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*Micah*

AN ALL-NEW ANITA BLAKE, VAMPIRE HUNTER NOVEL

# Micah

Laurell K. Hamilton



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# CHAPTER

I



It was half past dawn when the phone rang. It shattered the first dream of the night into a thousand pieces so that I couldn't even remember what the dream had been about. I woke gasping and confused, asleep just long enough to feel worse but not rested.

Nathaniel groaned beside me, mumbling, "What time is it?"

Micah's voice came from the other side of the bed, his voice low and growling, thick with sleep. "Early."

I tried to sit up, sandwiched between the two of them where I always slept, but I was trapped. Trapped

in the sheets, one arm tangled in Nathaniel's hair. He usually braided it for bed, but last night we'd all gotten in late, even by our standards, and we'd just fallen into bed as soon as we could manage it.

"I'm trapped," I said, trying to extract my hand from his hair without hurting him or tangling worse. His hair was thick and fell to his ankles; there was lots of it to tangle.

"Let the machine pick up," Micah said. He'd raised up on his elbows enough to see the clock. "We've had less than an hour of sleep." His hair was a mass of tousled curls around his face and shoulders. His face was dim in the darkness of the blackout curtains.

I finally got my hand free of Nathaniel's warm, vanilla-scented hair. I lay on my side, propped on my elbow, waiting for the machine to kick in and let us know whether it was the police for me or the Furry Coalition hotline for Micah. Nathaniel, as a stripper, didn't get emergency calls much. Just as well; I wasn't sure I wanted to know what a stripper emergency call would be. The only ideas I could come up with were either silly or nefarious. Ten rings, and the machine

finally kicked on. Micah spoke over the sound of his own voice on the machine's message. "Who set the machine on the second phone line to ten rings?"

"Me," Nathaniel said. "It seemed like a better idea when I did it."

We'd put in the second phone line because Micah was the main help for a hotline that new wereanimals could call and get advice or a rescue. You know, *I'm at a bar and I'm about to lose control, come get me before I turn furry in public*. It wasn't technically illegal to be a wereanimal, but new ones sometimes lost control and ate someone before they came to their senses. They'd probably be shot to death by the local police before they could be charged with murder. If the police had silver bullets. If not . . . it could get very, very bad.

Micah understood the problems of the furred, because he was the local Nimir-Raj, their leopard king.

There was a moment of breathing on the message, too fast, frantic. The sound made me sit up in bed, letting the sheets pool into my lap. "Anita, Anita, this is Larry. You there?" He sounded scared.



Nathaniel got the receiver before I did, but he said, "Hey, Larry, she's here." He handed me the receiver, his face worried.

Larry Kirkland—fellow federal marshal, animator, and vampire executioner—didn't panic that easily anymore. He'd grown, or aged, since he'd started working with me.

"Larry, what's wrong?"

"Anita, thank God." His voice held more relief than I ever wanted to hear in anyone's voice. It meant he expected me to do something important for him. Something that would take some awful pressure or problem off their hands.

"What's wrong, Larry?" I asked, and I couldn't keep the worry out of my own voice.

He swallowed hard enough for me to hear it. "I'm okay, but Tammy isn't."

I clutched the receiver. His wife was Detective Tammy Reynolds, member of the Regional Preternatural Investigation Squad. My first thought was that she'd been hurt in the line of duty. "What happened to Tammy?"

Micah leaned in against me. Nathaniel had gone very quiet beside me. We'd all been at their wedding. Hell, I'd been at the altar on Larry's side.

"The baby. Anita, she's in labor."

It should have made me feel better, but it didn't, not by much. "She's only five months pregnant, Larry."

"I know, I know. They're trying to get the labor stopped, but they don't know . . ." He didn't finish the sentence.

Tammy and Larry had been dating for a while when Tammy ended up pregnant. They'd married when she was four months pregnant. Now the baby that had made them both change all their plans might never be born. Or at least not survive. Shit.

"Larry, I'm . . . Jesus, Larry, I'm so sorry. Tell me what I can do to help." I couldn't think of anything, but whatever he asked, I'd do it. He was my friend, and there was such anguish in his voice. He'd never mastered that empty cop voice.

"I'm due on an eight a.m. flight to raise a witness for the FBI."

“The federal witness who died before he could testify,” I said.

“Yeah,” Larry said. “They need the animator that brings him back to be one of us who’s also a federal marshal. Me being a federal marshal was one of the reasons the judge agreed to allow the zombie’s testimony.”

“I remember,” I said, but I wasn’t happy. I wouldn’t turn him down or chicken out, not with Tammy in the hospital, but I hated to fly. No, I was afraid to fly. Damn it.

“I know how much you hate to fly,” he said.

That made me smile, that he was trying to make me feel better when his life was about to break apart. “It’s okay, Larry. I’ll see if the flight has some empty seats. If not I’ll get a later flight, but I’ll go.”

“All my files on the case are at Animators, Inc. I’d stopped by the office to get them and load up the briefcase when Tammy called. I think my briefcase is just sitting on the floor in our office. I got all the files in it. The agent in charge is . . .” And he hesitated. “I

can't remember. Oh, hell, Anita, I can't remember." He was panicking again.

"It's okay, Larry. I'll find it. I'll call the Feds and tell them there's been a change of cast."

"Bert's going to be pissed," Larry said. "Your rates are almost four times what mine are for a zombie raising."

"We can't change the price in midcontract," I said.

"No"—and he almost laughed—"but Bert is going to be pissed that we didn't try."

I laughed, because he was right. Bert had been our boss, but he'd been reduced to business manager because all the animators at Animators, Inc., had gotten together and staged a palace coup. We'd offered him business manager or nothing. He'd taken it when he realized his income wouldn't be affected.

"I'll get the files from the office. I'll get a flight. I'll be there. You just take care of yourself and Tammy."

"Thanks, Anita. I don't know what I . . . I've got to go—the doctor's here." And he was gone.

I handed the phone to Nathaniel, who placed it gently in the cradle.

"How bad is it?" Micah said.

I shrugged. "I don't know. I don't think Larry knows, not really." I started to crawl out of the covers and the nest of warmth that their bodies made.

"Where are you going?" Micah asked.

"I've got a plane to schedule and files to find."

"Are you thinking of going out of town on a plane by yourself?" Micah asked. He was sitting up, knees tucked to his chest, arms encircling them.

I looked back at him from the foot of the bed.  
"Yeah."

"When will you be back?"

"Tomorrow, or the day after."

"Then you need to book at least two seats on the plane."

It took me a moment to understand what he meant. I raised the dead and was a legal vampire executioner. That's what the police knew for certain. I was a federal marshal because all the vamp executioners who could pass the firearms test had been

grandfathered in so that the executioners could both have more powers and be better regulated. Or that was the idea. But I was also the human servant of Jean-Claude, the master vampire of St. Louis. Through ties to Jean-Claude I'd inherited some abilities. One of those abilities was the *ardeur*. It was as if sex were food, and if I didn't eat enough I got sick.

That wasn't so bad, but I could also hurt anyone that I was metaphysically tied to. Not just hurt, but potentially drain them of life. Or the *ardeur* could simply choose someone at random to feed from. Which meant the *ardeur* raised and chose a victim. I didn't always have a lot of choice in who it chose. Ick.

So I fed from my boyfriends and a few friends. You couldn't feed off the same person all the time, because you could accidentally love him to death. Jean-Claude held the *ardeur* and had had to feed it for centuries, but my version was a little different from his, or maybe I just wasn't as good at controlling it yet. I was working on it, but my control wasn't perfect, and it would be a bad thing to lose control on an airplane full of strangers. Or in a van full of federal agents.

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“What am I going to do?” I asked. “I cannot take my boyfriend on a federal case.”

“You aren’t going as a federal marshal, not really,” Micah said. “It’s your skills as an animator that they want, so say that I’m your assistant. They won’t know any different.”

“Why do you get to go?” Nathaniel asked. He lay back on the pillows, the sheets just barely covering his nakedness.

“Because she fed on you last,” Micah said. He moved enough to touch Nathaniel’s shoulder. “I can feed her more often than you can without passing out or getting sick.”

“Because you’re the Nimir-Raj and I’m just a regular wereleopard.” There was a moment of sullenness in his voice, and then he sighed. “I don’t mean to be a problem, but I’ve never stayed here with both of you gone.”

Micah and I looked at each other and had one of those moments. We’d all been living together for about six months. But he and Nathaniel had both

moved in at the same time. I'd never dated either of them alone, not really. I mean I'd gone out with them individually, and sex wasn't always a group activity, but the sleeping arrangements were.

Micah and I both had a certain need for personal time, alone time, but Nathaniel didn't. He didn't much like being alone.

"Do you want to stay at Jean-Claude's place while we're gone?" I asked.

"Will he want me there without you?" Nathaniel asked.

I knew what he meant, but . . . "Jean-Claude likes you."

"He won't mind," Micah said, "and Asher won't mind at all."

There was something about the way he said that last that made me look at him. Asher was Jean-Claude's second in command. They'd been friends, enemies, lovers, enemies, and shared a woman that they both loved for a few decades of happiness in centuries of unhappiness.



“Why’d you say it like that?” I asked.

“Asher likes men more than Jean-Claude does,” Micah said.

I frowned at him. “Are you saying that he made a pass at you or Nathaniel?”

Micah laughed. “No, in fact, Asher is always very, very careful around us. Considering that we’ve both been naked in a bed with Asher, Jean-Claude, and you more than once, I’d say that Asher’s been a perfect gentleman.”

“So why the comment about Asher liking men more than Jean-Claude?” I asked.

“It’s the way Asher watches Nathaniel when you aren’t looking.”

I looked at the other man in my bed. He appeared utterly at home half-naked in my sheets. “Does Asher bother you?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“Have you noticed him looking at you the way Micah just said?”

“Yes,” Nathaniel said, face still peaceful.

“And that doesn’t bother you?”