

## *Chapter One*

Vashti

I hate long lines. There were better ways to spend my time. I had places to go and creatures to kill. But I had a job to do. Even it was standing in a long line for a popular nightclub just so I could commit a murder.

“How long is the wait?” I asked the bouncer at the beginning of the queue. He was bruiser. His wide, stocky build screamed “werewolf enforcer”. I didn’t know why he bothered trying to blend in with the population.

“Forty-five minutes.”

I pasted a smile on my face. “Thanks.”

He nodded and ushered me behind the stanchions and rope. Finally, I made it past the first checkpoint. Surveillance was the mundane part of the assassination process. I had to spend my precious time being a consummate professional and study them to gain the advantage. Targets like mine were often hard to kill and a second chance didn’t happen. I couldn’t miss. Half the time, I couldn’t get close. It depended on the species. If it was a vampire or were— like I specialize in— distance was my best friend.

Along with being upwind.

Weres had an acute sense of smell and could scent danger from half a mile. With vamps I could get closer, but not too close. What they lack in sensory prowess they possessed in perception. I suspected they had mental abilities as well, but I didn’t make it habit of conversing with them.

At least until now.

My normal modus operandi involved shoot first and collect payment later. But my instructions were to infiltrate and when the word given, terminate. It annoyed me, but I’d get over it. This was my last job. Once done my family would be avenged. They were slaughtered by a troop of vampires and my mark was their lord.

I would never forget the sight of them lying on the floor bloodless. Their sunken faces had been contorted in fear and pain. The last words to my parents the night I ran away was how I had hated them and wished they were dead. Something I will regret the

rest of my life. A few childish hours later, I got my wish. I was sixteen years old when my world had been ripped from me by cruel words and circumstance.

“I’ve never seen you here before and I come to Masquerade all the time.”

I frowned before I caught myself. I didn’t want to draw too much attention, but I needed to be likeable. I smiled. “I’m new to the area.”

The man— a human, Caucasian, in his late twenties, about my height, and no real physical prowess grinned at me.

He held out his hand. “The name’s Don.”

I really didn’t want to talk this guy, much less touch him. The chance that I would get some sort of empathic flash from his touch was high. My powers were troublesome in certain encounters. But if this was going to work, I had to **improve** my people skills. I took his hand. I tried not to flinch from his the brief fantasy of me naked. “Vashti.”

His glance slid down my body. The man could not be any more obvious he desired me. I wasn’t interested in some vampire groupy.

“You sound like trouble.”

Little did he know how close he was to the truth.

I shook my head. “My criminal record is spotless I can assure you.”

He blinked his eyes at me then laughed. “A woman with a sense of humor.”

I didn’t see how my last statement could be construed as facetious, but so be it. His presence was making an already uncomfortable situation worse. The temptation to leave gnawed at me. Except my mark, Tyrone Essex, was here. Essex was the owner of the nightclub. And the only way to Essex lied through his establishment.

From my reconnaissance I had learned, Masquerade was an upscale dance club frequented by humans and others. Security was top notch. No vulnerable points. The only way into the club was through the front door with the rest of the hopefuls. Every night the queue wrapped around the converted warehouse building. According to the social media and the nightlife section, “Masquerade was a Richmond nightlife must for any single.” One site went on to call it “a swanky place for an ideal good time”.

The club held the answers that I needed— the one place Essex went that I couldn’t observe him from afar.

“I think you’re sexy,” the vampire groupy said into my ear. “Why don’t we take off and I buy you dinner.”

I shivered as I clasped my hands together. Another blast of lecherous emotions—no touch needed this time—assaulted me along with his breath. It reeked of cigarettes and alcohol. I stepped away. “I’m not that kind of girl.”

His eyes lingered on my chest through the draped fabric of my dress. His tongue briefly darted between his lips. “You are definitely my kind of girl.”

I had enough. There were two options. My favorite—kicking his ass—was currently off the table. I needed to get inside the club. I couldn’t afford for the bouncers to cart me away or get the police involved. Most of them were in the pocket of the wolves and vampires anyway. I didn’t want their eye on me.

That left option two—make someone do it for me. The plan didn’t sit well with me. It chafed at my independence and professionalism. But we were near the front of the line. I needed to ditch him or he’d follow me all night.

“So what about it, beautiful? I promise it’ll be night you’ll never forget.” He wrapped his arm around my waist as he stood behind me. My skin crawled when his erection poked my backside and I nearly swung.

*That’s it.*

I focused my attention on the man in front of me. He was tall, athletically built with a confident stance that told me he had his fair share of scuffles. His hands were large. He probably had one hell of a hammer fist. The perfect tool for my job. I stepped out my molester’s hold as I pushed my agitation onto my pawn.

Groupie continued to prattle on as though I considered his indecent proposal. “If you don’t want to go someplace then we—”

He hit the ground and Pawn stood over him breathing raggedly.

“What the hell was that for?” Groupie held his bleeding nose.

Pawn blinked several times when a bouncer grabbed him by the shoulders. Another bouncer picked up Groupie before the others in line could take in the scene.

I hated using my trump card for something simple, but I had to appear innocent. Besides it gave me demonstration of just how good was Essex’s security. I would have to tread carefully.

“Your first time visiting us?” the door security asked.

I nodded.

“ID?”

I opened my clutch and gave him my doctored credentials. The only truth on my license was my first name. Supernatural creatures noticed names. Names contained

power. They could instantly ferret out a fake name. Even my psychic abilities didn't allow me to hide from name magic. I can, however, gloss the effect over with the use of my first name.

He marked my name down on a list and gave me a white rubber bracelet. "Nice name," he said aloud.

In my mind, *"No more cute tricks. Supernatural activity is off limits in purple areas and gray areas. The White areas are safe."*

My blood ran cold. He made me in less than a second. No one including other hunters knew about my powers. I had worked hard to make it appear as though I excelled in the mental training all hunters were given. Hunters valued psychics but treated them differently. They didn't go out on missions. They were kept in a fortress bending spoons and trying to see into the future— not me. My clairvoyance was more annoying than helpful. I could see in the past if I touched certain objects of empathic value. The only thing I had of use was telekinesis and some ability to push suggestions and emotions. I used it to enhance my fighting and aim.

*"Don't worry. Our motto is discretion is the better part of valor. We are aware that many of our clientele wish to remain off the grid, but we have to monitor Supernaturals and Naturals for safety."*

I painted on a reassuring smile. *"I was surprised. I've never had a mental conversation with another."*

"Thanks," I said referring to the compliment about my name and walked past him. A large serious looking man in a suit stood in front of the door. His eyes scanned me from head to toe and his nostrils flared. Another wolf. They had an annoying habit of sniffing everything like they were looking for a hydrant.

He gave me a silver domino, nodded, and opened the door. "Enjoy," he grunted.

I stood in a gray lobby. The décor was grandiose. Gray wallpaper with those fancy flourishes adorned the walls. Mirrors hung from silver filigree frames reflecting the light from a large crystal and brass chandelier. In the center of the lobby was a glass top, mahogany table. A vase of grayish looking lilies surrounded by a circle of business cards, drew my attention. I plucked one for future information and secreted it in my clutch. The statement of color theme was not lost on me. The gray must be the color cue for the common areas.

On either side of the lobby was a set of doors, one set white and the other purple. A pair of bulky doormen guarded both doors. No doubt to keep the purple bands

out of the white areas. Near each door were several settees. Masked patrons of both color bands chatted amongst themselves. It was weird watching the two obvious groups. Normally, I would take the time to quietly observe everything, but I had more pressing matters. I strolled over to the white door. I could feel the weight of their eyes as they studied me.

The head of security for this place had to be formidable. The guards were highly trained and disciplined. Not only did they enforce the boundaries of each of the areas, they made careful note of who came and who went. I know the look. They were searching for anyone who could cause trouble. They were probably using telepathy as well. One toe out of line and my life would be forfeited. A predator knew another predator. I was in their territory—their rules. One of them pointed, ran their hands across their face, then pointed to my hand.

Right, my mask. I forgot to wear it.

I slipped on the domino and one of them opened the door for me.

Why all the secrecy? Were the Supernatural so paranoid that they had to hide their faces—or just that bored? With them I could never tell.

The white area décor's opulence was similar to the lobby. The area contained at least two floors with a set of rounded stairs in the back of the ballroom. A mirrored ball hung from the ceiling reflecting little rectangles of light all over the soft-lighted areas. Dancers moved in time to the music underneath the patterns. An interesting mix of nearly every genre of music played at a volume you didn't need to scream to hear the person next to you. Kudos to the DJ for mixing so much together seamlessly.

A sea of rounded tables filled outer edges of the room and were occupied with various Supernaturals—some in human form. Servers navigated between the tables delivering food and drinks from the kitchen and a large bar of white wood. The whole scene appeared normal. But I knew the truth. The creatures babbled like there was no care in the world. Like they didn't eek out their existence on the misery of humans. Their ilk disgusted me.

And I had to hang around them for an undetermined amount of time.

I stalked over to the bar. Every hunter knew the prey always showed up at the waterhole no matter how sophisticated it seemed. Bartenders heard and told everything to anyone who listened. Supernaturals liked to copy Naturals so they were sure to behave the same way. I gingerly sat on a rounded leather stool. My dress was short enough without improper sitting to send an invitation to another lecher.

A dark haired woman around my age grinned at me. She stared at me from behind a black domino with cheery, brown eyes and a warm smile. She was human. I nearly shook my head. It saddened me that someone so normal looking was so misguided. She worked on the white side. That meant she knew where she was and what was happening. She was the worst kind of enemy, a willing participant.

She wiped the space in front of me with a cloth. "What can I get for you, ma'am?"

I'm not a big drinker. But they wouldn't let me hang around and not patronize the place. "I'm not sure. What do you suggest?"

Her smile brightened. She took out a drink menu. "If you don't have a poison of choice then I suggest one of our non-alcoholic selections. I've been itching to make this one." She pointed to a blue neon looking drink. "You'll love it. And if you don't I'll make you something else. So how about it?"

Damn it. Her demeanor was infectious. Who knew what that glowing nuclear waste was going to do to me? "Sure. I love to live dangerously."

She clapped her hands together and started grabbing bottles from underneath her station. "You'll love it. It's fruity and it glows in the black light."

The situation got better than better. I'd taste it and then go off somewhere to find a potted plant. If I walked around with a drink for a while, I'd look normal enough. "I can hardly wait."

She shook her head. "No, you don't believe me. You have that look like Ian when I test my drinks on him." She smirked. "He's a dutiful boyfriend but not a big risk taker."

I said nothing while I watched her pour the concoction into a shaker and agitate the contents vigorously. I should be more careful. She worked around Supernaturals. It would stand to reason that she was a psychic like me. There was no telling what her abilities were. I was confident she didn't know my intentions. I haven't met a single creature who could break through my mental barriers. My mind was Fort Knox with five hundred twelve-bit encryption and surrounded by the Great Wall, the US Air Force and Navy. No information would escape.

She laid a napkin then set the glowing blue drink in front of me. "Here you are." She dropped a cherry into the martini glass. "Try it. I stand by my word."

I weighed my options. I didn't sense danger from her. I touched the glass lightly. No weird premonitions or freaky feelings. I felt warm and mischievous. I took a sip. It was fruity with a bubbly taste. "Not bad."

She gave me the thumbs up. "See I told you. I call it Toxic Blue Waste."

I nearly choked.

She gave me a napkin to wipe my mouth. "Sorry. The name needs work."

"How about Raspberry Glow?" Any name but something that referred to poison and possible mutations.

"I like it." She picked up an ePad. "The drink's on the house. The name's Monica by the way."

Good— already a name. I made some progress. Infiltration wouldn't be so painful after all. "Vashti."

She hugged her ePad and swooned. "I love your name. It sounds so exotic. It's not plain like mine."

That was a first. Must be the mask. Usually I got weird looks and people struggled with it. As for exotic, there was nothing unusual about me. I cleaned up well, but I was Vashti plain and tall.

"Thanks. Your name's nice too." Nothing like a compliment to loosen the tongue. "How long have your boyfriend and you been together?"

"A year." Her cheeks grew rosy.

I leaned in conspiratorially. "Sounds like a story."

Her face flamed and her smile grew. "It's stupid really." She started wiping down the bar vigorously.

A server walked up the bar. "I need two True Bloody Marys and a Mojito. Be quick about it. Some of us don't have a sugar daddy."

Monica's smile fell. She nodded to the server and started taking out glasses in rapid succession. The server—a rude brunette—tapped her finger on the bar impatiently.

I should be the one annoyed. The rude girl interrupted our conversation. I crossed my legs. Patience was a virtue. Not one I owned but a prize nonetheless. Fortunately my informant was a bartending marvel. All three drinks were made and the rude bitch was on her way before my foot made it in her ass.

Monica narrowed her eyes. "Don't you wish you could slap people silly sometimes?"

I was sure that she asked a rhetorical question. The smart ass in me chafed. "What's her deal? I know you're working but I am a customer."

She slapped the bar. "Exactly. She's been a jerk to me since day one and when Ian and I got together she got worse."

"Sounds like she's jealous." I took a sip of my drink.

“Maybe,” she said.

Another server appeared with drink orders. Monica flew into action fulfilling order after order. The girl knew her trade. Her concoctions looked interesting. I made note of one drink that resembled a chocolate mint shake. If I was going to be here for a while, I better have some selections to choose. I nursed my Raspberry Glow hoping for a free moment.

When I finished my drink and Monica still didn't get back to me, I decided to work the room. I started to get up from the stool.

An excited girl with black hair and a purple domino nearly bowled me over. “Excuse me, ma'am.” She bowed her head politely then turned. “Hey, Monica, did you hear? Kyra quit. I heard she was in a snit because Tirun wouldn't be her contract husband.”

What the hell was a contract husband? My money was on Tirun being a vampire. Weres mated for life and had a simple culture. They followed the strongest, fed their hungers, mated, and reproduced. Contract marriages sounded complicated and pretentious—standard vampire. Context clues aside, I made a note to research details on vampiric social culture.

The package of napkins Monica held slipped from her hands. “You're kidding.” She leaned over the bar. “When did this happen?”

The excitable girl smirked. “Just now. You should go for general manager. You're shoo-in since you're practically family.”

Monica shook her head and stepped back. “I don't want Ian to think I'm with him for money.”

I hit the jackpot. Monica's boyfriend had political pull in the club management— a direct connection to Essex. If this Ian guy was close to him then weeks of stalking this club could be cut.

“Please. Ian is your mate. He knows how you feel. I know you met through that dating agency, but mates are mystical.”

Monica held herself. “I don't know. It's not me. Bossing Ian around is one thing everyone else is another. Everyone hated Kyra. I'm not cut out for management”

This was my cue. “Sorry to interrupt, but I'm new in town and I'm looking for a job.”

Monica's friend stared at me as if seeing me for the first time. The girl almost knocked me over and now notices me?



“Uh—”

Monica placed her hand on the girl's shoulder. “Paula, this is my new friend Vashti. Vashti, this Paula.”

BFFs already. Excellent.

“Nice to meet you,” she said.

“Likewise.” I wanted to know more about the job, but I had a feeling I pressed my luck. The event just happened. I didn't want to appear overeager.

“I think it would be great if you went for it,” Monica said. “I know we just met but I have a good feeling about this and my instincts are usually right.”

Is that a fact? I wonder if her hunch told her that I'd kill everyone in the room to get to Essex, if necessary. She shouldn't be so trusting. I was her enemy. As sweet and misguided as she was, I couldn't let her get too close.

“I'll have to bank on that.” I opened my clutch. I scribbled my number. “Here. Would you let me know if the job is posted? I'd like to give it a go.”

She took the card and smiled. “Sure.”

“Thanks, I—”

“Hey, girl,” the rude girl from before barked. “I have more orders. Get off your ass.”

I've had enough. Twice she interfered with my information gathering. I turned towards the bitch. I meant that literally. Now that I looked at her, it was clear that she was werewolf. The aggressive stance, the attitude towards a quieter personality— all screamed she-wolf.

“You're in front of a customer. Two times you've interrupted me to harass this woman.” The girl bristled. Her stance tightened and I stood. “It's unprofessional and I'm offended by it. You can either apologize or I can put my foot up your rear.”

The she-wolf stepped into my personal space never once touching me. “You want to say that to my face.”

I glared at her. This was a game. Whose ovaries were bigger. Mine. “If I repeat myself, you're going to be sorry.”

She stared at me for a few seconds before looking away. She stepped back. “Sorry, ma'am.”

“And to your co-worker?”

She grit her teeth.

I had a new fan complete with a look that could kill. First chance this one got, she'd come after me. I'd have to be careful.

"Sorry, Monica."

Monica's cheeks flamed. I could tell that she was used to being the last picked for teams. I'd make her grow out of it.

"Um, thanks, Jenna."

The she-wolf turned on her heel and left.

"Wow," Paula said giving me a thumbs up. "You're my hero."

"Mine too," Monica added. She reached over the bar and hugged me.

I came to expect many things in life. Being crushed against a polished white, teak bar in gratitude was not one of them. Way too trustworthy for her own good. No wonder she fell in league with vampires, wolves, and various sundry creatures. "Don't go falling in love."

She laughed as she released me. I smoothed down the front of my dress. She was grinning like a maniac. This girl was naïve with a capital N. All I did was stand up for her. No need to go overboard.

Paula nudged me in my ribs. "Um, Vashti, I think you may get your chance."

What was that girl talking about? I turned around. My heart fluttered. Even in an elaborate silver carnival mask, I would know him anywhere. In front of me was my target and along with another.

Monica joined me at my side. When did she—?

"Vashti, this is my boyfriend Ian Essex and his brother Tirun."

I should have expected that. Really, I should have.