

Always

Chapter One

Vampires and I don't get along.

I don't have a cool title like Death Dealer or great intro music like Buffy. I also don't have any magical powers. I don't even have a cool name like Ravinnia or Salome. I just am what I am: Penny Bunkle, vampire killer.

It runs in the family, this thing I do. I was raised on the rules of killing a vamp, which incidentally is not rocket science. A stake through the heart. Removing the head. It's all pretty much what everyone grows up knowing from watching movies. Except most people think vampires are fictional. I was brought up knowing they weren't. I was schooled in the use of garlic, crucifixes and holy water before I was five. I was taking martial arts classes and gymnastics three times a week until I was eight, and then it was five days a week. Like I said, no magical powers, just good reaction skills and muscle.

I was sitting on a gravestone marked "John F. Buress". I had no idea who John F. Buress was, he died in 1964 and appeared to have stayed that way. I was actually waiting for the guy next to him, the one so freshly buried he didn't even have a marker

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yet, to wake up. Which means a couple of other vampires would be showing up soon to dig him up and spirit him away to a nest so he could get oriented to the undead lifestyle. The Master of the nest never shows up for these things, it's always underlings, which is why I pull most of these assignments, easy targets. Truth is, I'm not great at this job. People keep waiting for me to 'grow into it'. I'm almost thirty. I stopped growing years ago. It doesn't help that my parents are some of the best vampire hunters who ever lived: Nadinia and Oric Bunkle, semi-retired.

I played with an errant brown curl. It was a warm spring night in Atlanta and I was hot in my sweat suit. I considered pulling off the hoodie but all I had on under it was a sports bra.

I thought about calling my best friend, Cressida, she who had gotten the cool name, while I waited. I had gotten in trouble for being on the phone before when vamps showed up. Specifically I was making a call to IKEA customer service to tell them how much my shoe rack I bought there sucked. I was on hold when a vamp grabbed me from behind and tried to put the bite on me. It's just that there's a lot of downtime waiting around so I think I should multi-task. I would probably make a better Executive Assistant than a vampire killer. I was filing

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my nubby nails when I heard movement and voices coming from the pathway leading to where I was. I stuck my nail file in my knapsack and crouched down behind John's grave marker.

I got out my crossbow, already loaded with six sharp stakes. I also got out my Super Soaker water gun and put it next to me, no it's not elegant but it certainly gets the job done if I need holy water pronto. The more you can do at arm's length or further, the better, less chance you'll get scratched or worse bitten. I pulled up the hood on my sweatshirt and peeked around the corner of the stone.

Sure enough, there were two vamps headed my way with shovels. I slumped behind the gravestone so they wouldn't see me. Better to let them go ahead and dig up the newbie. Otherwise, I would have to wait hours for him to bust out of his casket and dig himself up from six feet of dirt. I really didn't have that kind of time, my mom was making four cheese lasagna for dinner and with any luck there would be leftovers for me.

I was almost asleep when an hour later I heard something being pried open with a crowbar.

Time to par-tee, I thought. I picked up my crossbow, peeked out again to get a location on each vampire and stood up. No one noticed me. They were too busy helping the new guy stand up. I felt bad for the dude. He was maybe twenty, overweight and had a

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Bieber haircut. I tamped down my feelings and shot a stake straight into the vamp on the rights chest. He immediately turned to ash. The new kid looked completely scared and like he was going to run so I did him next, again a good hit and a pile of ash. That left only one. He moved quickly. He was an older vampire, I realized. They aren't capable of actually dematerializing and reappearing but the little boogers can move. He was running toward my position.

I vaulted over the gravestone with one hand, the other clutching my crossbow. I landed in a crouched position, the tip of my stake pressing against where his heart was. Unfortunately he had mimicked my move and had a .45 pointed at my chest. We were so close to each other that if he was capable of breathing I would have been able to feel it on my face.

"Bunkle," he said cheerfully. "What a delightful surprise!"

"Gryph," I said with gritted teeth. Just what I did not want tonight.

Gryph, which is a stupid name, is a vampire two hundred or so odd years old. He's good looking, vain even but he has the right to be. Somewhere there's a lot of Nordic genes running around in there. He has extremely blonde hair, the bluest eyes I've ever seen and cheekbones you could cut glass with. He usually wears a lot of black leather. I know he's quite charming

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when you're not out to kill him, he must be, all his blood donors are actually willing. He has not, in all the years I have known him turned anyone nor even killed anyone that I gave a shit about. Oh sure, I had heard through the grapevine that he had torn a child molester or two apart or the odd gang member turned up drained dry but I could never prove it was him.

He smiled at me, his fangs weren't down so it looked like a friendly smile though I knew it was not. "What brings you out tonight," he asked mockingly.

"Still doing dirty work, I see," motioning my head to the pile of dirt they had left when they dug up the kid. Gryph is actually a pretty solo vampire. He doesn't belong to a nest like most do, keeps to himself for the most part. It's part of his mystique.

"Fancy dying tonight," he asked.

I looked down at the gun pointed at me. Inelegant, but effective. "I am willing to bet," I told him, "that you can shoot me but that I still have time to get off my shot and watch you turn into a pile of dust before I die." I touched my finger to his nose like I would a child.