

Skin Trade

Laurell K. Hamilton

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LAURELL K. HAMILTON

SKIN
TRADE

AN ANITA BLAKE,
VAMPIRE HUNTER, NOVEL

headline

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*Sudden and swift and light as that
The ties gave,
And he learned of finalities
Besides the grave.*

– From ‘The Impulse’ by Robert Frost
(*The Hill Wife*, 1922)

I

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 US 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.

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Undersheriff Rupert Shaw had a rough voice; either he'd been yelling a lot, or he'd smoked way too much, for way too many years. 'Who did you say this was?' he asked.

I sighed, and repeated for the umpteenth time, 'I am US Marshal Anita Blake. I need to talk to someone in charge, and I guess that would be you, Sheriff Shaw.'

'I will kick the ass of whoever gave your name to the media.'

'What are you talking about, Sheriff?'

'You didn't hear about the message from the media?'

'If you mean television or radio, I haven't had either on. Is there something I should know?'

'How did you know to call us, Marshal?'

I sat back in my chair, totally puzzled. 'I get the feeling that if I hadn't called you, you'd be calling me, Sheriff Shaw.'

'How did you know to call us?' he said again, each word a little more defined, an edge of stress, maybe even anger in his voice.

'I called you because I've got a package sitting on my desk that was mailed from Las Vegas.'

'What kind of package?' he asked.

Was it time to tell the whole story? I hadn't earlier because once you tell someone certain things – say, you got mailed a human head in a box – they tend to think you're crazy. I was in the media enough for someone to pretend to be me, so I'd wanted them to take me seriously before they discounted me as some crackpot psychotic.

'Someone mailed me a human head. The return address is your city.'

He was quiet for almost a minute. I could hear his raspy breathing. I was betting on the smoking. About the time I was going to prompt him, he said, 'Can you describe the head?'

He could have said a lot of things, but that wasn't on my list. Too calm, even for a cop, and too practical. The moment he asked me to describe it, I knew he had someone in mind, someone who was missing a head. Shit.

'The head is in plastic, packed in ice. The hair looks dark, but that could be partially from the way it was packed. The hair looks straight, but again, I can't be sure that it's not some leakage making the hair appear straight. Caucasian, I'm sure of, and the eyes look pale. Gray, maybe pale blue, though death can steal color from the eyes. I have no way of telling time of death, so I don't know how much discoloration could have taken place.'

'Have you searched the box for anything else?'

'Is your man missing more than just a head?' I asked.

'A badge, and a finger. The finger should have a wedding band on it.'

'I'm sorry to hear that last part.'

'Why?'

'Telling the wife, I don't envy you that.'

'You have to do that yourself much?'

'I've seen the grieving families of the vampire vics often enough. It always sucks.'

'Yeah, it always sucks,' he said.

'I'm waiting for forensics to look at it before I touch anything. If there are any clues, I don't want to fuck them up because I got impatient.'

'Let me know what they find.'

'Will do.' I waited for him to add something, but he didn't. All I had was his breathing, too rough, too labored. I wondered when was the last time he'd had a physical.

I finally said, 'What happened in Vegas, Sheriff Shaw? Why do I have a piece of one of your officers on my desk?'

'We aren't sure that's who it is.'

'No, but it would be an awfully big coincidence if you've got an officer who's missing a head, and I've got a head in a box sent from your town that superficially matches your downed officer. I just don't buy a coincidence that big, Sheriff.'

He sighed, then coughed; it was a thick cough. Maybe he was just getting over something. 'Me either, Blake, me either. I'll go you one better. We're holding back the fact that we've got a missing head and badge. We're also holding back from the media that there's a message on the wall where my men were slaughtered. It's written in their blood, and it's addressed to you.'

'To me,' I said, and my voice sounded a little less certain of itself than I wanted it to sound. It was my turn to clear my throat.

'Yeah, it reads, *Tell Anita Blake I'll be waiting for her.*'

'Well, that's just . . . creepy,' I said, finally. I couldn't think of what else to say, but there was that electric jolt that got through the shock for a second. I knew that jolt; it was fear.

'"Creepy," that's the best you can do? This vampire sent you a human head. Will it mean more to you if I tell you it's the head of our local vampire executioner?'

I thought about that for a few breaths, felt that jolt again – somewhere between an electric shock and the sensation of champagne in your veins. 'What word would make you happy, Shaw? Did he take any souvenirs from any of the other officers?'

'You mean, did he decapitate anyone else?'

'Yeah, that's what I mean.'

'No. He and his monsters killed three operators, but the bodies were not used for souvenir hunting.'

'Operators . . . so the vamp executioner was with your SWAT?'

'All warrants of execution are considered high risk, so SWAT helps deliver the message.'

‘Yeah, they’re talking about that in St Louis, too.’ I was still unsure how I felt about them forcing me to take SWAT on vampire hunts. Part of me was happy for the backup, and another part was totally against it. The last time SWAT had backed me, some of them died. I didn’t like being responsible for more people. Also, it was always a chore to convince them I was worthy to put my shoulder beside theirs and hit that door.

‘If our men killed any of the monsters, we don’t have any evidence to prove it. It looks like our people dropped where they stood.’

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I ignored it. ‘How long ago did all this happen?’

‘Yesterday, no, night before last, yeah. I’ve been up for a while; it starts to make you lose track.’

‘I know,’ I said.

‘What the hell did you do to this vampire to make him like you this much?’

‘I have no idea. Maybe let him get away and not chase him. Oh, hell, Shaw, you know there’s no logic to these nut-bunnies.’

‘Nut-bunnies,’ he said.

‘Fine, serial killers. Dead or alive they operate on a logic all their own. It doesn’t make sense to the rest of us because we’re not nut-bunnies.’

He made a sound that I think was a laugh. ‘No, we’re not nut-bunnies, yet. The papers and television say you killed a bunch of his people.’

‘I had help. Our SWAT was with me. They lost men.’

‘I’ve looked up the articles, but frankly, I thought you’d take credit and not mention the police.’

‘They went in with me. They risked their lives. Some of them died. It was bad. I don’t think I’d forget that.’

‘Rumor has it that you’re a publicity sl—hound,’ he said, changing the word he was going to use to something less offensive.

I actually laughed, which was a good sign. I wasn't completely in shock, yea! 'I'm not a publicity hound, or a publicity slut, Sheriff Shaw. Trust me, I get way more media attention than I want.'

'For someone who doesn't want the attention, you get a hell of a lot of it.'

I shrugged, realized he couldn't see it, and said, 'I'm involved with some pretty gruesome cases, Sheriff; it attracts the media.'

'You're also a beautiful young woman and are dating the master of your city.'

'Do I thank you for the *beautiful* comment before or after I tell you that my personal life is none of your concern?'

'It is if it interferes with your job.'

'Check the record, Sheriff Shaw. I've killed more vampires since I've been dating Jean-Claude than I did before.'

'I heard you've refused to do stakings in the morgue.'

'I've lost my taste for putting a stake through the heart of someone chained and helpless on a gurney.'

'They're asleep, or whatever, right?'

'Not always, and trust me, the first time you have to look someone in the face while they beg for their life . . . Let's just say that even with practice, putting a stake through someone's heart is a slow way to die. They beg and explain themselves right up to the last.'

'But they've done something to deserve death,' he said.

'Not always; sometimes they fall into that three-strikes law for vampires. It's written so that no matter what the crime is, even a misdemeanor, three times and you get a warrant of execution on your ass. I don't like killing people for stealing when there's no violence involved.'

'But stealing big items, right?'

'No, Sheriff, one woman got executed for stealing less than a thousand dollars of shit. She was a diagnosed kleptomaniac before

becoming a vampire; dying didn't cure her like she thought it would.'

'Someone put a stake through her heart for petty theft?'

'They did,' I said.

'The law doesn't give the preternatural branch of the marshal program a right to refuse jobs.'

'Technically, no, but I just don't do the stakedowns. I had stopped doing them before the vampire executioners got grandfathered into the US Marshal program.'

'And they let you.'

'Let's say I have an understanding with my superiors.' The understanding had been that I wouldn't testify on behalf of the family of the woman executed for shoplifting if they simply wouldn't make me kill anyone who hadn't taken lives. A life for a life made some sense. A life for some costume jewelry made no sense to me. A lot of us had turned down the woman. In the end they'd had to send to Washington, DC, for Gerald Mallory, who was one of the first vampire hunters ever who was still alive. He still thought all vampires were evil monsters, so he'd staked her without a qualm. Mallory sort of scared me. There was something in his eyes when he looked at any vampire that wasn't quite sane.

'Marshal, are you still there?'

'I'm sorry, Sheriff, you got me thinking too hard about the shoplifter.'

'It's in the news that the family is suing for wrongful death.'

'They are.'

'You don't talk much, do you?'

'I say what needs saying.'

'You're damn quiet for a woman.'

'You don't need me to talk. I assume you need me to come to Vegas and do my job.'

'It's a trap, Blake. A trap just for you.'

‘Probably, and sending me the head of your executioner is about as direct as a threat gets.’

‘And you’re still going to come?’

I stood up and looked down at the box and the head staring up at me. It looked somewhere between surprised and sleepy. ‘He mailed me the head of your vampire executioner. He mailed it to my office. He wrote a message to me in the blood on the wall where he slaughtered three of your operators. Hell, yes, I’m coming to Vegas.’

‘You sound angry.’

In my head I thought, *Better angry than scared*. If I could stay outraged, maybe I could keep the fear from growing. Because it was there in the pit of my stomach, in the back of my mind like a black, niggling thought that would grow bigger if I let it. ‘Wouldn’t you be pissed?’

‘I’d be scared.’

That stopped me, because cops almost never admit that they’re scared. ‘You broke the rule, Shaw, you never admit you’re scared.’

‘I just want you to know, Blake, really know, what you’re walking into, that’s all.’

‘It must have been bad.’

‘I’ve seen more men dead at one time. Hell, I’ve lost more men under my command.’

‘You must be ex-military,’ I said.

‘I am,’ he said.

I waited for him to say what service; most would, but he didn’t.

‘Where were you stationed?’ I asked.

‘Classified, most of it.’

‘Ex-special teams?’ I made it part question, part statement.

‘Yes.’

‘Do I ask what flavor, or just let it drop, before you have to threaten me with the old if-I-tell-you-then-I-have-to-kill-you routine?’ I tried for a joke, but Shaw didn’t take it that way.

'You're making a joke. If you can do that, then you don't get what's happening.'

'You've got three operators dead, one vamp executioner dead and cut up; that *is* bad, but you didn't send just three operators in with the marshal, so most of your team got away, Sheriff.'

'They didn't get away,' he said, and something in his voice made that tight, black pit of fear rise a little higher in my gut.

'But they're not dead,' I said, 'or you'd say so.'

'No, not dead, not exactly.'

'Are they badly hurt?'

'Not exactly,' he said.

'Stop beating the bush to death and just tell me, Shaw.'

'Seven of our men are in the hospital. There's not a mark on them. They just dropped.'

'If there are no marks on them, why did they drop, and why are they in the hospital?'

'They're asleep.'

'What?'

'You heard me.'

'You mean comas?'

'The doctors say no. They're asleep; we just can't wake them up.'

'Do the docs have any clues?'

'The only thing close to this is those patients in the twenties who all went to sleep and never woke up.'

'Didn't they make a movie years back about them waking up?'

'Yes, but it didn't last, and they still don't know why that form of sleeping sickness is different from the norm,' he said.

'Your whole team didn't just catch this sleeping thing in the middle of a firefight.'

'You asked what the doctors said.'

'Now, I'm asking what you say.'

'One of our practitioners says it was magic.'

‘Practitioners?’ I made it a question.

‘We’ve got psychics attached to our teams, but can’t call them our pet wizards.’

‘So operators and practitioners,’ I said.

‘Yes.’

‘So someone did a spell?’

‘I don’t know, but apparently it all reeks of psychic shit, and when you run out of explanations that make sense, you go with what you got.’

‘When you’ve eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth,’ I said.

‘Did you just quote Sherlock Holmes at me?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Then you still don’t get it, Blake. You just don’t.’

‘Okay, let me be blunt here. Something about my reaction wasn’t what you expected, so you’re convinced that I don’t get the seriousness of the situation. You’re ex-special teams, which means to you, women are not going to measure up. You’ve called me a beautiful woman, and that, too, makes most cops and military underestimate women. But special teams, hell, you don’t think most other military men are up to your level, or most cops. So I’m a girl; get over it. I’m petite and I clean up well; get over that, too. I’m dating a vampire, the master of my city; so what? It has nothing to do with my job or why Vittorio invited me to come hunt him in Vegas.’

‘Why did he run in St Louis? Why didn’t he run here when he knew we were coming? Why did he ambush our men and not yours?’

‘Maybe he couldn’t afford to lose that many of his vampires again, or maybe he’s just decided to make his last stand in your city.’

‘Lucky fucking us.’

‘Yeah.’

‘I called around, talked to some of the other cops you’ve worked

with, and some of the other vampire executioners, about you. You want to know why some of them thought this vampire ran in St Louis?’

‘I’m all ears.’

‘You, they thought he ran from you. Our Master of the City told me that the vampires call you the Executioner – that they’ve called you that for years.’

‘Yeah, that’s their pet name for me.’

‘Why you? Why you, and not Gerald Mallory? He’s been around longer.’

‘He’s been around years longer than me, but I’ve got the higher body count. Think about it.’

‘How can you have the higher body count if he’s been doing this for at least ten years longer than you?’

‘One, he’s a stake-and-hammer man. He refuses to go to silver ammo and guns. That means he has to totally incapacitate the vampires before he can kill them. Totally incapacitating a vampire is really hard to do. I can wound one, bring it down from a distance. Two, I think his hatred of vampires makes him less effective when hunting them. It makes him miss clues and not think things through.’

‘So you just kill them better than anyone else.’

‘Apparently.’

‘I’ll be honest, Blake, I’d feel better if you were a guy. I’d feel even better if you had some military background. I’ve checked you out; other than a few hunting trips with your dad, you’d never handled a gun before you started killing monsters. You’d never owned a handgun at all.’

‘We were all newbies once, Shaw. But trust me, the new is all worn off of me.’

‘Our Master of the City is cooperating fully with us.’

‘I’ll just bet he is.’

‘He says bring you to Vegas, and you’ll sort it out.’

That stopped me. Maximillian, Max, had met me only once, when he came to town with some of his weretigers after an unfortunate metaphysical accident. The unfortunate accident had ended with me pretty much possessing one of his weretigers, Crispin. He'd taken Crispin back to Vegas with him, but it wasn't because the tiger wanted to leave me. He was disturbingly devoted to me. It wasn't my fault, honest, but the damage was still done. Lately, some of the powers I'd gained as Jean-Claude's human servant seemed to translate into attracting metaphysical men. Vampires, wereanimals, so far just that, but it was enough. Some days it was too much. I didn't remember doing anything that impressive when Max was visiting.

I'd spent most of his visit trying to be a good little human servant for Jean-Claude, and whatever became mine, like a weretiger, became my master's, too. We'd done some fairly disturbing metaphysics, my master and I, for our guest's benefit. We'd left him kind of creeped, unless he was way more bisexual than he'd ever admit.

'Blake, you still there?'

'I'm here, Shaw, just thinking about your Master of the City. I'm flattered that he thinks I can sort it out.'

'You should be. He's old-time mob. Don't take this wrong, but if you think my opinion of women is low, then old-time mobsters think worse.'

'Yeah, yeah, you just think women can't cut it on the job. Mobsters think we're just for making babies or fucking.'

He made another laugh sound. 'You are one blunt son of a bitch.'

I took it for the compliment it was; he hadn't called me a daughter of a bitch. If I could get him to treat me like one of the guys, I could do my job.

'I am probably one of the most blunt people you will ever meet, Shaw.'

'I'm beginning to believe that.'

‘Believe it, warn the other guys. It’ll save time.’

‘Warn them about what, that you’re blunt?’

‘All of it – blunt, a girl, pretty, dates vampires, whatever. Get it out of their system before I hit the ground in Vegas. I don’t want to have to wade through macho bullshit to do my job.’

‘Nothing I can do about that, Blake. You’ll have to prove yourself to them, just like any . . . officer.’

‘Woman, you were going to say *woman*. I know how it works, Shaw. Because I’m a girl, I gotta be better than the guys to get the same level of respect. But with three men dead in Vegas and seven more in some sort of a spell, ten dead here in St Louis, five in New Orleans, two in Pittsburgh, I’d like to think your officers will be more interested in catching this bastard than giving me a hard time.’

‘They’re motivated, Blake, but you’re still a beautiful woman and they’re still cops.’

I ignored the compliment because I never knew what to do with it. ‘And they’re scared,’ I said.

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘You didn’t have to; you’re special teams and you admitted it. If it’s spooked you, then it’s sure as hell spooked the rest. They’re going to be jumpy and looking for someone to blame.’

‘We blame the vampires that killed our people.’

‘Yeah, but I’m still going to be the whipping boy for some of them.’

‘What makes you say that?’

‘The message on the wall was for me. The head came to me. You already asked me what I did to piss Vittorio off. Some of your people are going to say that I pissed him off enough to make him do all this, or maybe even that he did it all to impress me in that sweet serial killer sort of way.’

Shaw was quiet, only his thick breathing on the phone. I didn’t prompt him, just waited, and finally he said, ‘You’re a bigger cynic than I am, Blake.’

‘Do you think I’m wrong?’

He was quiet for a breath or two more. ‘No, Blake, I don’t think you’re wrong. I think you’re exactly right. My men are spooked, and they’ll want someone to blame. This vampire has made sure that the police here in Vegas will have mixed feelings about you.’

‘What you need to ask yourself, Shaw, is did he do it on purpose, to make my job harder, or did he not give a damn about the effect it had on you and your men?’

‘You know him better than I do, Blake. Which is it – on purpose, or didn’t give a damn?’

‘I don’t know this vampire, Shaw. I know his victims, and the vampires he left behind for killing. I thought he’d resurface because most of these guys can’t stop once they get to a certain level of violence. It’s like a drug, and they are addicted. But I never dreamed he’d send me presents or special messages. I honestly didn’t think I’d made that big an impression on him.’

‘We’ll show you the crime scene when you land. Trust me, Blake, you made an impression on him.’

‘Not the impression I wanted to make,’ I said.

‘And what was that?’

‘A hole in his head, and a hole in his heart big enough to see daylight through.’

‘I’ll help you do it.’

‘I didn’t think undersheriffs did fieldwork.’

‘For this one, I’ll make an exception. When can you get here?’

‘I’ll have to check the airline schedule, and I’ll have to check the regulations for my vampire kit. Seems like the rules change every time I have to fly.’

‘Our marshal didn’t carry anything special on him that you couldn’t get on a plane with if you’ve passed the air marshal test.’

I thought to myself, *Maybe that’s why he’s dead.* Out loud, I said, ‘I’m bringing phosphorus grenades if I can get them on the plane.’

‘Phosphorus grenades, no shit.’

‘No shit.’

‘They work on vampires?’

‘They work on everything, Shaw, and water makes them burn hotter.’

‘You ever seen a man dive into water, thinking it will put it out, but it just flares?’ Shaw asked.

I had a sudden picture in my head of a ghoul that had run through a stream trying to get away. He, or one of his pack, had killed a homeless man who’d fallen asleep in the cemetery where the ghouls had come out of the graves. They’d never have attacked him awake, but they still ate him, and that still earned them an extermination. I’d just been backup for a flamethrower team of exterminators. But ghouls that are brave enough to attack and kill the living rather than just scavenge the dead can turn deadly. Which means you don’t send civilians in without badges to back them. It’d been the first time I’d used the grenades. They worked better than anything I’d ever used on ghouls. When they go bad, they are as strong as a vampire, faster and stronger than a zombie, immune to silver bullets, and almost impossible to kill with anything but fire. ‘I saw some run through a stream. The phosphorus flared up around them like a hot, white aura everywhere the water splashed. So bright, the water sparked in the light.’

‘And the men screamed for a long time,’ Shaw said.

‘Yeah, ghouls, but yeah, they did.’ I heard my voice utterly cold. I couldn’t afford to feel anything yet.

‘I thought modern phosphorus didn’t do all that,’ he said.

‘Everything old is new again,’ I said.

‘I’m beginning to see why the vampires think you’re scary, Blake.’

‘The grenades aren’t what make me scary, Shaw.’

‘What does?’ he asked.

‘That I’m willing to use them.’

‘It’s not being willing to use them, Blake. It’s being willing to use them again.’

I thought about that, and finally said, 'Yeah.'

'Call me when you have your flight arranged.' His voice was unhappy with me, as if I'd said something else that wasn't what he wanted to hear.

'I'll let you know as soon as I know. Give me your direct number, if you're my go-to guy.'

He sighed loud enough for me to hear it. 'Yeah, I'm your go-to guy.' He gave me his extension and his cell phone number. 'We're not going to wait for you, Blake. If we can catch these bastards, we will.'

'The warrant of execution died with your vampire executioner, Shaw. If you guys kill them without me or another executioner with you, then you'll be looking at charges.'

'If we find them, and we hesitate, they'll kill us.'

'I know that.'

'So what are you telling me to do?'

'I'm reminding you of the law.'

'What if I said I don't need a fucking executioner to remind me of the law?'

'I'll be there as soon as I can. I have a friend with a private plane. That's probably the fastest way to get to you.'

'Your friend, or your master?'

'What did I say to piss you off, Shaw?'

'I'm not sure; maybe you just reminded me of something I didn't want to remember. Maybe you just made sure I know what may have to happen in my town before this is over.'

'If you want pretty lies, you have the wrong marshal.'

'I heard that about you, that and that you'll fuck anything that moves.'

Yeah, I'd pissed him off. 'Don't worry, Shaw, your virtue is safe.'

'Why, not pretty enough for you?'

'Probably not, but I don't do cops.'

‘What *do* you do?’

‘Monsters.’ I hung up. I shouldn’t have. I should have explained the rumors, and how it wasn’t true, and how I had never let sex interfere in a case, much. But there comes a point when you just get tired of explaining yourself. And, let’s face it, you can’t prove a negative. I couldn’t prove I didn’t sleep around. I could only do my job to the best of my ability and try to stay alive, oh, and try to keep everyone else alive. And kill the bad vampires. Yeah, mustn’t forget that part.

I had other phone calls to make before I could leave town. Cell phones are wonderful things. First call was to Larry Kirkland, fellow US Marshal and vampire executioner. He answered his own cell phone on the second ring. ‘Hey, Anita, what’s up?’ He still sounds young and fresh, but in the four years we’d known each other, he’d acquired his first scars, along with a wife and baby, and was still the main person for the morgue stakings. He had also refused to kill the shoplifter. In fact, he’d been the one who called me from the morgue to ask what the hell to do about it. He’s about my height, with bright red hair that would curl if he didn’t cut it so short, freckles, the works. He looks like he should be going out with Tom Sawyer to play tricks on little Becky, but he’s stood shoulder to shoulder with me in some bad places. If he had one fault, other than that I wasn’t entirely a fan of his wife, it was that he wasn’t a shooter. He still thought more like a cop than an assassin, and sometimes that wasn’t good in our line of work. Oh, and what did I have against his wife, Detective Tammy Reynolds? She didn’t approve of my choices in boyfriends, and she kept wanting to convert me to her sect of Christianity, which was a little too Gnostic for me. In fact, it was one of the last Gnostic-based forms of Christianity to have survived the early days of the Church. It allowed for witches, read psychics in this case. Tammy thought I’d be a fine Sister of the Faith. Larry was now a Brother of the Faith, since he, like me, could raise zombies from the grave. It’s not evil if you’re doing it for the Church.

‘I’ve got to fly to Vegas on a warrant.’

‘You need me to cover while you’re gone?’ he made it a question.

‘Yep.’

‘Then you’re covered,’ he said.

I thought about giving him more details, but I was afraid he’d want to come with me. Endangering myself was one thing, endangering Larry was another. Part of it was that he was married and had a baby; the other part was that I just felt protective of him. He was only a few years younger than me, but there was something still soft about him. I valued that, and feared it. Soft either goes away in our business or gets you killed.

‘Thanks, Larry. I’ll see you when I get back.’

‘Be careful,’ he said.

‘Aren’t I always?’

He laughed. ‘No.’

We hung up. He’d be pissed when he learned the details about Vegas. Pissed that I hadn’t confided in him, and pissed that I was still protecting him. But pissed I could live with; dead, I wasn’t sure about.

I also called New Orleans. Their local vampire hunter, Denis-Luc St John, had made me promise that if Vittorio ever resurfaced I’d give him a chance to get a piece of the hunt. St John had almost been one of Vittorio’s victims. Months in the hospital and rehab after had made him pretty adamant about helping kill the vampire that put him through all that.

It was a woman’s voice on the other end of the phone, which surprised me. To my knowledge, St John didn’t have a wife. ‘I’m sorry, I’m not sure I have the right number. I’m looking for Denis-Luc St John.’

‘Who is this?’ the woman asked.

‘US Marshal Anita Blake.’

‘The vampire executioner,’ and she made it sound like a bad thing.

‘Yes.’

‘I’m Denis-Luc’s sister.’ She said *Denis-Luc* with an accent I couldn’t match.

‘Hi, could I speak to your brother?’

‘He’s out, but I’ll give him a message.’

‘Okay.’ I told her about Vittorio.

‘You mean the vampire that nearly killed him?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Why would you even call him?’ Her voice was definitely hostile now.

‘Because he made me promise that if this vampire resurfaced I would call him and given him another crack at it.’

‘That sounds like my brother.’ Again, she didn’t sound happy about it.

‘Will you give him the message?’

‘Sure.’ Then she hung up on me.

I wasn’t sure I believed that the sister would give him the message, but it was the only number I had for St John. I could have called the local police and probably gotten a message to him, but what if I did, and this time Vittorio killed him? What would I say to his sister then? I left it in her hands. If she gave him the message, fine; if she didn’t, then not my bad. Either way, I’d kept my promise and wouldn’t be getting him killed. It seemed like a win-win to me.