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I'D WORKED MY share of serial killer cases, but none of the killers had ever mailed me a human head. That was new. I looked down at the head, ghostly, through the plastic bag it was wrapped in. It sat on my desk, on top of the desk blotter, like hundreds of other packages that had been delivered to Animators Inc., where our motto was *Where the Living Raise the Dead for a Killing*. The head had been packed in ice, for all the world like some employee of the postal service had done it. Maybe they had; vampires can be very persuasive, and it was a vampire who had sent the package. A vampire named Vittorio. He'd included a letter with my name written on the envelope in lovely calligraphy: *Anita Blake*. He wanted me to know who to thank for my little surprise. He and his people had slaughtered over ten people in St. Louis alone before he fled to parts unknown. Well, not unknown now, maybe. There was a return address on the package. It had been mailed from Las Vegas, Nevada.

Either Vittorio was still there, or it would be another of his disappearing acts. Was he in Las Vegas, or had he mailed it from there and would be somewhere else by the time I gave the information to the police there?

No way to know. I could still hear our daytime secretary, Mary, being hysterical in the other room. Luckily we had no clients in the office. I was about thirty minutes away from my first client of the day, and my appointment had been the first of the day for Animators Inc.; lucky. Mary could have her breakdown while our business manager, Bert, tried to calm her. Maybe I should have helped, but I was a U.S. Marshal, and business had to come first. I had to call Vegas and tell them they might have a serial killer in town. Happy fucking Monday.

I sat down at my desk, the phone in my hand, but didn't dial it. I stared at the pictures of other people's families on my desk. Once the shared desk had been empty, just files mingling in the drawers, but first Manny

Rodriguez brought in his family portrait. It was the one that every family seems to have, where people are too serious, and only one or two manage a good smile. Manny looked stiff and uncomfortable in his suit and tie. Left to his own devices he always forgot the tie, but Rosita, his wife, who was inches taller than he, and more inches wider than his slender form, would have insisted on the tie. She usually got her way on stuff like that. Manny wasn't exactly henpecked, but he wasn't exactly the voice of authority in his house either.

Their two girls, Mercedes and Consuela (Connie), were very grown-up, standing tall and straight with their father's delicate build, and their faces so pretty, they shone in the shadow of Rosita's older, heavier face. His daughters made me see what he might have seen all those years ago when Rosita, "little rose," must have matched her name. Their son, Tomas, was still a child, still in elementary school. Was he in third grade now, or fourth? I couldn't remember.

The other picture was a pair of photos in one of those hinged frames. One picture was of Larry Kirkland and his wife, Detective Tammy Reynolds, on their wedding day. They were looking at each other like they saw something wonderful, all shiny and full of promise. The other photo was of them with their daughter, Angelica, who had quickly become simply Angel. The baby had her father's curls, like an auburn halo around her head. He kept his orange-red hair cut so short there were no curls, but Tammy's brown hair had darkened Angel's, so that it was auburn. It was a little more brown, a little less red, than Nathaniel's auburn hair.

Should I bring a picture of Nathaniel and Micah and me in, to put on the desk? I knew that the other animators at Animators Inc. had pictures of their families on their desks, too.

But, of course, would I need more pictures? If I brought a picture of me with the two men, then did I need to bring a picture of me with my other sweeties? When you're sort of living with, at last count, four men, and dating another five or six, who goes in the pictures?

I felt nothing about the package on my desk. I wasn't scared or disgusted. I felt nothing but a huge, vast emptiness inside me, almost like the silence that my head went to when I pulled the trigger on someone. Was I handling this really well, or was I in shock? Hmm, I couldn't tell, which meant it was probably some version of shock. Great.

I stood up and looked at the head in its plastic wrap and thought, *No pictures of my boyfriends, not at work.* I'd had a handful of clients who had

turned out to be bad guys, and girls. I didn't want them seeing pictures of people I loved. Never give the bad guys ideas; they find enough awful things to do without giving them clues.

No, no personal photos at work. Bad idea.

I dialed Information, because I'd never talked to the Las Vegas police force before. It was a chance to make new friends, or piss off a whole new set of people; with me, it could go either way. I didn't do it on purpose, but I did have a tendency to rub people the wrong way. Part of it was being a woman in a predominantly male field; part of it was simply my winning personality.

I sat back down, so I couldn't see inside the box. I'd already called my local police. I wanted forensics to do the box, find some clues, help us catch this bastard. Whose head was it, and why did I get the prize? Why send it to me? Was it a sign that he held a grudge about me killing so many of his vampires when they were slaughtering people in our town, or did it mean something else, something that would never, ever, occur to me to think?

There are a lot of good profilers working on serials, but I think they miss one thing. You can't really think like these people. You just can't. You can try. You can crawl into their heads so far that you feel like you'll never be clean again, but in the end, unless you are one, you can't really understand what motivates them. And they are selfish creatures, caring only about their own pleasure, their own pathology. Serial killers don't help you catch other serial killers unless it helps their agenda. Of course, there were people who said that I was a serial killer. I still had the highest kill count of all the legal vampire executioners in the United States. I'd topped a hundred this year. Did it really matter that I didn't enjoy my kills? Did it really change anything that I took no sexual pleasure from it? Did it matter that in the beginning I'd thrown up? Did the fact that I'd had an order of execution for most of my kills make them better, less brutal? There were serial killers who had used only poison, which caused almost no pain; they'd been less brutal than me. Lately, I'd begun to wonder exactly what set me apart from people like Vittorio. I'd begun to question if to my oh-so-legal victims it mattered what my motives were.

A woman answered the phone in Las Vegas, and I began the process of getting passed up the line to the person who might be able to tell me whose head I had in the box.