

One

“So what kind of stories do you cover?” he asked, bathing my face in champagne fumes. “Bat Boy Goes to College? Elvis Shrine Found on Mars?” He laughed without waiting for me to answer. “God, I can’t believe people actually buy those rags. Obviously, they must, or you wouldn’t have a job.”

My standard line flew to my lips, something about tabloids functioning as a source of entertainment, not news, quirky pieces of fiction that people could read and chuckle over before facing the horrors of the daily paper. I choked it back and forced myself to smile up at him.

“I did a Hell Spawn feature once,” I said, as brightly as I could manage. “That’s True News’ version of Bat Boy. I covered his graduation from kindergarten. He was so cute, up there with a little mortar and board perched on his horns . . .”

I crossed my fingers under my cocktail napkin and prayed for “the look,” the curl of the lip, the widening of the eyes as they frantically searched for an escape. Escape would be so easy—a crowded museum gala, everyone in evening wear . . . come on, Douglas, just excuse yourself to go to the bathroom and conveniently forget where you left me . . .

He threw back his head and laughed. “Hell Spawn’s kindergarten graduation? Now that’s a fun job. You know what the highlight of my work week is? Nine holes of golf with the other AVPs.”

See, now that was the problem with guys like Douglas—they weren’t evil. Boring, boorish and borderline obnoxious, but not so awful that you could justify abandoning them. So you were stuck hoping they’d be the ones to declare the date a dud, and beg off early.

Dinner had been a mistake. I should have insisted we meet here, at the party, so if things didn’t go well, we’d have only been sentenced to a couple hours of each other’s company. But he invited me to dinner first, and even as I’d been thinking “No!” my mouth had done the right thing, the polite thing, and said “Sure, dinner would be great.”

I’d spent forty-five minutes at the table by myself, fending off sympathetic “you’ve been stood up” looks from the servers, and watching my salad wither on the plate. Then Douglas had arrived . . . and I’d spent the next hour listening to him complain about the cause of his lateness, some corporate calamity too complex for my layperson’s brain to comprehend. It wasn’t until we were here, at the opening of the museum’s new wing, that he’d even gotten around to asking what I did for a living.

“So what’s the weirdest story you’ve ever covered?” he asked.

I laughed. “Oh, there would be plenty of contenders for that one. Just last week I had this UFO—”

“What about celebrities?” he cut in. “Tabloids cover that, right? Celebrity gossip? What’s the best one of those stories you’ve done?”

“Ummm, none. True News includes some celebrity stories, but I’m strictly the “weird tales” girl, mainly paranormal, although—”

“Paranormal? Like ghosts?” Again, he didn’t wait for me to answer. “Our frat house was supposed to be haunted. Frederick and I—your brother-in-law and I were frat brothers, but I guess your mother told you that. Anyway, one night . . .”

My poor mother. Reduced to canvassing my sister’s husband’s college buddies for potential mates for her youngest child. She’d long since gone through every eligible bachelor she knew personally.

“I don’t need you to find me dates, Mom,” I said the last time, as I’d said the hundred times before. “I’m not so bad at it myself.”

“Dates, yes. Relationships, no. I swear, Hope, you go out of your way to find men you wouldn’t want to know for more than a weekend. Yes, I know, you’re only twenty-six, hardly an old maid, and I’m not saying you need to settle down, but you could really use some stability in your life, dear. I know you’ve had a rough go of it, struggling to find your way . . .”

What do you expect? I wanted to say sometimes. You gave me a demon for a dad. Of course, that wasn’t fair. Mom didn’t know what my father was. I’d been born nine months after my parents separated, and grown up assuming, like everyone else, that I was my father’s “parting shot” before he’d run off with his nurse.

Only at eighteen had I begun to suspect otherwise, when I’d realized that my feelings of being “different” were more than adolescent alienation.

Douglas finished his haunted frat house story, then asked, “So what kind of education does a tabloid writer need? Obviously you don’t go to journalism school for that.”

“Actually, I did.”

He had the grace to flush. “Oh, uh . . . but you wouldn’t need to, right? I mean, it’s not real reporting or anything.”

I searched his face for some sign of condescension. None. He was a jerk, but not a malicious one. Damn. Another excuse lost. I had a half-dozen girlfriends who wouldn't need a justification for ending this date early, who'd just cut and run. So why couldn't I? I was half-demon, for God's sake. I could be as nasty as I wanted.

I scanned the room. The gala was being held in the reception hall, which was also—as discreet signs everywhere reminded us—available for weddings, parties and corporate events. A jazz trio played in the corner beside a portable parquet dance floor that was small enough to be a solo stage, as if the organizers acknowledged this wasn't a dancing crowd, but felt obligated to provide something. Most of the guests were big business, so the main event here was schmoozing, fostering contacts while basking in the feel-good glow of supporting the arts. Large scale artifact replicas, such as statues and urns, dotted the room, reminding guests why where they were and why . . . although the pieces seemed to be getting more use as coat racks and leaning posts.

“The buffet table looks amazing,” I said. “Is that poached salmon?”

“Wild, I hope, but you can't be too careful these days. I had dinner with a client last week, and he'd been to a five-star restaurant in New York the week before, and they'd served farm-fed salmon. Do people just not read the papers? You might as well eat puffer-fish, which reminds me of the time I was in Tokyo—”

“Hold that thought,” I said. “I'm going to grab something and scoot back.”

I bolted before he could stop me.

As I crossed the floor to the buffet, I was keenly aware of eyes turning my way. A wonderful feeling for a woman . . . if those eyes are sweeping over her in admiration and envy, not glued to her dress in “what the hell is she wearing?” bemusement.

It was the dress's fault. It had screamed to me from across the store, a canary yellow beacon in the rack of blacks and olive greens and navy blues. A ray of sunshine in the night. That's how I'd pictured myself in it, cutting a swath through the darkness in my slinky bright yellow dress. Ray of sunshine? I looked like a banana in heels.

Sadly, it wasn't my first fashion disaster. The truly sad part was that I had no excuse for my lack of dress sense. My mother routinely showed up on the local society papers as a shining example of the well-bred and well-dressed. My sister had paid her way through law school by modeling. Even my brothers had both made the annual "best dressed bachelor" lists before their marriages disqualified them. It didn't matter. My whole family could have accompanied me to that store, unanimously told me—yet again—that yellow was the worst color anyone with dark hair and a dark complexion could choose, and I'd still have walked out with that dress, blinded by my sun-bright delusions.

At least I hadn't spilled anything on it. I paused mid-stride, and looked down at myself. Nope, nothing spilled yet, as long as I stuck to white wine and sauce-free food, I'd be fine.

I picked up a plate and surveyed the table. A roast duck centerpiece surrounded by poached salmon, marinated prawns on ice, chocolate-covered strawberries . . . I wasn't hungry, but there's always room for chocolate-covered strawberries. As I reach for one, my vision clouded.

Oh, God. Not now.

I tried to force the vision back, concentrate on the present, the buffet table, the smell of perfume circling the room, the soft jazz notes floating past, focus on that, keep myself grounded in the—

Everything went dark. Images, smells and sounds flickered past, hard and fast, like physical blows. A forest—the shriek of an owl—the loamy smell of wet earth—the thunder of running paws—a flash of a black fur—a snarl—teeth flashing—the sharp taste of—

I ricocheted from my vision so fast I had to grab the edge of the table to steady myself. I swallowed and tasted blood, as if I'd bitten my tongue, but couldn't feel it.

A deep breath, then I opened my eyes. There, in the center of the table, wasn't a roast duck, but a newly dead one, ripped apart, bloodied feathers scattered over the ice and prawns and poached salmon, steaming entrails spilling out on the white tablecloth.

I wheeled, smacked into a man standing behind me, and knocked the plate from his hands. I dove to grab it, but my charm bracelet snagged on his sleeve, and I nearly yanked him down with me. The plate hit the floor, shards of glass flying in every direction.

“Oh, I'm so sorry,” I said.

A soft chuckle. “Quite all right. I'm better off without the added cholesterol. My physician will thank you.”

I fumbled to extricate his sleeve from my bracelet. He reached down, hand brushing mine, and with a deft twist, set us free.

As he did, I got my first glimpse of him, and inwardly groaned. If I had to make a fool of myself, of course, it would be in front of someone like this, who looked as if he'd never made a fool of himself in his life. Tall, dark, and handsome, he was elegance personified, marred only by a slight hawkish cast to his face. Every response to my stammered apologies was witty and charming. Every move as we entangled was fluid and graceful. The kind of guy you expected to speak with a crisp, British accent and order his martinis shaken, not stirred.

As a bevy of serving staff rushed in to clean up, I apologized one last time, and he smiled, his last reassurance as sincere as his first, but his gaze grown distant, as if he'd mentally already moved on and, in five minutes, would forget me altogether which, under the circumstances, I didn't mind at all.