

Undead and Unpopular

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Extract

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CHAPTER 1

“There’s a zombie in the attic,” George the Fiend informed me over breakfast. His voice was a calm pond, and he wiped blond strands out of his face carefully as he peered at his knitting.

“Sure there is,” I replied. My casual response was, I decided much later, a massive mistake. I mean, here was this guy (vampire) living in the house owned by my best friend with at least three other people (two more vampires and a surgical resident), telling me what the problem was (a zombie), in plenty of time to do something about it, and I totally blew him off. Were this a horror movie and I, Betsy Taylor, Queen of the Vampires, was on the screen pulling this crap, everybody in the audience would have thrown their popcorn and Sno-Caps at the screen.

But this wasn’t a movie, so I screwed up in an honest sort of way.

Also, I was distracted, crow-like, by the big shiny thing on my finger: my engagement ring. Pretty silly for someone who was supposedly already married (to the prophesied Vampire

King for the next thousand years) and officially engaged (to same, one Eric Sinclair) for several weeks. But, my God, getting Sinclair to cough up a proposal had been hard enough. I was still stunned he'd come up with a ring, too.

In fact, I was still tingling from our whole previous evening together, a wacky outing involving blood-drinking, sex, a stop by Caribou Coffee for hot chocolate, and The Ring: a delightfully shiny gold band strewn with diamonds and rubies.

I'd had to make a Herculean effort not to squeal when he slid it onto my finger (where it promptly slid off; I have freakishly small hands). Now here it was, a day later, and I couldn't stop staring at the thing.

Also, it wasn't really breakfast, since neither George nor I were eating and it was eleven o'clock at night. But we still called it breakfast, since that's when Marc (the surgical resident) would often get up and have a muffin before his overnight shift.

George—well, actually, we learned his name was Garrett shortly after he began speaking—went back to the lovely baby blue afghan he was knitting, which matched the fine sweater I wore that evening. I, in turn, went back to the guest list. Not for my wedding. For my surprise birthday party. Which wasn't a surprise at all, but I wasn't telling.

It was a short list. My mom; my dad; my (sigh) stepmother Antonia; her BabyJon; my landlord Jessica; my fiancé Eric Sinclair; Marc; my sister, Laura; Garrett's mate, the other Antonia; our friendly neighborhood police officer Nick; Sinclair's friend Tina; former vampire hunter Jon; and of course Garrett. Almost all of these people I had met *after* I died.

Of course, half of these guests *were* dead people. Even Marc,

who was alive, often put it, “Why not be dead? Most of my ex-boyfriends act like I am anyway.”

Jessica and I kept trying to fix him up, but the few gay guys we knew were not Marc’s type. Not that we had any idea what Marc’s type was. On top of that, fixing people up is hard. Almost as hard as—well, trying not to drink blood.

I tapped my pencil on the pad, trying to come up with a plan to tell Eric before the wedding that I had decided to completely give up the blood-drinking thing. I figured being the vampire queen had a few advantages—as it was, every vampire I’d ever known had to drink every day, even Eric. But I could go up to a week without so much as a drop of O-neg, without any shakes or desperate pleas for stray rats. So in honor of my birthday, and of being in this shit queen job for a year, I figured I’d give it up completely. I would be in a blood-free zone!

But Eric would be tricky. Normally he ignored whatever I did, but during our intimate moments, someone always got bitten. Sometimes more than once. It squicked me out to try to explain it, but drinking during sex just made the whole thing better—

“Lame, Betsy,” Jessica said, coming into the kitchen and glancing over my shoulder as she headed for the espresso maker. “I can’t believe you’re making a list of birthday presents. Miss Manners would be rolling in her grave.”

“Miss Manners is still alive. Besides, it’s not a list of presents. It’s a list of people you’re going to invite to my surprise party.”

Jessica, a painfully skinny nag with gorgeous skin the color of Godiva milk chocolate, laughed at me. “Honey, it hurts me to say this. Like a sliver in the eyeball. But we’re not. Planning. A party.”

“Although,” I added, “you don’t have to try too hard to get the Ant there. I wouldn’t mind if she missed it.”

“Sugar.” She gave up the espresso maker as too complicated—this was a nightly ritual—and fixed herself a glass of chocolate milk instead. “You made it perfectly clear two months ago: no party. And we believed you. So stop making guest lists and worrying about your stepmother showing up. It’s not happening.”

“Are we talking about the nonexistent surprise party?” Tina asked, startling me as her bare feet slid noiselessly across the spotless shamrock green kitchen tile.

“I’m putting bells around your pretty, petite ankles,” I told her.

Jessica had nearly choked on her drink, Tina had so startled her. She took a breath and said, “She tells us our lives won’t be worth living if we throw her a party, then she makes a guest list.”

“Constancy, thy name is Queen Elizabeth,” Tina murmured as she slid her tiny butt onto the breakfast nook bar stool next to George—dammit, I mean Garrett. She was dressed like the most tempting college student in creation, as usual—long blonde curls, big pansy eyes, knee-length black skirt, white designer T-shirt, bare legs, black pumps. Most college students nowadays hadn’t witnessed the Civil War, but undead bombshells like Tina just didn’t let go of their perky tits.

“What do you want for your birthday, Majesty?” she was asking me as I stared jealously at those ageless melons. Her duties nowadays were the equivalent to serving as “best man” to Eric, whom she had turned into a vampire decades ago. Nowadays, instead of sucking his blood, she limited herself to smoothing out the morning edition of the *Wall Street*

Journal, fixing his tea the way he liked it, and setting out gobs of paperwork for him to look through. “Some nice shoes, I suppose.”

“You suppose wrong,” I replied. “I want peace on earth, goodwill toward men.”

“Do they have a store for that at the mall?” Jessica asked innocently. “Or maybe one of those sales carts in the walkways, right next to the portrait artist and the guy selling T-shirts with pithy sex jokes?” She was shamelessly stealing peeks at the memos Tina laid out neatly on the marble countertop.

“It’d be the only thing they don’t have,” I said. “Tina, Jessica, I know you. I know I told you not to throw a party, and that therefore you will throw one. But if you want to keep up the conceit—fine. No party. Instead, find a quiet moment to pray for the aforementioned world peace and global harmony, or failing that, snag me a fat gift card from Bloomingdale’s.”

“Or perhaps a pair of the new Prada loafers,” Jessica added.

“No, I’m sick of loafers. Spring is here—I want some strappy sandals.” Which was kind of silly—I couldn’t wear them with socks, and these days my extremities were pretty icy. But still. I was sick of winter, and this was Minnesota—we had at least two more months of snow.

“Right,” Jess said. “Because you don’t have enough of *those*.”

“Why don’t you take one of my existing pairs and shove them up your cute black butt?” I suggested sweetly.

“Well, Ms. Taylor, why don’t you take your delicate ivory nose and—”

Tina interrupted the argument *du jour*. “Majesty, are there any designer shoes you don’t like?”

Garrett cleared his throat as he started a different stitch—

knit, garter, crochet—it was all the same to me. “She doesn’t care for Rickard Shah sandals. Especially the gold ones.”

“This is true,” I confirmed. “They’re all like something out of the *Boogie Nights* prop drawer. I mean, what year is this? I’d pay two hundred bucks *not* to wear them.”

“No need for that,” Eric Sinclair said, ignoring my yelp and Jessica’s flinch. He was worse than Tina. Where she slithered silently, he teleported like an alien. A tall, broad-shouldered, dark-haired, dark-eyed, yummilicious alien. “You have a thousand pairs of sandals.”

“Do not. Leave me alone and read your papers.”

“Guest list?” he asked, leaning over my shoulder and peering at my pad. “But you don’t want a party.”

“You’re damned right I don’t!” I slapped my notebook shut. In fact, I didn’t. I was pretty sure. “How many times do I have to say it?”

Don’t get me wrong: I can hear myself. And I’m very self-aware, regarding all my little tics and annoying quirks. Nothing triggers Maslowian self-actualization like getting body-slammed by a Pontiac Aztek.

But no matter how bad I sound to myself, I can’t help it. My situation is impossible. You’d be amazed how often I’m ignored, even though I am the so-called Queen of Vampires. Repeating myself ad nauseum was one of the many ways I tried to make myself heard. I was too new to the game to be quietly tough, like Sinclair. Wasn’t smart like Tina. Wasn’t wealthy, like Jess. Wasn’t an all-seeing ghost, like Cathie. Wasn’t a clever doc, like Marc; or an indifferent psychic werewolf, like Antonia. You know what it’s like to be called a queen and have the least to offer among all the people you know? It’s a huge ego hit.

“We got it, Betsy,” Jessica was saying. “No party. Fine.”

“Fine.”

“Why are you—” Sinclair caught Jessica’s frantic arm waving. “Never mind. Are you ready for our guests?”

“Guests?” I tried not to freak out. They *were* throwing me a party! Bums! And throwing me off by having it two weeks before my actual birthday.

He sighed, which was about as close as he got to a blitzing tantrum. “Please don’t say ‘*guests?*’ like you don’t remember the European delegation coming at midnight.”

“And Sophie and Liam,” Tina added, looking over her own memos.

“I know. I *know*.” I did know. Sophie and Liam I didn’t mind—Sophie was a charming vampire who lived in a tiny town up north with her very alive, thirty-something boyfriend Liam. They’d been a couple for a few months and a while back, they’d helped us catch a real creep, a vampire who got his rocks off dating college girls, charming them into deep love, then talking them into killing themselves.

Sophie, in fact, had kind of renewed my faith in vampiredom. It seemed to me that most of us were jerks, men and women who found sexual pleasure in felony assault. But Sophie was made of purer stuff—the evil that supposedly consumed the undead didn’t seem to touch her.

So her coming tonight, along with the pleasant (if somewhat dry) Liam, was great by me.

But this European delegation was just what I didn’t need: a bunch of ancient vampires with stuffy accents dropping in to irritate me two weeks before my birthday. As if turning thirty last year (and dying) hadn’t been traumatic enough.

“I didn’t forget,” I said. Truth. I just had been trying hard to ignore it.

He smoothed his dark hair, which was already perfectly in place. Uh-oh. Something was up. “Um, Jessica, I wonder if you could excuse—”

“Don’t even,” she warned him. “You’re not kicking me out of my own house to have a dead-only meeting. Marc depends on me to pass on full reports of the crazy shit you guys are up to.”

Eric said something to Tina in a language I didn’t know. Which meant, anything but English. She replied in the same gibberish, and they talked for a minute.

“They are totally debating whether to kick you out or not,” I said to Jess.

“Duh.”

“Let’s speak our own language: we’ll call it English, which really fucking rude vampires don’t understand.”

I glared at the two of them; but Tina and Eric kept babbling. I wasn’t sure if they were ignoring me or honestly hadn’t heard, so I took the mature route and just spoke louder.

“IT’S PROBABLY A SAFETY ISSUE. YOU KNOW WHAT ASSHATS THOSE OLD VAMPIRES CAN BE. THAT’S WHY THESE TWO GET OFF ON INVITING THEM OVER. ANYWAY, ONE OF THEM WILL PROBABLY TRY TO CHOMP YOU, AND WE’LL HAVE A BIG WICKED FIGHT, ALL OF WHICH WE CAN AVOID IF YOU JUST HANG IN THE BASEMENT WITH GARRETT.”

“No, no, no. My house. No offense, Garrett.”

Garrett shrugged in response. He hadn’t offered much since his Shah sandal observation, and literally stuck to his knitting. He had been spending more time than usual in the kitchen: his girlfriend, a werewolf who never turned into a wolf, was in Massachusetts. Apparently her pack leader’s wife had had

another baby. She bitched, but she went. Garrett stayed, which was fine by me—it wasn't like we didn't have the room. Antonia could come back with half the pack and we'd have the room.

I had to admit, I had no idea what Antonia (the werewolf, not my stepmother) saw in him.

Sidenote: how weird was it that I knew two women named Antonia? Jessica claimed it all had Some Deeper Meaning, but I figured I was just lucky.

Back to my fretting about Garrett. Don't get me wrong. I mean, he was great-looking (it was the rare vampire who wasn't), but I had the impression he wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer. Not to mention, a few weeks ago he'd been running around on all fours and drinking blood by the bucket. Antonia was smart and, even if she'd been a drooling idiot, she could see the future. Hello? *See the future*. She could have had anybody, I figured.

She would have disagreed. Violently. It was amazing to me that a great-looking brunette with the body of a swimsuit model who could *see the future* had rotten self-esteem, but there it was. And who was I to judge? Garrett and Antonia had a good thing.

"Very well," the questionable prize I was dating said at last, in English. "You may stay. But Jessica, please watch what you say and do. Don't look them in the eyes for long. Speak only when spoken to. Yes sir, yes ma'am."

"Sit up. Arf," I teased.

"What about her?" Jessica cried, pointing in my general direction. "She's more in need of an etiquette lesson than I am."

"Yeah," I said, "but I'm the Queen. With a capital fucking

Q. Hey, you're looking me in the eyes for too long! Eric, make her stop!"

"Give me a damn break," she muttered, and went upstairs making gagging noises.