

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LAURELL K.
HAMILTON

THE
LAUGHING
CORPSE

AN ANITA BLAKE,
VAMPIRE HUNTER NOVEL

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD BY THE AUTHOR

The Laughing Corpse

By Laurell K. Hamilton

Book 2 of the Anita Blake Vampire Hunter Series

Editor's Note: Typos in the original book have been retained.

1

Harold Gaynor's house sat in the middle of intense green lawn and the graceful sweep of trees. The house gleamed in the hot August sunshine. Bert Vaughn, my boss, parked the car on the crushed gravel of the driveway. The gravel was so white, it looked like handpicked rock salt. Somewhere out of sight the soft whir of sprinklers pattered. The grass was absolutely perfect in the middle of one of the worst droughts Missouri has had in over twenty years. Oh, well. I wasn't here to talk with Mr. Gaynor about water management. I was here to talk about raising the dead.

Not resurrection. I'm not that good. I mean zombies. The shambling dead. Rotting corpses. Night of the living dead. That kind of zombie. Though certainly less dramatic than Hollywood would ever put up on the screen. I am an animator. It's a job, that's all, like selling.

Animating had only been a licensed business for about five years. Before that it had just been an embarrassing curse, a religious experience, or a tourist attraction. It still is in parts of New Orleans, but here in St. Louis it's a business. A profitable one, thanks in large part to my boss. He's a rascal, a scalawag, a rogue, but damn if he doesn't know how to make money. It's a good trait for a business manager.

Bert was six-three, a broad-shouldered, ex-college football player with the beginnings of a beer gut. The dark blue suit he wore was tailored so that the gut didn't show. For eight hundred dollars the suit should have hidden a herd of elephants. His white-blond hair was trimmed in a crew cut, back in style after all these years. A boater's tan made his pale hair and eyes dramatic with contrast.

Bert adjusted his blue and red striped tie, mopping a bead of sweat off his tanned forehead. "I heard on the news there's a movement there to use zombies in pesticide-contaminated fields. It would save lives."

"Zombies rot, Bert, there's no way to prevent that, and they don't stay smart enough long enough to be used as field labor."

"It was just a thought. The dead have no rights under law, Anita."

"Not yet."

It was wrong to raise the dead so they could slave for us. It was just wrong, but no one listens to me. The government finally had to get into the act. There was a nationwide committee being formed of animators and other experts. We were supposed to look into the working conditions of local zombies.

Working conditions. They didn't understand. You can't give a corpse nice working conditions. They don't appreciate it anyway. Zombies may walk, even talk, but they are very, very dead.

Bert smiled indulgently at me. I fought an urge to pop him one right in his smug face, "I know you and Charles are working on that committee," Bert said. "Going around to all the businesses and checking up on the zombies. It makes great press for Animators, Inc."

"I don't do it for good press," I said.

"I know. You believe in your little cause."

"You're a condescending bastard," I said, smiling sweetly up at him.

He grinned at me. "I know."

I just shook my head; with Bert you can't really win an insult match. He doesn't give a damn what I think of him, as long as I work for him.

My navy blue suit jacket was supposed to be summer weight but it was a lie. Sweat trickled down my spine as soon as I stepped out of the car.

Bert turned to me, small eyes narrowing. His eyes lend themselves to suspicious squints. "You're still wearing your gun," he said.

"The jacket hides it, Bert. Mr. Gaynor will never know." Sweat started collecting under the straps of my shoulder holster. I could feel the silk blouse beginning to melt. I try not to wear silk and a shoulder rig at the same time. The silk starts to look indented, wrinkling where the straps cross. The gun was a Browning Hi-Power 9mm, and I liked having it near at hand.

"Come on, Anita. I don't think you'll need a gun in the middle of the afternoon, while visiting a client." Bert's voice held that patronizing tone that people use on children. Now, little girl, you know this is for your own good.

Bert didn't care about my well-being. He just didn't want to spook Gaynor. The man had already given us a check for five thousand dollars. And that was just to drive out and talk to him. The implication was that there was more money if we agreed to take

his case. A lot of money. Bert was all excited about that part. I was skeptical. After all, Bert didn't have to raise the corpse. I did.

The trouble was, Bert was probably right. I wouldn't need the gun in broad daylight. Probably. "All right, open the trunk."

Bert opened the trunk of his nearly brand-new Volvo. I was already taking off the jacket. He stood in front of me, hiding me from the house. God forbid that they should see me hiding a gun in the trunk. What would they do, lock the doors and scream for help?

I folded the holster straps around the gun and laid it in the clean trunk. It smelled like new car, plastic and faintly unreal. Bert shut the trunk, and I stared at it as if I could still see the gun.

"Are you coming?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. I didn't like leaving my gun behind, for any reason. Was that a bad sign? Bert motioned for me to come on.

I did, walking carefully over the gravel in my high-heeled black pumps. Women may get to wear lots of pretty colors, but men get the comfortable shoes.

Bert was staring at the door, smile already set on his face. It was his best professional smile, dripping with sincerity. His pale grey eyes sparkled with good cheer. It was a mask. He could put it on and off like a light switch. He'd wear the same smile if you confessed to killing your own mother. As long as you wanted to pay to have her raised from the dead.

The door opened, and I knew Bert had been wrong about me not needing a gun. The man was maybe five-eight, but the orange polo shirt he wore strained over his chest. The black sport jacket seemed too small, as if when he moved the seams would split, like an insect's skin that had been outgrown. Black acid-washed jeans showed off a small waist, so he looked like someone had pinched him in the middle while the clay was still wet. His hair was very blond. He looked at us silently. His eyes were empty, dead as a doll's. I caught a glimpse of shoulder holster under the sport jacket and resisted an urge to kick Bert in the shins.

Either my boss didn't notice the gun or he ignored it. "Hello, I'm Bert Vaughn and this is my associate, Anita Blake. I believe Mr. Gaynor is expecting us." Bert smiled at him charmingly.

The bodyguard—what else could he be—moved away from the door. Bert took that for an invitation and walked inside. I followed, not at all sure I wanted to. Harold Gaynor was a very rich man. Maybe he needed a bodyguard. Maybe people had threatened him. Or maybe he was one of those men who have enough money to keep hired muscle around whether they need it or not.

Or maybe something else was going on. Something that needed guns and muscle, and men with dead, emotionless eyes. Not a cheery thought.

The air-conditioning was on too high and the sweat gelled instantly. We followed the bodyguard down a long central hall that was paneled in dark, expensive-looking wood. The hall runner looked oriental and was probably handmade.

Heavy wooden doors were set in the right-hand wall. The bodyguard opened the doors and again stood to one side while we walked through. The room was a library, but I was betting no one ever read any of the books. The place was ceiling to floor in dark wood bookcases. There was even a second level of books and shelves reached by an elegant sweep of narrow staircase. All the books were hardcover, all the same size, colors muted and collected together like a collage. The furniture was, of course, red leather with brass buttons worked into it.

A man sat near the far wall. He smiled when we came in. He was a large man with a pleasant round face, double-chinned. He was sitting in an electric wheelchair, with a small plaid blanket over his lap, hiding his legs.

"Mr. Vaughn and Ms. Blake, how nice of you to drive out." His voice went with his face, pleasant, damn near amiable.

A slender black man sat in one of the leather chairs. He was over six feet tall, exactly how much over was hard to tell. He was slumped down, long legs stretched out in front of him with the ankles crossed. His legs were taller than I was. His brown eyes watched me as if he were trying to memorize me and would be graded later.

The blond bodyguard went to lean against the bookcases. He couldn't quite cross his arms, jacket too tight, muscles too big. You really shouldn't lean against a wall and try to look tough unless you can cross your arms. Ruins the effect.

Mr. Gaynor said, "You've met Tommy." He motioned towards the sitting bodyguard. "That's Bruno."

"Is that your real name or just a nickname?" I asked, looking straight into Bruno's eyes.

He shifted just a little in his chair. "Real name."

I smiled.

"Why?" he asked.

"I've just never met a bodyguard who was really named Bruno."

"Is that supposed to be funny?" he asked.

I shook my head. Bruno. He never had a chance. It was like naming a girl Venus. All

Brunos had to be bodyguards. It was a rule. Maybe a cop? Naw, it was a bad guy's name. I smiled.

Bruno sat up in his chair, one smooth, muscular motion. He wasn't wearing a gun that I could see, but there was a presence to him. Dangerous, it said, watch out.

Guess I shouldn't have smiled.

Bert interrupted, "Anita, please. I do apologize, Mr. Gaynor . . . Mr. Bruno. Ms. Blake has a rather peculiar sense of humor."

"Don't apologize for me, Bert. I don't like it." I don't know what he was so sore about anyway. I hadn't said the really insulting stuff out loud.

"Now, now," Mr. Gaynor said. "No hard feelings. Right, Bruno?"

Bruno shook his head and frowned at me, not angry, sort of perplexed.

Bert flashed me an angry look, then turned smiling to the man in the wheelchair. "Now, Mr. Gaynor, I know you must be a busy man. So, exactly how old is the zombie you want raised?"

"A man who gets right down to business. I like that." Gaynor hesitated, staring at the door. A woman entered.

She was tall, leggy, blond, with cornflower-blue eyes. The dress, if it was a dress, was rose-colored and silky. It clung to her body the way it was supposed to, hiding what decency demanded, but leaving very little to the imagination. Long pale legs were stuffed into pink spike heels, no hose. She stalked across the carpet, and every man in the room watched her. And she knew it.

She threw back her head and laughed, but no sound came out. Her face brightened, her lips moved, eyes sparkled, but in absolute silence, like someone had turned the sound off. She leaned one hip against Harold Gaynor, one hand on his shoulder. He encircled her waist, and the movement raised the already short dress another inch.

Could she sit down in the dress without flashing the room? Naw.

"This is Cicely," he said. She smiled brilliantly at Bert, that little soundless laugh making her eyes sparkle. She looked at me and her eyes faltered, the smile slipped. For a second uncertainty filled her eyes. Gaynor patted her hip. The smile flamed back into place. She nodded graciously to both of us.

"I want you to raise a two-hundred-and-eighty-three-year old corpse."

I just stared at him and wondered if he understood what he was asking.

"Well," Bert said, "that is nearly three hundred years old. Very old to raise as a zombie.

Most animators couldn't do it at all."

"I am aware of that," Gaynor said. "That is why I asked for Ms. Blake. She can do it."

Bert glanced at me. I had never raised anything that old. "Anita?"

"I could do it," I said.

He smiled back at Gaynor, pleased.

"But I won't do it."

Bert turned slowly back to me, smile gone.

Gaynor was still smiling. The bodyguards were immobile. Cicely looked pleasantly at me, eyes blank of any meaning.

"A million dollars, Ms. Blake," Gaynor said in his soft pleasant voice.

I saw Bert swallow. His hands convulsed on the chair arms. Bert's idea of sex was money. He probably had the biggest hard-on of his life.

"Do you understand what you're asking, Mr. Gaynor?" I asked.

He nodded. "I will supply the white goat." His voice was still pleasant as he said it, still smiling. Only his eyes had gone dark; eager, anticipatory.

I stood up. "Come on, Bert, it's time to leave."

Bert grabbed my arm. "Anita, sit down, please."

I stared at his hand until he let go of me. His charming mask slipped, showing me the anger underneath, then he was all pleasant business again. "Anita. It is a generous payment."

"The white goat is a euphemism, Bert. It means a human sacrifice."

My boss glanced at Gaynor, then back to me. He knew me well enough to believe me, but he didn't want to. "I don't understand," he said.

"The older the zombie the bigger the death needed to raise it. After a few centuries the only death 'big enough' is a human sacrifice," I said.

Gaynor wasn't smiling anymore. He was watching me out of dark eyes. Cicely was still looking pleasant, almost smiling. Was there anyone home behind those so blue eyes? "Do you really want to talk about murder in front of Cicely?" I asked.

Gaynor beamed at me, always a bad sign. "She can't understand a word we say."

Cicely's deaf."

I stared at him, and he nodded. She looked at me with pleasant eyes. We were talking of human sacrifice and she didn't even know it. If she could read lips, she was hiding it very well. I guess even the handicapped, um, physically challenged, can fall into bad company, but it seemed wrong.

"I hate a woman who talks constantly," Gaynor said.

I shook my head. "All the money in the world wouldn't be enough to get me to work for you."

"Couldn't you just kill lots of animals, instead of just one?" Bert asked. Bert is a very good business manager. He knows shit about raising the dead.

I stared down at him. "No."

Bert sat very still in his chair. The prospect of losing a million dollars must have been real physical pain for him, but he hid it. Mr. Corporate Negotiator. "There has to be a way to work this out," he said. His voice was calm. A professional smile curled his lips. He was still trying to do business. My boss did not understand what was happening.

"Do you know of another animator that could raise a zombie this old?" Gaynor asked.

Bert glanced up at me, then down at the floor, then at Gaynor. The professional smile had faded. He understood now that it was murder we were talking about. Would that make a difference?

I had always wondered where Bert drew the line. I was about to find out. The fact that I didn't know whether he would refuse the contract told you a lot about my boss. "No," Bert said softly, "no, I guess I can't help you either, Mr. Gaynor."

"If it's the money, Ms. Blake, I can raise the offer."

A tremor ran through Bert's shoulders. Poor Bert, but he hid it well. Brownie point for him.

"I'm not an assassin, Gaynor," I said.

"That ain't what I heard," Tommy of the blond hair said.

I glanced at him. His eyes were still as empty as a doll's. "I don't kill people for money."

"You kill vampires for money," he said.

"Legal execution, and I don't do it for the money," I said.

Tommy shook his head and moved away from the wall. "I hear you like staking vampires. And you aren't too careful about who you have to kill to get to 'em."

"My informants tell me you have killed humans before, Ms. Blake," Gaynor said.

"Only in self-defense, Gaynor. I don't do murder."

Bert was standing now. "I think it is time to leave."

Bruno stood in one fluid movement, big dark hands loose and half-cupped at his sides. I was betting on some kind of martial arts.

Tommy was standing away from the wall. His sport jacket was pushed back to expose his gun, like an old-time gunfighter. It was a .357 Magnum. It would make a very big hole.

I just stood there, staring at them. What else could I do? I might be able to do something with Bruno, but Tommy had a gun. I didn't. It sort of ended the argument.

They were treating me like I was a very dangerous person. At five-three I am not imposing. Raise the dead, kill a few vampires, and people start considering you one of the monsters. Sometimes it hurt. But now . . . it had possibilities. "Do you really think I came in here unarmed?" I asked. My voice sounded very matter-of-fact.

Bruno looked at Tommy. He sort of shrugged. "I didn't pat her down."

Bruno snorted.

"She ain't wearing a gun, though," Tommy said.

"Want to bet your life on it?" I said. I smiled when I said it, and slid my hand, very slowly, towards my back. Make them think I had a hip holster at the small of my back. Tommy shifted, flexing his hand near his gun. If he went for it, we were going to die. I was going to come back and haunt Bert.

Gaynor said, "No. No need for anyone to die here today, Ms. Blake."

"No," I said, "no need at all." I swallowed my pulse back into my throat and eased my hand away from my imaginary gun. Tommy eased away from his real one. Goody for us.

Gaynor smiled again, like a pleasant beardless Santa. "You of course understand that telling the police would be useless."

I nodded. "We have no proof. You didn't even tell us who you wanted raised from the dead, or why."

"It would be your word against mine," he said.

"And I'm sure you have friends in high places." I smiled when I said it.

His smile widened, dimpling his fat little cheeks. "Of course."

I turned my back on Tommy and his gun. Bert followed. We walked outside into the blistering summer heat. Bert looked a little shaken. I felt almost friendly towards him. It was nice to know that Bert had limits, something he wouldn't do, even for a million dollars.

"Would they really have shot us?" he asked. His voice sounded matter-of-fact, firmer than the slightly glassy look in his eyes. Tough Bert. He unlocked the trunk without being asked.

"With Harold Gaynor's name in our appointment book and in the computer?" I got my gun out and slipped on the holster rig. "Not knowing who we'd mentioned this trip to?" I shook my head. "Too risky."

"Then why did you pretend to have a gun?" He looked me straight in the eyes as he asked, and for the first time I saw uncertainty in his face. Ol' money bags needed a comforting word, but I was fresh out.

"Because, Bert, I could have been wrong."

2

The bridal shop was just off 70 West in St. Peters. It was called The Maiden Voyage. Cute. There was a pizza place on one side of it and a beauty salon on the other. It was called Full Dark Beauty Salon. The windows were blacked out, outlined in bloodred neon. You could get your hair and nails done by a vampire, if you wanted to.

Vampirism had only been legal for two years in the United States of America. We were still the only country in the world where it was legal. Don't ask me; I didn't vote for it. There was even a movement to give the vamps the vote. Taxation without representation and all that.

Two years ago if a vampire bothered someone I just went out and staked the son of a bitch. Now I had to get a court order of execution. Without it, I was up on murder charges, if I was caught. I longed for the good of days.

There was a blond mannequin in the wedding shop window wearing enough white lace to drown in. I am not a big fan of lace, or seed pearls, or sequins. Especially not sequins. I had gone out with Catherine twice to help her look for a wedding gown. It didn't take long to realize I was no help. I didn't like any of them.

Catherine was a very good friend or I wouldn't have been here at all. She told me if I

ever got married I'd change my mind. Surely being in love doesn't cause you to lose your sense of good taste. If I ever buy a gown with sequins on it, someone just shoot me.

I also wouldn't have chosen the bridal dresses Catherine picked out, but it was my own fault that I hadn't been around when the vote was taken. I worked too much and I hated to shop. So, I ended up plunking down \$120 plus tax on a pink taffeta evening gown. It looked like it had run away from a junior high prom.

I walked into the air-conditioned hush of the bridal shop, high heels sinking into a carpet so pale grey it was nearly white. Mrs. Cassidy, the manager, saw me come in. Her smile faltered for just a moment before she got it under control. She smiled at me, brave Mrs. Cassidy.

I smiled back, not looking forward to the next hour.

Mrs. Cassidy was somewhere between forty and fifty, trim figure, red hair so dark it was almost brown. The hair was tied in a French knot like Grace Kelly used to wear. She pushed her gold wire-framed glasses more securely on her nose and said, "Ms. Blake, here for the final fitting, I see."

"I hope it's the final fitting," I said.

"Well, we have been working on the . . . problem. I think we've come up with something." There was a small room in back of the desk. It was filled with racks of plastic-covered dresses. Mrs. Cassidy pulled mine out from between two identical pink dresses.

She led the way to the dressing rooms with the dress draped over her arms. Her spine was very straight. She was gearing for another battle. I didn't have to gear up, I was always ready for battle. But arguing with Mrs. Cassidy about alterations to a formal beat the heck out of arguing with Tommy and Bruno. It could have gone very badly, but it hadn't. Gaynor had called them off, for today, he had said.

What did that mean exactly? It was probably self-explanatory. I had left Bert at the office still shaken from his close encounter. He didn't deal with the messy end of the business. The violent end. No, I did that, or Manny, or Jamison, or Charles. We, the animators of Animators, Inc, we did the dirty work. Bert stayed in his nice safe office and sent clients and trouble our way. Until today.

Mrs. Cassidy hung the dress on a hook inside one of the dressing stalls and went away. Before I could go inside, another stall opened, and Kasey, Catherine's flower girl, stepped out. She was eight, and she was glowering. Her mother followed behind her, still in her business suit. Elizabeth (call me Elsie) Markowitz was tall, slender, black-haired, olive skinned, and a lawyer. She worked with Catherine and was also in the wedding.

Kasey looked like a smaller, softer version of her mother.

The child spotted me first and said, "Hi, Anita. Isn't this dress dumb-looking?"

"Now, Kasey," Elsie said, "it's a beautiful dress. All those nice pink ruffles."

The dress looked like a petunia on steroids to me. I stripped off my jacket and started moving into my own dressing room before I had to give my opinion out loud.

"Is that a real gun?" Kasey asked.

I had forgotten I was still wearing it. "Yes," I said.

"Are you a policewoman?"

"No."

"Kasey Markowitz, you ask too many questions." Her mother herded her past me with a harried smile. "Sorry about that, Anita."

"I don't mind," I said. Sometime later I was standing on a little raised platform in front of a nearly perfect circle of mirrors. With the matching pink high heels the dress was the right length at least. It also had little puff sleeves and was an off-the-shoulder look. The dress showed almost every scar I had.

The newest scar was still pink and healing on my right forearm. But it was just a knife wound. They're neat, clean things compared to my other scars. My collarbone and left arm have both been broken. A vampire bit through them, tore at me like a dog with a piece of meat. There's also the cross-shaped burn mark on my left forearm. Some inventive human vampire slaves thought it was amusing. I didn't.

I looked like Frankenstein's bride goes to the prom. Okay, maybe it wasn't that bad, but Mrs. Cassidy thought it was. She thought the scars would distract people from the dress, the wedding party, the bride. But Catherine, the bride herself, didn't agree. She thought I deserved to be in the wedding, because we were such good friends. I was paying good money to be publicly humiliated. We must be good friends.

Mrs. Cassidy handed me a pair of long pink satin gloves. I pulled them on, wiggling my fingers deep into the tiny holes. I've never liked gloves. They make me feel like I'm touching the world through a curtain. But the bright pink things did hide my arms. Scars all gone. What a good girl. Right.

The woman fluffed out the satiny skirt, glancing into the mirror. "It will do, I think." She stood, tapping one long, painted fingernail against her lipsticked mouth. "I believe I have come up with something to hide that, uh . . . well . . ." She made vague hand motions towards me.

"My collarbone scar?" I said.

"Yes." She sounded relieved.

It occurred to me for the first time that Mrs. Cassidy had never once said the word "scar." As if it were dirty, or rude. I smiled at myself in the ring of mirrors. Laughter caught at the back of my throat.

Mrs. Cassidy held up something made of pink ribbon and fake orange blossoms. The laughter died. "What is that?" I asked.

"This," she said, stepping towards me, "is the solution to our problem."

"All right, but what is it?"

"Well, it is a collar, a decoration."

"It goes around my neck?"

"Yes."

I shook my head. "I don't think so."

"Ms. Blake, I have tried everything to hide that, that . . . mark. Hats, hairdos, simple ribbons, corsages . . ." She literally threw up her hands. "I am at my wit's end."

This I could believe. I took a deep breath. "I sympathize with you, Mrs. Cassidy, really I do. I've been a royal pain in the ass."

"I would never say such a thing."

"I know, so I said it for you. But that is the ugliest piece of fru-fru I've ever laid eyes on."

"If you, Ms. Blake, have any better suggestions, then I am all ears." She half crossed her arms over her chest. The offending piece of "decoration" trailed nearly to her waist.

"It's huge," I protested.

"It will hide your"—she set her mouth tight—"scar."

I felt like applauding. She'd said the dirty word. Did I have any better suggestions? No. I did not. I sighed. "Put it on me. The least I can do is look at it."

She smiled. "Please lift your hair."

I did as I was told. She fastened it around my neck. The lace itched, the ribbons tickled, and I didn't even want to look in the mirror. I raised my eyes, slowly, and just stared.

"Thank goodness you have long hair. I'll style it myself the day of the wedding so it helps the camouflage."

The thing around my neck looked like a cross between a dog collar and the world's biggest wrist corsage. My neck had sprouted pink ribbons like mushrooms after a rain. It was hideous, and no amount of hairstyling was going to change that. But it hid the scar completely, perfectly. Ta-da.

I just shook my head. What could I say? Mrs. Cassidy took my silence for assent. She should have known better. The phone rang and saved us both. "I'll be just a minute, Ms. Blake." She stalked off, high-heels silent on the thick carpet.

I just stared at myself in the mirrors. My hair and eyes match, black hair, eyes so dark brown they look black. They are my mother's Latin darkness. But my skin is pale, my father's Germanic blood. Put some makeup on me and I look not unlike a china doll. Put me in a puffy pink dress and I look delicate, dainty, petite. Dammit.

The rest of the women in the wedding party were all five-five or above. Maybe some of them would actually look good in the dress. I doubted it.

Insult to injury, we all had to wear hoop skirts underneath. I looked like a reject from *Gone With the Wind*.

"There, don't you look lovely." Mrs. Cassidy had returned. She was beaming at me.

"I look like I've been dipped in Pepto-Bismol," I said.

Her smile faded around the edges. She swallowed. "You don't like this last idea." Her voice was very stiff.

Elsie Markowitz came out of the dressing rooms. Kasey was trailing behind, scowling. I knew how she felt. "Oh, Anita," Elsie said, "you look adorable."

Great. Adorable, just what I wanted to hear. "Thanks."

"I especially like the ribbons at your throat. We'll all be wearing them, you know."

"Sorry about that," I said.

She frowned at me. "I think they just set off the dress."

It was my turn to frown. "You're serious, aren't you?"

Elsie looked puzzled. "Well, of course I am. Don't you like the dresses?"

I decided not to answer on the grounds that it might piss someone off. I guess, what can you expect from a woman who has a perfectly good name like Elizabeth, but prefers to be named after a cow?

"Is this the absolutely last thing we can use for camouflage, Mrs. Cassidy?" I asked.

She nodded, once, very firmly.

I sighed, and she smiled. Victory was hers, and she knew it. I knew I was beaten the moment I saw the dress, but if I'm going to lose, I'm going to make someone pay for it. "All right. It's done. This is it. I'll wear it."

Mrs. Cassidy beamed at me. Elsie smiled. Kasey smirked. I hiked the hoop skirt up to my knees and stepped off the platform. The hoop swung like a bell with, me as the clapper.

The phone rang. Mrs. Cassidy went to answer it, a lift in her step, a song in her heart, and me out of her shop. Joy in the afternoon.

I was struggling to get the wide skirt through the narrow little door that led to the changing rooms when she called, "Ms. Blake, it's for you. A Detective Sergeant Storr."

"See, Mommy, I told you she was a policewoman," Kasey said.

I didn't explain because Elsie had asked me not to, weeks ago. She thought Kasey was too young to know about animators and zombies and vampire slayings. Not that any child of eight could not know what a vampire was. They were pretty much the media event of the decade.

I tried to put the phone to my left ear, but the damned flowers got in the way. Pressing the receiver in the bend of my neck and shoulder, I reached back to undo the collar. "Hi, Dolph, what's up?"

"Murder scene." His voice was pleasant, like he should sing tenor.

"What kind of murder scene?"

"Messy."

I finally pulled the collar free and dropped the phone.

"Anita, you there?"

"Yeah, having some wardrobe trouble."

"What?"

"It's not important. Why do you want me to come down to the scene?"

"Whatever did this wasn't human."

"Vampire?"

"You're the undead expert. That's why I want you to come take a look."

"Okay, give me the address, and I'll be right there." There was a notepad of pale pink paper with little hearts on it. The pen had a plastic cupid on the end of it. "St. Charles, I'm not more than fifteen minutes from you."

"Good." He hung up.

"Good-bye to you, too, Dolph." I said it to empty air just to feel superior. I went back into the little room to change.

I had been offered a million dollars today, just to kill someone and raise a zombie. Then off to the bridal shop for a final fitting. Now a murder scene. Messy, Dolph had said. It was turning out to be a very busy afternoon.

3

Messy, Dolph had called it. A master of understatement. Blood was everywhere, splattered over the white walls like someone had taken a can of paint and thrown it. There was an off-white couch with brown and gold patterned flowers on it. Most of the couch was hidden under a sheet. The sheet was crimson. A bright square of afternoon sunlight came through the clean, sparkling windows. The sunlight made the blood cherry-red, shiny.

Fresh blood is really brighter than you see it on television and the movies. In large quantities. Real blood is screaming fire-engine red, in large quantities, but darker red shows up on the screen better. So much for realism.

Only fresh blood is red, true red. This blood was old and should have faded, but some trick of the summer sunshine kept it shiny and new.

I swallowed very hard and took a deep breath.

"You look a little green, Blake," a voice said almost at my elbow.

I jumped, and Zerbrowski laughed. "Did I scare ya?"

"No," I lied.

Detective Zerbrowski was about five-seven, curly black hair going grey, dark-rimmed glasses framed brown eyes. His brown suit was rumpled; his yellow and maroon tie had a smudge on it, probably from lunch. He was grinning at me. He was always grinning at me.

"I gotcha, Blake, admit it. Is our fierce vampire slayer gonna upchuck on the victims?"

"Putting on a little weight there, aren't you, Zerbrowski?"

"Ooh, I'm hurt," he said. He clutched hands to his chest, swaying a little. "Don't tell me you don't want my body, the way I want yours."

"Lay off, Zerbrowski. Where's Dolph?"

"In the master bedroom." Zerbrowski gazed up at the vaulted ceiling with its skylight. "Wish Katie and I could afford something like this."

"Yeah," I said. "It's nice." I glanced at the sheet-covered couch. The sheet clung to whatever was underneath, like a napkin thrown over spilled juice. There was something wrong with the way it looked. Then it hit me, there weren't enough bumps to make a whole human body. Whatever was under there was missing some parts.

The room sort of swam. I looked away, swallowing convulsively. It had been months since I had actually gotten sick at a murder scene. At least the air-conditioning was on. That was good. Heat always makes the smell worse.

"Hey, Blake, do you really need to step outside?" Zerbrowski took my arm as if to lead me towards the door.

"Thanks, but I'm fine." I looked him straight in his baby browns and lied. He knew I was lying. I wasn't all right, but I'd make it.

He released my arm, stepped back, and gave me a mock salute. "I love a tough broad."

I smiled before I could stop it. "Go away, Zerbrowski."

"End of the hall, last door on the left. You'll find Dolph there." He walked away into the crowd of men. There are always more people than you need at a murder scene, not the gawkers outside but uniforms, plainclothes, technicians, the guy with the video camera. A murder scene was like a bee swarm, full of frenzied movement and damn crowded. I threaded my way through the crowd. My plastic-coated ID badge was clipped to the collar of my navy-blue jacket. It was so the police would know I was on their side and hadn't just snuck in. It also made carrying a gun into a crowd of policemen safer.

I squeezed past a crowd that was gathered like a traffic jam beside a door in the middle of the hall. Voices came, disjointed, "Jesus, look at the blood . . . Have they found the body yet? . . . You mean what's left of it? . . . No."

I pushed between two uniforms. One said, "Hey!" I found a cleared space just in front of the last door on the left-hand side. I don't know how Dolph had done it but he was alone in the room. Maybe they were just finished in here.

He knelt in the middle of the pale brown carpet. His thick hands, encased in surgical gloves, were on his thighs. His black hair was cut so short it left his ears sort of

stranded on either side of a large blunt face. He saw me and stood. He was six-eight, built big like a wrestler. The canopied bed behind him suddenly looked small.

Dolph was head of the police's newest task force, the spook squad. Official title was the Regional Preternatural Investigation Team, R-P-I-T, pronounced "rip it." It handled all supernatural crime. It was a place to dump the troublemakers. I never wondered what Zerbrowski had done to get on the spook squad. His sense of humor was too strange and absolutely merciless. But Dolph. He was the perfect policeman. I had always sort of figured he had offended someone high up, offended them by being too good at his job. Now that I could believe.

There was another sheet-covered bundle on the carpet beside him.

"Anita." He always talks like that, one word at a time.

"Dolph," I said.

He knelt between the canopy bed and the blood-soaked sheet. "You ready?"

"I know you're the silent type, Dolph, but could you tell me what I'm supposed to be looking for?"

"I want to know what you see, not what I tell you you're supposed to see."

For Dolph it was a speech. "Okay," I said, "let's do it."

He pulled back the sheet. It peeled away from the bloody thing underneath. I stood and I stared and all I could see was a lump of bloody meat. It could have been from anything: a cow, horse, deer. But human? Surely not.

My eyes saw it, but my brain refused what it was being shown. I squatted beside it, tucking my skirt under my thighs. The carpeting squeezed underfoot like rain had gotten to it, but it wasn't rain.

"Do you have a pair of gloves I can borrow? I left my crime scene gear at the office."

"Right jacket pocket." He lifted his hands in the air. There were blood marks on the gloves. "Help yourself. The wife hates me to get blood on the dry cleaning."

I smiled. Amazing. A sense of humor is mandatory at times. I had to reach across the remains. I pulled out two surgical gloves; one size fits all. The gloves always felt like they had powder in them. They didn't feel like gloves at all, more like condoms for your hands.

"Can I touch it without damaging evidence?"

"Yes."

I poked the side of it with two fingers. It was like poking a side of fresh beef. A nice, solid feel to it. My fingers traced the bumps of bone, ribs under the flesh. Ribs. Suddenly I knew what I was looking at. Part of the rib cage of a human being. There was the shoulder, white bone sticking out where the arm had been torn away. That was all. All there was. I stood too quickly and stumbled. The carpet squeeshed underfoot.

The room was suddenly very hot. I turned away from the body and found myself staring at the bureau. Its mirror was splattered so heavily with blood, it looked like someone had covered it in layers of red fingernail polish. Cherry Blossom Red, Carnival Crimson, Candy Apple.

I closed my eyes and counted very slowly to ten. When I opened them the room seemed cooler. I noticed for the first time that a ceiling fan was slowly turning. I was fine. Heap big vampire slayer. Ri-ight.

Dolph didn't comment as I knelt by the body again. He didn't even look at me. Good man. I tried to be objective and see whatever there was to see. But it was hard. I liked the remains better when I couldn't figure out what part of the body they were. Now all I could see was the bloody remains. All I could think of was this used to be a human body. "Used to be" was the operative phrase.

"No signs of a weapon that I can see, but the coroner will be able to tell you that." I reached out to touch it again, then stopped. "Can you help me raise it up so I can see inside the chest cavity? What's left of the chest cavity?"

Dolph dropped the sheet and helped me lift the remains. It was lighter than it looked. Raised on its side there was nothing underneath. All the vital organs that the ribs protect were gone. It looked for all the world like a side of beef ribs, except for the bones where the arm should have connected. Part of the collarbone was still attached.

"Okay," I said. My voice sounded breathy. I stood, holding my blood-spattered hands out to my sides. "Cover it, please."

He did, and stood. "Impressions?"

"Violence, extreme violence. More than human strength. The body's been ripped apart by hand."

"Why by hand?"

"No knife marks." I laughed, but it choked me. "Hell, I'd think someone had used a saw on the body like butchering a cow, but the bones..." I shook my head. "Nothing mechanical was used to do this."

"Anything else?"

"Yeah, where is the rest of the fucking body?"