

# One

“Ready, Marla? In three, two...” the young man mouthed *one* and the *Taping in Progress* light came on.

I folded my hands on my lap, taking a moment to admire my fresh Pucker Up Pink manicure before I looked up, gazing into the camera’s lens. Pinching the tender web of flesh between my thumb and forefinger, my vision blurred with tears right on cue. Take note you show biz wannabes, this little trick works every time.

“I’m sorry, y’all,” I drawled, tears making my voice rough. Normally, America hears me laugh. To hear me cry would be something totally different. Hopefully it would tug on their heart strings.

I pinched harder, blinked, and felt a tear roll down my cheek. “Using...uh...language...that is...I mean...*inappropriate* language is...er...hurtful to...um...”

Dang it all, the tears were flowing but I’d forgotten my lines. *Not* what one would expect from a professional of my caliber, but it wasn’t really my fault. You might say my heart wasn’t in it. After all, I’d done nothing wrong.

“Cut! Cut!” my grandson called. At twenty-two, Eugene is my son Samuel and his mate, Hannah’s oldest and my self-appointed assistant.

He's slender (like his mother) and tall (like his father), with shoulder length brown hair that swings with every twitch of his head. His chin is covered in a dark fuzz that he calls a beard and I call lint. Today he wore black skinny jeans, white Converse sneakers, and a gray cashmere sweater pulled over a black striped button down. Black horn rimmed glasses framed his bright cornflower blue eyes (a gift from yours truly).

"What is it now, Eugene?" I snapped, the tears vanishing like a Death Valley mirage.

"Did you even read the script, Nana?" He asked tugging off his glasses.

"Gosh darn-it, Eugene! Yes, I read the danged script but with all this..." I swung an arm wide and gave my head a toss encompassing the cameraman, sound man, and the other hangers on, "*foolishness* I've been a little distracted. I mean, what did I do that was so wrong? I didn't fire a handicapped person. I didn't bad mouth the President. Please tell me, what did I do that warrants me giving a world-wide apology?"

"Really, Nana? You were caught in the middle of a racist rant. Even worse, the video of your rant was leaked to TMZ and Radar Online and is playing non-stop on CNN and MSNBC."

"Poo!" I said rolling my eyes. "I only spoke the truth. Compared to the lupu manaren, humans *are* an inferior race. Their senses of smell, sight, hearing, and taste are equal to a slug's. Don't frown. You know it's true!"

He cast a glance over his shoulder, and said, “I know Nana, but the humans...”

“Are a nasty, smelly race,” I finished in my *because I said so* tone.

Eugene plowed both hands through his hair as though he wanted to rip it out and said through gritted teeth, “You’re angry because a human chef won the Culinary Arts Outstanding Chef Award.”

I growled—an involuntary reflex in a lupo manaro when threatened or sassed by a young pup that needed his pants dusted. He knew that was a sore subject for me. He also knew we were in mixed company and was thus safe from said dusting of pants.

Sniffing, I smoothed a wrinkle from my skirt. “The award should have been mine—Stuart Poser stole it from me. He bribed the judges.”

Eugene clapped a hand to his mouth. “He did?” He gasped.

“Well, he must have,” I hedged casting him a sullen gaze from beneath my lashes. “It was the only way he could possibly win.”

Stuart Poser was a human chef on the Cooking Today channel, a rival network. His shows, *Stuart’s Sumptuous Sundries* and *Poser’s Pork*, were in the same time slot as my own on the Foodie Culinary Channel. I consistently beat him in

the ratings, but that was before my political correctness went off the reservation.

Eugene sighed, and in a tone that said he'd heard this more than once and that he was trying to reason with someone to who reason is an alien concept, said, "Yes. I know, Nana, but you must have proof to back up your accusation. The problem is that when you called Poser's race filthy, talentless, and inferior the human press thought you meant his *race-race*."

"Well, I did!" I exclaimed throwing my hands wide. "He's a member of the human race, an *inferior* race. Mind you, he can't help that he was born human and not lupo manaro, but..." I shrugged. "...you can't alter the facts."

Another sigh. "That's not... You don't understand. Dammit, Nana!"

"You watch your mouth, boy," I snapped, my slow, southern, cane syrup speech becoming weaponized, a rigid billy club to flatten any and all impertinence.

Once more, Eugene plowed his hands through his hair and spun around to face me. "Nana, they think you meant his ethnicity." Ethnicity? What in the hell was the young pup talking about now?

At my blank gaze he continued. "You know, the color of his coat, er—his skin, not that he is of the human race."

I frowned. "What the blazes does his skin color have to do with it? That makes no sense, Eugene!"

My grandson removed the horn-rimmed glasses with one hand and pinched the bridge of his nose with the other, as though massaging away a headache. “Can you please concentrate on why we’re here? It doesn’t matter if you don’t understand, Nana. We’re trying to put out the fire you started. You know, do damage control.”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine,” I sighed, drumming my Pucker up Pink nails on my lap. “Who cares what the humans think,” I grumbled.

“Not humans, Nana, the Congress. Remember them? The ruling body of the Shadowlands. Does that ring a bell?”

The Shadowlands Congress is the governing branch of the paranormal world and its citizens. Made up of red drinkers, lupomans, the fae, giants, wee folk, mer people, and others, the Shadowlands is the world hidden in shadows. It had to be. Every time humanity got a peek behind the veil, Shadowland citizens suffered. There was one unbreakable law that every Shadowlander learned from birth: Don’t expose the Shadowlands to humanity. To do so would result in anything from a slap on the wrist (which was always, always much more intense than the human version) to the ultimate punishment—death in some species, banishment in others.

I was balancing on the edge, just shy of crossing the line of exposure. The Shadowland Congress had taken an interest in my poor choice of words which seemed like overkill.

I've been told that when I get angry, my blue eyes become spooky, frightening even. It's said that they look as though they're not eyes at all, but living gas blue flames dancing in my eye sockets. Whatever. All I know is that when I settled my gaze on my grandson in one breath, possibly two, he was biting his bottom lip and nervously scrubbing the lens of his glasses with the hem of his cardigan sweater.

"If you think I won't come over there and tan your bottom for you, just keep it up, Eugene!" I gave my head an angry toss then turned to Killer, a lupo manaro cameraman and said, "Who, in their right mind, would hang a name like 'Eugene' on a child, for the moon's sake?"

Killer just smiled and shrugged. "My daughter-in-law wouldn't budge, and believe me, we went round and round on that one," I finished in a loud aside before turning back to my red-faced grandson.

"Dammit, Nana! You know I had no say in what I was named."

"Why Hannah insisted on saddling you with that..." I paused waving my hand in a small circle as though to encompass the enormity of this injustice. "*travesty* is beyond me. I did not approve, but of course my son would back his mate," I finished with a sniff.

With his face an interesting blend of red and white, Eugene stiffly set the glasses back on the bridge of his nose. “It’s a *family* name,” he insisted.

“It’s ridiculous,” I snapped putting my hands on my hips almost daring him to say anything else on the matter. What was it with young people nowadays? No respect. No manners. Full of sass and a bunch of know nothing know-it-alls. Well, I wasn’t taking it from any of the pack’s pups—not as long as Marla Sheen and the Captain were the Alpha’s of the Southeastern Lupo Manaren Conglomerate.

With ears standing out of his limp dark hair like a pair of red stop signs, my grandson squeaked, “Why don’t we take a short break?”

I looked skyward, like I could find the answers drifting around with the ceiling fan. I gave my head one solemn shake then snatched up a glass of iced sweet tea.

“Ms. Sheen?”

I glanced up over the rim of the glass and raised a quizzical brow to mask the sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. Not her again. “You gotta problem with your hearin’, sugar? I told you *no*.”

The woman was slender to the point of emaciation. Her sleek, white suit clung to her like a second skin. Straight blond hair cut in a reverse bob, swung around high cheekbones, a wide jawline, and almond shaped hazel eyes. It was obvious to even

the least observant that the woman was a Dr. Bill sycophant. She certainly espoused the good “doctor’s” dietary maxims. She was obviously human. No lupo manaro would look this frail unless she was ill.

The woman shrugged. “Surely you know Dr. Bill is a Texas cattleman. *No* isn’t in his vocabulary.”

I snorted. “I *know* he’s full of the bull he raises,” I muttered and took a sip of tea.

The woman backed up a step and positioned her hands on slender hips. “The Dr. Bill Show is the number one talk show in the United States. His goal is to reach out and aid those in need. He believes in keeping it real, and that being honest, if only to yourself, is best for maintaining healthy relationships and a healthy life. Naturally, he feels his show would be the perfect platform for you to get your side of the story out.”

“The perfect platform to put me on the grill and barbeque me like a side of ribs, you mean,” I said and grabbed a dish of banana pudding from a sideboard. Okay, so I’m a stress eater. I can’t help it and besides, my pudding is a blue ribbon winner.

“You misunderstand the doctor’s intent, Ms. Sheen,” the woman said her eyes narrowed as she tried to come at me from a different angle. “He wants to help you. It’s what he does.”

“Honey,” I said around a mouth full of bananas, vanilla wafers, and whipped cream. “Don’t bullshit an old bullshitter. Bill’s goal is to keep his ratings high, that’s ‘what he does’.” I

made finger quotations before dipping up another spoonful of pudding and popping it in my mouth.

The woman scowled at me for a moment and then her face smoothed. “I understand how you must feel, how much stress you must be under, and can only assure you that the doctor truly has your best interests at heart.”

Oh, brother. I rolled my eyes and made a rude noise.

“Really!” she huffed.

I flashed her my million dollar smile (more like fifty grand, but that’s on a need to know basis) and said, “Now, let’s put on our listening ears. I am not interested today, tomorrow, or ever of being on the Dr. Bill show. So, why don’t you just toddle on back to that snake oil salesman and tell him...”

“Nana!”

Eugene seemed to spring out of thin air, one arm spinning like an airplane propeller. We both turned to him, surprise covering the face of the young woman, while I was filled with a mixture of relief and consternation.

“For the moon’s sake, boy, what has crawled up your shorts and bit your as—er—behind?”

“It’s an emergency!”

“I can see that. What happened, the store run out of your special shampoo?” I asked eyeing his long hair with an air of

disapproval. I think a man should look like a man with a decent haircut and a clean shaved face.

“No. Not that. It’s Gramps...I mean the Captain. He’s been challenged...” He cast a quick look at Dr. Bill’s assistant who was listening in obvious interest then back at me with a guilty grimace. “I mean, there’s an emergency at the compound!” He finally finished, almost flinging the cell phone at my nose.

My face lost all feeling. Seriously, it felt like my body had been freeze dried and suddenly I felt every minute, every damn second, of my one hundred sixty-seven years. I was embarrassed to discover that I was trembling. Hey, I’m a tough old broad, but hearing that my husband was facing a fight to the death showdown would freak anyone out.

I grabbed the phone as though it was a live grenade and gingerly held it to my ear. Listening, my gaze skated over my idiot grandson and the silent crew, assistants, and friends to briefly land on Dr. Bill’s producer who, I couldn’t help but notice, watched me intently through slit eyes, a small flip notebook and pen in her hands.

“Stall them. I’m on my way,” I ordered and dropped the phone into Eugene’s waiting palm. I’m the co-Alpha of the freaking South Eastern Lupo Maneren Conglomerate. I’m accustomed to having my orders obeyed. They had better, by the Moon, be obeyed.

Thrusting the bowl at the nosy woman, I called for someone, anyone to help me find my damn purse and when it materialized like a David Copperfield magic trick, I sprinted for the door like Usain Bolt.

Somehow, Dr. Bill's Stepford wife beat me to it and then positioned herself in front of the door, blocking my escape. I could think of nothing but getting to my vehicle and racing home.

Challenge. The word sent an electric spark down my spine that branched into questions I could not answer. Who challenged? Who effing dared to challenge? And, why now? More immediate, why was this human standing between me and my pack?

"I see you have a family emergency," she said, her tone of concern offset by her calculating expression. "Perhaps we could book you for next Thursday's taping instead?"

"What?" I asked, blinking in confusion. What was the fool woman talking about? Couldn't she see I had to leave? Why was she blocking the door?

"Can I tell Dr. Bill that taping the show next week is better for you?" she purred.

"Show," I repeated, uncomprehending.

"You probably should do the show," Eugene said slowly. "It might help to clear up this mess."

I sighed. I couldn't care less about the humans and their prickly sensibilities. They could do with a little more tough love and a whole lot less molly coddling, but still, it might be better for the pack if I made an appearance on the good doctor's show. I exhaled, and fearing it was a mistake said, "Fine. I'll do it."

I was desperate to get home to my mate's side. The thought of my gruff, roly-poly mate facing a challenger for pack leadership was shocking. Only blood members could challenge and I knew of no one who wanted the headache of taking up the pack's reins.

Besides, my husband wasn't in any shape to face a challenge. The pack's doctor had been warning the Captain about his diet and the need to put down the knife and fork and get on a treadmill, but the man loves my cooking and, God help me, I love to cook for him. What scared the be-Jesus out of me was the niggling thought that maybe my cooking would impact his fighting skills. You know, slow his reaction time, hinder his movements. Maybe my cooking would really kill my mate.