

VENGEANCE

FOR HIRE

Chapter One

6:03 A.M.

The Business Call

“Dôme épais le jasmine...”

I opened my eyes, startled out of a nice little dream about chocolate covered strawberries by the shrill sound of opera. I shot up from the bed. What the hell? My alarm was set to Elmer Fudd’s version of *Ride of the Valkyries*, not this—

Then I remembered. It was the ring tone for the Phone. With a capital P.

I pressed the talk button on the Phone before the chorus was over. Luckily, Rosemary was already up and about. My human roommate had a habit of getting up at five thirty in the morning in order to bake. And they called *me* the supernatural.

“Hello, this is Clear Vengeance. How may I help you?” I kept my tone professional and non-groggy-like.

It’d been a month since Gregory and I started working together as mercenaries. He’d been the one who handled our business bookings. But last night, I decided that enough was enough and I grabbed the Phone off him. I wasn’t stupid—whoever possessed the Phone was the one who truly controlled the business, and I desperately needed some control when it came to Gregory, even if it was only for this one aspect. I’d been feeling off-kilter ever since that kiss we’d shared, on the night I said goodbye to my life as a vengeance demon student.

Although, with the Phone linked to our 24/7 Hire-A-Vengeance-Demon hotline, this little fight for dominance might just bite me in the ass.

An old woman’s raspy voice came through the receiver. “Hello, dear. I have an urgent vengeance matter that I need your help in.”

“That’s what we’re here for.” I smiled. See, this wasn’t so bad.

“Can you come right away?” she asked urgently.

I glanced at my calendar. Our first appointment of the day wasn’t until eight thirty, and thanks to teleportation, it wasn’t like there was any time lost to commuting. We could totally fit

the little old lady in before that. Besides, if I was up already, then why shouldn't Gregory be?
Geez, I sounded cranky even to myself.

After copying down her information, I hung up and called Gregory. At least there was no awkwardness in waking him up for business purposes. Being in the vengeance business was like working in the ER—people didn't always have need of us within the nine to five time frame.

"Hey, guess what? I got us some new business," I said proudly. Yes, I would focus on the positivity of the new job rather than my other, less professional feelings.

"Oh, yeah?" His voice sounded groggy, like he was talking underwater or he was still in bed. And I tried not to let myself wonder what he must look like, or whether or not he slept shirtless. I'd seen his naked chest before, so there was plenty to fuel my imagination. "What's the address?"

"53 Mango Tree Drive. Apartment 503."

Gregory groaned. "This doesn't happen to be for a Ms. Whitehall, does it?"

I frowned at his tone. "How did you know?"

"I know"—he sighed—"because Ms. Whitehall is a *TPC*."

"A what?"

"A *TPC*. Trivial Pursuit Caller. The lady in question is super paranoid and she has been calling the line every week since I started it. I don't know how the human managed to get my number, but she did and she never stops calling."

"Well, maybe she has a legitimate concern this time." I couldn't help but feel a little defensive. Ms. Whitehall might be a *TPC*, but she was *my* *TPC*.

"Last Wednesday she called about a neighbor stealing her jellybeans. But only the orange ones. The week before she thought her gluttonous cat gained weight because it was cursed by fairies."

Damn.

"I gave a code to every caller who'd ever used the line: *MVC* for Most Valued Customer, *ECFP* for Extra Charge due to Fringe Plane, etc," Gregory explained. "The code is right on the display of the Phone. Otherwise how am I supposed to tell who has an actual urgent matter?"

"Why didn't you tell me?" I complained.

"I wanted to," he said dryly, "but you grabbed the Phone and teleported away before I could say a single word."

Double damn.

"I'll cancel the appointment then." I could imagine how uncomfortable that call would be, when I had just promised the old lady that I would look into her problem less than five minutes ago. But I was the one who created this mess, so it was only fair that I was the one to fix it.

"We can't." Gregory sighed. The sound of springs creaking in the bed, footsteps, and then a running faucet came over the receiver. "By the code of mercenary, we cannot cancel an appointment without just cause once a promise to meet is given. A mercenary's word is his or her bond. Why do you think I coded the callers to begin with?"

Before I started, I would've never thought in a million years that mercenaries would have a stricter code of conduct than licensed vengeance demons from the Council, but there it was. Gone were the days when I mocked Gregory about the lack of ethics of his profession. Now it was also my profession, and it was nothing like how I'd imagined it.

Chapter Two

7:00 A.M.

Client Interview #1

Gregory met me in front of Ms. Whitehall's apartment door. He was dressed in his usual tight black sweatshirt and dark jeans; his hair had grown in the last month, and started to cover his chiseled cheekbones. His power signature was rich and multi-toned, and revealed none of the irritation from being jostled out of bed.

His eyes shifted away as I approached, then looked at me again and nodded. The awkwardness that had been present since that kiss was still there, though it usually subsided once I got a bit of my inner bitch going.

So exactly what happened that night in front of the hospice?

To keep the story short, while we kissed I thought I felt a spark like how they'd described what it would be like with a *solus iungere*, and I assumed Gregory felt the same way as he pulled me closer and deepened the kiss. But that obviously wasn't the case because the next thing I knew he ended the kiss rather abruptly, stepping back with an unreadable expression, and that was that.

And oh, for vengeance demons, *solus iungere* was the word for soul mate.

I rang the doorbell.

"Don't say a word," I warned. It was hard to get my inner bitch to come out when it was I who got us into this interview with a TPC.

"I wasn't going to," he replied evenly.

I gritted my teeth. It would've been better if he'd yelled at me, or mocked me. But he didn't. He'd be a perfect gentleman today.

As he had been for the past month. Damn him.

The door opened, and the combined smell of birdseed, cat litter, and dog breath assaulted my nose. I resisted the urge to gag. I'd been to the shelter that Rosemary volunteered at, and not even there was the smell of animals so pungent.

"Come on in." A woman in her sleeping robe and curlers beckoned, and I had no choice but to follow her inside. I glanced at Gregory, who shrugged resignedly.

The dark and tiny one bedroom apartment definitely had too many animals in too tight a space. As my host led me to her living room, I counted five cats, two dogs, one parrot, and a family of free-run hamsters. The gluttonous cat in question could've made off with a hamster or two and it would have never been noticed. No wonder the feline was getting fat.

So on top of paranoia, our potential client was also an animal hoarder.

"Good morning, Ms. Whitehall." Gregory bowed to her. Gotta hand it to him. His courteous tone betrayed none of his private reservations.

"Hello, Gregory." Ms. Whitehall huffed, "I haven't been able to reach you since that one time you came here and I told you about the haunted litter box on the balcony. My Betty still gets quite a fright every time she goes in there. What do you have to say for yourself?"

Gregory pressed his lips together, in an attempt not to talk back, or to laugh, I didn't

know which.

Ms. Whitehall turned to me and her demeanor warmed by several degrees. I was, after all, the one who agreed to meet her. “You must be Megan.”

“Nice to meet you, ma’am.” I nodded toward her.

I was rewarded with a smile.

Ms. Whitehall went to a high armchair and shooed away a napping kitten. “Sorry, Princess Penelope, Mommy has guests.”

Ms. Whitehall patted the now empty armchair and gestured at me. “Come sit over here, dear.”

She didn’t offer Gregory a seat.

“Can I get you a coffee or tea?” she asked me.

I doubted I wanted anything from her kitchen. From where I was I could see a sink full of dirty plates with stuck-on food. She was even a bigger slob than me. “It’s alright, ma’am.”

As Ms. Whitehall settled herself in a second armchair, Gregory cleared his throat. “What is it you want to see us about?”

“My neighbor,” she said.

“The one you said stole your jellybeans?” Gregory asked.

She shook her head. “No, another one.”

Gregory raised a single eyebrow in my direction in a look that said it all.

“Hey, if you know about the jellybeans, it means you *did* get my messages.” Ms. Whitehall glared and shook her index finger at Gregory. “Shame on you for not answering an old lady’s call, boy. Anyway, I’m not talking about *that* neighbor. He’s across the hallway. I’m talking about that new girl who just moved in next door.”

“What did this one do?” I asked.

“Why, she’s an absolute slut. Slut, I tell ya. Slut!”

“Huh?”

“She’s been having very loud sex all hours of the day. Moaning and screaming. More than two voices most of the time. The noise stopped just before you arrived, but it’ll be back before you know it. The walls are thin here and I could hear everything. Even my neutered cats went into heat with all those god-awful sounds!”

“We’re here because your neighbor is, er, having too much fun?” I had a very hard time keeping the laughter from my voice. I dared not chance a glance at Gregory. I was embarrassed, because the job turned out to be such a joke, and because we were talking about sex in the presence of a guy who’d more or less rejected me.

“Ms. Whitehall, there’s no law against that,” Gregory explained gently. “What people do in their home is their own business.”

Ms. Whitehall snorted. “That’s what the building management said, and the police, too. That’s why I called you guys here to get this fixed. Boy, am I in need of some good vengeance. I’m entitled to a good night’s sleep like anyone else, and to my animals *not* being traumatized!”

A tomcat entered, sat down on the rug in the center of the room, and promptly licked his balls for all the world to see. Yeah, he was very traumatized indeed.

“The noise has been keeping me up at night for days now,” Ms. Whitehall continued. “Why do you think I called you at six in the morning?”

Gregory took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. I knew that posture. That was how he mentally steeled himself to refuse a vengeance job at the end of an initial interview. “As much as this noise is a nuisance to you, I’m afraid—”

“We’ll do it,” I said.

“But—” Gregory protested. I cut him off with a *we’ll-talk-later* look, and rushed him out of the apartment, promising Ms. Whitehall I would be in touch soon.

“What the hell was that?” Gregory demanded once we were out in the hallway again.

“Didn’t you see the dark circles under her eyes?” I asked. “She’s not faking it. This is really stressing her out.”

“Be that as it may, you know full well she doesn’t have a leg to stand on for true vengeance.”

“Who said anything about true vengeance?”

“Then what are you talking about?” Gregory frowned.

“Oh, come on, be a little more creative. There’s more than one way to resolve this issue.” The little trickster in me smiled. “We could put a super drying spell on the neighbor’s lubricant, if she uses any. Or we could use this new charm Fir just invented called Underneath Your Clothes, which makes people appear ten times less attractive once they’re in their birthday suit. Or we could scare away a would-be lover during the pre-coitus bathroom break with an illusion of mold in the toilet bowl. All this activated only after eleven at night, of course. I just want the neighbor to have fun that is a little less disruptive to others, not to stop having it altogether.”

Gregory looked like he wasn’t sure if he should be horrified or impressed. “You know that the name of this business is called Clear Vengeance, right? With ‘vengeance’ being the operative word?”

I shrugged. “I don’t think the customers care, as long as the job is done. This could be like a new side business or something, with me, your partner, bringing a trickster flare to the business. I mean, it’s not like you have to keep to a certain kind of services offered for tax purposes, right?”

I got him there, and he knew it.

It felt nice to give my inner trickster a chance to come out and play. It would give me something else to focus on. I refused to moon and act like a lovesick human teenager, though it was well within my rights, even socially acceptable to do so, when a vengeance demon met her *solus iungere*.

Well, I was a hybrid. My trickster heritage was all about instant hookups and getting four kids young and all with different fathers. So who knew if a real soul mate was even in the cards anyway?

Yeah, it would be my luck that I was fated to get just half a soul mate out of Gregory.

Chapter Three

8:30 A.M.

Mini Job #1

As mercenaries, Gregory and I took on jobs both big and small. Most assignments averaged one to three days. But big assignments that had multiple phases, or involved a lot of preparation such as vetting and recon, could span over a month. We had two of those currently on the go.

And then there were the straightforward mini jobs that were like power naps, but with money earned. They were quick, easy, and a nice way to get the cash flow going while waiting for the bigger jobs to pay off.

For our first mini job of the day, we boarded a crowded GO Train carrying human office workers from the suburbs to downtown Toronto during the morning rush hour. We headed for the Quiet Zone, a designated noise-reduced area on the upper level of the train. It was a sanctuary for the long commuters to relax and get some shuteye, to prepare for another day of keeping their noses to the grindstone.

Too bad not everyone respected that intended purpose.

“...I crunched some numbers. Sales are up this month by twenty-three percent, forty-six point four percent year-on-year,” a loud voice boomed in the Quiet Zone. “We’re going to have no problem hitting the EAC. And the FRS is going to hit the roof. I suggest implementing the L.A.D.D.E.R right away, and delivering some high-value, high-impact, high-functioning...”

Our target was Cameron Bell, junior account manager at a large corporation, executive-in-training. He had the habit of making long business calls in the Quiet Zone, often for the duration of the entire train ride, much to the annoyance of his fellow commuters. On top of creating the illusion to his colleagues that he was in the office already when he was still on his way there, he thrived on subjecting the whole train to accounts of his self-proclaimed success with inflated numbers and the latest buzz words, half of which he misused anyway.

Nobody liked a wannabe.

The last thing people who had to put up with the bullshit of the business world needed was to listen to more of it in their own spare time. On their way to work, people were fantasizing about time with their family, their weekend at the cottage, and their own retirement. They didn’t need this endless *blah, blah, blah* in their moment of tranquility.

So a group of them banded together and hired me and Gregory.

Mr. Bell had just gotten onto another phone call. An international conference call by the sound of it. High stake. He was just launching into an overview of his achievements this quarter when the earphone of his neighbor’s smart phone came loose, interrupting his speech with the sound of a military-inspired app game: thunderous footsteps, shooting, explosion, curse words, etc.

When Mr. Bell tried to talk over the noise, there came the sound of a baby wailing, and a dog’s frantic barking like it was the end of the world.

Mr. Bell looked around, but found that nobody else was hearing what he was hearing, and there were no babies or dogs anywhere on the train. “No, sir. I’m not still at home...of course

this presentation is important to me. I'll call you back when I get to the office...no, I'm not still *at* home. I swear..."

I repressed a smile. The whole purpose of the noise was to stop the phone call, but the boss thinking our target was playing hooky while talking shit out of his ass was an unexpected but happy bonus.

From now on, for a year, every time the guy made such a phone call on the train, noise would ensue, may it be club music, sound of bacon sizzling, or the crying and berating of a jealous girlfriend.

Ha, try to project a sense of professionalism with *that!* He wanted to do business in public? Then he had to put up with the downside of it.

And yes, at the end of the year our clients could renew the contract at the reduced price of 20 percent off. This was, after all, a business.

