

Chapter One

She had the Midas touch. Except everything she laid hand on didn't turn into gold—it exploded in her face.

Which was just what a person should expect when she was cursed, right? How well Jeannette Darcy knew this having lived under that shadow for nigh on six centuries.

She'd come to this rotting wreck of a hotel in Jackson, Mississippi in pursuit of her old enemy, the Macedonian, and instead she'd found humans. And these were not your average run of the mill humans. Oh no, just her luck she'd stumbled across a team from the Society of Eternal Illumination. Hunters they were, trained and deadly. Even though their knowledge of the Tier was spotty at best, it was still dangerous. Now, Richard would walk, lamb to the slaughter, into a Society trap. The silver the mortals carried would kill him, and it was all her fault. Her hesitation would cost her last ally his life. She choked back a sob. In this instant, as much as she hated the Macedonian, Jeannette loathed herself more.

She pushed back a strand of sweat-dampened iron gray hair and shifted from one foot to the other, a captive of indecision, behind moldy double doors hanging half off their hinges. The midnight heat was oppressive, the moist atmosphere ripe with the scent of human feces, urine, rotten wood, and the astringent zing of diesel.

“I will not permit it,” she whispered, pulling a silver blade from the sheath strapped on her upper thigh. The worn leather-

wrapped hilt fit snugly in her fist like an old friend. Its feel, the weight of it in her palm, settled her. Jeannette inhaled a deep gulp of the swampy, malodorous stew that passed for oxygen and squared her shoulders. She was in it up to her neck, she was about to break the unbreakable Law of the Zha'Ignisiin. There would be no going back.

“For Richard!” Her laughter was a wild, hysteria-tinged exclamation point. Giving the double doors a hard shove, she stepped over the threshold and into a wall of flames.

Chapter Two

“And another one bites the dust.” Smitty’s smile, more the snarl of a timber wolf, glittered in the liquid firelight cast by the pair of flamethrowers.

“’Bout like shooting fish in a goddamn barrel,” Devin McIntyre agreed, not sure if what he felt was disgust over the vampire’s stupidity or insult that the creature thought them just as brainless. Devin pursed his lips and settled on disgust.

“Yeah, ain’t it great those Hollywood boys got it all wrong?” Smitty said.

The vampire of legend was diabolically clever and damn near indestructible, but the difference between legend and reality was the simple fact that while able to regenerate even after taking a direct missile strike, the true vampire possessed an IQ that made your average village idiot look like a bona fide Mensa genius. Stupid just didn't cover it.

“You'd think they'd learn...something. Caution, maybe? Doesn't seem right somehow. Wouldn't the older vamps teach the younger ones how to avoid basic traps?” It was insane the way they walked to their destruction, time after time, like lemmings going Geronimo off a cliff. He'd gone through a training program that would put the SEALs to shame then gave the Society eleven years of his life only to have *this* to hunt. He may as well be hunting sheep. Hell, sheep would be more challenging.

“Huuh...I'm glad they don't. Makes my job easier,” Smitty concluded with a shrug, but Devin didn't hear his second-in-command. His words were buried beneath an avalanche of curses and shouts from the team.

Devin swallowed a shout of his own as the vampire strolled naked out of the fire stream with not so much as a scorch mark on her. But what he felt wasn't fear, it was elation. Finally, something had showed up that was off the Society's radar, something not protocol. Something worth fighting.

“Hello, what have we here?” he murmured, dialing down adrenaline laced excitement. No vampire could survive fire that intense. It was in the manual, basic Vampire Hunting 101.

“Hit her again!” Smitty shouted. “Light that bitch up!”

With nerves springing like Olympic high jumpers, Devin watched Meloni and Croft turn the flamethrowers on the vampire once more.

Liquid flames lapped at the vampire's skin, the fiery maelstrom causing her hair to fly about her head like a steel-colored nimbus, turning her body into a living tiki torch.

But the fire didn't consume her.

The she-vamp passed through the firestorm whole and unharmed. The sight of her slim, nude body framed by the flame's red glow made Devin's mouth go dry. Speechless, he watched the muscles in her thighs flex and relax as she strode forward.

She's a tiny, little thing. Can't be more than five foot, he thought. But her body now, her body was perfection. Small, fine-boned feet, shapely calves and toned thighs were attached to slender hips that framed a mons lined with a miniscule strip of silver curls which shone against ivory flesh. Her waist was thin, her abs sculpted with a narrow ribcage which made her plump, caramel-tipped breasts appear larger than their true size.

Suddenly, Devin felt like hitting something. Before him stood the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

And he had to kill her.

"Why won't the bitch burn?" A young voice cried. The rookie, Devin remembered. What was his name?

"Fuck that shit. Shoot her! Bring that whore down!" Smitty's shout startled Devin out of the spell the she-vamp had

cast. He scrambled upright on numb legs, dwarfed by Smitty who climbed to his full six-foot eleven-inches. The automatic rifle in his big hands looked like a child's toy. Devin swung back around to face the delicate little creature who looked like a strong breeze would send her flying and slowly, hesitantly, lifted his automatic pistol.

The fireproof beauty's platinum colored eyes narrowed. With her full lips pulled back in a snarl, she hissed like an angry cat, the very image of an avenging goddess.

Then the shooting began.

Bullets sang their deadly song, piercing the spot where she stood, making the shadows flicker and dance to their beat until the clips ran out and silence returned. The stench of gun smoke hung heavy in the hot air like a cloud of poisonous gas. Devin stood with Smitty by his side in a quasi-stupor watching the men congratulate each other with high fives and knuckle bumps. He clutched his weapon in his fist, the muzzle pointed at the floor and realized he'd never fired a shot.

What's wrong with me? Was it regret at the creature's destruction? Couldn't be, he thought, dismissing the notion.

Wake up, McIntyre. He gave himself a mental shake ignoring Smitty's sidelong glance, but his lieutenant would not be silenced.

“Fireproof vamps, Dev. I mean, what the fuck? Does the Society know about this?” Smitty paused a beat, a scowl wreathing his face. “Why weren't we briefed?” he asked, giving voice to Devin's own doubts.

It was way past time to pack up their tents and get the hell out of town.

“Save the celebration for after we get out of this fuckin’ shit house,” he ordered, the smell of a set-up polluting the air and sending a claxon of alarm through every nerve fiber. He forced it back and turned his attention to the tasks at hand.

Rotten wall paneling burned merrily. Flames lapped at the ceiling tiles, blazing ever higher, filling the room with murk, like a Mississippi smoke house.

“Smitty, let’s put this fire out,” Devin called. Last thing they needed was the Jackson Fire Department showing up.

“Meloni...?”

“Yo,” a voice answered to Devin’s left.

“Crack a window. Smoke’s getting thick in here.”

“Got it, boss,” the hunter replied and pelted away.

There came the tinkle of shattering glass and fresh air wafted through the room to feed the flames. A fluted column crashed to the floor in an explosion of red embers. The situation was going south PDQ, and hell if he wanted to explain to Big Joe why the hotel had been torched for one little vampire. *One fireproof vampire.*

The flamethrowers should’ve asked her. That they hadn’t made no sense to Devin. Where was the Society in all of this? His mind worried at the puzzle she presented, but that required time, and time was a commodity they were short on. It would be best to gather what was left of the vampire and bring it back to

headquarters. He'd give the sludge to the science nerds. Devin's lips curved in a grim smirk. Those eggheads would piss themselves in delight.

“Rico!” he shouted.

The four-year veteran turned away from where he crouched picking up spent shell casings to face Devin.

“Leave that to the rookie,” he said. “Go bag up the remains.” With his chin, he gestured to where the vamp had been brought down. “The science geeks will want samples to study.”

Rising to his feet, Rico nodded and strode away to where their gear was stowed. Devin turned to find the fire had spread to another wall and a couple more columns.

“Why am I still waiting on the extinguishers, Smitty?” he called, impatience making his voice sharper than normal.

“I'm comin', goddammit, Dev. Keep your damn shirt on,” Smitty huffed, carrying four large red canisters, one under each muscular biceps and the other two in each hand.

Keeping one, he passed the others to waiting hunters, then lifted the nozzle and shot a stream of foam on the base of the blaze. The foam gained traction and began knocking down the fire. Devin folded his arms, satisfied to see something finally going right.

“Croft, you and the rookie pack the gear. We need to be out of here in under five.” Fifteen minutes was the amount of time the Society calculated an operation had to dismantle, mount up,

and ride off with none of the locals any the wiser. Unfortunately, fighting a fire had not been factored into the equation, but then they'd never had to light up a vamp twice.

It was unheard of—that she'd walked out of the fire stream not once, but twice. Somehow she'd survived. It had taken a butt-load of silver rounds to bring her down. Devin's fingers tightened on the grip, startling him. He hadn't been aware that the pistol was still in his hand. Holstering his weapon, he went back to directing the breakdown, grateful for the routine.

“Hey, where'd the vamp go?” Jasper asked with an incredulous laugh.

“Uh, boss?”

“What is it now, Rico?” Exasperated, Devin called over his shoulder. The clock was ticking down dangerously close to the end of the team's window for safe egress.

“We gotta problem,” the hunter replied.

Grinding his teeth, disgusted, feeling seriously harassed, Devin turned to where Rico squatted, a red HazMat baggie in his hand.

Pushing aside his frustration, he asked in what he hoped was a level tone, “Problem?”

“There's no body,” Rico said, slowly rising to his feet.

“Say again,” Devin spun all the way around to face the man, unease a cold wind that shrieked and moaned, making his heart stutter in response.

“Well, of course there shoulda’ never been a body.” Rico touched his fingers together then flicked them open simulating an explosion. “Shoulda’ been nothin’ but floatin’ ash from the Zippos, but hell,” he chuckled, “we *all* saw her walk out of the fire stream.” The lean hunter paused and looked dead in Devin’s eyes. “And we shot her, boss—with silver rounds. I know I hit her with at least half a clip.”

Rico turned back to the empty place on the floor, eyes wide with disbelief. He took a slow, shuddering breath and continued, “Boss, the silver should’ve dropped the bitch.” The cynical bravado was gone from his face leaving confusion in its wake. “There should be a dead vamp laying here, Dev, but she’s...gone.” His voice had turned soft, his words coming slow, pouring from his lips like cold honey.

“Bitch ain’t dead,” Smitty growled. The large canister rang like a school house alarm on the tile floor as the big man tossed it aside and reached for his rifle.