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I WAS WORMING my way through a mass of parents and children with a tiny clown hat clutched in one hand. In my navy blue skirt suit I looked like a dozen other mothers who had had to come straight from work to the dance recital. My hair was a little curly and a little too black for all the blond mothers, but no one gave me a second glance. The one saving grace as I threaded my way through the crowd of parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and siblings was that I wasn't one of the parents. I was just here as moral support and last-minute costume rescuer. It was just Monica Vespucci's style to leave part of her son's costume at her house and need an emergency save. Micah and I had been running late with client meetings so we got to ride to the rescue, and now since the vast majority of the performers were female I was the only one safe to go backstage without scandalizing the mothers. What did little girls who only had male relatives do at things like this? My dad would have been at a loss.

A little girl and her mother damn near knocked me down the stairs in their rush to get up past me. The little girl was knocked into me so that my suit jacket pushed back and she was staring at my holstered gun and U.S. Marshal badge. The child's eyes went big as she met my eyes. The mother never noticed, dragging the silent child up the stairs. I let them get ahead of me, the little girl's huge, dark eyes following me until the crowd hid her from sight. She couldn't have been more than five. I wondered if she'd even try to tell her mother she'd seen a woman with a gun and a badge.

I started pushing my way up the stairs, keeping the hand with the clown hat in it close to my jacket so I wouldn't flash the gun by accident anymore. I was going to try to keep my occupation a secret from the screaming children and their frantic mothers. They didn't need to know that I hunted bad little vampires and wereanimals for the preternatural branch

of the U.S. Marshals Service. They certainly didn't need to know that I raised zombies as my day job. I blended in as long as no one figured out who I was.

I got to the upper hallway and there was one lone male over the age of twelve being herded by his mother. She had an almost embarrassed look on her face, as if apologizing for not having a girl. I knew there were more men up here, because some of them were mine, but they were safely away from the estrogen-rich room of little girls.

Monica's son was under five, so he didn't count as male yet. He was just a generic child. Now if I could only find the generic child, hand his mother the hat, and flee to our seats where everyone was waiting for me, I'd count it as a win, though knowing Monica she'd need something else. I didn't like her at all. But her husband had been one of Jean-Claude's vampires who died sort of in the line of duty, so Jean-Claude made sure that he and others stood in for her lost husband. It was honorable, I even approved of it, but I avoided Monica when I could. She'd betrayed me and a shared friend to some bad vampires once. She'd apologized, and she depended on Jean-Claude's people for emergency babysitting and things like tonight. She'd been bad because the old Master of the City had been bad; now that we had a good Master of the City, Jean-Claude, she was good. Sure, and the Easter Bunny is a friend of mine.

The fact that I had a key to her house in case of emergencies still bugged me, but Jean-Claude was right; someone who could go out in the daylight needed to have the key. He also knew that no matter how much I disliked Monica, I'd do the right thing. He was right, damn it. A herd of pink, sequined little girls barreled past me. I hugged the wall and let the teachers chase them down. There were so many reasons I didn't have children yet.

I heard my name squealed out, in that high-pitched generic toddler voice, "Nita, 'Nita!" I had no idea why, but just lately Matthew, Monica's son, had taken a liking to me.

He came rushing at me in his bright multicolored clown outfit with the little balls on the front that matched the ones on the hat. His hair was a deep auburn like his mother's, but there was something about his three-year-old face that made me think of his dead father. Robert hadn't been my favorite vampire, but he'd been handsome and Matthew was a cute kid. He came running with his arms up and launched himself at me. He was

not big for his age but it was still startling. I caught him and swept him up in my arms because to do anything else would have either knocked me flat or been churlish.

He put those little hands on my shoulders and leaned in for a kiss. I offered a cheek, but he touched my face and shook his head, very solemn. "I'm a big boy now, 'Nita. I kiss like a big boy now." Cheek kisses had been fine until about two weeks ago, and now Matthew was very certain that cheek kisses were baby kisses. It made me wonder if Monica was being overly friendly with the new boyfriend in front of the kid. It was Monica; there would be a boyfriend.

I'd told Monica about it and she thought it was cute. Matthew puckered up and planted one on my mouth, which meant he was wearing my very red lipstick. "Now you've got my lipstick on you, and that's more big girl than big boy," I said, as I looked around for some Kleenex or something to wipe his mouth with. I was also looking for his mother. Where was Monica?

"It *is* big boy if it's *your* lipstick."

I frowned at that tiny face just inches from mine. "What do you mean, it's big boy if it's mine?"

"All the big boys kiss you, 'Nita."

I had a sinking feeling that maybe it wasn't just Monica and a boyfriend in front of Matthew that were giving him ideas. "Where is your mother?" I said, and began searching the room for her a little desperately.

She finally separated herself from the mass of women and girls of various ages and came toward us beaming. It creeped me out a little that Monica seemed to think I didn't hold a grudge about her betraying me five years ago. I did hold a grudge and I didn't trust her. She seemed unaware of that.

She had Matthew's curly auburn hair, cut shorter and more styled, but her face was thinner, more of a sharp triangle, as if she'd lost weight since I saw her last. Once upon a time you could have asked if she was feeling all right, but now women dieted for no reason at all. Monica was shorter than I was by a few inches, and I was five-three. She was still in her skirt suit, too, but her blouse was white, and mine was blue.

Matthew kept his arms around my neck while she used a wet wipe on his mouth. Then she put a paler shade of lip gloss on his lips, though they didn't seem to need any to me. She took the hat from me and put it over

his curls. If he'd been any older the outfit would have been embarrassing to any boy I'd ever met, but at three it was actually . . . cute. I would not admit it out loud, but it was.

"Thank you so much, Anita," Monica said. "I can't believe I forgot it."

I could, but I just smiled and kept quiet. Quiet usually worked better between Monica and me. A mass of little girls dressed in the girl version of his outfit bounced up, and he wiggled to be put down. I did so, happily.

Monica watched him run away with the others in his class with that proverbial mother's look: pride, love, and almost possession. I never doubted that she loved her little boy. It was one of the reasons I was nice to her.

She turned to me, still smiling. "I'm so glad the recital is tonight so I can concentrate on the business tomorrow."

I nodded, and tried to make my escape. Monica was apparently a better lawyer than she was a human being, or at least Jean-Claude trusted her to do up the contracts that might, or might not, be getting signed tomorrow. I trusted Jean-Claude to be a good businessman.

"Agreed," I said, and tried to slip away.

She grabbed my arm. I don't like to be touched by people that I'm not close to. I stiffened under her hand, but she didn't seem to notice. She leaned in and whispered, "If I was being offered a seventeen-year-old boy toy I'd be more excited, Anita."

Matthew was out of sight so I let my eyes show just how happy that comment made me. Monica let go of my arm, her eyes a little wide, face surprised. "Oh, come on, Anita, what woman wouldn't be flattered?"

"First, I haven't agreed to letting him stay in St. Louis when they bring him in from Vegas tomorrow. Second, don't ever call him a boy toy again."

"Touchy," she said, and then her face softened and her eyes glittered with some thought that I knew I wasn't going to like. "Defensive of him already, Anita. My, my, he must be better in bed than I remember at that age."

I leaned in and hissed in her ear. "We were all mind-raped by one of the scariest vampires to ever exist, Monica. She used me to feed on his power as a weretiger. She used me, and him, and all the other tigers in a bid to survive even if it meant destroying all of us. You tell me, what part of that was a good thing?" I had grabbed her arm somewhere in all that.

She spoke low. "You're hurting me."

I let go of her, and stepped back. She looked up at me, and I think for a moment let herself see me, really see me. She was angry, and for just a

moment I knew that she didn't like me any more than I liked her, not really. Then I watched a different look cross her face, one that most men would have thought was a good look, but a woman knows when another woman is about to drive the blade home.

"Funny how it's never your fault when you have to have sex with all these men, Anita," and with that she walked away. She walked away with the proverbial knife stuck deep and hard right through my heart. Nothing cuts deeper than when another person says exactly what you're afraid to say out loud. Hell, Matthew had said it, too, in his way. *All the big boys kiss you, 'Nita.*

I fled the laughing costumed children and Monica's knowing eyes. I waved at Matthew as he called my name, all lined up with the little girls in his class. I wanted to be in my seat so I could see him; he'd go on second. Yeah, that was it, I hurried to my seat to make sure I'd see his performance, but I knew that wasn't the truth. I ran toward my seat and the men waiting for me, because part of me believed that Monica was right and all my words were just a case of the lady protesting too much.