

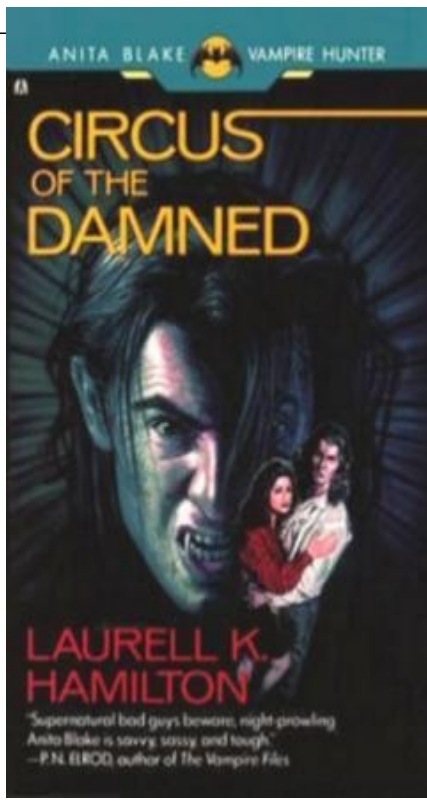
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LAURELL K.
HAMILTON

AN ANITA BLAKE
VAMPIRE HUNTER NOVEL

CIRCUS
OF THE
DAMNED

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD BY THE AUTHOR



Book 3 of the Anita Blake Vampire Hunter Series

Editor's Note: Typos from original manuscript retained.

There was dried chicken blood imbedded under my fingernails. When you raise the dead for a living, you have to spill a little blood. It clung in flaking patches to my face and hands. I'd tried to clean the worst of it off before coming to this meeting, but some things only a shower would fix. I sipped coffee from a personalized mug that said, "Piss me off, pay the consequences," and stared at the two men sitting across from me.

Mr. Jeremy Ruebens was short, dark, and grumpy. I'd never seen him when he wasn't either frowning or shouting. His small features were clustered in the middle of his face as if some giant hand had mashed them together before the clay had dried. His hands smoothed over the lapel of his coat, the dark blue tie, tie clip, white shirt collar. His hands folded in his lap for a second, then began their dance again, coat, tie, tie clip, collar, lap. I figured I could stand to watch him fidget maybe five more times before I screamed for mercy and promised him anything he wanted.

The second man was Karl Inger. I'd never met him before, He was a few inches over six feet. Standing he had towered over Ruebens and me. A wavy mass of short-cut red hair graced a large face. He had honest-to-god muttonchop sideburns that grew into one of the fullest mustaches I'd ever seen. Everything was neatly trimmed except for his unruly hair. Maybe he was having a bad hair day.

Ruebens's hands were making their endless dance for the fourth time. Four was my limit.

I wanted to go around the desk, grab his hands, and yell, "Stop that!" But I figured that was a little rude, even for me. "I don't remember you being this twitchy, Ruebens," I said.

He glanced at me. "Twitchy?"

I motioned at his hands, making their endless circuit. He frowned and placed his hands on top of his thighs. They remained there, motionless. Self-control at its best.

"I am not twitchy, Miss Blake."

"It's Ms. Blake. And why are you so nervous, Mr. Ruebens?" I sipped my coffee.

"I am not accustomed to asking help from people like you."

"People like me?" I made it a question.

He cleared his throat sharply. "You know what I mean."

"No, Mr. Ruebens, I don't."

"Well, a zombie queen . . ." He stopped in mid-sentence. I was getting pissed, and it must have shown on my face. "No offense," he said softly.

"If you came here to call me names, get the hell out of my office. If you have real business, state it, then get the hell out of my office."

Ruebens stood up. "I told you she wouldn't help us."

"Help you do what? You haven't told me a damn thing," I said.

"Perhaps we should just tell her why we have come," Inger said. His voice was a deep, rumbling bass pleasant.

Ruebens drew a deep breath and let it out through his nose. "Very well." He sat back down in his chair. "The last time we met, I was a member of Humans Against Vampires."

I nodded encouragingly and sipped my coffee.

"I have since started a new group, Humans First. We have the same goals as HAV, but our methods are more direct."

I stared at him. HAV's main goal was to make vampires illegal again, so they could be hunted down like animals. It worked for me. I used to be a vampire slayer, hunter, whatever. Now I was a vampire executioner. I had to have a death warrant to kill a specific vampire, or it was murder. To get a warrant, you had to prove the vampire was a danger to society, which meant you had to wait for the vampire to kill people. The lowest kill was five humans, the highest was twenty-three. That was a lot of dead bodies. In the good ol' days you could just kill a vampire on sight.

"What exactly does 'more direct methods' mean?"

"You know what it means," Ruebens said.

"No," I said, "I don't." I thought I did, but he was going to have to say it out loud.

"HAV has failed to discredit vampires through the media or the political machine. Humans First will settle for destroying them all."

I smiled over my coffee mug. "You mean kill every last vampire in the United States?"

"That is the goal," he said.

"It's murder."

"You have slain vampires. Do you really believe it is murder?"

It was my turn to take a deep breath. A few months ago I would have said no. But now, I just didn't know. "I'm not sure anymore, Mr. Ruebens."

"If the new legislation goes through, Ms. Blake, vampires will be able to vote. Doesn't that frighten you?"

"Yes," I said.

"Then help us."

"Quit dancing around, Ruebens; just tell me what you want."

"Very well, then. We want the daytime resting place of the Master Vampire of the City."

I just looked at him for a few seconds. "Are you serious?"

"I am in deadly earnest, Ms. Blake."

I had to smile. "What makes you think I know the Master's daytime retreat?"

It was Inger who answered. "Ms. Blake, come now. If we can admit to advocating murder, then you can admit to knowing the Master." He smiled ever so gently.

"Tell me where you got the information and maybe I'll confirm it, or maybe I won't."

His smile widened just a bit. "Now who's dancing?"

He had a point. "If I say I know the Master, what then?"

"Give us his daytime resting place," Ruebens said. He was leaning forward, an eager, nearly lustful look on his face. I wasn't flattered. It wasn't me getting his rocks off. It was the thought of staking the Master.

"How do you know the Master is a he?"

"There was an article in the *Post-Dispatch*. It was careful to mention no name, but the creature was clearly male," Ruebens said.

I wondered how Jean-Claude would like being referred as a "creature." Better not to find out. "I give you an address and you go in and what, stake him through the heart?"

Ruebens nodded. Inger smiled.

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

"You refuse to help us?" Ruebens asked.

"No, I simply don't know the daytime resting place." I was relieved to be able to tell the truth.

"You are lying to protect him," Ruebens said. His face was growing darker; deep frown wrinkles showed on his forehead.

"I really don't know, Mr. Ruebens, Mr. Inger. If you want a zombie raised, we can talk; otherwise . . . I let the sentence trail off and gave them my best professional smile. They didn't seem impressed.

"We consented to meeting you at this ungodly hour, and we are paying a handsome fee for the consultation. I would think the least you could do is be polite."

I wanted to say, "You started it," but that would sound childish. "I offered you coffee. You turned it

down."

Ruebens's scowl deepened, little anger lines showing around his eyes. "Do you treat all your . . . customers this way?"

"The last time we met, you called me a zombie-loving bitch. I don't owe you anything."

"You took our money."

"My boss did that."

"We met you here at dawn, Ms. Blake. Surely you can meet us halfway."

I hadn't wanted to meet with Ruebens at all, but after Bert took their money, I was sort of stuck with it. I'd set the meeting at dawn, after my night's work, but before I went to bed. This way I could drive home and get eight hours uninterrupted sleep. Let Ruebens's sleep be interrupted.

"Could you find out the location of the Master's retreat?" Inger asked.

"Probably, but if I did, I wouldn't give it to you."

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because she is in league with him," Ruebens said.

"Hush, Jeremy."

Ruebens opened his mouth to protest, but Inger said, "Please, Jeremy, for the cause."

Ruebens struggled visibly to swallow his anger, but he choked it down. Control.

"Why not, Ms. Blake?" Inger's eyes were very serious, the pleasant sparkle seeping away like melting ice.

"I've killed master vampires before, none of them with a stake."

"How then?"

I smiled. "No, Mr. Inger, if you want lessons in vampire slaying, you're going to have to go elsewhere. Just by answering your questions, I could be charged as an accessory to murder."

"Would you tell us if we had a better plan?" Inger said.

I thought about that for a minute. Jean-Claude dead, really dead. It would certainly make my life easier, but . . . but.

"I don't know," I said.

"Why not?"

"Because I think he'll kill you. I don't give humans over to the monsters, Mr. Inger, not even people who hate me."

"We don't hate you Ms. Blake."

I motioned with the coffee mug towards Ruebens. "Maybe you don't, but he does."

Ruebens just glared at me. At least he didn't try to deny it.

"If we come up with a better plan, can we talk to you again?" Inger asked.

I stared at Ruebens's angry little eyes. "Sure, why not?"

Inger stood and offered me his hand. "Thank you, Ms. Blake. You have been most helpful."

His hand enveloped mine. He was a large man, but he didn't try using his size to make me feel small. I appreciated that.

"The next time we meet, Anita Blake, you will be more cooperative." Ruebens said.

"That sounded like a threat, Jerry."

Ruebens smiled, a most unpleasant smile. "Humans First believes the means justifies the end, Anita."

I opened my royal purple suit jacket. Inside was a shoulder holster complete with a Browning Hi-Power 9mm. The purple skirt's thin black belt was just sturdy enough to be looped through the shoulder holster. Executive terrorist chic.

"When it comes to survival, Jerry, I believe that, too."

"We have not offered you violence," Inger said.

"No, but ol' Jerry here is thinking about it. I just want him and the rest of your little group to believe I'm serious. Mess with me, and people are going to die."

"There are dozens of us," Ruebens said, "and only one of you."

"Yeah, but who's going to be first in line?" I said.

"Enough of this, Jeremy, Ms. Blake. We didn't come here to threaten you. We came for your help. We will come up with a better plan and talk to you again."

"Don't bring him," I said.

"Of course," Inger said. "Come along, Jeremy." He opened the door. The soft clack of computer keys came from the outer office. "Good-bye Ms. Blake."

"Good-bye, Mr. Inger, it's been really unpleasant."

Ruebens stopped in the doorway and hissed at me, "You are an abomination before God."

"Jesus loves you, too," I said, smiling. He slammed the door behind them. Childish.

I sat on the edge of my desk and waited to make sure they had left before going outside. I didn't think they'd try anything in the parking lot, but I really didn't want to start shooting people. Oh, I would if I had to, but it was better to avoid it. I had hoped flashing the gun would make Ruebens back off. It had just seemed to enrage him. I rotated my neck, trying to ease some of the tension away. It didn't work.

I could go home, shower, and get eight hours uninterrupted sleep. Glorious. My beeper went off. I jumped like I'd been stung. Nervous, me?

I hit the button, and the number that flashed made me groan. It was the police. To be exact, it was the Regional Preternatural Investigation Team. The Spook Squad. They were responsible for all preternatural crime in Missouri. I was their civilian expert on monsters. Bert liked the retainer I got, but better yet, the good publicity.

The beeper went off again. Same number. "Shit," I said it softly. "I heard you the first time, Dolph." I thought about pretending that I'd already gone home, turned off the beeper, and was now unavailable, but I didn't. If Detective Sergeant Rudolf Storr called me at half-past dawn, he needed my expertise. Damn.

I called the number and through a series of relays finally got Dolph's voice. He sounded tinny and faraway. His wife had gotten him a car phone for his birthday. We must have been near the limit of its range. It still beat the heck out of talking to him on the police radio. That always sounded like an alien language.

"Hi, Dolph, what's up?"

"Murder."

"What sort of murder?"

"The kind that needs your expertise," he said.

"It's too damn early in the morning to play twenty questions. Just tell me what's happened."

"You got up on the wrong side of bed this morning, didn't you?"

"I haven't been to bed yet."

"I sympathize, but get your butt out here. It looks like we have a vampire victim on our hands."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Shit."

"You could say that."

"Give me the address," I said.

He did. It was over the river and through the woods, way to hell and gone in Arnold. My office was just off Olive Boulevard. I had a forty-five-minute drive ahead of me, one way. Yippee.

"I'll be there as soon as I can."

"We'll be waiting," Dolph said, then hung up.

I didn't bother to say good-bye to the dial tone. A vampire victim. I'd never seen a lone kill. They were like potato chips; once the vamp tasted them, he couldn't stop at just one. The trick was, how many people would die before we caught this one?

I didn't want to think about it. I didn't want to drive to Arnold. I didn't want to stare at dead bodies before breakfast. I wanted to go home. But somehow I didn't think Dolph would understand. Police have very little sense of humor when they're working on a murder case. Come to think of it, neither did I.

The man's body lay on its back, pale and naked in the weak morning sunlight. Even limp with death his body was good, a lot of weights, maybe jogging. His longish yellow hair mixed with the still-green lawn. The smooth skin of his neck was punctured twice with neat fang marks. The right arm was pierced at the bend of the elbow, where a doctor draws blood. The skin of the left wrist was shredded like an animal had gnawed it. White bone gleamed in the fragile light.

I had measured the bite marks with my trusty tape measure. They were different sizes. At least three different vamps, but I would have bet everything I owned that it was five different vampires. A master and his pack, or flock, or whatever the hell you call a group of vampires.

The grass was wet from early morning mist. The moisture soaked through the knees of the coveralls I had put on to protect my suit. Black Nikes and surgical gloves completed my crime-scene kit. I used to wear white Nikes, but they showed blood too easily.

I said a silent apology for what I had to do, then spread the corpse's legs apart. The legs moved easily, no rigor. I was betting that he hadn't been dead eight hours, not enough time for rigor mortis to set in. Semen had dried on his shriveled privates. One last joy before dying. The vamps hadn't cleaned him off. On the inside of his thigh, close to the groin, were more fang marks. They weren't as savage as the wrist wound, but they weren't neat either.

There was no blood on the skin around the wounds, not even the wrist wound. Had they cleaned the blood off? Wherever he was killed, there was a lot of blood. They'd never be able to clean it all up. If we could find where he died, we'd have all sorts of clues. But in the neatly clipped lawn in the middle of a very ordinary neighborhood, there were no clues. I was betting on that. They'd dumped the body in a place as sterile and unhelpful as the dark side of the moon.

Mist floated over the small residential neighborhood like waiting ghosts. The mist was so low to the ground that it was like walking through sheets of drizzling rain. Tiny beads of moisture clung to the body where the mist had condensed. Beads collected in my hair like silver pearls.

I stood in the front yard of a small, lime-green house with white trim. A chain-link fence peeked around one side encircling a roomy backyard. It was October, and the grass was still green. The top of a sugar maple loomed over the house. Its leaves were that brilliant orangey-yellow that is peculiar to sugar maples, as if their leaves were carved from flame. The mist helped the illusion, and the colors seemed to bleed on the wet air.

All down the street were other small houses with autumn-bright trees and bright green lawns. It was still early enough that most people hadn't gone to work yet, or school, or wherever. There was quite a crowd being held back by the uniform officers. They had hammered stakes into the ground to hold the yellow Do-Not-Cross tape. The crowd pressed as close to the tape as they dared. A boy of about twelve had managed to push his way to the front. He stared at the dead man with huge brown eyes, his mouth open in a little "wow" of excitement. God, where were his parents? Probably gawking at the corpse, too.

The corpse was paper-white. Blood always pools to the lowest point of the body. In this case dark, purplish bruising should have set in at buttocks, arms, legs, the entire back of his body. There were no marks. He hadn't had enough blood in him to cause lividity marks. Whoever had murdered him had drained him completely. Good to the last drop? I fought the urge to smile and lost. If you spend a lot of time staring at corpses, you get a peculiar sense of humor. You have to, or you will go stark raving mad.

"What's so funny?" a voice asked.

I jumped and whirled. "God, Zerbrowski, don't sneak up on me like that."

"Is the heap big vampire slayer jumping at shadows?" He grinned at me. His unruly brown hair stuck up in three separate tufts like he'd forgotten to comb it. His tie was at half-mast over a pale blue shirt that looked suspiciously like a pajama top. The brown suit jacket and pants clashed with the top.

"Nice pajamas."

He shrugged. "I've got a pair with little choo-choos on them. Katie thinks they're sexy."

"Your wife got a thing for trains?" I asked.

His grin widened. "If I'm wearing 'em."

I shook my head. "I knew you were perverted, Zerbrowski, but little kids' jammies, that's truly sick."

"Thank you." He glanced down at the body, still smiling. The smile faded. "What do you think of this?" He nodded towards the dead man.

"Where's Dolph?"

"In the house with the lady who found the body." He plunged his hands into the pockets of his pants and rocked on his heels. "She's taking it pretty hard. Probably the first corpse she's seen outside of a funeral."

"That's the way most normal folks see dead people, Zerbrowski."

He rocked forward hard on the balls of his feet, coming to a standstill. "Wouldn't it be nice to be normal?"

"Sometimes," I said.

He grinned. "Yeah, I know what you mean." He got a notebook out of his jacket pocket that looked as if someone had crumbled it in their fist.

"Geez, Zerbrowski."

"Hey, it's still paper." He tried smoothing the notebook flat, but finally gave up. He posed, pen over the wrinkled paper. "Enlighten me, oh preternatural expert."

"Am I going to have to repeat this to Dolph? I'd like to just do this once and go home to bed."

"Hey, me too. Why do you think I'm wearing my jammies?"

"I just thought it was a daring fashion statement." He looked at me. "Mm-huh."

Dolph walked out of the house. The door looked too small to hold him. He's six-nine and built bulky like a wrestler. His black hair was buzzed close to his head, leaving his ears stranded on either side of his face. But Dolph didn't care much for fashion. His tie was tight against the collar of his white dress shirt. He had to have been pulled out of bed just like Zerbrowski, but he looked neat and tidy and businesslike. It never mattered what hour you called Dolph, he was always ready to do his job. A professional cop down to his socks.

So why was Dolph heading up the most unpopular special task force in St. Louis? Punishment for something, that much I was sure of, but I'd never asked what. I probably never would. It was his business. If he wanted me to know, he'd tell me.

The squad had originally been a pacifier for the liberals. See, we're doing something about supernatural crime. But Dolph had taken his job and his men seriously. They had solved more supernatural crime in the last two years than any other group of policemen in the country. He had been invited to give talks to other police forces. They had even been loaned out to neighboring states twice.

"Well, Anita, let's have it."

That's Dolph; no preliminaries. "Gee, Dolph, it's nice to see you too."

He just looked at me.

"Okay, okay." I knelt on the far side of the body so I could point as I talked. Nothing like a visual aid to get your point across. "Just measuring shows that at least three different vampires fed on the man."

"But?" Dolph said.

He's quick. "But I think that every wound is a different vampire."

"Vampires don't hunt in packs."

"Usually they are solitary hunters, but not always."

"What causes them to hunt in packs?" he asked.

"Only two reasons that I've ever come across: first, one is the new dead and an older vampire is teaching the ropes, but that's just two pairs of fangs, not five; second, a master vampire is controlling them, and he's gone rogue."

"Explain."

"A master vampire has nearly absolute control over his or her flock. Some masters use a group kill to solidify the pack, but they wouldn't dump the body here. They'd hide it where the police would never

find it."

"But the body's here," Zerbrowski said, "out in plain sight."

"Exactly; only a master that's gone crazy would dump a body like this. Most masters even before vampires were legally alive wouldn't flaunt a kill like this. It attracts attention, usually attention with a stake in one hand and a cross in the other. Even now, if we could trace the kill to the vampires that did it, we could get a warrant and kill them." I shook my head. "Slaughter like this is bad for business and whatever else vampires are, they're practical. You don't stay alive and hidden for centuries unless you're discreet and ruthless."

"Why ruthless?" Dolph said.

I stared up at him. "It's utterly practical. Someone discovers your secret, you kill them, or make them one of your . . . children. Good business practices, Dolph, nothing more."

"Like the mob," Zerbrowski said.

"Yeah."

"What if they panicked?" Zerbrowski asked. "It was almost dawn."

"When did the woman find the body?"

Dolph checked his notebook. "Five-thirty."

"It's still hours until dawn. They didn't panic."

"If we've got a crazy master vampire, what exactly does that mean?"

"It means they'll kill more people faster. They may need blood every night to support five vampires."

"A fresh body every night?" Zerbrowski made it a question.

I just nodded.

"Jesus," he said.

"Yeah."

Dolph was silent, staring down at the dead man. "What can we do?"

"I should be able to raise the corpse as a zombie."

"I thought you couldn't raise a vampire victim as a zombie," Dolph said.

"If the corpse is going to rise as a vampire, you can't." I shrugged. "The whatever that makes a vampire interferes with a raising. I can't raise a body that is already set to rise as a vamp."

"But this one won't rise," Dolph said, "so you can raise it."

I nodded.

"Why won't this vampire victim rise?"

"He was killed by more than one vampire, in a mass feeding. For a corpse to rise as a vampire, you have to have just one vampire feeding over a space of several days. Three bites ending with death, and you get a vampire. If every vampire victim could come back, we'd be up to our butts in bloodsuckers."

"But this victim can come back as a zombie?" Dolph said.

I nodded.

"When can you do the animating?"

"Three nights from tonight, or really two. Tonight counts as one night."

"What time?"

"I'll have to check my schedule at work. I'll call you with a time."

"Just raise the murder victim and ask who killed him. I like it," Zerbrowski said.

"It's not that easy," I said. "You know how confused witnesses to violent crimes are. Have three people see the same crime and you get three different heights, different hair colors."

"Yeah, yeah, witness testimony is a bitch," Zerbrowski said.

"Go on, Anita," Dolph said. It was his way of saying, "Zerbrowski, shut up." Zerbrowski shut up.

"A person who died as the victim of a violent crime is more confused. Scared shitless, so that sometimes they don't remember very clearly."

"But they were there," Zerbrowski said. He looked outraged.

"Zerbrowski, let her finish."

Zerbrowski pantomimed locking his lips with a key and throwing the key away. Dolph frowned. I coughed into my hand to hide the smile. Mustn't encourage Zerbrowski.

"What I'm saying is that I can raise the victim from the dead, but we may not get as much information as you'd expect. The memories we do get will be confused, painful, but it might narrow the field down as to which master vampire led the group."

"Explain," Dolph said.

"There are only supposed to be two master vampires in St. Louis right now. Malcolm, the undead Bill Graham, and the Master of the City. There's always the possibility we've got someone new in town, but the Master of the City should be able to police that."

"We'll take the head of the Church of Eternal Life," Dolph said.

"I'll take the Master," I said.

"Take one of us with you for backup."

I shook my head. "Can't; if he knew I let the cops know who he was, he'd kill us both."

"How dangerous is it for you to do this?" Dolph asked.

What was I supposed to say? Very? Or did I tell them the Master had the hots for me, so I'd probably be okay? Neither. "I'll be all right."

He stared at me, eyes very serious.

"Besides, what choice do we have?" I motioned at the corpse. "We'll get one of these a night until we find the vampires responsible. One of us has to talk to the Master. He won't talk to police, but he will talk to me."

Dolph took a deep breath and let it out. He nodded. He knew I was right. "When can you do it?"

"Tomorrow night, if I can talk Bert into giving my zombie appointments to someone else."

"You're that sure the Master will talk to you?"

"Yeah." The problem with Jean-Claude was not getting to see him, it was avoiding him. But Dolph didn't know that, and if he did, he might have insisted on going with me. And gotten us both killed.

"Do it," he said. "Let me know what you find out."

"Will do," I said. I stood up, facing him over the bloodless corpse.

"Watch your back," he said.

"Always."

"If the Master eats you, can I have your nifty coveralls?" Zerbrowski asked.

"Buy your own, you cheap bastard."

"I'd rather have the ones that have enveloped your luscious body."

"Give it a rest, Zerbrowski. I'm not into little choo-choos."

"What the hell do trains have to do with anything?" Dolph asked.

Zerbrowski and I looked at each other. We started giggling and couldn't stop. I could claim sleep deprivation. I'd been on my feet for fourteen straight hours, raising the dead and talking to right-wing fruitcakes. The vampire victim was a perfect end to a perfect night. I had a right to be hysterical with laughter. I don't know what Zerbrowski's excuse was.

There are a handful of days in October that are nearly perfect. The sky stretches overhead in a clear blue, so deep and perfect that it makes everything else prettier. The trees along the highway are crimson, gold, rust, burgundy, orange. Every color is neon-bright, pulsing in the heavy golden sunlight. The air is cool but not cold; by noon you can wear just a light jacket. It was weather for taking long walks in the woods with someone you wanted to hold hands with. Since I didn't have anyone like that, I was just hoping for a free weekend to go away by myself. The chances of that were slim and none.

October is a big month for raising the dead. Everyone thinks that Halloween is the perfect season for raising zombies. It isn't. Darkness is the only requirement. But everyone wants an appointment for midnight on Halloween. They think spending All Hallows Eve in a cemetery killing chickens and watching zombies crawl out of the ground is great entertainment. I could probably sell tickets.

I was averaging five zombies a night. It was one more zombie than anyone else was doing in one night. I should never have told Bert that four zombies didn't wipe me out. My own fault for being too damn truthful. Of course, truth was, five didn't wipe me out either, but I was damned if I'd tell Bert.

Speaking of my boss, I had to call him when I got home. He was going to love me asking for the night off. It made me smile just thinking about it. Any day I could yank Bert's chain was a good day.

I pulled into my apartment complex at nearly one in the afternoon. All I wanted was a quick shower and seven hours of sleep. I had given up on eight hours; it was too late in the day for that. I had to see Jean-Claude tonight. Joy. But he was the Master Vampire of the City. If there was another master vampire around, he'd know it. I think they can smell each other. Of course, if Jean-Claude had committed the murder, he wasn't likely to confess. But I didn't really believe he'd done it. He was much too good a business vampire to get messy. He was the only master vampire I'd ever met who wasn't crazy in some way: psychotic, or sociopath, take your pick.

All right, all right, Malcolm wasn't crazy, but I didn't approve of his methods. He headed up the fastest-growing church in America today. The Church of Eternal Life offered exactly that. No leap of faith, no uncertainty, just a guarantee. You could become a vampire and live forever, unless someone like me killed you, or you got caught in a fire, or hit by a bus. I wasn't sure about the bus part, but I'd always wondered. Surely there must be something massive enough to damage even a vampire beyond healing. I hoped someday to test the theory.

I climbed the stairs slowly. My body felt heavy. My eyes burned with the need to sleep. It was three days before Halloween, and the month couldn't end too soon for me. Business would start dropping off before Thanksgiving. The decline would continue until after New Year's, then it'd start picking up. I prayed for a freak snowstorm. Business drops off if the snow is bad. People seem to think we can't raise the dead in deep snow. We can, but don't tell anyone. I need the break.

The hallway was full of the quiet noises of my day-living neighbors. I was fishing my keys out of my coat pocket when the door opposite mine opened. Mrs. Pringle stepped out. She was tall, slender, thinning with age, white hair done in a small bun at the back of her head. The hair was perfectly white.

Mrs. Pringle didn't bother with dyes or makeup. She was over sixty-five and didn't care who knew it.

Custard, her Pomeranian, pranced at the end of his leash. He was a round ball of golden fur with little fox ears. Most cats outweighed him, but he's one of those little dogs with a big-dog attitude. In a past life he was a Great Dane.

"Hello, Anita." Mrs. Pringle smiled as she said it. "You're not just getting in from work, are you?" Her pale eyes were disapproving.

I smiled. "Yeah, I had an . . . emergency come up."

She raised an eyebrow, probably wondering what an animator would have for an emergency, but she was too polite to ask. "You don't take good enough care of yourself, Anita. If you keep burning the candle at both ends, you'll be worn out by the time you're my age."

"Probably," I said.

Custard yapped at me. I did not smile at him. I don't believe in encouraging small, pushy dogs. With that peculiar doggy sense, he knew I didn't like him, and he was determined to win me over.

"I saw the painters were in your apartment last week. Is it all repaired?"

I nodded. "Yeah, all the bullet holes have been patched up and painted over."

"I'm really sorry I wasn't home to offer you my apartment. Mr. Giovoni says you had to go to a hotel."

"Yeah."

"I don't understand why one of the other neighbors didn't offer you a couch for the night."

I smiled. I understood. Two months ago I had slaughtered two killer zombies in my apartment and had a police shootout. The walls and one window had been damaged. Some of the bullets had gone through the walls into other apartments. No one else had been hurt, but none of the neighbors wanted anything to do with me now. I suspected strongly that when my two-year lease was up, I would be asked to leave. I guess I couldn't blame them.

"I heard you were wounded."

I nodded. "Just barely." I didn't bother telling her that the bullet wound hadn't been from the shootout. The mistress of a very bad man had shot me in the right arm. It was healed to a smooth, shiny scar, still a little pink.

"How did your visit with your daughter go?" I asked.

Mrs. Pringle's face went all shiny with a smile. "Oh, wonderful. My last and newest grandchild is perfect. I'll show you pictures later, after you've had some sleep." That disapproving look was back in her eyes. Her teacher face. The one that could make you squirm from ten paces, even if you were innocent. And I hadn't been innocent for years.

I held up my hands. "I give up. I'll go to bed. I promise."

"You see you do," she said. "Come along, Custard, we have to go out for our afternoon stroll." The tiny dog danced at the end of his leash, straining forward like a miniature sled dog.

Mrs. Pringle let three pounds of fluffy fur drag her down the hall. I shook my head. Letting a fuzzi-ball boss you around was not my idea of dog ownership. If I ever had another dog, I'd be boss, or one of us wouldn't survive. It was the principle of the thing.

I opened the door and stepped inside the hush of my apartment. The heater whirred, hot air hissing out of the vents. The aquarium clicked on. The sounds of emptiness. It was wonderful.

The new paint was the same off-white as the old. The carpet was grey; couch and matching chair, white. The kitchenette was pale wood with white and gold linoleum. The two-seater breakfast table in the kitchen was a little darker than the cabinets. A modern print was the only color on the white walls.

The space where most people would have put a full-size kitchen set had the thirty-gallon aquarium against the wall, a stereo catty-corner from it.

Heavy white drapes hid the windows and turned the golden sunlight to a pale twilight. When you sleep during the day, you have to have good curtains.

I flung my coat on the couch, kicked my dress shoes off, and just enjoyed the feeling of my bare feet on the carpet. The panty hose came off next, to lie wrinkled and forlorn by the shoes. Barefoot, I padded over to the fish tank.

The angelfish rose to the surface begging for food. The fish are all wider than my outspread hand. They are the biggest angels I've ever seen outside of the pet store I bought them from. The store had breeding angelfish that were nearly a foot long.

I stripped off the shoulder holster and put the Browning in its second home, a specially made holster in the headboard. If any bad guys snuck up on me, I could pull it and shoot them. That was the idea, anyway. So far it had worked.

When the dry-clean-only suit and blouse were hung neatly in the closet, I flopped down on the bed in my bra and undies, still wearing the silver cross that I wore even in the shower. Never know when a pesky vampire is going to try to take a bite out of you. Always prepared, that was my motto, or was that the Boy Scouts? I shrugged and dialed work. Mary, our daytime secretary, answered on the second ring. "Animators, Incorporated. How may we serve you?"

"Hi, Mary, it's Anita."

"Hi, what's up?"

"I need to talk with Bert."

"He's with a prospective client right now. May I ask what this is pertaining to?"

"Him rescheduling my appointments for tonight."

"Ooh, boy. I'll let you tell him. If he yells at someone, it should be you." She was only half-kidding.

"Fine," I said.

She lowered her voice and whispered, "Client is on her way to the front door. He'll be with you in a jiffy."

"Thanks, Mary."

She put me on hold before I could tell her not to. Muzak seeped out of the phone. It was a butchered version of the Beatles' "Tomorrow." I'd have rather listened to static. Mercifully, Bert came on the line and saved me.

"Anita, what time can you come in today?"

"I can't."

"Can't what?"

"Can't come in today."

"At all?" His voice had risen an octave.

"You got it."

"Why the hell not?" Cursing at me already, a bad sign.

"I got beeped by the police after my morning meeting. I haven't even been to bed yet."

"You can sleep in, don't worry about meeting new clients in the afternoon. Just come in for your appointments tonight."

He was being generous, understanding. Something was wrong.

"I can't make the appointments tonight, either."

"Anita, we're overbooked here. You have five clients tonight. Five!"

"Divide them up among the other animators," I said.

"Everybody is already maxed."

"Listen, Bert, you're the one who said yes to the police. You're the one who put me on retainer to them. You thought it would be great publicity."

"It has been great publicity," he said.

"Yeah, but it's like working two full-time jobs sometimes. I can't do both."

"Then drop the retainer. I had no idea it'd take up this much of your time."

"It's a murder investigation, Bert. I can't drop it."

"Let the police do their own dirty work," he said.

He was a fine one to talk about that. Him with his squeaky-clean fingernails and nice safe office. "They need my expertise and my contacts. Most of the monsters won't talk to the police."

He was quiet on the other end of the phone. His breathing came harsh and angry. "You can't do this to me. We've taken money, signed contracts."

"I asked you to hire extra help months ago."

"I hired John Burke. He's been handling some of your vampire slayings, as well as raising the dead."

"Yeah, John's a big help, but we need more. In fact, I bet he could take at least one of my zombies tonight."

"Raise five in one night?"

"I'm doing it," I said.

"Yes, but John isn't you."

That was almost a compliment. "You have two choices, Bert; either reschedule or delegate them to someone else."

"I am your boss. I could just say come in tonight or you're fired." His voice was firm and matter-of-fact.

I was tired and cold sitting on the bed in my bra and undies, I didn't have time for this. "Fire me."

"You don't mean that," he said.

"Look, Bert, I've been on my feet for over twenty hours. If I don't get some sleep soon, I'm not going to be able to work for anybody."

He was silent for a long time, his breathing soft and regular in my ear. Finally, he said, "All right, you're free for tonight. But you damn well better be back on the job tomorrow."

"I can't promise that, Bert."

"Dammit, Anita, do you want to be fired?"

"This is the best year we've ever had, Bert. Part of that's due to the articles on me in the *Post-Dispatch*."

"They were about zombie rights and that government study you're on. You didn't do them to help promote our business."

"But it worked, didn't it? How many people call up and ask specifically for me? How many people say they've seen me in the paper? How many heard me on the radio? I may be promoting zombie rights, but it's damn good for business. So cut me some slack."

"You don't think I'd do it, do you?" His voice snarled through the phone. He was pissed.

"No, I don't," I said.

His breath was short and harsh. "You damn well better show up tomorrow night, or I'm going to call your bluff." He slammed the receiver in my ear. Childish.

I hung up the phone and stared at it. The Resurrection Company in California had made me a handsome offer a few months back. But I really didn't want to move to the west coast, or the east coast for that matter. I liked St. Louis. But Bert was going to have to break down and hire more help. I couldn't keep this schedule up. Sure, it'd get better after October, but I just seemed to be going from one emergency to another for this entire year.

I had been stabbed, beaten, shot, strangled, and vampire-bit in the space of four months. There comes a point where you just have too many things happening too close together. I had battle fatigue.

I left a message on my judo instructor's machine. I went twice a week at four o'clock, but I wasn't going to make it today. Three hours of sleep just wouldn't have been enough.

I dialed the number for Guilty Pleasures. It was a vampire strip joint. Chippendale's with fangs. Jean-Claude owned and managed it. Jean-Claude's voice came over the line, soft as silk, caressing down my spine even though I knew it was a recording. "You have reached Guilty Pleasures. I would love to make your darkest fantasy come true. Leave a message, and I will get back to you."

I waited for the beep. "Jean-Claude, this is Anita Blake. I need to see you tonight. It's important. Call me back with a time and place." I gave him my home number, then hesitated, listening to the tape scratch. "Thanks." I hung up, and that was that.

He'd either call back or he wouldn't. He probably would. The question was, did I want him to? No. No I didn't, but for the police, for all those poor people who would die, I had to try. But for me personally, going to the Master was not a good idea.

Jean-Claude had marked me twice already. Two more marks and I would be his human servant. Did I mention that neither mark was voluntary? His servant for eternity. Didn't sound like a good idea to me. He seemed to lust after my body, too, but that was secondary. I could have handled it if all he wanted was physical, but he was after my soul. That he could not have.

I had managed to avoid him for the last two months. Now I was willingly putting myself within reach again. Stupid. But I remembered the nameless man's hair, soft and mingling with the still-green lawn. The fang marks, the paper-white skin, the fragility of his nude body covered with dew. There would be more bodies to look at, unless we were quick. And quick meant Jean-Claude.

Visions of vampire victims danced in my head. And every one of them was partially my fault, because I was too chickenshit to go see the Master. If I could stop the killings now, with just one dead, I'd risk

my soul daily. Guilt is a wonderful motivator.

I was swimming in black water, strong smooth strokes. The moon hung huge and shining, making a silver pathway on the lake. There was a black fringe of trees. I was almost to shore. The water was so warm, warm as blood. In that moment I knew why the waters were black. It was blood. I was swimming in a lake of fresh, warm blood.

I woke instantly, gasping for breath. Eyes searching the darkness for . . . what? Something that had caressed my leg just before I woke. Something that lived in blood and darkness.

The phone shrilled, and I had to swallow a scream. I wasn't usually this nervous. It was just a nightmare, dammit. Just a dream.

I fumbled for the receiver and managed, "Yeah."

"Anita?" The voice sounded hesitant, as if its owner might hang up.

"Who is this?"

"It's Willie, Willie McCoy." Even as he said the name, the rhythm of the voice sounded familiar. The phone made it distant and charged with an electric hiss, but I recognized it.

"Willie, how are you?" The minute I said it, I wished I hadn't. Willie was a vampire now; how okay could a dead man be?

"I'm doing real well." His voice had a happy lilt to it. He was pleased that I asked.

I sighed. Truth was, I liked Willie. I wasn't supposed to like vampires. Any vampire, not even if I'd known him when he was alive.

"How ya doing yourself?"

"Okay, what's up?"

"Jean-Claude got your message. He says ta meet him at the Circus of the Damned at eight o'clock tonight."

"The Circus? What's he doing over there?"

"He owns it now. Ya didn't know?"

I shook my head, realized he couldn't see it, and said, "No, I didn't."

"He says to meet 'im in a show that starts at eight."

"Which show?"

"He said you'd know which one."

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