

## BLOOD SONG

### Chapter 1

I pulled the Miata to the curb and checked the address one more time. I stared at the building and the neighborhood. It wasn't what I'd expected. The interview I'd had with the Prince's retainer had taken place in a conference room at one of the very best Los Angeles hotels. In fact, at this moment I knew that the press and several royal bodyguards were stationed at that same hotel. This place was nice, palatial even, but it was far enough off the beaten path that I'd had to use Mapquest to find it.

I shut off the engine and looked down at the file sitting on the passenger seat. I thought about looking at it again, but I'd practically memorized the contents already. Prince Rezza of Rusland was in the United States with his father's blessing, meeting with private defense contractors. Publicly he was being the very image of a religious conservative. Rusland was a small kingdom in eastern Europe, nestled primarily between the Ukraine and Poland, touching on Checkoslavakia as well.

Rusland might be small in size, but it was gaining a whole new level of prominence politically thanks to the discovery of a huge supply of natural gas in the region. The Russians were practically apoplectic. Their control over Europe's natural gas supply was critical to their economy. Having a competitor practically next door wasn't making them happy.

Despite some common ancestors the Russians hadn't been happy with the Ruslanders . . . well, ever. Still, the little country managed to stubbornly exist as a monarchy in the face of socialism, communism, and rampant capitalism. How they'd managed not to be overrun by Germany during World War II, or absorbed into the Soviet Union after, was one of those burning political questions that nobody either could or would answer.

Traditionally the public religion of Rusland was Orthodox, but a fundamentalist regime was gaining power and influence. All in all the kind of political turmoil that makes you worry about assassination. The prince had very publicly declared his anti-American sentiments and allied himself with the zealots—who would not necessarily be pleased with his private plans while in LA. Which was why an imposter was taking his place for the evening, freeing the real prince up to do whatever it was he had in mind. The retainer had been fairly coy, but the prince's upcoming marriage had been made very public. So I was guessing this was the equivalent of sowing the last of his wild oats. Besides, using a stand-in is a fairly common ploy when people like royals are trying to ditch the paparazzi. It's difficult and expensive to find someone good enough at magic to do a long-term illusion, but they exist, and there's always the old fashioned 'body double.'

Whatever. I wasn't about to judge, especially not given Vicki's situation. My job is to keep the protectee safe. Celia Graves, personal security consultant. At one point or another I've served as a bodyguard for movie stars, politicians, authors, celebrities, and now, royalty. I protect them from the press, overzealous fans, and when necessary, from the monsters. I'm good at what I do, so I charge quite a lot and stay in business by myself, for myself. I'm *not* particularly good at the political and social sides of the job: too blunt; too sarcastic; not inclined to suck up and play nice. The 'attitude' has cost me jobs, so I try to work on it. . . and generally fail miserably.

I was getting ready to grab my jacket and climb out of the vehicle when I caught sight of

the brightly patterned photo envelope sticking out from beneath the folder. I checked my watch. I was early. I could spare a minute or two to look at the pictures from my best friend's birthday party this afternoon.

I grabbed the envelope, pulled it open and began flipping through the photos. The ones I'd taken weren't great. I'm no photographer. But the others, taken by one of the staff members at Vicki's insistence, were really nice. There were shots of Vicki blowing out her candles. There were flowers from Vicki's girlfriend Alex, and a balloon bouquet in the background. One or two really good shots of the two of us, and even more of her standing in front of the present I'd bought her.

Her face was absolutely alight with joy, and I couldn't help but smile in satisfaction. Unlike Christmas, or her last birthday, this time I'd actually managed to find the perfect gift. Vicki's a level nine clairvoyant. She uses a mirror to focus her gift. I'd found an antique mirror, backed with real silver, and had it put under multiple protection spells until it was well nigh unbreakable. That way she could have it in her room at Birchwoods.

I sighed. Vicki had been at Birchwoods, a high-end "treatment" facility, for almost five years now. She could probably move home. Then again, maybe not. A clairvoyant of her power could actually change the future if she got out of control. Right now she was stable, but I didn't doubt that the shielding and protected atmosphere of Birchwoods helped her. So it didn't surprise me that she showed no desire to leave, even though I knew Alex wanted the two of them to live together.

It was none of my business. Vicki might be sweet and quiet, but she had a will of iron. She would do what she was going to do, and that was the end of it.

I was still smiling as I stuffed the photos back in the envelope and tossed it back behind the passenger seat. It wouldn't do to have anyone spot them accidentally. As far as the world is concerned, Vicki is *not* at Birchwoods. Like the prince I was about to meet, she has a body double. Hired by her wealthy parents, the fake Vicki plays on the Riviera, vacations in the Hamptons, and skis the Swiss Alps—none of which the real Vicki has ever had the luxury to do.

Just thinking about that took away my smile, which was fine. It was time to get down to business. I climbed from the vehicle, grabbing my blazer from the passenger seat. I slid it on. It took a minute of shifting things around to get everything balanced comfortably. Despite the fact that it was practically a walking armory, the jacket didn't bulge. The tailoring and illusion spells cost a small fortune, but I consider it worth every penny. Hidden discreetly beneath that jacket I had not only the holster with my Colt, but also a pair of "One Shot" brand squirt guns filled with holy water, a stake, and a very special pair of knives. Oh, and a garrote. Mustn't forget the garrote, although honestly, I've never used it, and couldn't imagine drawing it quickly enough for use in a crisis. I was also wearing an ankle holster with a little Derringer, but if things got desperate enough for me to draw that, I was in deep shit. Still, when it comes to weapons, better too much than too little. Some of the older bats are damned hard to kill, and on my best day I wouldn't want to take on a werewolf or ghoul without backup.

I glanced down at my watch: ten-fifteen. I wasn't due on shift until eleven. I still had plenty of time to use the nifty new gadget I'd picked up at my favorite weapons shop. I reached behind the front seat and pulled out a black box not much larger than the wallet I carried in my back pocket. The lid was hinged, like a jewelry case, with the store's logo embossed on it in red foil. Very classy. Considering the price, it should be. I'd actually thought twice about whether or not to get it. But if it worked as well as advertised, it would be worth the money.

I grinned. I'm such a geek. I love gadgets, and this one was sweet. I could hardly wait to take it for a test drive.

Flipping open the lid revealed what looked like a Matchbox car and a small remote. Made primarily of silver, the little car gleamed in the light of the street lamp overhead. I set the tiny vehicle onto the pavement at my feet, facing the building where the Prince was staying. I took out the remote, then closed the box and slid it into my front pocket. Pressing a small green button on the remote, I said, "Perimeter check" as clearly as I could. The little vehicle zipped forward with astonishing speed. It stopped just inside the driveway of the building and turned sharply right. I followed on foot, watching in pleasure as, with a soft whirring noise, it traced the invisible magical barrier that surrounded the building, protecting those inside from preternatural creatures. I followed it over well-lit lawns, around to the one-lane service road that ran along the back of the building. Abruptly, the little car stopped, emitting a sharp, high-pitched whistle. A light on the remote in my hand began flashing red.

I looked from the remote to the car and back again. "Well, hell. This can't be good." I rummaged in my pocket to withdraw the box where there'd no doubt be the instruction manual that I should've read ahead of time but hadn't. Oops. It took a minute, but I finally managed to retrieve the instruction booklet and flip to the appropriate page.

*When encountering a perimeter break the unit will issue a warning in the form of a whistle.*

No kidding. I never would've guessed. But that didn't explain the light show.

*The type of energy causing the break will be indicated by color on the transmitter unit. Green indicates the presence of ghouls or other necromantic magics; amber, werewolves; blue, vampires. A red flashing light indicates non-vampiric demonic energy. A continuous red light indicates a current presence.*

"A demon?" I stared at the remote in my hands in disbelief, my hand shaking the tiniest bit. Yes, the demonic exists. So does the angelic. But it's not like I run into either of them every day. In fact, unless a person works for one of the militant religious orders, they probably will go their entire *life* without running into either the angelic or the demonic—other than vampires. Real demons are *rare*. Which is good. Particularly if you didn't have the clearest conscience in the world. How bad a problem this was depended on whether we were looking at a half-demon spawn, an imp, or a lesser or greater demon. But even flipping desperately through the directions, I didn't see any way of telling which it might be.

Crap. I mean, good news, the light was flashing. Bad news, it was red; I was dealing with a freaking demon of one level or another, and the barrier was down.

I needed to fix this. Fast. I'm neither a mage nor a true believer. About the only thing I had on me right now that would hurt anything demonic was the holy water in my One-Shots. One-Shot being both the brand and a literal description. For a vampire, it would burn like acid, hopefully buying me enough time to kill it with one of my other weapons. But this wasn't a simple bat. It had taken something big and bad to break through a standing magical barrier like this. If I wound up facing whatever it was my little squirt gun would probably just piss it off.

*Think, Girl. . . think. You need the barrier back up, at least long enough to call in a mage or a warrior priest.*

If there was enough residual magic left from before the break I *might* be able to get the barrier partway back up if I could reseal the break. It wouldn't be as strong, but it would be better than nothing. Of course, if I sealed the barrier I *might* be sealing the demon *in*.

I debated the pros and cons for a few seconds, and decided it was better to get the barrier up. If I sealed it in, we'd have it in a contained area when the priests arrived. If I sealed it *out*, more the better.

I slid remote and manual into my jacket pocket and drew out one of my two little plastic squirt guns. I really didn't want to use both. I might wind up needing one if the demon was still around. Ever so carefully, I drew out the refilling plug and began dribbling holy water in a delicate line. As every drop hit the ground, the little scanner moved forward, the headache-inducing whistle giving a little hiccup before restarting. Still, when the last drop fell and my little gun was dry, the gap snapped shut. I knew this because the little silver car went silent and shot along the re-raised barrier, around the corner and out of sight.

I jogged after it, across the asphalt and sprinkler-soaked grass, all the while keeping alert for anything out of the ordinary. My head was throbbing from the combined effects of stress and that ear-piercing whistle.

I would like to say I was surprised that no one came to a window or door to check out the racket. Sadly, I wasn't. Alarms mean trouble. People don't *like* trouble. On the whole, most of them will cower behind charmed thresholds or inside power circles, hoping and praying that whatever's out there will pass them by.

I came around the corner just a few feet from where I'd started, to find a blocky man dressed in the kind of nice clothes that wouldn't look out of place in the better clubs, but would still hide the same kind of arsenal I was carrying. He stood on the perimeter, holding the probe in his hand, examining it with a rapt expression on his face.

I came to a skidding halt in the wet grass. "Johnson?" I stared in disbelief. It was Bob. It really was. Seeing him standing there made me feel better. Because Bob Johnson is an experienced professional. Hell, he's the man who'd convinced me to go into the business when I first got out of college. Everyone else had told me that a "vanilla" mortal with no magic or psychic abilities had no business fighting the monsters. Bob said that *no* human was a match for the monsters, talent or no, that the two things that were most important were brains and good equipment. I'm not stupid, and I'm willing to pay for top of the line weaponry.

I met Bob when Vicki's grandfather hired him to work up the security for her estate. It had been the old man's "housewarming gift." I'd watched Bob set everything up. He'd been patient enough to explain the how and why of everything he did—let me follow him around for days. It was obvious he knew his stuff. With an almost unlimited budget to play with, he'd done one hell of a job. I'd been impressed at the time. I still was.

His plain features lit up with a delighted smile. He brushed a hand over shaggy hair the color of warm honey. "Celia Graves, as I live and breathe. Don't tell me you're here to guard the prince?"

I nodded my affirmative, and his grin widened. "Is this yours?" He held out his hand to me. The little scanner looked almost impossibly tiny balanced in his huge palm.

"Yup. Just bought it this afternoon. Works like a champ."

"I heard. But why didn't you put it on stealth mode? What good is the deluxe model if you don't use all the bells?"

"There's a stealth mode?" Yow! I couldn't help but grin—nearly identical to the one Bob had on his face.

He snorted and rolled his eyes, but proceeded to flip the little car over and show me a switch I hadn't noticed before. "So what was with the alarm?"

I told him about the break in the perimeter. His expression sobered instantly. He handed me my car without any fuss and said. “Show me.”

I showed him. He didn’t have a lot of magical talent—almost none really. But that didn’t keep him from squatting down and using what little he did have to test the area around my little “fix it” job.

He looked up at me, his expression serious. “This isn’t going to hold up for more than a few minutes. We need to get upstairs, warn the client, and call in the cavalry.”

“Agreed.”

I let him take lead. Neither of us had a weapon drawn, but our jackets were open, our hands loose so that we could react in a hurry if need be. We moved deliberately toward the side entrance, eyes scanning the area for any sign of trouble.

Nothing. Not a damned thing. It should’ve reassured me. Instead, I felt the tension in my shoulders tighten another notch. Why would a demon break a barrier and then just *leave*?

I turned to the side, providing cover as Bob took the wallet from his back pocket and pulled out a key card. I’d been provided a similar card when I’d been hired. From the corner of my eye I saw him slide the card through the black security box. A series of small lights flashed green. When the last one lit, I heard the lock on the door click open.

We stepped inside and the door swung shut, locks and spells closing behind us. I waited as he repeated the process with the service elevator.

I blinked, trying hard not to stare as I caught sight of him in the polished stainless steel door. His whole body language had changed. He looked like *hell*. Oh, he was still clean, and the clothes were pressed. But there was this sense of *defeat* about him. You could almost smell it, like a cheap cologne. It showed in the slight slump of his broad shoulders, the hesitation in his movements that had never been there before. He was pale—but then he’d been living on the east coast. Probably hadn’t had a lot of beach time. Still, there’s pale and there’s *pale*. I hesitated, trying to think what to say, and couldn’t come up with a damned thing that wasn’t prying. So I reached forward to hit the intercom button.

“Celia Graves.” I pronounced each syllable of my name clearly as I held down the button to the intercom speaker.

“Bob Johnson.”

The two of us turned to face the security camera, giving them a good look. I didn’t bother to glance up at the monitor mounted near the ceiling in the corner.

“So,” he said, while we waited for someone to answer. “You’re looking good—really good. The business must be agreeing with you.”

It was my turn to snort. “Hardly, but thanks.” I unconsciously smoothed fingers against my ash blonde hair. The hair is shoulder length at the moment, longer than I like to keep it. I’ve had enough business that I haven’t had a chance to get it cut. If I hadn’t been wearing it pulled it back it’d be driving me crazy.

“No, really. You’re closing in on beautiful tonight.”

That made me stare at him with an open mouth. I am *not* beautiful. Oh, sure, I have pretty good bone structure, but my features that are too harsh to be considered traditionally pretty. I’m too tall, at 5’10”, for my body type and my skin goes beyond ‘creamy’ to nearly goth pale. My last boyfriend described my eyes as the gray of storm clouds with chips of ice. A fair enough description, and certainly more poetic than I would have expected.

“I’d better *not* look beautiful. Seriously, Bob. That’s not good for business. Be honest. Is

this outfit too . . . much?" I looked down at my clothes and then looked up at his face. He finally understood what I was talking about and my question made him look at me critically. I was wearing mostly black, from the comfortable flats on my feet, to my jeans and blazer. The only contrast was the deep burgundy of my blouse. Well, that and the garnet earrings I was wearing that matched it. I'd put on make-up, but it was minimal. I was, after all, here on business. I've noticed that if I look too good male clients get the wrong impression—start treating it as a date—and the other bodyguards don't take me seriously. Better to keep things simple and avoid misunderstandings.

He'd just opened his mouth to reply when a voice came through the speaker above. "You're early." The tone made it sound like we'd done a bad thing, but I heard the whir of machinery as the private elevator descended toward us from the penthouse.

"We came early to check the perimeter for threats. There was a problem." Bob did his best bored, professional voice. "We'll need to report it to the authorities."

I could've sworn I heard swearing in the instant before the intercom was cut off. It surprised me a little. One of the first things I'd learned as a professional was that you don't let the protectee know you're upset. Concerned is okay. But you stay calm. Emotions just get in the way, so you bury them deep. Don't get me wrong, you still feel them, but they're under control and they *don't* show.

Which meant somebody upstairs wasn't a professional. Terrific. I just love working with amateurs. (And if you believe that, there's this bridge. . .)

I cast a meaningful look at Bob, and he rolled his eyes. We stood in silence for a few seconds. In the end he was the one who spoke first.

"The outfit is fine. Not overdone. Sorry. I understand how compliments can be a double-edged sword." He paused. "So, how's Vicki?"

I shrugged off the compliment. He'd meant well, but . . . well, it does always worry me. "Still in the hospital. She seems to like it there." She did. I'd have felt trapped, but she liked the safety of it. "How's Vanessa?"

He flinched, and I saw a flash of pain in his eyes before he was able to hide it. "We're divorced." He closed his eyes for a second. When he opened them again, his face was a pleasant mask. "Back on the market again." He smiled, but I knew him well enough to know he didn't mean it. "She got everything except the clothes on my back and my weapons. That's the main reason I took this job. I didn't really like the look of the guy they sent to talk to me, but I needed the money."

"Speaking of weapons, what have you got on you?"

He held open his jacket to show me his main gun, a Glock Safe Action 9mm in a custom leather holster. Loops in the lining of his jacket held a pair of throwing knives. I knew they had high silver content, and could tell from the engraving that he'd sprung for the throwing accuracy spells. But that was it. Which was *so* not like him that I was actually taken aback. I tried to hide my surprise, but it must've shown because he answered me, his voice gruff with embarrassment.

"I had to pawn some of my stuff to pay for the ticket out."

Well *shit*. I really didn't know what to say in response to that, so I kept my mouth shut. It just seemed safer.

"Well? I showed you mine—" He made a gesture that was more a demand than an invitation. Which was fair, I suppose. But I was almost embarrassed to show him. Stealing myself I held open the jacket and watched his eyes widen as he took inventory of my armament.

“Damn, girl! And it doesn’t even show.”

“Special tailoring and spells on the jacket,” I admitted. “And I had the sleeves made wide enough that I could draw my knives.” I did just that, pulling one with a smooth, easy draw. I held it out to him hilt first. Anybody else, I wouldn’t have shown the knives. They were a gift from Vicki and are valuable as hell. The spell work on them is such that they rank as major magical artifacts. People have killed to get their hands on that sort of thing. For me, though, they were a major part of my kit, because a single scratch from the blade will kill pretty much any of the monsters. I never wanted to get close enough to have to use them, but I damned well wanted to have them. . . just in case.

Bob let out a long, low whistle as he ran his hands over the polished wood handle. I was guessing he was testing the spell work as well, but couldn’t be sure. “Damn girl, you get the *best* toys.”

“Gift from Vicki.” I admitted.

He shook his head and passed the knife back with what was almost reverence. “Keep those out of sight if you can. Don’t want to invite trouble.”

I just nodded my assent and thought about the possibility of trouble. Something about this job was bugging me. (Other than the obvious demon thing). It wasn’t anything big, just a pebble in your shoe kind of thing. Bob had said he didn’t like the guy who’d interviewed him. I couldn’t say I disagreed. The guy I’d talked to had been vague about details of the job to the point of being coy. I don’t *like* coy. He’d answered my questions in ways that really didn’t tell me much of anything. I’d come damned close to rejecting the job.

And then there was the fact that I suspected I might have been chosen just because I was a woman, to force Rezza into towing his father’s progressive line.

Don’t get me wrong, there are cases when a woman is specifically needed—you get a female client, they need someone who can check out the ladies room without problems, go into dressing rooms. But that wasn’t what this was supposed to be.

“I feel better knowing you’re here.” Bob admitted quietly.

“Back atcha, big guy.”

The elevator bell rang. We stepped inside the elegantly appointed cabin. Pressing the button for the top floor, I turned to face the front as the doors whooshed smoothly closed. When they reopened I stepped into an expansive living space. One entire wall was a bank of windows, open to show a panoramic view of the city lights sparkling below.

Stupid. Unless those windows were bulletproof, I could see three perfect spots for a sniper’s roost, and that was without really trying. I thought about the demon again. What if he was in the room with us already? I needed to figure out a way to check each person. I couldn’t do it openly for fear of a violent reaction with possible hostages. But leaking a little holy water onto my palm and then shaking hands with everyone would just look like I had sweaty palms.

“You’re early.” The retainer repeated his earlier complaint. In photographs in my research file, he was always just a pace behind the king, always with the same dour expression. I turned to face him, keeping my expression neutral. He stepped away from a group of men standing by the bar. His voice was disapproving. I’d thought that the photos just made him look cranky, but they’d only captured the real him. I immediately felt sorry for whoever his significant other might be.

Standing at about five nine, he was a little bit shorter than me. I could tell he didn’t like it. He was apparently used to looking down that beakish nose and glaring with those beady black

eyes until the person opposing him backed down. If that's what he wanted, he'd picked the wrong girl. I wouldn't start trouble. Certainly not with a client. But I wouldn't grovel or toady either. Wouldn't be much use as a bodyguard if I did. I gave him the pleasant, not-quite-blank expression I reserve for difficult clients. He didn't seem to like that either. Sometimes, you just can't win. I held out my water soaked hand. He looked at it like it was distasteful bug.

Crap. Now what?

I lowered my hand after a few awkward moments. There would be other opportunities before we left. "I came in a little ahead of time to check the perimeter, meet up with the other guards, find out who's going to be in charge and iron out the details." I sounded polite, professional, without even a hint of irritation or sarcasm. My Gran would be so proud.

"I will be in charge."

The man who glided away from the bar spoke with a hint of an accent and more than a hint of condescension. I recognized him from his pictures. The prince was six two and slender, he moved with a sleek grace that should have been effeminate but wasn't. He was wearing gray dress slacks with a cream colored silk shirt that had enough buttons left open to expose a lightly muscled but hairless chest. His light brown curls were artfully mussed; his dark eyes narrowed with appraisal as he looked me over from head to foot. He kept his hands clasped behind his back.

"Ultimately, of course," I gave a respectful nod, "but generally with a multi-person team, there's a coordinator the other guards report to. I was wondering who that was going to be."

He stopped, barely two inches away from me. I think he expected me to react. He was used to women reacting sexually and men backing down. I didn't do either. I simply stood my ground, pleasant and impassive, waiting for him to respond. I was pretty sure I knew what he was going to say. But maybe I was wrong. Surely he wasn't *that* much of an idiot—

"I will be in charge." He repeated.

Apparently he *was* that much of an idiot. Oh joy. I cringed inwardly, but kept my mouth shut, counting to ten so that I wouldn't say anything stupid. I could walk away from the job, but the money was damned good and the connections were better. Any small business grows by word-of-mouth referrals. Tick him off and I could be going hungry for a long time. But it was tempting. Because his stupidity could get me killed. On the other hand, Bob was here. He'd have my back—and I'd have his. Risking my life is part of what I get paid for. And, again, I was going to be getting an almost obscene amount of money for this.

I glanced across the room to where the rest of the security team was standing. I mean, I couldn't actually be the only person worried about this, the only one to notice the prince's glassy, bloodshot eyes, could I? Surely *somebody* else was bothered by the situation?

Two of the guards stared past me as if I were beneath their notice. I felt my jaw clench, and had to force myself not to grind my teeth. I didn't know either of them, which surprised me. I'm fairly well connected in the industry. I've worked with most of the independents at one time or another, and most of them have come to respect my abilities and treat me as an equal. I'd have bet half of what I was making that they were pissed because I was a woman. I've dealt with the prejudice before. You'd think I'd be used to it.

You'd be wrong.

Bob's soft cough drew everyone's attention while I was shaking hands with the third guard. He was clean . . . or at least *human*.

"We checked the perimeter. There was evidence it had been broken by a demonic

presence. Ms. Graves put together a temporary patch, but we need to contact the authorities.”

He said my name as if he'd never met me before tonight. I might have said something, but he gave me a quelling look. He was probably right. The prince didn't seem the type to appreciate socializing amongst the staff, and it wouldn't do to have the other guards pissed at *him* too.

The prince's eyes narrowed, and he gave me a long, assessing look. “My people contacted the authorities while you were on your way up.” He turned to one of the nearest retainers, a short, square man with blunt features and small dark eyes, “Jean Paul, take Josef downstairs and deal with Ms. Graves' ‘patch.’”

The two men hustled off, not looking particularly happy. Then again, they didn't seem the sort to be happy about much of anything. Maybe they were paid to be surly. In which case, Josef deserved a bonus.

Prince Rezza stared at me, trying to judge my reaction. I tried to keep it neutral, but failed. His expression darkened. “It's being dealt with. Satisfied?” His tone was challenging.

Not really. I'd be more satisfied when some of the militant religious were on scene. But saying that would just piss him off more. So would forcibly touching him. It might even create an international incident. We'd already started off on the wrong foot, so I kept my mouth shut and gave a curt nod.

“Good.”