

CHAPTER 1



Vlad the Impaler had a beautiful singing voice. I bet you didn't know that. Most people think of him for his penchant for putting bodies on sticks. That and for being a vampire. Which he was, by the way. The whole staking thing was more of a prop. But nobody seems to really talk about how he captured so many people to impale in the first place. Just by sheer might? By the strength of his army?

No.

He subdued them with his song.

And he was exceptional with a melody. His voice was as bright as sunlight on steel. When he sang, it was like being swept up in the terror and allure of a god. He was fearsome and intimidating, but his voice was warm and inviting. You wanted to stand in his presence, even though you were terrified of his gaze lingering on your skin. You wanted his attention, for him to sing to you, despite the nefarious gleam in his dark eyes. He might be romancing you, or he might be about to kill you. There was lust, and danger, and fury. Vlad was adept at balancing horror with desire.

But one thing Vlad was shit at was flying undercover.

The ego. *Holy fuck*. The *ego* on that man. It was a time in history when there was room to spare for the narcissism of madmen. Eventually, however, even the Reapers couldn't turn a blind eye. They caught up with Vlad. They ambushed him with silver arrows, their points alight with hellfire. And then they left him to the terrified survivors of his years of rampage. The humans burned his body and scattered his ashes in water and earth so that they would never be whole again.

I mean, the lengths they went to... it was all a bit much. Humans back then were very dramatic. Their superstitions were ridiculous. Garlic, crosses, holy water, incantations. The only thing they got right was silver. I mean, *honestly*. Vlad was dead. He was beheaded and burned. Spreading his ashes here, there and everywhere was unnecessary. And they didn't even leave something for me to keep. *Me*, his maker.

Frankly, it was super uncool. So, I felt the need to kill most of them for being such dicks. And they never expected some sweet-faced, unassuming, quiet young woman would be the true epicenter of all the chaos and destruction. It could never be a woman. They always underestimate us. They always overlook us. *Always*.

Just like Jessie Bates.

Men like Jessie Bates are all the same. They've been this way for millennia, and they will be like this for centuries to come. Jessie assumed he could demean my boss, because Jessie is a man who has enjoyed pushing the boundaries of consequence. An athletic, preppy, Hilfiger-wearing, college frat boy? He loves getting away with things. A little quip here about Bian's Vietnamese accent. A laugh there about her stature. And trust me, Bian can look after herself. She can fight her own battles, and I promised myself I wouldn't fight them for her.

But that all changed when Mr. Bates assumed he could disrespect *me*.

All right, so maybe I made myself seem extra vulnerable when I saw him in the foyer or when I passed him walking alone to the dining room. I wanted him to cross the line. I guess in terms of your human semi-moralities that would be *entrapment*. But honestly, I don't think I even needed to do anything at all. Jessie Bates would have been a misogynistic douchebag to me without any help from me pretending to be weak.

At first it was just a sneer or his lingering stare at my tits. Which, by the way, aren't anything more than average. But eventually, predictably, he went too far.

I still remember the smell of cheap scotch and cologne as he stumbled down the hallway after the bachelor party and caged me between his arms as he pressed his palms to the wall.

"Why don't we go to my room... Lu?.." he had asked, tapping a wobbling finger to my name tag. His voice was thick, like it was stuck in rancid syrup. I remember shaking my head and looking down at the carpet, wondering how anyone had come up with the unfortunate design of purple and orange circles and dreamed up the absurd idea to put it on a floor. The 1970s were the worst.

Jessie pulled me out of my thoughts of interior design. Literally. He tugged my ponytail over my shoulder in a gesture that he must have thought was a little seductive, a little aggressive. "What, you got nothing to say? I'll be real sweet, I promise."

I had met Jessie's bloodshot, watery gaze, swallowing down my desires. Not *those* desires. *Gross*. I meant my desire to tear out his throat and lick his blood off the hideous carpet.

When I shook my head again, he rolled his eyes and

laughed. I felt the gleam of the red light grow behind my pupils and closed my eyes.

Not here. I can't do it here.

It felt like I swallowed flame. Every breath of Jessie's scent had made it burn hotter in my throat. I tried to steady the thunder of my heart. I felt his finger trace a line down the column of my throat, past my collarbones, down the center of my chest. I wanted to tear that finger right off and stick it up his asshole. But I didn't. He seemed to take that as permission to go a step further. He placed a hot palm over my breast and squeezed.

A sudden *whack* jolted his hand off my body. Jessie had yelped in surprise and another whack quickly followed.

"You let her go!" Bian yelled. I heard her shoeless footfalls thudding on the carpet as she ran to come and save me.

"Did you just throw a shoe at me?"

"Security is coming! You let her go and get out. Get out!"

I opened my eyes and watched as Bian rushed toward us, picking up one of her wayward shoes only to throw it at Jessie again. She chased him down the hall and after that he was quietly kicked out of the Swan Inn.

But it's not like he went far.

The wedding he was here for happened yesterday, and I know it was a wild one. Andy told me the police were called twice to break up rowdy, drunken fights. And a man like Jessie Bates is never far from the center of trouble. If he just happens to go missing, I'm sure there will be plenty of suspects.

Normally, I don't hunt in my hometown.

But for Jessie Bates, I'll make an exception.

CHAPTER 2



Jessie Bates has no idea I'm about to suck him dry.

Ugh *no*. Not like *that*.

I'm going to *kill* Jessie Bates, and I'm going to enjoy it.

And I'm an excellent hunter. It's one of the few things you humans got right in your myths about us. We are the ultimate predators. Sneaky, stealthy, alluring when we want to be. We can stand out or we can blend in. We can be charming or we can be terrifying. We can be political agents or we can slip through society unnoticed. We are shapeshifters not because we change into other creatures, but because we change into other versions of ourselves. We adapt to what you need us to be in that moment, so that we can get exactly what we want from you.

Most everything else you believe about vampires is wrong.

Sunlight? Dude. *Please*.

Bats? *Seriously?* Do I look like the kind of girl to have a collection of sky mice? *Hell no*. I might be too cold to incubate rabies, but I don't want to douse myself in it either.

I don't sparkle, I don't sleep in a coffin, I don't live in a crypt. Garlic doesn't deter me and holy water doesn't burn me. In fact, enchanted water is exactly where my life as an immortal began. I'm pretty enough with thick black lashes and bright hazel eyes, long hair the color of melted chocolate and flawless olive skin. With a bit of makeup I can be a knockout, but why would I want you to remember my face in a crowd? It's in my best interest to be forgettable, particularly given my... history.

But I guess there are a few things you got right. Like my preternatural senses. And right now, all I can smell is that big hunk of sweaty, fleshy, frat boy man candy. Like I said, I don't usually hunt on my home turf. I don't like to draw attention to myself, and more than anything I want to keep trouble away from Bian's doorstep. But this time I can't help it. I'm just so hungry.

Any thought of repercussions drifts away on the breeze carrying Jessie's warm, musky scent. He just smells so divine.

I start humming a little tune.

At first, Jessie doesn't really notice. He keeps walking, past the closed shops, beneath the streetlights where the moths ping against the yellowed plastic. His gym bag is slung over his shoulder. He's checking his phone, his attention focused on the light of his little screen. I say a prayer of thanks that he isn't wearing headphones. Headphones are the bane of a siren's existence. Seriously, how in the fuck am I supposed to seduce my prey if they're always listening to their shitty playlist on Spotify or whatever-

Come on, focus. I'm so easily distracted when I'm hungry. I home in on Jessie's broad, mouth-watering back and start humming louder. I see the instant the sound finally registers in his peanut-sized brain. When Jessie's head tilts to the side and his pace slows, I start putting words to my tune. It's not so much *what* I sing, it's *how* I sing it. And I don't like the

crusty old tunes of my people, songs about the sea and ancient ships and Odysseus, that crafty fucker.

I like a challenge.

I start singing some of the lyrics from *WAP* by Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion. It's a modern masterpiece and I will fight you if you say otherwise. And I can sing it sweet. So sweet it sounds like a church hymn.

I want you to park that big Mack truck

Right in this little garage

Make it cream, make me scream

Out in public, make a scene

I don't cook, I don't clean

But let me tell you how I got this ring...

Jessie slows to a near stop. He's entranced by my lilting soprano (told you so). I catch up with him and grab his hand, pulling him with me. I keep singing, swinging his hand in mine as though we're two high school lovers taking an evening stroll.

I lead Jessie toward the narrow alley between the Cheese Louise cheese store and Puptown dog grooming. The combined smell of cheese and dog is revolting. But Jessie doesn't mind. He follows me willingly. He's completely under my control. And I don't mind either, really. I'm just so fucking hungry that you could bathe a dog in cheese, wipe it on Jessie's thick neck, and I'd still bite down and call it heaven.

I pull Jessie away from the lamplight, into the shadow. I do prefer to hunt in the night, you humans did get that part of our tale correct. When we're far enough away from the empty sidewalk that I know we won't be seen, I stop and turn to face Jessie. His expression is wistful. His eyes are caught in the middle distance. His thoughts are far from me. It's a kindness that we vampires offer. Peace before death. What other creature can offer such a guarantee?

I gently push Jessie until his back is against the cold brick. It'll make it easier when his legs give out. Fuck, he's so tall. I usually pick smaller prey, but he was such a dick the other day at the Inn and I really feel like he deserves it. I'm just gonna have to climb him like a tree.

My canines elongate and I graze the tip of my tongue along the needled point. I taste the sweet venom. My stomach rumbles. I can only see the throbbing vein in Jessie's neck. I can only hear the beat of his heart. I grip onto his shoulders and haul myself up, inhaling his delicious combination of hangover sweat and cologne. I close my eyes and smile, then open my mouth and prepare to bite-

"Oh no you don't," a deep voice says behind me. A large and powerful hand grips my shoulder with unnatural strength and whirls me away from Jessie. My eyes land on the broad chest of a man. A black button-up shirt. Swirling smoke. A blade of silver and rippling fire in the hand not still clasped around my shoulder. Black tattoos snake up from under his collar, covering the side of his neck to the edge of his short dark hair. The pupils of his rich brown eyes are consumed with flame.

A Reaper.

Holy fuck.

Holy fucking fuck.

Fuuuuuuuuck.

This is it. This is how I die. Five thousand fucking years I've been alive, and I'm gonna die behind Cheese Louise.

They've found me. After all this time. They found me in fucking Sanford, of all places.

...fuck.

The Reaper's gaze makes a slow path across my face as though memorizing every detail. He's probably savoring the moment. He probably wants to see the look in my eyes when he slips his sword between my ribs. He's about to be famous

among his clan and the anticipation must be almost as great as the victory itself.

"Are you skilled with a blade?" he asks.

He wants me to... fight him? ... That's a little sadistic, considering he's, like, twice my size and *he's a fucking Reaper*. He's born to take immortal lives. I might be a great predator and all but a Reaper is hard to kill. *Really* hard. And I would know.

Still... I'll take any chance I can get, no matter how small.

I nod.

"Good," he says. He lifts his hand from my shoulder and withdraws a second silver sword from a scabbard strapped across his back. "Werewolves are coming. They've caught your scent. I'm here to reap the Alpha for the Crime of Abomination. Defend yourself."

De-*what* myself?

The Reaper takes a step back from me. His gaze is snagged on mine like a hook in the gills of a fish. I'm still trying to work out exactly what in the hell is going on and why I'm not dead. I realize I'm staring at him with a dumbass look on my face and I try to school my expression into something that looks less confused and panicky. I'm not convinced by my efforts and by the frown on the Reaper's face, neither is he.

"I am Ashen of House Urbigu. What is your name?"

I nearly burst out laughing. He has no fucking clue. By some insane miracle, he must not have heard me sing to Jessie. He has no idea he's standing in front of the vampire bounty kill of an immortal lifetime.

If I answer his question, he'll be pretty quick to figure it out. Not because of my name, I could give him any name I wanted. Bertha. Ethel. I could even give him the random computer bee-boop of Grimes and Elon Musk's baby name.

If I speak one word, he'll hear it in my voice. He'll know exactly who I am.

Ashen of House Urbigu narrows his eyes at me. He opens his mouth to repeat his question.

And I never thought I'd say this before, but thank fuck for werewolves.