

Chapter One

Blood Spaghetti

I can totally eat pasta with a broken arm, but I let my girlfriend feed it to me because it's cute.

"Say *aaah*," Kate says, bringing a forkful of fettuccini to my mouth. I lean forward, tucking the empty right sleeve of my blazer under the table so it doesn't drag over my plate. Food tastes *delicious* when you don't have to work for it, does it not? Kate must be thinking something similar, because her tan cheeks bunch up in a smile, and her big, velvety brown eyes take on a cocksure twinkle.

Being this corny at any other restaurant would probably get us cringes and eye rolls. At this one, I glance behind Kate to see Messalina, one of the restaurant's three owners, flouncing by in her chef's jacket, a hot platter trailing steam in her wake. She gives me a wink and a fanged grin, and I smile back at her with sauce on my chin.

The restaurant is underground; you have to go down a little staircase to a half-hidden door, which makes it seem more secretive than it actually

is. The walls are red brick, lit by warmly glowing lights scattered across the ceiling, suspended at varying heights like stars. There's even a full moon by the bar that Tommaso, Messalina's younger husband, tends.

I prompt Kate, "Try the asparagus, it's all nice and buttery."

Kate sweeps a bit of auburn hair out of her face as she reaches across the table. She's been complaining that her roots need a touch-up, but I secretly like the way her hair now fades from black to red, just like I like the way her crimson lipstick is wearing off her lips to leave only a dark outline. As she speaks, her freckles come in and out of hiding in the candlelight.

"Don't vampires drink blood? What do they need a restaurant for?"

"They don't *need* to eat regular food, not if they're feeding on fresh blood. But registered vampires barely get the nutrition they need on Council rations, and cooked food is a way to counter that. Animal meat and blood is like... empty carbs, at best, but it's the only way for vampires to feel full without access to fresh human blood. And that fullness—along with the ritual of having food prepared for you, eating it in a social

setting—it gives a sense of normalcy, you know?”

“Is it just vampires who come here?”

“Vampires, werewolves, succubi, humans, even the occasional demon. There’s other places that cater to a carnivorous patronage, but Messalina’s the only one cheeky enough to center her whole menu around blood and garlic. Garlic doesn’t vibe with certain blood drinkers. It’s like cilantro that way; they either don’t mind it or really, really hate it. But Messy’s signature sauce converts haters just like *that*.” I snap my fingers for emphasis.

Kate stops eating, like something’s occurred to her, and looks down at her dish. “Does this have blood in it?”

I shake my head, clumsily twirling spaghetti on a fork with my left hand. “Don’t worry, I ordered yours without it.”

Her eyes travel to my plate. “...But yours?”

“I got the regular. It’s really good, Messy is a visionary.”

“Huh. Can I try some?”

We scrape our plates clean, mopping up extra sauce with soft bread

and eating all of that too. It really is that good; besides, I know how much a spotless plate inflates Messy's pride. Kate wipes her mouth with a napkin and excuses herself to go to the bathroom. A few seconds later, the white of Messalina's chef's jacket flashes into view, and she slides into the empty seat across from me.

"Sooo, how is the date going?" she asks in her deliberately preserved Italian accent. Her tone makes literally everything she says sound like innuendo.

"The date is going beautifully," I assure her. "She loves your food—not that I've ever had a date who didn't."

Messy smiles like a cat, patting her tall, puffy white chef's hat. She has a striking face with a narrow, aquiline nose that ends at a sharp point, cheekbones angled to match. The shadows around her eyes add to the effect, though she often complains to me about them. Her skin is pale, translucent even, and bluish in the places where the veins show through.

"Harrietta dear," she coos, "I know you're flattering me to get out of trouble. You've been with this girl for two months, and you haven't

brought her to me until now?" She flicks my nose. "Shame, shame."

I laugh. "Messy, I already told you I'm sorry. It's not my fault we both got the flu for three weeks, and then she had to fly to her parents' for New Year's. I really would have brought her earlier if not for that." I gesture to my cast and sling. "Cut me some slack, I'm injured."

She crosses her arms and looks slyly skeptical. "You're a blood witch, Harry. The only reason you still have that cast on is that your sister hasn't had time to fix you."

"Ha! Caught me. But you know I never stay away for long, especially with that extra-special couple's discount."

Messy winks. "Only for you, sinner dear." Her smile turns to a frown, and she chews her lip. She looks... nervous. It scares me, sends a wave churning in my stomach that tells me, *get ready*.

She takes off her hat and holds it in front of her. Her hair is thin but well kept, swept into a loose bun at the nape of her neck. She rasps, "Harry... I have something to ask of you."

"Yeah, of course, shoot."

She twists around in her seat and calls, "Amore?"

At his wife's voice, Tommaso looks up from behind the bar. He hurriedly rounds the counter, his tailored black shirt stretching over his big biceps and belly as he does so. His head is shaven but his beard is a marvel to behold, and when he comes to stand next to Messy, he makes her look like a straw doll.

I wait a beat, instinctively, for the final member of their trio to arrive. When he doesn't, I find myself looking around. "Where's Felix?"

Messy swallows. "Felix..." Her hand draws magnetically upward, as if to search for him too. Tommaso clasps it, his beard quivering, mustache agitated to one side. I sit up.

"Guys, where's Felix?"

It's Tommaso who answers, his voice rich and full with an echo of Messy's inflection. "We don't know. We only know that he's been gone for a week, and he is not picking up calls from either of us. We've been looking for him, but it's harder for us to track each other."

I nod. Vampires have evolved to track prey using body heat. That

means that, as cold-blooded undead, they can't sense each other at a distance.

Tommaso continues, but the shadows under his brow deepen with every word. "We lost his trail, but we found something of his in a slaughterhouse. And we also found—blood. Purged blood. Bad blood."

My heart thuds. "Do you know for sure it was Felix who was purging?"

Messy shakes her head, squeezing her husband's hand. "We don't know anything for sure. But I hope... I hope it's not him. If it is..."

Vampires purge when they've ingested blood with sickness or drugs in it. And some of the easiest human prey in the city are homeless addicts and elders. "He could be feeding on animals..." I try, tentatively.

Messy lowers her eyes. The words seem to stick in her throat. "There was too much blood for that. Enough for a grown human."

Tommaso only stands straighter with his chest puffed out, some kind of defiance in his eyes. His energy buoys me up, making me respond with optimism.

“Messy, it’s going to be all right. I know Felix, *you* know Felix—he wouldn’t just go off the rails like that, not after fifty years of being just fine on Council rations. What if he’s just sick?”

Tommaso engulfs Messy’s hand in both of his own. “See, I told you! Our witch friend agrees!”

Messy tries to smile for her husband, but she can only spare him a quick glance before her eyes slide back to me. I see why; there’s too much bitterness in them. “Maybe. But fifty years is not as much to us as it is to you. Maso here is younger, but Felix and I... I am six hundred, and Felix is even older. Perhaps I... didn’t pay enough attention. Perhaps I didn’t realize that he was reaching his breaking point, being without fresh blood since the genocide. Fifty years... perhaps fifty years was as long as he could last.”

“That’s *not true*,” Tommaso insists, raising his voice to just shy of shouting. He stoops to be at eye level with her, his bear-like hands only holding hers tighter. “You know how strong he is. You *know*.”

Messy’s lower lip pulls down at the corners, and the red rims of her

eyes show. She can't cry—her body doesn't produce tears anymore—but she wipes her face with the back of her hand anyway, either out of instinct or practice.

“Just—please find him,” she manages to get out. “Once you find him, you don't have to confront him. Just tell us where he is. We—Tommaso and I—can handle it.”

She stands with a soft grunt of effort, and Tommaso rises with her. I can hear him as he envelops her in his arms, asking if she's alright, asking if they should close the restaurant for the night. But she speaks through a smile in between sniffles. “It's all right, my love. Go take Table 9's order. Michail is here, and I know you haven't seen him in a while.” She holds his cheeks and tiptoes to kiss him on the nose, then gently pushes him away. He goes, reluctantly, as she sits back down across from me.

I watch Tommaso leave, his posture slumped at first, then straightening as he reaches Table 9. He greets the customer loudly, and the two of them engage in a lot of manly guffaws and back-slapping. Messy watches them too, leaning her chin on one hand. Just the sight of Tommaso

laughing takes the tension from her face, her lips curling into an unconscious smile.

“...Messy,” I say, loathe to interrupt her happiness but knowing that I have to. “What is it you couldn’t say to me in front of Tommaso?”

She keeps her eyes on her husband, but I know she heard me. Her shoulders rise and fall with a deep breath. “There is... one last thing. I feel bad for even asking. I don’t want you risking yourself more than you have to, Harrietta, for your pretty girlfriend’s sake.”

I nod. “Of course.”

“But...” She finally turns back to me, her hands folding in on themselves. The lines on her face are more like cracks. “If you see that the Council has found him—”

“I’ll make *sure* they don’t, not before I do. I won’t let them be the ones to take him from you.”

There it is again, that smile with the bitter eyes. “Grazie. But what I mean is...” She looks up at the ceiling. Her retinas shine a milky blue. “You know what the Council did to us. To our kind, to our friends. The three of

us agreed that, if the Council ever hunted us down, we'd rather die at the hands of someone we love. So—I trust you. You know Felix trusts you. If... if it is between you and the Council—”

“Messy—Messy!” I don't even know what I'm saying, I'm just in such a rush to interrupt her. “It's not going to come to that, I *swear*. I'll do everything in my power to *keep* it from coming to that. I—I—”

She just looks at me, quietly. She doesn't even have to say anything. She can't afford to run from this conversation, and I'm wasting her time, wasting Felix's time, by trying. I stop babbling and just sigh, letting the heavy pit of fear and anxiety sink into its place in my stomach.

“Okay, Messy. If there's really no other option... I'll do it.”

She closes her eyes, her head falling slightly, settling naturally like a paper boat on water. “I knew you'd understand.”

I glance over at Tommaso, who's disappearing through the curtain that leads to the kitchen. “Is this something you've talked about with Maso?”

Guilt shows in the twist of her lip. “No. Maso is still young.” I open

my mouth to speak, and she hastily keeps going. “—Comparatively, I mean. He’s lived a hundred and thirty years—a mortal human could live that long. And so he still has the hope that—that life has ups and downs, and the times can get worse, but they can also get better. This... shining view of the world, he has always had it, even before he was turned. It was what caused Felix and I to fall for him. Why we dueled for him.” She smirks at the memory. “But my Maso can only think this way because, unlike Felix and I, he does not know how unprecedented the genocide was. That this way that we are living now, in the shadow of human mages, cannot just, ah... ‘blow over.’ He cannot imagine that maybe the good days are not coming back.” The smirk fades, and she inhales deeply. “So, I... I don’t want to hurt him, by showing him how bad it really is. He will learn on his own, one day. In truth, I hope he doesn’t. It would be lovely to have my sweet, sweet Maso stay hopeful forever.”

I stay quiet. I used to think immortals were lucky. I figured they didn’t feel emotions in the urgent, childish way that the rest of us do, all panicked under the ticking clock. But maybe it’s the opposite. Maybe they

don't have the comfort of an eventual, natural release from pain. So they just have to... deal.

Messalina reaches into the breast pocket of her jacket and pulls out a cravat, one I recognize as Felix's by the deep coloring and printed pattern of gold chain. "This is what we found in the slaughterhouse. It should be good enough to track him with, yes?"

"This is perfect, Messy."

She kisses it before she hands it to me, and her fingers tremble stiffly. She can't keep her eyes off of it, even as it transfers into my hand, then disappears into my jacket pocket. She stays like that, still as a corpse, until I lean forward to touch her shoulder, asking, "Messy?"

She startles. "Oh! Yes, sorry." She ducks her head to put her hat back on, tucking some loose hairs behind her ears. "Ah, I almost forgot—what is your rate? I would not ask you to work for free, of course."

"Oh, uh—how much of that four-thousand-dollar debt have I paid back to you so far? From when I bought all that blood from you?"

"A little over a thousand."

I do the math on my fingers. “Okay, so that leaves three thousand. And for finding a person, I’d charge five hundred a day... Messy, with my rates, that’s, like, a week. You don’t have to pay me anything, and if I find Felix in the time frame I’m hoping for, I’ll *still* owe you money.” I groan, putting my head in my hands. “I need a budget.”

Messalina laughs hoarsely, and it’s a welcome sound. “Don’t worry, I will continue to accept payment in form of imported skincare products. That Korean hand cream you got me last month is wonderful—here, feel!” She presents her hands to me, fingers extended all lady-like. They *are* very soft, and pleasantly cold and velvety, like old lady hands. I’m still complimenting them when I look up to see Kate coming back from the bathroom; I wave at her, and Messy stands up.

“Oh, wait,” I say, standing too and catching her before she leaves. “Can I get the usual?”

She grins, the points of her filed fangs peeking out. “Lava cake. Of course, sinner dear.” She flounces away, Kate peering after her as she takes her place.

“That was Messalina, right? Your friend?” Kate says, putting her purse down. Her lipstick has been reapplied, and I immediately mess it up again by bending to kiss her.

“Yeah, that’s her. She’s making us a lava cake.”

“Oof,” Kate says, her cheeks puffing up and her hand going to her stomach. “I’m pretty full—but for lava cake, I think I can pull through.”

She sits back down, but not before I steal another kiss, this time with tongue.

“Hey, I know what you’re doing,” Kate complains into my mouth.

“You keep messing up my lipstick, I *will* take you into the bathroom for a scolding.”

I lean back in my seat, using a thumb to swipe crimson lipstick off my mouth, then check my watch. “Well, the lava cake is going to take a few minutes. And I know you’re packing, so…” I prop my chin up with a hand and bat my eyelashes, wearing a cherubic smile.

Kate is already getting back up. “Bring that napkin,” she says.

“You’re going to need a gag.”