

VENGEANCE BE MINE

Chapter One

There is a saying amongst vengeance demons—justice comes slowly, but surely.

Or on rare occasions, it could hit hard and fast, like the waves of contractions my male target was experiencing as I stood over him.

“Make it stop. I’m begging,” he groaned, arching his back on the hotel bed. His T-shirt was drenched, like in those bar contests he frequented, revealing the long torso and lean six-pack of an athlete in his prime. He looked up at me, his brown eyes pleading, and his gaze unfocused—the way humans got when they were in pain.

“Mr. Lodge, it’s not even midnight yet. We’ve got another four hours of torment to go, according to my work order.” I tried to sound professional, but my nineteen-year-old voice was just a bit on the squeaky side, even to my own ears. The business of vengeance was harder than I’d ever thought possible.

This was my first solo practice session after a year of in-class lectures at the University of Demonic Studies, Faculty of Arts and Vengeance. I needed it to go well.

Problem was, none of my textbooks mentioned how to deal with a crybaby.

A crying *man*-baby.

MVP Jeremy Lodge, aka “The Machine,” clutched his stomach and whimpered. The famous basketball star was known for striking fear in the hearts of opposing teams all over the world, but now the only thing that came knocking was another contraction.

“What’s happening?” The Machine panted during a respite, the tranquility of the hotel room clearly lost on him. There was soft light from the paper lantern overhead and a fluffy sand-colored carpet one could sink one’s toes into. The sliding doors made of mint-frosted glass added a touch of modern elegance to the five-star suite.

What was happening? What a question.

When I’d fantasized about getting my vengeance demon designation, this was the part I’d found the most satisfying—telling the target how his actions had led to the consequences he was facing.

“A taste of childbirth pain, which is a fitting punishment for cheating on your pregnant wife with the whole cheerleading squad.”

I had to pat myself on the shoulder for coming up with *that* particular punishment. Why exact a boring old vengeance when you could spice it up with a cool, ironic twist?

“You little bitch!” The Machine pounded his enormous fist on the mattress.

“Hey, the name is Megan. Not bitch. Not little.” I gritted my teeth.

“Fuck you!”

I pushed aside my first instinct—getting mad or, worse, scared. I’d been insulted before,

but usually with more subtlety than that. I guess humans weren't exactly subtle creatures. It might also be the difference between having the cuss words tossed at me, rather than learning them in a classroom setting. I forced myself to unclench my fists, my fingernails peeling away almost reluctantly from the imprints they dug into my palms. There was a magical barrier between us, and I was in control.

Even though it was my first time alone with a target.

I straightened. Never show fear, they'd taught us in *Occupational Insults & Threats 101*. "Bad manners will only get me mad and extend your punishment."

"I'm going to kill you," he snarled.

"Alright, an extra ten minutes it is."

Was insisting on ten too harsh? Should I have said five? I caught myself brushing my fingertips over the edge of the pocket-sized training manual currently pressed against my jean-clad bum. This being my first time, I'd packed the mini-bible along just in case. Now I longed to take it out and flip to the chapter on *How to Deal With the Misgivings of Hurting In the Name of Justice*, because every single moan that came out of The Machine hit my guts like ice water. Since I wasn't the target's direct victim, it was hard for me to establish him as the total bad guy in my mind, and part of me felt bad about administrating the suffering to him. Green, green, green—that was what I was.

Come on, Megan. You can't afford a soft heart. You want to help people, remember? Keeping balance in the world is helping them.

I sometimes forgot how annoyingly logical my inner voice could be.

"I swear, I'm going to kill you," The Machine repeated, every muscle on his body taut, his eyes promising death and destruction. Had I been a mortal, I would have been scared shitless.

I sighed. "I heard you the first time. How about you try *not* cheating in the future?"

The Machine looked ready to explode into a string of curses when his eyes widened to the size of saucers. Halftime was over, and there was no sitting this round out.

"Alright, listen up." I hastily leaned over. I had under a minute to get him to understand. "Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. In for three, then out for three. Come on, I've read these exercises on your Internet and it should help."

Oh boy, it was going to be a long night. At least the target was contained within a dome-shaped energy barrier covering the entire bed. An attack from over two hundred pounds of pure muscle was something I did not need.

And so the labor carried on past midnight. And on. And on.

According to my training manual, I was supposed to stay with the target throughout the entire process. I tried, I really did. But after three hours of his moaning and bitching, I'd had enough. Why, oh why, was my fickle magic able to mute the noise for all humans within hearing range, but not for me?

The grating sound of torment caused my head to pound with the intensity of a full-blown aura migraine, the queen of all migraines that even a supernatural being couldn't escape. First came the offending aura; a whirling circle of flashing light the size of a penny appeared in my visual field. Soon, it expanded to cover most of my vision, pretty much blinding me. When the aura dissipated, that was when the nausea, dizziness, and excruciating pain in my skull started. Fun.

I stumbled out of the bedroom and sank down on the sofa in the dim living room, my temples throbbing. There was still another hour of vengeance to go, but my magic should maintain his torment for a while in my absence. Right now, my priority was to survive until this

terrible pain in my skull went away, and that meant putting some distance between The Machine and me.

It was two in the morning, and the floor-to-ceiling window greeted me with a view of the Toronto Harbor. Mercifully, the yachts pushed only feeble light into the surrounding darkness, and the undisturbed water calmed my nerves. I did mention I was sensitive to light in my current state, right?

I hoped it would get easier with each job, like Dad had claimed.

At long last my migraine subsided, but I wasn't ready to face the howling athlete just yet. I was still on the clock, and The Machine was still suffering. Who was there to see that I wasn't actually *in* the room the entire time? I just needed a few more minutes. It was more than fair, considering the occupational hazard.

As if on cue, The Machine's wails took on a kicked-in-the-balls tone, only to change pitch midway into a string of inventive swear words, most of which I'd never even heard before.

I turned on the lights, took out *Renters Weekly* from my backpack and sifted through the roommates-wanted ads. Now that the in-class segment of my demon education was almost over, bye-bye college dorm, hello sweet independence.

As I lost myself in the magazine, The Machine's yowls faded to nothing but ambient noise.

These human females sure were easy to please. Being a non-smoker with no pets that mortal eyes could see and no qualms about living in dodgy neighborhoods, I had my pick of the lot.

At some point, the screaming stopped and there was a distant thud. Huh, I wonder what that was all—

Wow, look at this ad with the most amazing feature ever: "3 meals/day incl. I'm a culinary student and I LOVE cooking!"

My mouth watered. It would be like living on the Food Network 24/7. As a half demon, I might not *need* to eat, but I sure *liked* to. Stuffed mushrooms, seared scallops with pancetta, fluffy soufflés...

"Ahem." Someone cleared her throat from the edge of the sofa.

I jumped, sending the thick rental magazine to the floor with a *smack*.

A slender figure in a tailored, taupe business suit and genuine sea pearl necklace graced the living room with her stern feminine presence.

Crap.

It was my turn to clear my throat. A lump formed at the base of it, the blockage nonexistent just seconds ago. "Hello, Enid. I didn't hear you teleporting in."

A moment of silence.

My heart raced guiltily and I shifted my weight, feigning sudden interest in a spot on my right shoe. The image of The Machine trapped in bed, going through the routine of tears and pain without proper supervision, came to mind. Damn, talk about rotten timing. I suppose that was why they called it a *surprise* inspection. How could I not have realized I'd get into trouble the moment I stepped out of line? It'd been happening since that one time I'd tried to talk behind the teacher's back in grade two history class.

Enid was a middle-age brunette with a tightly coiled hair bun and thick-rimmed glasses. She showed off her maturity not with the tiny crow's feet around her eyes, since anyone could get them with the purchase of a bag of semi-permanent faery dust, but from the well-measured power she carried around. That kind of discipline took decades to hone, and my program mentor was a lady who meant business.

After a year of in-class lectures, students like me were eligible to join the co-op program with Enid's approval. Given the serious expression on her face right now, I needed to convince her I was responsible and reliable, which I wasn't exactly doing by being caught taking this little breather.

"Megan, in our line of work, control is an art," Enid began with quiet dignity. "Making the targets suffer just enough—"

I lifted my head. "I'm so sorry. I got a migraine and stepped out for just a mo—"

"—without scaring them to death." Enid stared at me. "Or pushing them to commit suicide."

I swallowed. "Suicide?"

Shit, what have I done? How could The Machine be dead? I left him for, like, five seconds. I'd painstakingly tested the dome-shaped barriers in the school lab. Was it my flaky magic, failing me when it most counted? Or did I overlook a procedure somewhere along the line? Didn't matter. The guy still died on my watch. Dammit.

Without another word, Enid led me into the bedroom—which was empty. She gestured towards the French doors and the balcony. "Twenty-two stories down. He landed on the concrete, poolside."

I winced. I might not have cared for the cheating bastard's lifestyle, but that didn't mean I wanted him dead. And there was his wife to think about, not to mention his newborn baby. From what I heard, it was expensive to raise kids, no matter what plane they were born into.

"You can reverse it, right?" I asked Enid urgently.

"Of course." My mentor nodded towards the window. "I've already called Reapers 'R' Us to cancel the dispatch. But you get a mark of zero in this practice session."

I wanted to kick something or cry. A mark of zero. After all the group practice sessions and hard work. I didn't realize until now that a part of me honestly thought I'd aced this with no issues. It was demoralizing to screw up in such a disastrous manner.

Alright, chin up and do some damage control. You lost the battle, but not the war. Try saying something contrite and repenting. You can't afford to fail this semester. Not if you want to move out of the dorm and get away from those dreadful girls.

"What does *he* get?" I heard myself ask. I couldn't help it. I might not want The Machine dead, but the idea of him getting off scot-free, with no memory of his punishment, didn't sit well with me, either. Maybe I just plain sucked at the whole detachment thing they valued in school.

"Something a little less...heavy." I could've sworn there was just the tiniest curve at the corners of Enid's mouth. In an instant, the facial expression made my usually austere mentor appear a decade younger.

"Like what?" Now I was intrigued.

"A period."