaids finally got Tammy's veil unhooked from the skeletal toes, but it ruined the entrance for the bride and groom. If Tammy had wanted the decorations safe for the tall people, she shouldn't have left it to Larry and his brothers. There wasn't a one of them over 5' 6". Don't blame me. Groomsman or not, I hadn't helped decorate the hall. It was not my fault.

There were other things that I was going to get blamed for, but they weren't my fault either. Well, mostly not my fault.

I'd escorted Jessica Arnet into the room. She hadn't smiled at me as I led her into the room. She'd looked way too serious. When Tammy's veil was safely secure once more, Jessica had gone to the table where Micah and Nathaniel were sitting. She'd leaned into Nathaniel, and when I say leaned, I mean it. Like leaned on him, so that the line of her body touched his shoulder and arm. It was bold and discreet at the same time. If I hadn't been watching for it, I might not have realized what she was doing. She spoke quietly to him. He finally shook his head, and she turned and wove her way through the small tables full of guests. She took the last empty seat at the long table where the wedding party was trapped. The last empty

chair was beside me. We got to sit down in the order we'd entered. Goody.

In the middle of the toasts, after Larry's brother had made the groom blush, but before the parents had had their turns, Jessica leaned over close enough that her perfume was sweet and a little too much.

She whispered, "Does Nathaniel really live with you?"

I'd been afraid the question would be hard. This one was easy. "Yes," I said.

"I asked if he was your boyfriend, and he said that he slept in your bed. I thought that was an odd way to answer." She turned her head so I was suddenly too close to her face, those wide-searching hazel eyes. I was struck again by how lovely she was, and felt stupid for not noticing sooner. But I didn't notice girls, I noticed boys. So sue me, I was heterosexual. It wasn't her beauty that struck me, but the demand, the intelligence, in her eyes. She searched my face, and I realized that no matter how pretty she was, she was still a cop, and she was trying to smell the lie here. Because she had smelled one.

She hadn't asked me a question, so I didn't answer. I rarely got in trouble by keeping my mouth shut.

She gave a small frown. "Is he your boyfriend? If he is, then I'll leave it alone. But you could have told me sooner, so I wouldn't have made a fool of myself."

I wanted to say, You didn't make a fool of yourself, but I didn't. I was too busy trying to think of an answer that would be honest and not get Nathaniel and me in more trouble. I settled for the evasion he'd used. "Yes, he sleeps in my bed."

She gave a small shake to her head, a stubborn look coming over her face. "That isn't what I asked, Anita. You're lying. You're both lying. I can smell it." She frowned. "Just tell me the truth. If you have a prior claim, say so, now."

I sighed. "Yeah, I have a prior claim, apparently."

The frown deepened, putting lines between the pretty eyes. "Apparently? What does that mean? Either he's your boyfriend, or he's not."

"Maybe *boyfriend* isn't the right word," I said, and tried to think of an explanation that didn't include the words *pomme de sang*. The police didn't really know how deeply involved with the monsters I was. They suspected, but they didn't know.

Knowing is different from suspicion. Knowing will hold up in court; suspicion won't even get you a search warrant.

"Then what is the right word?" she whispered, but it held an edge of hiss, as if she were fighting not to yell. "Are you lovers?"

What was I supposed to say? If I said, yes, Nathaniel would be free of Jessica's unwanted attentions, but it would also mean that everyone on the St. Louis police force would know that Nathaniel was my lover. It wasn't my reputation I was worried about, that was pretty much trashed. A girl can't be coffin-bait for the Master of the City and be a good girl. Most people feel that if a woman will do a vampire, she'll do anything. Not true, but there you go. No, not my reputation at stake, but Nathaniel's. If it got out that he was my lover, then no other woman would make a play for him. If he didn't want to date Jessica, fine, but he needed to date someone. Someone besides me. If I wasn't going to keep Nathaniel forever, like almost death-do-you-part ever, then he needed a bigger social circle. He needed a real girlfriend.

So I hesitated, weighing a dozen words, and not finding a single one that would help the situation. My cell phone went off, as I fumbled for it, to stop the soft, incessant ringing, I was too relieved to be irritated. It could have been a wrong number at that moment, and I still would have felt I owed them flowers.

It wasn't a wrong number. It was Lieutenant Rudolph Storr, head of the Regional Preternatural Investigation Team. He had opted to be on duty during the wedding so that other people could attend. He'd asked Tammy if she was inviting any nonhumans, and when she'd said she didn't like that term, but if he meant lycanthropes, the answer was yes, Dolph had suddenly decided he'd be on duty and not come to the wedding. He was having a personal problem with the monsters. His son was about to marry a vampire, and that vampire was trying to persuade Dolph's son to join her in eternal life. To say that Dolph was not taking it well was an understatement. He'd trashed an interrogation room, manhandled me, and damn near gotten himself brought up on charges. I'd arranged a dinner with Dolph, his wife, Lucille, their son, Darrin, and future daughter-in-law. I'd persuaded Darrin to put off the decision to join the undead. The wedding was still on, but it was a start.

His son still being among the living had helped Dolph deal with his crisis of faith. Deal with it enough that he was talking to me again. Deal with it enough that he called me in on a case again.

His voice was brisk, almost normal, "Anita?"

"Yeah," I whispered, cupping the phone with my hand. It wasn't like every cop in the place, which was most of the guests, wasn't wondering who I was talking to, and why.

"Got a body for you to look at."

"Now?" I made it a question.

"The ceremony is over, right? I didn't call in the middle of it."

"It's over. I'm at the reception."

"Then I need you here."

"Where's here?" I asked.

He told me.

"I know the strip club area across the river, but I'm not familiar with the club name."

"You won't be able to miss it," he said, "it'll be the only club with it's own police escort."

It took me a second to realize that he had made a joke. Dolph didn't make jokes at murder scenes, ever. I opened my mouth to remark on it, but the phone was dead in my hand. Dolph never had been much for good-byes.

Detective Arnet leaned in, and asked, "Was that Lieutenant Storr?"

"Yeah," I whispered, "murder scene, gotta run."

She opened her mouth, as if she was going to say something else, but I was already moving up the table. I was going to give my apologies to Larry and Tammy, then go look at a body. I was sorry to miss the rest of the reception and all, but I had a murder scene to go to. Not only would I get away from Arnet's questions, but I wouldn't have to dance with Micah, or Nathaniel, or anybody. The night was looking up. I felt a little guilty, but I was glad somebody was dead.