UNDER ATTACK

My words were cut off by the sound of a blade slicing through the air. I felt a body make contact with mine, then the wind as it left my chest when I fell onto the cold, damp concrete. I only knew Alex had been hit when I heard the strangled sound of his groan.

“Sophie, run!”

Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion and Alex’s command didn’t even sound like him. It was higher, more menacing, and I kicked my feet, sliding on the concrete until I got some traction, then stopped dead, seeing the dark figure in front of Alex.

Our attacker was dressed entirely in black and stood a half-head taller than Alex, his face obscured by a black knit ski mask that only revealed sinister hooded eyes, which remained fixed on us.

He held his blade aloft once more and I heard my own scream when I saw the blood—Alex’s blood—dripping from the cold steel . . .
UNDER ATTACK

The Underworld Detection Agency Chronicles

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KENSINGTON BOOKS
http://www.kensingtonbooks.com
It’s nearly impossible to get hobgoblin slobber out of raw silk.

I know this because I had been standing in the bathroom, furiously scrubbing at the stubborn stain for at least forty-five minutes. If I could do magic, I would have zapped the stain out. Heck, if I could do magic I would zap away the whole hobgoblin afternoon and be sinking my toes in the sand somewhere while a tanned god named Carlos rubbed suntan lotion on my back. But no, I was stuck in the Underworld Detection Agency women’s restroom—a horrible, echoey room tiled in Pepto pink with four regular stalls and a single tiny one for pixies—when my coworker Nina popped her head in, wrinkled her cute ski-jump nose, and said, “I smell hobgoblin slobber.”

Did I mention vampires have a ridiculously good sense of smell?

Nina came in, letting the door snap shut behind her. She used one angled fang to pierce the blood bag she was holding and settled herself onto the sink next to me.

“You’re never going to get that out, you know,” she said between slurps.
I huffed and wrung the water from my dress, glaring at Nina as I stood there in my baby-pink slip and heels. “Did you come in here just to tell me that?”

Nina extended one long, marble-white leg and examined her complicated Jimmy Choo stilettos. “No, I also came in to tell you that Lorraine is on the warpath, Nelson used his trident to tack a pixie to the corkboard, and Vlad is holding a VERM meeting in the lunch room.”

I frowned. “This job bites.”

Nina smiled, bared her fangs, and snapped her jaws.

Nina and I work together at the Underworld Detection Agency—the UDA for those in the know. And very few people are in the know. Our branch is located thirty-seven floors below the San Francisco Police Department, but we have physical and satellite offices nationwide—word is the Savannah office gets the most ghosts but has the best food. The Manhattan office gets the best crossovers (curious humans wandering down) and the good ol’ San Francisco office is famous for our unruly hordes of the magnificent undead, mostly dead, and back from the dead. However, we’re rapidly becoming infamous for a management breakdown that tends to make incidents like the fairy stuck to the corkboard barely worth mentioning. Some demons blame the breakdown of Underworld morals. I blame the fact that my boss and former head of the UDA, Pete Sampson, disappeared last year and has yet to be replaced. Thus, we’ve been privy to a semipermanent parade of interim management made up of everything from werewolves and vampires to goblins and one (mercifully short) stint with a screaming banshee.

So am I a demon? Nope. I’m a plain, one hundred
percent first-life, air breathing, magic-free human being. I don’t have fangs, wings, or hooves. I’m five-foot-two on a good day, topped with a ridiculous mess of curly red hair on a bad day, and my eyes are the exact hue of lime Jell-O. My super powers are that I can consume a whole pizza in twelve minutes flat and sing the fifty states in alphabetical order. And that I’m alive. Which makes me a weird, freakish anomaly in an Underworld office that keeps blood in the office fridge and offers life insurance that you can collect should you get the opportunity to come back to life.

“There you both are!”

My head swung to the open doorway where Lorraine stood, eyebrows raised and arched, her blue-green eyes narrowed. Lorraine is a Gestault witch of the green order, which means that her magiks are in kind with nature and are deeply humane. Usually.

Her honey-blond hair hangs past her waist and her fluttery, earth-toned wardrobe reflects her solidarity with natural harmony.

Unless you got on her bad side, which, today, I was.

Lorraine glared at my slip. “Can you wrap up your little lingerie fashion show and meet me in my office, please? And you”—Lorraine swung her head toward Nina, who was holding my damp dress under the hand dryer—“can you please break up Vlad’s empowerment meeting and get out to the main floor? Vlad’s got nine vamps singing “We Shall Overcome” in the lunch room and I’ve got sixteen minotaurs in the overflow waiting room.”

I looked at Nina. “Vlad is still into the Vampire Empowerment Movement?”

Nina gave me her patented “Don’t even start” look,
punched her fist in the air, and bellowed “*Viva la revolución!*” while slipping out the bathroom door.

I pulled my dress over my head under Lorraine’s annoyed stare, and then worked quickly to rearrange my hair. When Lorraine sighed—loudly—I wadded my curls into a bun and secured them with a binder clip, then followed her down the hall.

“Okay,” I told her as I tried to keep pace with her. “What’s up?”

Lorraine didn’t miss a step. She pushed a manila file folder in my hand with the blue tag—*Wizards*—sticking out. “Nicholias Rayburn,” I read as I scanned the thick file. “Ring a bell?”

I frowned. “No. Should it?”

“How about ‘Three Headed Dog Ravages Noe Valley Neighborhood’?”

I felt myself pale. “Mr. Rayburn did that?”

“No,” Lorraine said flatly. “You did.”

I raised my eyebrows and Lorraine let out another annoyed sigh. “Nicholias Rayburn was here last week. Old guy, blue robe, pointy hat?”

I cocked my head. “Oh yeah. Now I remember him.”

“You should, because you allowed him to renew his magiks license.”

My stomach started to sink.

“Yeah. With his three-inch-thick cataracts and mild senility. You were supposed to *withdraw* his license and strip him of his magiks, but you didn’t, and he walked home, thought a fire hydrant was following him, and unleashed the hound of Hell on the land of the soccer mom. Not exactly great for our reputation.”

I felt my usually pale skin flush. “Whoops.”

Lorraine stopped walking and faced me, the hard line of her lips softening. “Look, Sophie, I know you’ve had a hard time. I understand that with all you’ve been
through you’re going to make some mistakes, but you’ve got to be more aware.”

The events of the last year of my life flooded over me, and I blinked rapidly, trying to dispel the imminent rush of tears.

It had been rough.

While I had gone for more than thirty-three years with nothing so much as an overdue library book to raise any eyebrows, in the last twelve months I had become involved in a gory murder investigation, been kidnapped, attacked, hung by my ankles as someone attempted to bleed me dry—

“And I know it’s got to be hard, what with Alex out of the picture and all.”

And I had fallen in love with a fallen angel who had the annoying habit of dropping into my life with a pizza and a six-pack when things were supernaturally awful, and dropping out when things shifted into relatively normal gear.

I sniffed, hugging Mr. Rayburn’s file to my chest. “Thanks. It won’t happen again. I promise.”

“Let’s hope not. But why don’t you head out a little early today?” she said, squeezing my shoulder. “Get some rest and regroup.” Lorraine bit her lip and danced from foot to foot, then leaned in close to me. “Okay. I’m really not supposed to say anything but I’m about to burst, so this is just between you and me, okay?” Lorraine sucked in an excited breath. “The main offices have found Sampson’s replacement. We’re supposed to have the new management in place by the end of the week. But it’s super hush-hush so don’t tell a soul, okay?”

I nodded, feeling a fresh pang of emotion washing over me. In the half-second it took to close my eyes I saw Pete Sampson’s cocoa-brown office walls, his worn leather chair, the orderly stack of files he always had on
his desk. I felt the familiar lump in the back of my throat and swallowed furiously. Pete Sampson wasn’t coming back to the Underworld Detection Agency. Pete Sampson was dead. The realization was hard enough to face; knowing someone else would be sitting at Pete’s desk was almost too much to bear.

I cleared my throat and winced when my voice came out quiet and choked. “Your secret is safe with me. I’m going to go check in with Nina.”

I walked slowly down the hall, taking great gulps of airs and using my index fingers to dab at my moist eyes.

Nina was perched on the end of her desk when I found her, legs crossed seductively, her shoe dangling from one toe. She was winding her long black hair around and around her index finger and interviewing a werevamp who was sitting in her visitor’s chair. Nina was the only person I’d ever met who could make the sentence “please tell me about your previous employment history” sound sordid. She was nearly purring as the werevamp—who looked dashing in a steel-grey suit and had the chiseled profile of James Bond—ticked off a forty-seven-decade-long employment history that included working as a tax collector for King Henry the VIII and ended with software programmer.

I tried to catch Nina’s eye but she glared at me—nothing is icier than a vampire glare—and I rolled my eyes, heading down the hall toward the elevator. I was skirting the hole in the linoleum where a High witch blew herself up when I ran chest to chest into Vlad and his Fang Gang—the nine vampire staff members of UDA who were currently enraptured by the Vampire Empowerment and Restoration Movement. Loosely put, VERM members were dead-set on bringing vamps back to their glory days
(think Dracula, graveyard dirt, and ascots). Though UDA code was adamant about vampire/human relationships (the former was not allowed to eat the latter), I generally tried to steer clear of VERMers—Vlad, being Nina’s nephew (and a longtime resident of our couch), was the exception. Vlad and Nina shared the same fine-boned structure and elegant limbs that seemed to be signature of the LaShay family; both had pronounced, inky-black widow’s peaks under their sheaths of glossy hair. But fashion-wise, the relatives couldn’t have been farther apart.

Vlad fell in step with me, his ankle-length black duster coat floating behind him. I looked at it skeptically.

“Isn’t it a little warm for the coat?”

Vlad just shrugged his thin shoulders and straightened his paisley ascot. “Vampire mystique.”

“Of course.”

“Have you seen Aunt Nina? I’ve been looking all over for her. She was going to bring the snacks for the meeting.”

“I thought she was anti-VERM?”

I watched Vlad’s nostrils flare; the members of the Vampire Empowerment and Restoration Movement loathed being belittled by their lame acronym. “She is, but you know Auntie.”

I nodded. “Right. Pro-snacks.” I gestured toward Nina’s office door that had mysteriously closed. “She’s interviewing a werevamp.”

Vlad smoothed his perfect hair. “I didn’t think we had any open positions.”

I shrugged. “I’m pretty sure we don’t. So, how are things with the movement?”

Vlad grinned, his fangs pressing over his lower lip. “Nice of you to ask. They’re going well. We’ve been able to reach out to more key figures in the Underworld lately, but our next hurdle is our biggest.”
“VERM is going after Hollywood?” I asked, skeptical.
Vlad stiffened. “It’s the Vampire Empowerment and Restoration Movement. As for Hollywood, we are against the way vampires are being portrayed in modern media.” He shook his head. “It’s awful.”
I raised my eyebrows and met Vlad’s dark eyes. He blew out an exasperated sigh. “Oh, come on; according to Hollywood—and now according to every woman south of forty-five—vampires are misunderstood nightwalkers who are really just looking for someone to love.”
I glanced again toward Nina’s office door.
“Trust me; she’s not interested in loving him,” Vlad said with a disgusted shudder. “I mean, have you seen television lately? They’ve got us going to high school, using jewelry to go out into sunlight. If a new vamp tries to mimic what he sees on television, he’s going to get burned to a crisp. And don’t even get me started on how they’re screwing with our legendry!”
I nodded. “Yep. Best to go back to the good old days of Bela Lugosi, Nosferatu, and the Count from Sesame Street.”
Vlad rolled his eyes but continued to stroll beside me. “So, did you hear about that three-headed dog in Noe last week?”
“No,” I said quickly, stepping into the elevator.

My apartment is a little more than six blocks away from the San Francisco Police Department/Underworld Detection Agency offices, but this being the Bay Area, six blocks on foot equaled twenty-five minutes in the car. By the time I pulled into my apartment building’s under-
ground parking garage the vein over my left eye was throbbing—whether it was from the midafternoon stop-and-go or from very nearly running down a clutch of tourists wearing I ESCAPED ALCATRAZ sweatshirts, I wasn’t sure. Either way, I knew psychologically that there were only two things that could help the kind of day I was having, so a good forty-five seconds after pushing the key into the lock at my second-story walk-up, I had a bottle of chardonnay in one hand and a package of marshmallow Pinwheels in the other. The surge of chocolate and alcohol helped but not enough, so I beelined for the bathroom, filling my mouth with cookies and peeling my clothes off as I went.

I drew a bath as hot as I could stand it and upturned a bottle of cucumber-melon bath goo under the tap. Then I positioned my wineglass next to the remaining marshmallow Pinwheels and eased myself into the tub.

“Ahh,” I moaned, closing my eyes, breathing in the heady scent of cucumber and chocolate as the hot water washed over me. “Much better.”

I dunked a washcloth, wrung it out, and placed it over my eyes, then sipped contentedly at my wine. I was reaching out for another Pinwheel cookie when I heard the rustle of cellophane and felt a cold prickle of fear creep up my neck, despite the hot water. I stiffened and froze, arm outstretched, palm upward.

Someone placed a Pinwheel in my open hand and I sat bolt upright in the tub, the washcloth falling from my eyes, the poor Pinwheel reduced to chocolaty, marshmallow ooze as I gripped it. Bits of bathwater-doused marshmallow dripped through my fingers.

“Didn’t mean to scare you,” Alex said, perched on the side of my tub, his pincher finger and thumb hovering above my half-empty Pinwheel package. “May I?”
Alex Grace was gooey, chocolaty goodness if ever there was. And he had disappeared without a word six months ago.

I felt my eyes bulge and the speedup of my heart was so immediate it hurt. “Alex?” My tone was that rare mix of Christmas-morning excitement, beautiful-man proximity, and ex-boyfriend angst. I felt the burn of anger, the hurt of loss, and the wild rush of pure animal attraction as Alex Grace looked down at me, Pinwheel held aloft, luscious pink-tinged lips pushed up in the cocky half-smile I had started to remember in my dreams.

He was an angel—of the fallen sort—with sky-blue eyes and hair the color of dark chocolate, swirling in wondrous, luxurious curls over his forehead, snaking over ears just perfect for nibbling. He had the high cheekbones and feather-long lashes that women would do naughty things for, and the square jaw and puckered pink lips that could do naughty things. His build was fairly slight but wrought with wiry, rock-hard muscles that made his jeans look mouthwateringly comfortable, and stretched out the chest and arms of his T-shirts mercilessly.

“What the hell—why are you—” I fluttered and floundered, splashing bits of cucumber melon–scented fluff, chocolate pieces, and bathwater all around. Alex just grinned that familiar half-smile that I found so annoyingly erotic; he crossed his arms and relaxed against my towel rack, clearly enjoying my spastic discomfort. That angered me even more so I worked to get my panicked breathing under control. Alex and I had shared some steamy moments and every glance or touch of his skin electrified me. This moment was no exception—but he was bad news. Fallen angels always are. And his whole disappearing/reappearing thing really got on my last nerve.

And then I realized I was naked.
I sunk lower into the water, pushing the bubbles over my girly bits and glowering at Alex who looked at me, that obnoxious, adorable half-smile still playing on his lips. He helped himself to a cookie.

“What are you doing here?” I snapped.

He chewed thoughtfully. “I needed to talk to you.”

“I have a phone. Or an e-mail address. Or, hell, a carrier pigeon. Do you always have to show up in the bathroom?”

“I needed your undivided attention.”

I raised an annoyed brow. “Or you needed a naked-lady fix. And did you lose your ability to knock along with your wings?”

He grinned, took a swig from my wineglass. “Ooh.” His blue eyes looked up, raked the ceiling. “Is that an oh-eight? It’s buttery.”

“Get out!” I screamed, pointing a sopping, bubble-laden arm at the bathroom door. “I’m not going to talk to you while I’m naked.”

Alex’s grin widened. “So you are naked . . . ?”

“I’m in the bathtub,” I snarled. “What did you expect?” I was sitting forward now and vaguely aware of the cool air touching my breasts. I hunkered down in the water again. “You’re a pervert.”

Alex shrugged, finished my wine, and poured himself some more. “Hey, I’m no angel.”

I rolled my eyes and snatched my wineglass out of his hand. “Get out.”

Alex’s eyes went puppy-dog round. “I still need to talk to you.”

I held my ground, though it wasn’t easy; my heart—with its sudden, mile-a-minute beat—was betraying me.

“And I still need you to get out.”

“Can I have another cookie?”

That did it.
“Out!”

Once Alex was safely on the other side of the bathroom door I slipped out of the tub, hastily dried off, and wrapped myself in my sky-blue bathrobe. I flounced my hair a bit and patted my cheeks, hoping to get a semblance of that innocent-girl pink in my cheeks; instead I had the bright red imprint of my own hands. I swiped on some Sugar Kiss lip gloss in hopes that sexy, glossy lips would detract from my cheeks. I was tightening the belt and padding into the kitchen when I was treated to a view of Alex’s rump poking out of my fridge.

“Can I help you with something?” I asked his butt.

Alex backed out of the fridge, frowning. “There’s nothing in here to eat. Are there any more Pinwheels?”

I crossed my arms in front of my chest. “No. I threw them away.” Threw them down my throat was more like it.

I nudged Alex aside and peered into the fridge, coming out with a half loaf of cracked-wheat bread and a stack of Polaroid-thin cheese slices. “Grilled cheese?”

“Tres gourmet.”

“You’d better believe it.”

Alex handed me a frying pan and got to work buttering the bread.

I slowly peeled a piece of cheese, careful to keep my eyes away from Alex, lest my bathrobe fall off or I find myself climbing him like a stepladder. “So, what are you doing here anyway? I mean here, here.” I pointed with a spatula to the floor. “In this realm. In my kitchen.”

Alex peeled the filmy cellophane from a piece of cheese and crumpled it in his hand, popping the cheese ball in his mouth.

“Go ahead,” I said. “Make yourself at home.”

Alex gave me a sarcastic smile and snagged a couple of beers from the fridge. He opened them both, then
handed one over, clinked mine, and took a long pull. I did the same.

“Can’t a guy just pop in to talk to a friend?”

The word *friend* sent my hackles up, but I pretended it was from a draft and tightened the belt on my robe.

“A guy could. You couldn’t.”

Alex shrugged, smiled, and remained quiet.

“Okay, what do you want to talk about?”

Alex wasted no time. He put down his beer and looked at me, cobalt eyes piercing and suddenly serious. I pretended not to notice. “I need your help,” he said simply.

I raised my eyebrows. “Is that so?”

“Remember when I told you about the Vessel?”

“The Vessel of Souls? The one that got you banned from Heaven? Stripped of your wings? That Vessel?”

Alex pursed his lips in annoyance. “Are you through?”

I sniffed. “I guess. What about it?”

“I need to find it.”

“I know that. But why now? And why do you suddenly need me to help?”

Alex let out a long sigh. “The Vessel of Souls houses all human souls that are in limbo. If the fallen angels get their hands on it they can take over everything: the angelic plane, the human plane—even the Underworld. We need to keep the Vessel out of the hands of the fallen.”

I looked at Alex. “You’re fallen. Why should I help you get it?”

“You know that if I can restore the balance of the planes and get the Vessel back, I can get my wings restored. I’m not going to jeopardize that . . . again.”

I picked up the spatula again, used it to peek underneath my sandwich. “And you need me why?”

Alex raised his eyebrows expectantly and I flipped the sandwich, sighing. “Because the Vessel is charmed,” I said, answering my own question.
“Even the angelic plane uses magic. They like to hide things in plain sight.”

“Really?”

Alex nodded and took a swig from his bottle. “Yeah. Last I heard the Holy Grail was actually a tanning bed in Manhattan Beach.”

I narrowed my eyes at Alex’s little-boy grin. “Really, Lawson. You’re the only one I know who will be able to see through the charm.”

Along with my superior pizza-eating and state-reciting powers, I am also magically immune. My grandmother was a seer, my mother was a mind-melder, and my specialty? Nothing. In a good way. Nothing magical can be used on me. Veils, charms, spells, happy endings—anything that could be conjured, wanded, or abracadabraed was lost on me. The magical immunity helped working in the Underworld. The occasional fire-breathing dragon singe or High witch explosion rolled off me like water off a duck’s back. Warlocks couldn’t use glamour spells to make me fall in love with them and give them extra magiks freedoms or process their paperwork any faster, and I could share a cup of coffee with Medusa and stay perfectly, humanly pink.

I flipped the second sandwich onto a plate and handed it to Alex.

“Okay,” I said. “Where do we start?”
I was sprawled on the couch, eating the peanut-butter part of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich when I heard the lock tumble and Nina walked in, dropping her shoulder bag in a heap. Vlad loped in behind her, his shoulders slumped in his black velvet sport coat, earbuds securely clipped in his ears, iPod turned up so loud we could hear the white-noise whir of his music.

“Turn that crap down!” Nina snarled.

Vlad rolled his eyes and snatched his laptop from the kitchen table, then slunk off to the fire escape.

Nina wagged her head as she looked after him, then rubbed her temples. “I just don’t know what I’m going to do with him.” Though Vlad was technically one hundred and thirteen, he was forever sixteen.

He poked his head back into the living room and eyed Nina and me. “Do we have any of that AB negative left?”

Moody, grunty, hungry sixteen.

“Check the fridge,” Nina said to Vlad without taking her eyes off me. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” she said to me with a frown.

Nina was my coworker, my roommate, and my very best friend. She was ballerina slim and elegantly tall,
with waist-length gorgeous black hair that tumbled over her defined shoulders and highlighted her deep, coal-black eyes. She was the kind of friend I could tell anything to, the kind of girl who always took your side, would stay up nights sharing secrets with you.

And also, she was dead.

Well, undead.

Nina was a one hundred and sixty-eight-year-old vampire and had the pale complexion, penchant for type O neg, and the pointed incisors to prove it.

She was born—the first time—in 1842 and as a twenty-nine-year-old party-girl heiress, she climbed out her bedroom window one night to meet a dark-eyed stranger. Three days and two punctured arteries later, she caused the massacre of the Elpistones army. That was a long time ago and her bloodlust had long ago subsided, being replaced by an insatiable urge for high-end couture. Tonight she was wearing a vintage Guy Laroche cocktail dress with a pair of nosebleed-high leather boots, paired with an Old Navy hoodie and a felt cloche hat. She looked like a page out of *Vogue*; in the same outfit, I would have looked like a college kid on laundry day.

“No ghosts,” I said, still studying my sandwich. “Alex.”

Nina sat down with a start on the coffee table. “Alex Grace?” She whipped her head around. “Where is he? Is he here now? I want to kick that son of a bitch’s—” She paused. “Unless you’re back together, then we should all go out and get drinks.” She grinned, her small fangs pressing against her bloodstained lips.

I clicked off the TV. “He wants my help.”

“Heaven stuff.”
“Boo.” Nina cocked her head, considering. “Well, I guess that could be fun. So, where’s Alex now?”
I shrugged. “Wherever angels go when they’re not here. Or, back to the police station. I don’t know.”
Being a fallen angel came with all sorts of otherworld perks, but it didn’t come with a paycheck. To keep himself in cloud pillows and ambrosia (okay, beer and pizza), Alex kept his bank account padded with occasional work with the San Francisco Police Department. To them he was an undercover FBI field agent whose long disappearances were chalked up to hush-hush cases in the field; to me he was just annoyingly undependable.
Currently, San Francisco was Alex’s home base. His paychecks and credit card bills went to an apartment he kept in the Richmond district; I happened to notice the address on a piece of mail that was inadvertently left in my apartment (after it fell out of Alex’s office). When I happened to drive by the Turk Street address, I found it was an empty storefront with newspaper-covered windows and a heap of Target ads and Safeway circulars jammed in the mail slot. I hadn’t gotten around to asking Alex about his fake address—mainly because he never asked me if I’d stolen any of his mail.
“I just don’t know if I want to get involved,” I said.
At one time I had considered Alex and my dead/undead relationship passionate and romantically star-crossed; now I considered it hopelessly dead-end.
Mostly.
There was something about his sexy half-smile, his lush, pink-tinged lips, and my dating drought that made me swoon in a way that brought a blush to my cheeks, a tingle to my nether regions, and made me deeply consider the benefit of one-night stands.
I readjusted myself on the couch and tried to remind myself that losing Alex the first time was gut-wrenchingly, Lifetime-television bad. I didn’t know if I could—or wanted to—go through it again.

Nina cocked her head, picked a glob of jelly off the lapel of my bathrobe. “You mean because you’re so busy here.”

I tried to glare. “I mean I’m not sure if I want to get involved with Alex again. The last year has been so . . .” I let the word trail off and tried to avoid Nina’s annoyed stare as self-pity ballooned in my chest.

“The last year has been so what? Ordinary? You may not have been hung up by your ankles lately, but you’ve also managed to watch the entire seven seasons of The Golden Girls multiple times. And”—Nina held up a single index finger—“you’ve alphabetized our spice rack. Twice. If that’s not a body calling out for a little extracurricular activity, I don’t know what is.”

I remained unconvinced—and gun shy. I had fallen hook, line, and sinker for Alex’s baby blues once, and after a few steamy scenes he disappeared for six months without a word. When I finally got over the heartbreak and stopped listening to mopey love songs, Alex popped back into my life—this time, with bad news.

“It’s not like the relationship is going to go anywhere. He wants to go—” I paused, looking for the right word. “Back.” I sighed miserably. “Last I heard Heaven-to-Earth long-distance relationships didn’t ever pan out too well.”

“So it’s destined to be a dead-end relationship?”

I nodded.

“Even more reason to jump in with both feet and no panties on!”

I licked some peanut butter off my index finger and blew out a tortured sigh. “Why even bother if you know
a relationship is doomed from the get-go? It’s just asking for heartbreak.”

“And a few steamy months of hot, sweaty monkey love.”

I raised my eyebrows.

Nina stuck out her tongue. “Oh, come on. All my relationships are doomed. Or damned. Besides, just working with the guy isn’t going to get you all hot and bothered. Is it?”

I avoided Nina’s gaze but couldn’t avoid the telltale blush that crept over my cheeks.

“Slut!” I eyed Nina’s gleeful face and she rolled her eyes. “Really, Sophie. What’s there to be worried about? He’s a lovely specimen of manhood; you’re a museum-quality specimen of undersexed womanhood. Don’t they say—what is it?—better to have gotten a little and lost, than never to have gotten a little at all.”

“Poetic.”

Nina poked her foot in between the couch cushion and wiggled her toes underneath my backside. “Whew. Just checking. Wanted to make sure you and the couch weren’t sharing a bloodline. Ooh, that reminds me, I’m hungry.”

I swatted Nina’s foot away and stood up. “You suck.”

“It’s what we do.” She grinned. “So we’re helping?”

I pursed my lips. “He’s coming over tomorrow night.”

I watched as Nina’s libido-meter went up to her ears. “We’ll have to go to Victoria’s Secret at lunch.”

“It’s purely a business meeting,” I said. And then, with a quick lick of my lips, “For now.”

Nina grinned and socked me in the shoulder. “That’s my slutty friend.”

I rolled my eyes and Nina prattled on. “We need to get all our excitement in while we can. This is just between
you and me, but I heard that the new UDA management will be in place soon.”

“Hey! That was supposed to be between me and Lorraine!”

Nina tugged her ear “Vampire perk. It’s not like I can turn off the supersonic hearing.”

I glared and she relented. “Okay, fine. Just between you and me and Lorraine. And Vlad. And the operations staff. And I guess some of the VERMers. Anyway, I’m going to find out everything I can about this new management guy. I have worked too long and too hard to let some new demon come in and tell me how to do my job.”

I grinned, both at Nina’s stern determination and her belief that she worked either long or hard.

The next morning I was out the door before Nina came home from her night out. I hurried to my favorite Philz Coffee and let the scent of roasted beans and caffeine wash over me when I pulled open the door. By the time I got to the front of the line, the warm, comforting feeling of coffee and croissants was replaced by the eerie feeling that I was being watched.

While most women would get the “someone’s watching me” feeling and scan the room for the hot barista or the well-dressed businessman giving her the eye, this was my life, which meant my first reaction was to search for a fire-breathing dragon, homicidal vamp wannabe, or a three-foot-high troll hell-bent on making me his wife. Oddly enough, it was none of the above. The staff and clientele of Philz was above-ground normal—dog walkers with rolls of plastic poop bags sticking out of their pockets, pseudo-exercise gurus in track suits and pristine Coach sneakers, businessmen with slick striped ties and
impeccable hair. No one seemed to be paying me any mind, but I still couldn’t shake the feeling. My whole body hummed with an uncomfortable awareness, and when the barista asked again to take my order I jumped, then bit my lip and offered him a shy smile.

“Sorry, I just . . .”

The barista seemed far more interested in the blond woman behind me so I forwent the explanation and ordered my coffee, then offered him a crumpled bill. I shuffled to the end of the bar and waited for my drink, the awkward, uncomfortable feeling not waning.

“Customer service is really not his strong point,” the guy beside me said, nudging his head of ash-blond hair toward the barista.

I jumped, and the guy grinned, his smile wide and comforting. “Tell me you’re getting a decaf,” he said, his English accent clipping his words.

I felt a blush creep over my cheeks. “I’m sorry, I guess I’m a little jumpy. And it’s a vanilla latte, full caff, so . . .”

“So I guess they’ll be scraping you off the ceiling by lunchtime.” The guy picked up his coffee, gave me a friendly head nod, and zigzagged through the crowded coffeehouse. When he turned, I noticed the back of his well-fitting navy-blue T-shirt had the red and white San Francisco Fire Department logo on it.

When the barista handed over my cup, I took my coffee and pushed out of the shop. I looked over my shoulder hoping for a second glance at the fire guy, but the blond woman who was behind me in line was blocking my line of sight. She was staring at me through the plate-glass window, her face half-obscured by the lid of her takeout cup as she sipped slowly. Finally, she pulled the cup away from her face and grinned at me, a dazzling, beatific smile that shook me right to the bone.
I pushed open the door to Nina’s office and slumped into her visitor’s chair, balancing my Philz cup in my hand.

“So, I just had a weird experience.”

Nina raised her eyebrows, dropping her sparkly Hannah Montana pen. “Demon weird or mortal weird?”

“Mortal, I guess, but you never really can be sure anymore.”


I filled Nina in on my non-run-in with the blonde, and how the heebie-jeebie feeling of discomfort was just now beginning to subside. Nina listened intently, drumming her fingers on her desk, then chewing the end of her pen. I winced when her left fang pierced Hannah Montana’s smiling face.

“I have no idea why it bothered me so much, Nina,” I explained. “She just smiled. A friendly, nice smile and it was like I had been hit in the head with a sledgehammer. It was weird.” I shuddered. “Beyond weird.”

Nina dropped her pen, then steepled her fingers psychologist style. “She was probably an old friend from college who recognized you or something. Or, you probably stand in front of her at Philz like, every day and just noticed her now. Or”—Nina waggled her eyebrows salaciously—“she totally has the hots for you and has been stalking you for ages, and is just waiting to bonk you over the head and drag you back to her chick cave.”

I frowned and Nina sighed. “Really, Sophie, you’re being too paranoid, even for you. You act like every time Alex comes into your life, the world becomes full of goblins or gooblygooks all out to get you.”

I rolled my eyes and downed the last of my coffee, tossing the empty into Nina’s trashcan. “Who—or what—
ever she was, she gave me the heebie-jeebies. And then when I turned around again, she was gone.”

“Ooh, spooky. A woman gets her coffee and then mysteriously leaves the coffee shop afterward. How chillingly bizarre.”

“Remind me again why we’re friends?” I asked.

“Because I pay half the rent and you can’t kill me.” Nina grinned, her fangs pressed against her lower lip. “So what happened after that? Oh, let me guess—you found Excalibur in your blueberry scone?”

“Fine. Then I won’t tell you that I ran into a hot fireman.”

Nina dropped her pen and her eyes went big and round. I thought I saw a bit of drool at the side of her mouth. “A fireman? Really?” Her eyes narrowed. “I love firemen. They taste so smoky and good.”

I sighed. “And that’s why I can’t have breather friends.”

Nina frowned. “You act like I eat everyone I meet.” She brightened. “Now, do you want to hear my news?”

I held up my hands, resigned. “Do I have a choice?”

“Of course not.” She stood up and closed the door softly. I grinned at the 1950s-style strapless satin cocktail dress that she wore over a Smelly Mel’s T-shirt and topped with a beaded black bolero. She walked noiselessly on Manolo Blahnick cutout stilettos that I know cost more than my car. “I heard about the new staff. They’re going to be here later this afternoon.”

I leaned forward in my seat. “There’s a whole staff? I thought it was just one guy.”

Nina shook her head. “Nope. Latest intel says it’s a whole staff.”

“Intel?”

“Pierre overheard it in the restroom.”

“So it’s reliable.”

Nina nodded.
I sat back, considering. “Wow. So, what did you hear?”
Nina sat on the edge of her desk. “Well, first of all, they’re pro-vamp.”
“Really?”
She nodded. “Yeah, from what I heard, the new management team is actually all vamp. All men, too, I think.”
“You must be in seventh heaven.”
Nina looked stunned. “Are you kidding? Vamp men can be such control freaks. And they are so twelfth century when it comes to women in the workplace! Mark my words: This new head-honcho guy thinks he’s going to have all the women here wrapped around his bloodless little finger. No way. I’m going to let him think he’s the boss and then show him who’s really in charge here.”
“And I’m guessing that would be you?”
“Of course it’s me!” Nina exploded. “If that vamp thinks I’m going to give him one extra inch”—she held her thumb and forefinger the appropriate distance apart—“well then, he’s got another thing coming.”
“Noted,” I said, pushing open the office door. “Whoa!”
A swarm of UDA employees ambled down the hall outside Nina’s office door. Nina poked her head over my shoulder and frowned. “What’s going on?”
Pierre, our resident centaur/file clerk, paused in front of us. “Didn’t you hear? Staff meeting. They’re introducing the new management.”
Nina and I shared an eyebrows-up glance. “Really? Already?”
I stepped out into the crowd and Nina followed behind me, hiking up the green satin skirt on her evening gown so she showed an extra inch of firm, pale thigh.
“I thought you were against wrapping people and things around fingers.”
Nina grinned salaciously, repositioning her breasts. “I
said he couldn’t wrap me around his little finger. I didn’t say anything about what I’d wrap him around.”

I giggled and linked arms with Nina. We stepped into the demon stream, found Lorraine in the crowd, and glommed on to her.

“So, is there a big announcement or just an intro?” I wanted to know.

Lorraine shrugged, her thin shoulders dusting the bottoms of her dangly jade earrings. “I don’t know, but I heard reorg.”

Nina and I gulped.

“I swear, if I get moved to licensing, I am so out of here.” Lorraine’s emerald eyes were wide and defiant—with just a hint of worry.

Licensing was the bane of the UDA employee’s existence. The licensing department handled all new demon breeds, half-breeds, and cross breeds, plus was the dumping ground for newly made vampires, werevamps, and werewolves. Newcomers—licensed or otherwise—had the tendency to fly off the handle, testing their new powers in weird and damaging ways, which was why the licensing department had an unlimited budget for new waiting-room chairs, curtains, and carpets, since they were set on fire, chewed, or torn on a regular basis.

“You’re accounts receivable. There is no way the new management is going to demote you to licensing,” I told her.

“I don’t know,” Lorraine said, hugging herself with crossed arms. “I heard these guys are pretty shrewd. They really like to shake things up.”

“Please,” Nina said, checking her eternally perfect cuticles. “You’ve got nothing to worry about. I have been through so many reorgs. Hell, most of these guys have no idea what they’re doing anyway. They’ll bring in a couple of old buddies from their pre-vamp college days,
add a few big-busted breather girls for fang candy, and fire the mail guy so it looks like they’re doing something.” Nina yawned as if the whole situation bored her. “We’re probably dealing with some pasty, round, Pillsbury dough-vamp on a power trip. Small penis, big car, everything back to Hell-on-Earth normal in five days, guaranteed.”

“I hope you’re right,” Lorraine said, rubbing her arms. “Shh,” I hissed. “Here they come.”

The whole of the staff straightened as the back-office doors slid open and the new head of the UDA stepped out, flanked on either side by well-dressed henchmen whose dark eyes scanned the assembled crowd, their faces betraying nothing.

One of the henchmen stepped forward, straightening his impeccable tie. He leaned against the podium, cleared his throat into the microphone. “Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Mr. Dixon Andrade.”

There was a smattering of polite applause as Dixon stepped forward, looking all at once politician slick and businessman savvy.

To say Dixon was a commanding presence was an understatement. He was at least six feet tall with strong swimmer’s shoulders and a long, lean body that gave the impression of careful control. His longish brown hair was carefully slicked back from a wide forehead that was punctuated by thick, dark eyebrows that seemed very comfortably formed into a constant V of consternation and distaste. His pale skin was taut and perfect; his square jaw was set hard but offset by ruby red lips that were pressed into a thin line as he surveyed the UDA staff. Suddenly, his lips broke into a welcoming grin, and a slight hint of color washed over his cheeks.

“So this is the San Francisco staff of the Underworld Detection Agency. Nice-looking group of demons.”
Dixon nodded slowly, appraisingly, as the crowd hummed, pleased. I just swallowed and did my best to fade into the background.

It’s not that I was any way ashamed of my non-demon status, nor was it much of a secret around the office—I tended to stick out like a sore thumb, as I routinely bypassed the freeze-dried blood in the office vending machine and opted for the Rice Krispies Treats and Kit Kat bars. I just considered that until the new management got to know me, it might be best to blend into the whole of the group—which is not that easy, considering the majority of the group sported horns, fangs, or hooves. I sported a dress with a slobber stain and a Swatch watch.

“Now I know a lot of you might be worried about a so-called shake-up around here. I am here today to put you all at ease. I know my predecessor, Pete Sampson, ran a tight ship around here and you all have the profit margins”—Dixon held a thick stack of documents aloft—“to prove it.”

A whoosh of relief whipped through the crowd and suddenly the UDA employees were showing signs of everyday life: Pierre was shifting from hoof to hoof, bored. Kale, the mega-pierced apprentice witch to Lorraine was batting her eyes at Nina’s nephew Vlad, who was working hard to ignore her. Eliot, a newly hired werevamp was nonchalantly texting on his iPhone.

“Now, now,” Dixon went on, pale palms up to appease the crowd. “That doesn’t mean there won’t be some changes. Nothing drastic, I assure you. But I do want to get a feel for what you all do around here.” Dixon stressed certain words like an overly sincere politician. I didn’t warm to him.

“I want to know you, your job descriptions, what a day in the life is like for you as a UDA employee.” Dixon flashed a brilliant grin, his teeth impossibly white, his
incisors sharpened to terrifying points. I felt my eyebrows shoot up and I stole a glance over at Nina.

Her eyebrows were raised, too; her dark eyes were wide as saucers and transfixed—but it wasn’t the surprise of seeing a pair of sharpened fangs.

It was love.

Pure, unadulterated, “I’d follow you anywhere, Dixon Andrade” love.

“Aw, geez,” I muttered under my breath. “Nina!”

She was leaning forward on her toes, her sky-high Manolo Blahniks raising her up four inches already. Her hands were clasped in front of her heart and every inch of her was still, waiting, watching, like a cat ready to pounce.

“He. Is. Beautiful,” she said, her voice coming out high-pitched and breathy.

“I intend to get to know each and every one of you, and to do that”—Dixon’s eyes scanned the crowd—“I am hoping to enlist the help of the Underworld Detection Agency’s human resources staff.”

Nina thrust her chest out with so much pride that I thought her rib cage would come sputtering out of her. She offered a brilliant, toothy grin—her fangs not nearly as spiked as Dixon’s—and raised one thin arm, waving proudly, Nadia Comaneci-winning-the-gold style. I felt myself cringe, and I was vaguely concerned that Nina might explode with a supernatural combination of horniness and joy.

“I am thrilled to be of service, Mr. Andrade,” Nina purred, her voice a sweet, tender pitch that was usually reserved for puppy dogs and enormous favors.

I leaned forward, whispering in Nina’s ear, “I thought he was a useless Pillsbury dough-vamp?”

Nina looked at me incredulously. “Can’t you see? He’s brilliant!” Nina’s eyes went from stunned wonder to
naked want. I thought I saw a drop of saliva teeter on her lower lip.

“I will have . . .” Dixon frowned, scanned his stack of papers “Nina, is it?”

Nina nodded with all the restraint of a bobblehead on a dashboard.

“Nina will be scheduling one-on-one interviews with me, which will commence immediately. And with that, the Underworld Detection Agency is ready for business. Demons, man your stations!”

The crowd slowly began to dissipate, a low chorus of grumbles with them, but Nina stood perched, erect, her small hands clapping spastically. “Wonderful speech, Mr. Andrade, just—motivating!” she said.

Dixon grinned at her as he stepped down from the podium and patted Nina gingerly on the shoulder. “You can call me Dixon, Nina.”

Again, Nina’s chest puffed and I vaguely wondered how that was possible, given that the woman hadn’t taken a breath in over a hundred years.

Dixon’s brown eyes set on me and I was entranced by the flecks of gold that danced in them. Though my magical immunity rendered me untouchable by the usual glamours that vampires use to mesmerize humans, I wasn’t above falling under the spell of a good-looking man—undead or otherwise.

“I don’t believe we’ve met,” Dixon said in his satin-sleek voice. He extended a slim, pale hand. “Dixon Andrade. And you are?”

I took his hand, the bloodless cold of his palm going all the way up to my shoulder. “I’m Sophie Lawson,” I said, pumping his arm.

“Sophie Lawson,” Dixon drew out the words, seemed to savor my name on his tongue. A knowing look flitted
across his sharp features. “You were Mr. Sampson’s executive assistant, were you not?”

“That’s right.”

“And she was wonderful with Mr. Sampson,” Nina said, butting in between Dixon and me. “He was absolutely crazy about her.”

Dixon raised one black eyebrow and Nina licked her lips. “In a purely professional way.”

Dixon nodded slowly, his eyes still on me. “Good to know. And lovely to meet you, Sophie. I’ll be seeing you around and looking forward to our interview.”

“Likewise,” I said, my voice sounding thin and weak as Dixon nodded to Nina, then turned on his heel, his henchmen following closely behind him.

“Oh. My. God,” Nina said when Dixon was out of earshot. “I thought I was going to explode.”

I stepped back. “Well, don’t do it anywhere near me.”

“Do you not think that Dixon Andrade is downright yummy? I mean, look at him!” Nina gestured wildly as Dixon got smaller and smaller as he headed down one of UDA’s long hallways. “That is some delicious vamp candy!”

I crossed my arms. “I suppose he’s pretty hot. If you’re into that hot, good-looking, brooding type.”

“With a smile that could melt butter!”

And fangs that could cut glass. “I guess he’s okay,” I finished.
Chapter Three

The plastic bag loaded with takeout Chinese was cutting off the circulation in my fingertips as I tried to shift my stuff—coat, laptop case, purse—and get my key into the lock. After four tries and an impressive show of inner-thigh muscle as I clenched the sliding bags between my knees, I got the apartment door open, grunting the whole time but managing to keep the mu shu upright. I dropped everything—except the takeout bag—in a heap on the floor when I saw what greeted me: a living room full of vampires, their faces pale and perfect, eyes narrowed, bee-stung lips full and dyed blood red. The house was in disarray and little droplets of blood spattered the coffee table, along with discarded bits of clothing and glasses knocked on their sides, plasma starting to congeal inside. Despite the blood on their lips, these vampires looked hungry. I blew out a sigh.

“Really, Vlad?”

Vlad sprung up from the flower-print easy chair and strode across the room toward me. His cold fingers chilled my arm as he steered me into the hall.

“We’re having an Empowerment meeting.”
“You didn’t tell me you guys have become the Slob Empowerment Movement.”

“Geez, Sophie, you’re as bad as Aunt Nina. I’ll clean up when we’re done. Promise.”

“Good. I have a meeting, too.” I swung the takeout bag in front of him.

“Another meeting of the Mu Shu Pork Society?” Vlad asked, crossing his arms and jutting out one hip.

I narrowed my eyes. “Just clean it up. You didn’t tell me you guys were meeting here today.”

“Do I have to tell you everything?”

I held my glare steady.

Vlad fluffed up his ascot. “We were chased out of the UDA by Lorraine. We need a place to meet. The Empowerment Movement is currently only in its infantile stages, so this is when we are most in need of a nurturing environment.” He smiled, a sweet, boyish smile that reminded me of the earnest kid he must have been—back in the eighteen hundreds or so.

“Shouldn’t you be meeting in a cemetery or something?”

Vlad’s eyes widened. “Do you know one with mausoleum space?”

“Look, just wrap it up and give me fair warning the next time you plan on bringing the fang gang around.” I looked over his shoulder, eyeing the assembled vamps as they flipped through magazines and stuck skinny straws into their blood bags, à la Capri Sun. “You know I’m pro-vamp and I support the movement,” I glanced back at Vlad’s ascot and black-painted fingernails. “At least most of it. But Alex and I have some important business to discuss tonight.”

“The angel is back?”

Vlad’s eyebrows went up, but I stopped him before he
could comment. “Yes. But this is just business—another case. So, can you wrap it up?”

“Geez,” Vlad said with an eye roll. “I can’t wait until I get my own place.”

“Not until you’re two hundred,” I muttered parentally as I followed him back into the apartment.

I set my bag down and nodded—graciously, though nervously—to Vlad’s vampire friends as they gathered up their trash and filed out the front door, Vlad in tow. I gave them a polite finger wave and then raced to the bathroom, telling myself that I was freshening up as a polite hostess and nothing more as I dabbed on a drywall layer of deodorant and slapped on some Siena Sunset lip stain. I undid the bun on the top of my head and my hair fell in soft, curled tendrils that swooped romantically around my face and stuck up like wheat grass in the back. I spent the next eight minutes pleading with said wheat-grass hair and finally finagled it in a downward direction with a handful of centuries-old Dippity-do that I found in the back of the medicine cabinet.

Deeming myself cosmetically presentable, I went back to the kitchen and unloaded the armful of takeout containers onto the dining room table, trying to arrange them artfully. If I couldn’t cook, the least I could do was arrange takeout beautifully. I finished off my Hang chow bounty with a meager-looking daisy stuck in a water glass. Not exactly The Slanted Door, but it would do.

I sucked in an anxious breath when I heard the lock tumble on the front door. My heart gave a little pitter of warmth that dropped down into my nether regions and I imagined myself gripping Alex by the lapels and dragging him into the living room, lip to passionate lip. Instead, I crossed my legs and forced myself to look nonchalant.
“Oh,” I sighed when I opened the door. “It’s you.”
Nina gave me a sour look. “Nice way to greet your roommate.”
I wrung my hands. “It’s just that I was expecting Alex.”
Nina gaped. “Don’t tell me you gave him a key now, too!”
I wagged my head and Nina arched an eyebrow. “I thought you weren’t sure you were interested in getting involved with him again.”
“What are you talking about? We’re just two old friends meeting for dinner.”
Nina sniffed at the air. “Hang chow?” She sniffed again. “And you sprang for the prawns chow fun.”
“I like prawns.”
Nina squinted and pointed at my pursed lips. “And that’s Siena Sunset. That’s name-brand product. You don’t shell out for shrimp and name-brand product for someone you’re not getting involved with. I bet you even shaved your legs.”
I bit my lip—whoops.
I sighed, a meager attempt to center myself. “I’m not exactly getting involved. I’m helping him with a case.”
*And possibly out of his clothes.* . . . I put my hands on my hips. “And I thought you were anti-Alex.”
“I’m not anti-Alex. I’m pro-love. You’d be surprised how pro-love one becomes when they’re not getting enough blood to their personal parts.”
“So love is all about what gets to your personal parts?”
Nina licked her lips and winked. “Honey, love can be about anything having to do with the personal parts.”
“Silly me. I thought it was about the heart and all that malarkey.”
Nina waved a dismissive hand, twisting her glossy dark hair around her finger. “Eh, it’s all the same after a
while.” She yanked open the fridge door and rooted around for a blood bag, then pulled herself up onto the kitchen counter and kicked off her shoes, aiming them into the dining room.

“So”—she took a long sip that crumpled her blood bag—“back to you and Alex.”

“A case,” I reiterated. “That’s all this is about. Shrimp chow fun, name-brand lip gloss—which was a free sample by the way—and that’s it. Just a case.” I was talking so loudly I was beginning to convince myself. “He’s coming over so we can discuss the particulars.”

“Discuss the particulars?” Nina’s lips went into a sleazy half-grin. “Something tells me I know the particulars you’re interested in. . . .”

“Uh, hello?”

Alex was standing in the open doorway, head cocked, eyebrows raised. I sucked in a traumatic breath, my body not knowing whether to die of embarrassment or of sheer desire.

Tonight, Alex Grace looked good enough to eat.

His pale grey T-shirt looked soft and was fraying a little at the collar. It stretched across his broad shoulders and the short sleeves were pulled taut against his thick, ropey muscles. His arms were crossed and the bottom edge of his tattoo—a single angel’s wing—poked out from underneath the fabric covering his left bicep. I worked hard to keep my eyes welcoming and friendly, but they kept slipping to Alex’s slim waist, to the way his well-worn jeans hung on him, and visions of him stepping out of those jeans clouded my “friendly” stance.

Alex held up a six-pack of beer and stepped into the apartment, kicking the door shut behind him. The click of the door and the clink of the beer bottles shook me out of my revelry.
“Hi. Nina and I, we were just . . .”

There was a playful look of knowing in Alex’s eyes and I felt the heat of embarrassment wash over me. I looked down and went to work opening the beer, certain that my face was flushed as red as a midlife-crisis Corvette.

“So,” Nina began, “Sophie tells me there’s another mystery to be solved. Count me in.”

“Great.” Alex walloped the backpack I didn’t realize he was carrying onto the dining-room table, making the Chinese food and my pitiful flower jump.

I handed Alex his beer, our fingertips brushing in the exchange. My stomach did a little butterfly flutter and I took a quick pull from my beer, gulping a mouthful of foam.

“Is that mu shu?” Alex asked, sniffing at the air.

“Yes,” I said. Then I pointed at the backpack. “Is that your homework?”

Alex took a pair of chopsticks and the takeout box of mu shu. “I guess it’s our homework.”

Nina frowned. “There’s going to be reading in this one? I don’t know if I want to play anymore.” She pierced her blood bag with a single angled fang, sucked earnestly on what remained and then looked up, her full lips stained a deep red. “What are we after, anyway?”

“The Vessel of Souls,” Alex said in between bites.

I took my own takeout box and chopsticks and dug into some Kung Pao. “Hey, how do we even know the Vessel is here anyway? Shouldn’t it be like, in Europe—like Vatican City or something?”

Nina looked up from her second blood bag, eyebrows raised. “Rome? Okay, I’m back in.”

“The Vessel is definitely here. I’m sure of it.”

“Is your angel sense tingling?” I asked.
A flash of darkness skittered across Alex’s cobalt eyes and his smile dropped. “I know it’s here because Ophelia is here.”

I felt like I had been kicked in the stomach. Alex and I weren’t exclusive or even dating, really—and I had no idea where he went when he wasn’t stretched out drinking a beer on my couch or eating day-old donuts at the police station—but I still felt a sudden, illogical pang of jealousy.

“Who’s Ophelia?” Please say your mother, please say your mother, please say your mother, I silently prayed.

“Ophelia is a fallen angel.”

“Like you,” Nina said.

“No.” Alex shook his head, holding a piece of mu shu pork between poised chopsticks. “Not like me at all. She’s currently the head of the fallen and she’s very bad news. Evil bad.”

I had a faint sliver of hope that her being the head of the fallen meant she was horned or cross-eyed or wore gaucho pants.

“The head of the baddies?” Nina looked impressed.

“Who do you have to kill to get that gig?”

Alex looked away. “Ophelia was why I left here—why I left San Francisco—the first time.”

I swallowed, not tasting my food. Instead I imagined Alex and his fallen-angel friend Ophelia frolicking on clouds and harmoniously strumming harps while I had spent those solitary six months after he disappeared in elastic-waist pants trolling the ice cream aisle at Cala Foods.

“Oh.” My voice came out a choked whisper.

“No—it wasn’t—wasn’t like that. The word got out that she was looking for me. So I decided I’d better find her first.”
“And did you find her?” Nina asked, toes tapping angrily, eyes narrowed in the ultra-protective best-friend mode.

“No.”

I felt remotely better. “So why is she here? And why does that mean the Vessel is, too?”

“Ophelia has been tracking the Vessel ever since—” Alex looked down at his hands, ashamed. “Ever since I lost it. She wants it for herself. She’s desperate for it—has been the whole time I’ve known her. Ophelia is the kind of woman who gets off on power. Lots of power.” Alex looked at Nina and me. “She’ll kill for it. And if she’s here, then the Vessel can’t be far off.”

I felt a breeze—like icy breath—creep up the back of my neck and I shivered. Hollow laughter rang out in my ear and I frowned, going to the kitchen window and scanning for errant, laughing kids. There was nothing but darkness and the occasional sound of horns honking so I slammed the window shut. The breeze went away, but the chill and the sound of laughter hung in my head for another few seconds.

“How do you know she’s back here? Have you”—I paused, tasting the bitterness of my words—“seen her?”—I

Alex wagged his head again, his dark curls bobbing. “No, thank God. But I’ve heard things. I know she’s here.”

I swallowed, waiting for the feeling of relief to wash over me. It didn’t.

Alex placed a thick file folder flat on the table and pushed it toward me. I glanced down. “Something tells me this isn’t the complete files of the Lolcats.”

I opened the file and the front page of a week-old San Francisco Chronicle was folded neatly on top. The headline blared HUNGARIAN DIPLOMAT AMONG CESSNA DEATHS.
There was a full-color picture of the wreckage of the small plane in a shallow section of the bay; someone had drawn a red circle around a smudge of black on the wing of the plane. “Did you circle this?” I pointed to the smudge and Alex nodded.

“What is it?”

Alex took the file from me and rummaged past a few pages, then pulled out a tattered-looking Ziploc bag with a single black feather locked inside. I raised my eyebrows, squinted back at the circled smudge.

“That is that?” I asked skeptically.

“No. This”—Alex dangled the bag—“is from a different crime scene.” He pulled a sheaf of papers from the folder and dropped them in front of me. “But that,” he said, gesturing toward the circled smudge, “is also a black feather.”

Nina stood up. “Are you saying that both of these murders were committed by crows?” She slammed her fist into her palm. “Damn birds!”

I continued looking through the file. “Homicide,” I read, flipping through a thin file with another Ziploced black feather enclosed. “Accidental drowning . . . victim was recovered on shore near Crissy Field, DOA, five-inch black feather was—ugh”—I shuddered—“recovered from victim’s throat. Murder-suicide in Portola Valley, one dead in fiery crash on Devil’s Canyon Slide.” I scanned the last article. “Brendan Joel found dead when his car went off the road. . . . Three-to-four-inch black crow feather found in the victim’s right hand.” I shook my head. “I don’t get it. What’s with the black feather?”

I held up my hand to silence Nina before she could answer.
“It’s like a sign. Every time the angelic plane crosses the human plane—”

Nina crossed her arms in front of her chest. “In non-Heaven speak, please.”

“Every time an angel touches a human, something is left behind.”

“I don’t remember any black feathers,” I said.

“I don’t have my wings, remember?”

“Well, if Ophelia is a fallen angel, too, how come she’s got hers to toss around all crazy?”

Alex’s eyes were downcast. “She’s embraced the darkness.”

“You mean she’s playing on Team Satan, right?” Nina asked.

“We try not to mention it.”

“So bad-good angels, like you, don’t leave anything behind?” I shrugged. “I guess that’s good.”

Alex took my hand, turned my wrist so it faced upward. There was a tiny red dot—as though from a ball-point pen—on the pale flesh of my wrist. He smiled; I gawked.

“That’s from you?”

He dropped my hand. “You don’t have to look entirely disgusted.”

“I’m not, it’s just—”

“You were expecting a halo burn?”

I put my hands on my hips, tapped my foot angrily on the floor. “No, you make it hard to forget you’re a fallen angel.”

“Just be glad you’re not covered with those stupid crow feathers.” Nina shuddered. “Birds totally freak me out.”

Alex raised an eyebrow. “Doesn’t vampire trump fowl?”
“It was a pre-vamp thing,” I said, using my hand to partially cover my mouth. “She’s still not over it. So, this?” I brushed my index finger over the tiny strawberry-colored spot.

Alex shrugged, suddenly looking slightly bashful. “Yeah, sorry.”

“No, it’s . . . kind of nice.” I felt the blush creep over my cheeks. “Anyway, back to the crime scene.”

“And the Vessel.”

“And the crow queen.”

Alex and I both swung to face Nina, who held her hands palm up and hunched her shoulders. “Sorry, sorry—just trying to help.”

I tapped my index finger against my chin. “So, Ophelia comes into town and just starts randomly killing people and that means the Vessel is here? That’s weird.”

Alex wagged his head. “I don’t think they’re random.”

I fanned out the photographs and newspaper clippings in front of me on the table. “A diplomat, a couple, a teacher . . . some of these are outright murders, some of these look like accidents. I don’t get it; what’s the connection?”

Alex sank onto one of the dining room chairs and began stacking the photos. “I think they were all guardians.”

Nina raised her black brows. “Of who?”

“Not who, what.” Alex looked at me. “The Vessel has seven guardians.”

“And there are six incidents with Ophelia’s trademark,” I said.

“She’s picking off the guardians?”

I eyed the fat stack. “Apparently, she’s pretty good at it. So, where’s the last guardian?”
“Lucky number seven?” Alex shrugged. “Don’t know. But I plan on finding him before Ophelia does.”

“And finding the Vessel.”

Nina came and sat at the table with us, leaning closer. “So back to this Ophelia chick. How do you know all this stuff about her?”

I saw the muscle twitch in Alex’s jaw. “Ophelia and I had a history.”

“Define history,” Nina said, one black eyebrow arched. “Nina!” I hissed, secretly thankful for my best friend’s reliable nosiness.

“I’m asking because ‘history’ could mean a lot of things to people like us.” Nina gestured to herself and to Alex. “Like, we used to hit the movies together, or we assisted in overthrowing the Soviet power structure together.”

Alex looked at Nina, alarmed.

“She’s always had a thing for Russians,” I explained. “So, just for clarity’s sake, which was it? Dating or . . . history?”

Alex suddenly became very interested in spearing his next bite of dinner. “The first one,” he finally murmured.

I swallowed, suddenly very aware of my stomach, of the mu shu pork that sat like a steel fist at the bottom of my gut. I forced a wan smile anyway. “How nice” was all I could muster.

Nina sat back in her chair. “So, this seems pretty cut and dry to me. Ophelia follows the Vessel, we follow Ophelia, nick the Vessel from her, and, bada-bing, bada-bang”—Nina slapped her hands together—“we hightail it to Rome to do some shoe shopping.”

“It’s not that easy. We need to find the Vessel before Ophelia does. That’s the bottom line. Once it’s in her hands, this world is as good as over.”
“Dramatic.”
I glared at Nina and let Alex continue.
“I figure I can hold off Ophelia while you go after the Vessel.”
Nina crossed her arms, shaking her head decidedly.
“We don’t do minion work.”
Alex’s eyes were set hard as he glanced at Nina and me. “You need to stay away from Ophelia. She’s—she’s not like anything you’ve ever seen at the UDA.” I opened my mouth to protest, but Alex held up a silencing hand.
“She’s evil incarnate.”
“But you don’t need to stay away from her?” I asked.
“She’s not going to expect me coming after her when the Vessel is near. I think she’ll assume I’m after the Vessel, too. Again.”
Nina arched an eyebrow. “Again?”
“Alex, um, was responsible . . .”
Alex shrugged. “I lost the Vessel the first time. I went after it, found it, and then lost it.”
“How do you lose an ancient artifact stuffed with human souls? Did you leave it at the donut shop? Maybe trade it for a couple of maple glazed?”
I watched Alex’s jaw tighten. The taking—and losing—of the Vessel of Souls was a sore subject for him. I cleared my throat and tried to give Nina the look of death—loosely translated as “shut up already”—but she persisted.
“I mean, if I’m going to risk my afterlife to help you . . .”
“You don’t have to risk anything. I asked for Sophie’s help.”
“Okay, if my best friend is going to risk her first life to help you . . .”
“When Alex was in favor—” I started.
“I got duped, okay?” Alex said. “I heard about the
Vessel, I lusted for it, I stole it, and then someone stole it from me.”

Nina sat back, impressed. “Way to get your wings cut off, lust monster.”

The look of sadness in Alex’s eyes stung. I wanted to slip my arms around him, to brush the clutch of curls that lolled over his forehead, but the air suddenly seemed heavy and charged. Somehow, a heartfelt “there, there” didn’t seem to suffice for someone who had stolen the Vessel that could change the fate of the world, had been thrown out of Heaven for it, and was now relegated to a life of day-old donuts and subpar mu shu in the earthly realm.

“What about the guy who stole it from you? Are you sure it’s not on his mantle somewhere? Maybe holding the remains of his Aunt Fanny or something?” Nina asked.

I watched Alex’s Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed thickly. “I’m sure. He was destroyed. The Vessel wasn’t recovered.”

“Destroyed?” I asked, my voice coming out in a harsh whisper.

“I’m just lucky I got what I did. And a second chance. I can actually go back if I return the Vessel. It would prove that I no longer lust for power.” Alex’s eyes held mine. He blinked, those soft eyelashes batting, and I would have scoured the world for him, right there in that moment.

“Yeah, see right there—I’d be out of the angelic realm in a heartbeat.” Nina licked her fingers. “So, you’ve got me. We’ll do it. Heck, I’ll even go a few rounds with your ex. I can take her.” Nina flexed a nonexistent bicep.

“No,” Alex said firmly.
“What’s she going to do? Kill me again?” Nina grinned at her own cleverness.

I rolled my eyes, but Alex’s look stayed hard. “I mean it.”

The same chill seemed to creep up my spine and I hugged my arms across my chest. “Is anyone else freezing?”

Nina and Alex stared at me and I yanked the afghan off the couch. “Oh. Right.”

Nina yawned, exposing sharp incisors. “Evil, schmevil. How bad can a fallen angel be? And what’d she do to you? Break your heart? Cheat on you with Cupid?”

“Just stay away from her, okay?”

I pushed away my dinner, suddenly feeling very full. I wanted to believe Alex. I wanted to believe that he had our best interests at heart. Ophelia could be bad news. Fallen angels always are. So was Ophelia really that bad—or did Alex really have something to hide?

I looked at him sideways, my appraisal hidden by a few strands of hair that fell over my forehead. I didn’t want to love him, didn’t want to feel that rush of adrenaline that washed over me whenever he walked through my door, whenever he walked back into my life. I wanted to believe all the best about him. In the Underworld I could see through magical veils. Horns, fangs, tails, bad intentions—everything that could be hidden with a charm or a spell was hung out in clear sight to me, but when it came to Alex Grace—and love—everything was as clear as mud.

“Do you think she’d really try and come after us?” I asked.

“Maybe. She might consider you an enemy, especially if you were standing in the way of her getting what she wanted. But believe me, you’d know if Ophelia was after you. She’s never been one to keep a secret.”

Nina snorted. “Does she travel with a marching band
or something? Like, the fallen angel’s equivalent of the angelic trumpets?” She grinned, her fangs catching the light.

I narrowed my eyes at her. “You really have a way of comforting people.”

“Hello? Vampire, remember? Empathy has never really been our strong point.”

The thought of Alex’s psycho-killer ex-girlfriend rattled me a little, but with the entire Underworld behind me, I wasn’t that concerned.

“I don’t think she’d be able to find us.” I jutted my chin toward Nina. “Nina doesn’t have a paper trail above ground and mine’s pretty limited. We’re pretty far off the grid.”

Nina held up a finger. “Except for my Facebook page.” She whipped out her iPhone and started mumbling to herself while she typed. “Am embarking on a Heaven and Earth scavenger hunt.”

“Way to keep under the radar,” I said.

Alex bit his lip, considering whether or not to share his information. Finally he sighed and said, “Ophelia—and fallen angels in general—can read minds. They don’t really need to go looking for anyone—at least not the conventional way.”

Heat surged from my toes to the frazzled red hair follicles on my head. I thought of all the nights I had lain awake, thinking of Alex’s firm chest, the way he tasted, those soft, full lips pressed up against mine. “All the time?” I asked meekly.

Alex grinned, breaking the somberness in the room. “If we so choose.”

I promptly tried to erase all further thoughts of Alex in anything other than wholesome activities—including the velvety sweet tone of his voice as he murmured in my ear. It wasn’t working, so I urged my inner voice into a
loud rendition of the *Gilligan's Island* theme song. And then I imagined Alex’s smooth chest glistened up with coconut butter as he reclined on the beach.

“Damn,” I muttered.

Less than thirty minutes later, two sets of chopsticks poked out of a host of empty takeout boxes and a few fat grains of fried rice and packets of soy sauce littered the table. I eyed the backpack Alex had left untouched on the dining-room table and pointed to it.

“So, what’s in there?”

I really hoped it wasn’t a scrapbook of Alex’s past relationship with Ophelia. I knew it was childish, but I earnestly prayed that in the time since they had been apart, Ophelia had sprouted a tail, horns, a unibrow, or a beer belly—anything that might render her patently undatable—as though Alex’s description of her imminent evil wasn’t enough.

Alex unzipped the pack and slid out a stack of leather-bound books. Nina wrinkled her nose, and I coughed, covering my nose over the dusty smell of old paper.

“What are those?”

“Various accounts of the history of the Vessel.”

I picked up one of the books, squinting at the worn gold writing on the spine. “There are books about it? I thought it was supposed to be hush-hush.”

“Well, you can’t exactly get them on Amazon.”

“The Vessel of Souls and the Origin of Evil,” Nina read. “Ooh, I’ll take this one.”

I poked through the stack. “Looks like people have been searching for this thing for years.”

“Eons,” Alex said without looking up. “Searching for it, documenting the things they know about it, even the things they just think they know.”

I slid a thin volume out from Alex’s backpack and
opened it, leafing through the handwritten pages. “This
one looks more like a journal,” I said.
Alex looked over my shoulder. “That’s the journal of
the last guy who was seeking the Vessel.”
“What happened to him?”
Alex shrugged. “Don’t know. I didn’t get a lot of back-
story with the books.”
Nina kicked her feet up on the table and crossed her
ankles. “Hmm. I’m guessing that means you didn’t pick
these up at our local Barnes and Noble?”
I watched Alex’s Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed.
“No. I sort of took them. From Ophelia.”
I felt myself gape. “You ‘sort of’ took them?”
“Okay, I completely took them. And pretty soon she’ll
come looking for them.” Alex poked the journal I held in
my hand. “Especially that one.”
I flipped the journal to the first page and froze, my
eyes set on the name inscribed. “Lucas Szabo,” I mur-
murred.
“Yeah, that’s the guy. He’s some mortal guy who obvi-
ously has a serious desire for some power. There’s no
other reason to seek out the Vessel. Apparently, he got
pretty close. It should help us. The guy was really de-
tailed. He listed who guarded the Vessel, included draw-
ings, pictures—where he last tracked it. Everything.”
My heart started to beat in the rapid thud-thud-thud
of a panic attack. My palms started to sweat and the in-
scription on the yellowed page swirled as tears started
to pool.
“Are you okay, Sophie?”
“Sophie?” I felt Alex’s hand on my shoulder, but his
voice sounded far away.
“Lucas Szabo,” I murmured again.
“Yeah, he was the hunter who was looking for the
Vessel.”
I shook my head and with leaden hands, pulled the book toward me. I tried to form saliva to lick my parched lips, but I couldn’t. All I could do was choke out the name “Lucas Szabo.”

“Sophie, what’s wrong? You’re scaring me.” Nina was standing up, rushing toward me, her coal-black eyes the size of saucers. I heard her voice, but it was a million miles away—distant—like the feeling of Alex’s hand on my shoulder.

“Lucas Szabo is my father,” I answered.