

## VENGEANCE UNCLAIMED

I was in the middle of stuffing my face with my roommate's truly awesome blueberry muffins when the phone rang, which led to two very unhappy discoveries.

One, I'd been sleeping, which meant those yummy muffins weren't real. Damn.

Two, I'd been sleeping. And now I was not. On a Saturday morning, a day without classes. Double damn.

I reached over to grab the phone on the bedside table and spoke groggily into the receiver. "Hello."

"Megan, sweetie. How are you?" Mom asked. Did her cheerful tone sound just a little too forced? I was too sluggish to tell.

A quick check on my cell showed it was four-thirty in the morning. It was late, even by the standards of my night owl mom.

"I'm good. What's up?" I yawned and snaked my tongue around my molars in a futile attempt to taste the blueberry muffins again, until I realized there was nothing but silence on the receiver end for far too long.

"Er, Mom? You still there?" Now I was fully awake, my heart galloping. What the heck was she calling me this early for? Did something happen? My dad, an arch vengeance demon, wasn't exactly in a desk job line of work. Not that he was that killable, but still. *Please don't let it be bad news. Please don't let it be bad news.*

"I am, dear." Mom cleared her throat. "So, how do you feel about Hawaii?"

Hawaii? I released the breath I was holding. Here I was worrying that it was something dire, and she wanted to talk about vacation spots.

"On the human or the vengeance plane?" The two planes were parallel universes, with vengeance demons being responsible for the justice of the human world and beyond.

"The vengeance side, of course. We want to be able to perform magic openly during our vacation."

"For next summer? Sure." With everyone so busy with their own careers, we'd saved the date for the family trip almost a year in advance. "Listen, can we talk about this tomorrow morning—"

"No, I mean Hawaii for this weekend," Mom clarified.

"Wait, what?"

"We're doing a spur-of-the-moment vacation in Hawaii as a family." Mom laughed in an aren't-we-just-a-spontaneous-bunch kind of way. I wasn't buying it. "This is a long weekend for you anyway, isn't it?"

"Of course." The coming Monday was the Day of Contemplation, a statutory holiday for vengeance demons. All classes at the University of Demonic Studies were cancelled.

"Perfect. I'll text you the name of the beach resort we've just booked—"

"Hold on." Something was not right. Mom was well aware of my original plan to stay in and study. As a hybrid with a vengeance demon father and a trickster mother, I had to work hard

to keep up with the rest of my vengeance class. “Why do you want us to leave town so suddenly? What’s going on?”

“Nothing. It’s just been a while since we spent quality family time together, and I don’t want to wait until next summer, that’s all.”

“Mom, you’re a terrible liar, you know that? What’s really happening?”

Mom sighed. “The coming Monday is not just the Day of Contemplation. It’s also the Day of Shenanigans for us tricksters.”

“What?” I yelled, then lowered my voice in fear that my human roommate would come running.

Given that the Day of Contemplation was a time for quiet reflection of the vengeance performed over the past year, and the Day of Shenanigans was a jubilant celebration of all things chaotic, how the heck was I, a child of both worlds, supposed to observe both festivals on the same day? While I had finally reached a point in my life where I was at peace with my dual natures, I was never big on holidays, and the vengeance one sounded as boring as the trickster one was over-exuberant. Talk about a rock and a hard place.

“I thought the Day of Shenanigans wasn’t for another month.” I sounded whiny even to my own ears.

“It’s changed this year,” Mom explained.

“Again?”

“You know how the trickster calendar works.”

Just like how there were two human calendars—Gregorian and Lunar—trickster and vengeance demons ran on different ones as well. The discrepancy had led to all trickster-calendar-based holidays landing on different dates on the vengeance calendar every year. For example, my mom’s birthday, which was in March according to the trickster calendar, was sometimes in February, April, or even January.

Way to get a child into trouble for not remembering.

“So this year, both holidays just happen to be on the same day?” I said incredulously.

“The first time in a thousand years,” Mom confirmed.

“But there’s more, isn’t there?” I guessed.

Mom swallowed. “Fir, Clef, Boone, and Ty all decided to take the Challenge this year. In fact, they already left the house for the human plane to get a head start.”

“Oh, no!” I moaned. The Challenge was a twenty-four hour pranking binge every trickster attempted during at least one Day of Shenanigans in their life. My four older half-brothers from Mom’s prior relationships spanned from their early to late twenties, the perfect age to do the Challenge, which required both cunning and physical endurance. “We gotta stop them. If they make headlines, guess who the authorities are going to blame? Me!”

The chaos from the Challenge was enough to drive straitlaced vengeance demons nuts on any given day, but on their most sacred holiday? Scandalous. As a hybrid, I had to work twice as hard to get half the respect in the vengeance demon society, and anything my trickster kin did would be looked upon as proof of why I, Megan, would never be a true vengeance demon.

Also, as someone targeted by an ancient order aiming to destroy the world—long story—I desperately needed to stay under the radar in order to flush out my enemy. The boys’ actions wouldn’t help any of this. They truly loved me, but asking them not to prank would be like asking scorpions not to sting.

Then I remembered this whole conversation had started with Mom springing the Hawaiian trip on me.

“You’re trying to head off the pranks, aren’t you?” I realized.

“I figured an impromptu trip would keep them out of trouble,” Mom replied sheepishly. “But I need you to be a part of it so it looks like a real family vacation, and not, er...”

“Us trying to be buzzkills on the best day of their lives?” Thankfully, as adult children under my parents’ roof, my half-brothers did have to play by their rules—if the ruling came with enough of a cover story to make it irrefutable.

“Yeah, that. The official story is that we, as a family, have decided that the best way to respect both holidays this year is to observe neither of them. Your father is picking up the boys as we speak from the city of Laodicea ad Mare, on the human side. I don’t think they’ve had time to land in too much trouble yet.”

After I’d gotten my instructions on the hotel check-in time and teleport coordinates, I hung up with Mom. Staring at the receiver, I couldn’t help but wonder about her interesting choice of words. *Not in too much trouble yet*, huh? Just how much was too much trouble? Why did I get a nagging feeling that Mom wasn’t telling me everything?

The only way to find out was to actually go on the trip.