

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 beet red 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.

We might not be so brazenly corny at a different restaurant; but this is Messalina's Garlic Romance, a place practically built for *Lady and the Tramp* shenanigans by the most hopelessly romantic vampire trouple I've ever met. The place is tiny, reservation-only with five or six tables at the most, underground in both the literal and figurative sense. The cozy red brick walls are lit by warm yellow bulbs suspended from the ceiling at varying

heights like stars, the symbolism completed by a glowing crescent moon over the small bar.

I prompt Kate, "Try the scallions and blood sausage together, it's really good."

Kate sweeps a long auburn curl 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?"

"Vampires can still eat food. Nutritionally it doesn't do anything, but it takes the edge off their hunger, like popcorn and empty carbs... not that they'd be hungry in the first place if they could feed on live people. But Council rations come stale and disappointing all the time, so Messalina fixes it. She turns the blood from shitty protein shakes into big, delicious meals that trick vampires' brains into feeling full even with the low nutrition value."

Kate stops eating and looks down at her dish. "Does our food have human blood in it?"

I shake my head, clumsily twirling spaghetti on a fork with my left hand. "No, just pig and goose."

Kate sighs in relief and keeps eating.

We scrape our plates clean, mopping up extra sauce with soft bread and finishing 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, picks up her purse, and excuses herself to go to the bathroom; I lean to watch her go like the perv I am, even though she's dressed pretty modestly in this long, drapey sweater dress that satisfies both her classy aesthetic and permanent aversion to New York's winter chill.

Moments later, the white of a chef's jacket flashes into view as the titular Messalina slides into the empty seat across from me. "Sooo, how is the date going?" she asks, her accent Italian, her tone that of a mischievous, boozy aunt dipping her toes into the latest gossip.

“The date is going beautifully,” I assure her. “Kate loves your food—not that I’ve ever brought a date who didn’t.”

Messy smiles like a cat, patting the top of her flat black chef’s skull cap. She has a striking face with high, arcing brows, cut cheekbones, and a narrow, aquiline nose that ends in a sharp point, the type of profile to make a Renaissance painter cream. Probably did, once upon a time—at least, before the hollow eye sockets, barely translucent skin, and purple spider veins set in.

“*Harrietta* dear,” Messalina 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 can’t help my bubbling laughter. “Messy, I already told you I’m sorry. It’s not my fault we both got the flu, 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 is that your sister has not had time to fix you.”

“Heh, 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 accompanying smirk is as playful as ever—but it falters, the corner of her lip flickering in a losing bid to keep up the expression. That scares me, sends a wave churning in my stomach that tells me, *get ready*. She tries a moment longer to keep up the facade, but when she sees that I’ve already seen through it, she sighs and lets go, her face falling into an expression I can only describe as preemptive grief. She takes off her cap and holds it in front of her, showing her thin but well-kept curls gathered 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 reaches into her breast pocket and pulls out a digital watch on a clip, more utilitarian than heirloom. She checks the time, clips the watch onto the outside of her jacket, then twists slightly in her seat to call, "Maso?"

At his wife's voice, Tommaso looks up from behind the bar. He hurriedly rounds the counter, his tailored black shirt and waiter's waist apron stretching over his barrel-like chest 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?"

Lines appear around Messy's mouth. Tommaso steps in, his voice rich and deep with just an echo of Messy's inflection. "We don't know where Felix is. We wouldn't usually worry—he is who he is, and he has always needed his solitude. But it's been five days, and he isn't picking up any of our calls..."

“...And he wouldn’t let you worry like that,” I finish. Tommaso nods fervently, reaching for and squeezing his wife’s hand. It’s hard to tell which of them needs the contact more as Messy takes over talking.

“We have been looking for him, but we cannot move quickly enough without raising suspicions with the Council. You know they watch us; it is the cost of our business.”

I nod. I don’t know the minutia, but I know Garlic Romance has special permission from the Council to purchase their human blood rations for use as restaurant ingredients. No other vampire-run business in the city gets that much leeway—no legal ones, at least. That means they can’t step out of line. Ever.

Messy continues, “Felix has always been better at dodging their gazes than we are, even with his condition. Two days ago, one of our associates spotted him traveling alone in Brooklyn; we arrived too late to catch him, but discovered something of his in a warehouse.” She looks to Tommaso who, without letting go of her hand, produces a folded silk cravat from a pocket of his waist apron; I recognize it as Felix’s by the deep coloring and

printed pattern of gold chain. He gives it to me, and just by touch I can tell it's been washed and steamed, leaving it spotless and unwrinkled as though just out of a gift box.

"You cleaned it?" I ask as I turn it over in my hand.

Tommaso bites his lip. "We had to. It was soaked in blood—purged blood."

My heart. Thuds. 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. I find my grip on the cravat tightening. "How do you know it was purged?"

Messalina inhales shakily. "Purged blood has a—*distinct* smell. It is detectable even to a human with a sensitive nose. And my nose is never wrong."

"Could it have been animal blood? Rat, pigeon, dog...?"

Messalina shakes her head. "Human. Unmistakably."

As Messalina tightens her hold on his hand, Tommaso straightens up to his full height, chest puffed out, like he's becoming her pillar. His energy

buoys me up, makes optimism more possible; I straighten up too, offering the cravat to Messy across the table.

“Messy, it’s gonna be all right. I know Felix, *you* know Felix; he’s a godlier pacifist than the three of us combined. He’d *never* go off the rails like that. His migraines are probably just acting up, making him puke up old rations.”

Messy doesn’t look convinced, her fingers trembling as she takes back the cravat and holds it to her chest—until Tommaso’s arm urgently knocks into hers, almost making her drop it. “See, I told you!” he half-whispers. “Our witch friend agrees!”

Messy chuckles and nudges him back with her head, a little of the dread gone from her face. “You are right, amore, it makes the most sense. It is not desirable, and we still need to find him—but I should know better than to cast aspersions on our gloomy little padre.” She actually does smile at invoking their affectionately teasing nickname for him. It instantly eases Maso and me, our shoulders dropping simultaneously... though, I do notice

Messy's eyes flickering downward, quick and furtive, to the digital watch still clipped to her breast pocket. She addresses me again.

“Please, Harry, I would appreciate your help in finding him. We would not ask you to work for free, of course—”

The doorbell chimes, interrupting her and making Tommaso jump. “Shit,” he curses, “I forgot Petyr is reserved for seven thirty.” He looks back and forth between Messy and the door, looking younger than ever. “Should I...?”

Messy is already letting go of his hand and lightly pushing him away. “Go let them in. You should not keep your friends waiting.”

Tommaso hurries to the door, fixing his cuffs along the way; when he opens it, he's met with a chorus of pleased voices, the leader of the dining party immediately engaging him in a bout of manly guffaws and back-slapping. As Maso seats the veritable crowd of guests, Messy watches with her chin leaned on one hand, her lip curling into an unconscious, mournful half-smile.

“...Messy,” I say. “You didn’t forget that reservation was coming, did you?”

She keeps looking at her husband, but that’s answer enough.

“So... what couldn’t you say to me in front of Tommaso?”

Messy closes her eyes. Opens them. Her shoulders rise and fall with a deep breath.

“Harry. You and I know that Felix would never attack an innocent. His principles would have him starve first. If he *is* hunting humans, there must be a reason—an injustice, a ransom, a loss of rationality—*something*.”

“I know, Messy, I know.”

“But circumstances, reality, they do not matter to the Council. Not when a vampire is under judgment.” She holds up the silk cravat. “Had the Council found this before us, you know what they would have done. They would have taken Felix, like they took all of our friends during the genocide. They would have peeled his mind open like an orange and used what they found to descend upon the rest of us: our community, our business...” Her throat moves as she swallows. “...our Maso.”

Both of our gazes flicker over to Petyr's table; Tommaso has laid out menus for the party and is trying to retreat to the kitchen, but they keep insisting he sit down with them to catch up. He's still making a show of refusing as they pull up an extra chair and practically drag him into it; at the sound of his helpless, pleased laughter, Messalina meets my eye.

"The Council cannot take Felix alive. Were he in his right mind, he would know this and act accordingly; but I fear he is not in control. He cannot be, to have left this—" she indicates the cravat— "behind.

"We promised each other, even before we were lovers: Maso first. The rest of the world can burn, and we can burn with it. But not Maso. Never Maso. If someone, or something, has stolen Felix's ability to keep that promise... if the Council sets his sights on him, and he is not enough himself to cut his own throat... I need you to be his hands, Harry. His and mine."

I'm wishing now that I hadn't eaten so much bread; I can feel gas bubbling up my throat, unease churning my stomach. I try to swallow my feelings down with my saliva, gather the right words. Messy's eyes are like waterless, lightless wells. I feel an urge to run my mouth, to say stuff like

“That won’t happen” and “Everything’s going to be okay...” but that feels so childish and meaningless to say to someone who’s lived so much more life than me, who’s probably heard it a million times before in a thousand different languages.

So instead, I sigh, letting the heavy pit of fear and anxiety sink into its place in my stomach. I say, “Okay, Messy. I’ll do it. Only if the Council is coming for him, and only if there’s no other way, I’ll do it. Just... answer me this. Why are we having this conversation without Tommaso? Does he even know you’re asking this of me?”

Guilt shows in the twist of her lip. “No. He does not. And you cannot tell him.”

“Why?”

“He is... not like us. Like Felix and I, I mean. He still believes in... not miracles, exactly, but of an inherent balance. That the worse times are now, the better they will one day be; that immortality is the blessing of surviving to see those better times. That suffering has meaning, that struggle has value. This... shining view of the world, it was not surprising to find in a handsome

young waiter fresh off a boat on Ellis Island. But he is over a century old now, and he still holds it. He somehow is still strong enough to hold it, through the disappointment and sorrow that was the genocide, the second World War, and the world we live in now.

“Felix and I... we are too tired. Too worn down. How fast the world moves now—how quickly the tragedies come, with no room to breathe in between—we try not to show it to Maso, but it has already broken us. We were broken before we met him. Hope, it slips like water between our fingers. We cannot hold it. So we need Maso to hold it for us. The way Felix and I love each other, it comes from a sameness, a recognition of each other’s pain that only became possible because we were enamored of the same man. The way we both love Maso... we need him like air. Maso believes he needs us, but Felix and I both know: he could survive losing us. It would hurt him, deeply, but he could find enough meaning in the loss to carry on. He has the strength. But if Maso passed... we were already only here for him. He is the last thing that makes any of this worth it.

“He cannot know this is how we feel. There is nothing to be done about it, and so knowing would only give him a desperation to fix something that cannot be fixed. He would find himself at fault, somehow. He would lose sleep. No, he cannot find out. We cannot let him.”

Messy has twisted the silk around her fingers and is gripping it like a rosary. Her gaze drifts to her pocket watch and she startles, sitting up in her chair. “Ah, I am sorry, I distracted myself. You are not here to listen to an old woman’s ramblings.”

“Messy, it’s fine—”

She lifts the silk cravat, making it look like the golden chain pattern is drooping between her two hands. “Is this good enough to track Felix with? Perhaps we washed it too aggressively...”

“Don’t worry, it’s perfect. It would be harder to use with someone else’s blood on it.”

She kisses it before she hands it to me, her fingers trembling stiffly. I can tell she has to force herself to let it go, and she reoccupies her hands by smoothing her palms down the front of her jacket. “I meant to ask earlier,

but what is your rate for something like this? I would hate to exploit your labor.”

“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?”

“About fifteen hundred.”

“That leaves...” I stare at the ceiling as I count out loud. “Four... two, five... twenty five hundred. And for finding a person, I’d charge five hundred a day... Messy, that’s a whole ass work week. You don’t have to pay me anything—and if I find Felix fast enough, I’ll *still* owe *you* money.” I groan, putting my head in my hands. “I need a better budget.”

Messalina laughs, hoarsely, and it’s a welcome sound. “Don’t worry, Harry. Numbers are nothing compared to trust, and you have ours.” She inhales curtly and turns her head; I follow her gaze to see Kate coming back from the bathroom. I wave, and Messy stands up, redonning her cap—but before she can leave, I stand too and catch her sleeve.

“Wait, Messy, can I get the usual?”

She grins, the points of her filed fangs peeking out. “Lava cake. Of *course*, sinner dear.”

Kate looks ready to introduce herself as she comes over, shifting her purse to her shoulder to free up her hands—but Messalina sweeps agilely past her, only dipping her head slightly to acknowledge her presence. Kate blinks into the space Messy was just standing in, looking back and forth between me and Messy’s retreating form.

“That... was Messalina, right? Your friend?” she says.

She’s reapplied her lipstick, and I immediately mess it up again by bending to peck her on the lips. “Yeah, that’s her. She’s making us a lava cake.”

I pull out Kate’s chair and she sits down, her cheeks puffing up as she says, “*Oof*. I’m pretty full—but if this cake is as good as you’ve said, I’ll power through.”

I put off returning to my own seat to steal another kiss, this time with tongue—which is in bad form, because I know Kate is only comfortable with

a certain amount of PDA. But this dinner date is the first I've gotten to see her all day and I'm feeling attention-starved—not to mention a little bratty.

When her tongue leaves my mouth, I get greedy and chase after it—until Kate pinches my earlobe with ridiculously strong fingers, turning my happy kissy noises into “Ow ow ow *ow!*”

She keeps her grip to pull me closer, whispering, “Keep it in your pants, babygirl. Remember what happened last time you acted up in public?”

I *do* remember—which sends a shiver up my spine and tightens my grip on the back of Kate's chair.

Kate brushes my cheek with a finger. “I still have half of that Peruvian ginger root left in the fridge. Behave yourself.” She punctuates her point with a kiss to my cheek and one last affectionate tug of my earlobe.

I round the table, sit my ass down, and fold my hands angelically in front of me.

“*Much* better.” And she smiles that smile that dims everything around us but her, turns my whole world into the glow of her joy and affection and approval.

Ain't love something?