

## CHAPTER 1

# PARTY CRASHER

**T**HE BOUNTY HUNTER arrived as I was setting the dinner table. I had a punch bowl in my arms, blood donor bags piled inside. As I made my way across the rooftop, my eyes strayed over the pool to the patio, eventually settling on the crystal goblet at my place setting. The man's reflection was fish-bowled across its surface, a tiny silhouette superimposed on the skyline of Montreal.

"A last supper," he said. "How fitting . . ."

His voice was peculiar, slow and deep, with just a hint of Southern drawl.

I set the punch bowl on a centrepiece of rose petals, then turned around. I don't know what part of his getup shocked me the most: the large, gem-encrusted rings that sat on each finger, his thick mutton-chop sideburns, his gold-rimmed aviator sunglasses, his white, rhinestone-studded jumpsuit that flared just below the knees or the matching cowboy hat embroidered with gold thread. He would have been a dead ringer for Elvis had it not been for his tanned skin and Arab features. And his guns.

Long-barrelled six-shooters hanging in snakeskin holsters. He started walking towards me, the wooden soles of his cowboy boots double-clicking on the patio stones.

It was Halloween. All week, my best friend, Charlie, and I had been planning a surprise dinner date with the lovely Abbott sisters, Luna and Suki. I'd left my sword-fighting lesson early so I could get things ready. There hadn't been time to remove my body armour, which was just dumb luck, but I wasn't armed for a gunfight. Against a normal man, I'd have fared well with a paper clip and an elastic band, but this guy moved with a fluid grace particular to a higher brand of killer. He was a vampire, like me.

"Aren't you a bit old to be trick-or-treating?" I asked, glancing over the tabletop.

Of the two guests we'd been expecting for dinner, only Suki, Charlie's girlfriend, was human. Her salad was at the far end of the table, along with the steak knife she'd need for her filet mignon. It was the only weapon in sight. Thinking to pull it closer, I put my hand on the tablecloth. It was meant to look like a casual gesture, but I was so rattled I probably looked less like 007 and more like the Tin Man from *The Wizard of Oz* after a good week of rain.

The bounty hunter stopped about six paces from me, placed a toothpick in his mouth, pushed up the brim of his hat, then removed his sunglasses and tucked them into his suit pocket. Normally, a vampire's eyes faded over time. His sparkled like amethysts.

"You sure you want to go that way?" he said.

The correct answer was no. What I wanted was a hot shower and some quality time with my Xbox, but there seemed to be little point in saying so.

His right hand moved closer to the handle of his pistol, his fingers undulating slowly so his gem-spangled rings sparkled

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red, white and blue in the candlelight. The toothpick rolled from one side of his mouth to the other. I tightened my grip on the tablecloth. He drew. I yanked the material towards me and raised my hand to catch the knife.

Nothing happened. The entire length of cloth pulled free. Everything on top stayed exactly where it was. The dishes, the punch bowl, the cutlery, Suki's salad. Even most of the rose petals. For a fraction of a second I stared in mute horror at the undisturbed place settings. Then he opened fire.

The bullets left a trail in the air. Gyrojet ammunition. Each round was like a rocket that sped up as it left the gun. A full clip cost more than a U2 concert, so you either had to be good or filthy rich to use them.

I twisted sideways and the first shot ricocheted off my shoulder armour. The second trimmed a lock of hair from over my ear. I spun the tablecloth like a cape to block his view, then dove to the far end of the table, rolled to my feet and reached back for Suki's knife. He stared at my hand with an expression of disbelief. I guessed he'd never seen a young vampire move so quickly.

I guessed wrong.

"You really think you can beat me with a fork?" he asked.

I glanced back at the table and blanched. Wrong cutlery. This was shaping up to be one of those nights.

Bullet number three hit my chest like a mallet. My armour stopped the round, but the force knocked me through one of the Plexiglas panels of the pool fence. I landed hard and rolled away as two more bullets shattered the patio stones beside me. Hoping to create some space, I leapt for the diving board and sprang onto the roof of the penthouse. My feet touched down on either side of the peak just as another bullet clipped the vambrace over my arm. I glanced behind

me. The vampire smiled, holstered his gun and pulled out a short, curved dagger.

I took a deep breath and focused on the instructions Ophelia, my guardian and sword-fighting instructor, had given me.

*Be like water. A thousand pounds crashing down the mountain. Fast. Fluid. And unstoppable.*

The only part of me that felt like water was my stomach. The rest of my muscles were knotted rope. I could feel the fork deforming in my fingers.

*Be like water . . .*

The vampire leapt upwards, caught the edge of the eaves and slung himself over the lip of the shingles so we were staring at each other from opposite ends of the roof. He closed in at a run. I flicked the fork at him like it was a throwing star, then threw a desperate jab. He tapped the utensil aside, ducked my punch and swung his blade. A sound like a firecracker followed as it sparked against my armoured forearm.

The barrage that followed had me bobbing and weaving like a master of drunken kung fu. I should have been circling away from his knife hand, but on a pitched roof that would have given him the high ground, so I had to back straight up. In no time, I was dancing at the end of the peak. He thrust high. I ducked and slipped and would have tumbled over the side had he not grabbed me by the wrist. He pressed the tip of his blade against my throat and smiled. *“That’s When Your Heartaches Begin.”*

The pool was just beneath me. I twisted my hand free, kicked out hard and aimed for the deep end. My execution was slow and his blade sliced through my skin, sending ribbons of pain up and down my neck. This was followed by a shocking jolt when, instead of splashing gently down into the pool, my back landed flush on the diving board. One bounce later, two hundred pounds of flailing idiot was soaring over the patio.

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I landed on the dinner table. The wooden legs collapsed. Blood donor bags burst, plates and crystal goblets shattered, tea lights spilled their wax and sputtered out, the smell of balsamic vinaigrette gummed up my nostrils. Suki's steak knife clattered to the patio beside me. By sheer luck, my hand came down over the handle. I turned it so the blade was hidden under my wrist, then tucked it up my sleeve.

The bounty hunter was doubled over, laughing on the penthouse roof. "And they say you're going to be T-R-O-U-B-L-E. *Trouble*." He straightened up to wipe his eyes. "All those crusty elders holed up in their tombs, too scared to face the night. Unbelievable."

I was lying on my side. Blood from my neck ran through my fingers and down the inside of my armour. A burst blood donor bag was lying on the patio stones near my hip. I picked up the bag and drained what was left. A short-lived euphoria carried the pain away. My heart was still stuck at the Daytona 500, but at least all my leaks were sealing.

The vampire leapt from the roof, hit the diving board, executed a perfect straight-legged front flip and landed like a rhinestoned ninja right in front of me. It was the coolest thing I'd ever seen. He drew his gun, cocked the hammer and put the tip of the barrel against my forehead. "Any last words?"

"Why are you doing this?" I asked.

"There's a bounty on your head. If you can match your price tag, I might forget I found you."

"How much?"

"Five billion dead. Ten billion alive."

I quickly did the math. "You're saying killing me is going to cost you five billion dollars?"

"A word to the wise, youngblood. Never wrong a person and leave them alive to take revenge on you. Five billion dineros is

nothing to pay for peace of mind. And a good scrap is priceless. You're the first target who's ever tried to kill me with a fork."

He watched as I lowered the empty blood donor bag to the ground. As soon as his eyes lifted, I let the knife slide down into my palm. He took a quick step back.

"Ah-ah-ahhh!" he said. "*Too Much Monkey Business*. Drop it. NOW."

I raised both hands and spread my fingers. The knife slipped to the ground. "You don't miss much, do you?"

"Wouldn't be good at my job if I did."

"Did you know you were out of bullets?"

He peered down and noticed his chambers were empty. "So there's still room for improvement . . ."

I threw the salad bowl at him. It hit his chest. Dressing and lettuce flew everywhere. I grabbed the knife and rolled to my feet.

"Dagnabbit," he shouted. "You're *Steppin' Out of Line!*"

Balsamic vinaigrette dripped from the rim of his white leather hat. He flicked an olive from his lapel, then assumed an offensive crouch, the tip of his curved knife held aloft. We circled each other. My heart was beating so frantically I was amazed it hadn't bruised any ribs. The man faked a thrust. I moved to block it. He slapped my hand away and kicked me so hard in the stomach I went crashing back into the pool fence, knocking another Plexiglas panel loose.

He let me get up. I tried to tag him as he closed in. He leaned back, his suit snapping from the speed of his movements, then executed a perfect spin kick. The air was out of my lungs before I registered what was happening. Then he slammed his dagger into my sternum. By some bizarre miracle, the blade got wedged between two platinum armour plates. He tried to wrench it free and it snapped.

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Inside the penthouse apartment the elevator pinged. As I circled away, chest throbbing, Charlie stepped out. He saw me and did a double-take. An instant later he was on the terrace, his dark hair matted, beads of sweat glistening on his forehead. He was still armed from his sword-fighting lesson and pointed the tip of his *katana*—a Japanese killing blade—at the bounty hunter.

“What is this, karaoke night? Who is this clown?”

“The last man you’re ever gonna meet,” the bounty hunter answered. “And you are . . . ?”

“Impressed with your costume. You know you’re three thousand miles from Graceland?”

“The King lives, baby.”

“Not for much longer.” My friend stepped forward and raised the *katana* overhead. “Charlie Rutherford is going to send your sorry ass back to Vegas.”

The man’s forehead knit.

“You’ve never heard of me, have you?” Charlie asked.

“Should I have?”

My friend scowled and lowered his sword. “But I bet you’ve heard of Zack.” It sounded like an accusation.

“Daniel Zachariah Thomson—the Child of Prophecy? Naturally. I’m lucky to have found him first. So who are you, his *sidekick*?”

Charlie snarled and threw his *katana*. The bounty hunter leaned out of the way, grinning as it swept past. Fortunately, Charlie wasn’t trying to hit him. He was tossing the sword to me.

## CHAPTER 2

# THE UNBREAKABLE RULE

CHARLIE SMILED as my fingers closed over the sword handle. “Good luck,” he said to the bounty hunter.

I went at the man like a berserker, the sword an extension of my body. It whistled through the air with deadly precision. I trimmed one sideburn, then the other. He managed to back up and pull his second gun, the one that was still loaded. Before he could take aim, I kicked his arm aside. Then I snapped the blade over his shoulder and stopped it at the edge of his neck.

“Drop it,” I said.

The muscles of his jaw clenched. His gun was pointed sideways. If he swung it back my way, I’d have two options: kill him or take a round at point-blank range.

I was spared the decision. Charlie crashed into him and the two went down in a tangle of arms and legs.

“*Sidekick?* I’ll show you *sidekick!*” my friend shouted. He started throwing haymakers. It bought me enough time to slip close and take what I needed.

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The bounty hunter pushed Charlie away and rolled to his feet, only to find the barrel of his gun aimed squarely at his nose.

“Last words?” I asked.

He reached up slowly and pushed the top of his hat back so we were eye to eye. His purple irises sparkled mischievously. “You bet,” he said. “*There’s no tomorrow!*” His other hand was behind his back. It swung forward.

Charlie dove, hands outstretched, and pushed me sideways. “FLASH-BANG!” he shouted. A grenade hung in the air right where my face had been. I raised my arms as it detonated. My eyes were protected from the flash, but the bang shattered both eardrums. The world went silent and I tripped over the broken table. A smell of burnt metal filled the air as my ears started to ring.

I rolled over and tried to stand, but my balance was shot and I stumbled sideways, trashing another section of fence. Charlie was at my side. I expected him to help me up, but he pulled the gun from my hand instead, then staggered after the bounty hunter, who’d leapt from the edge of the roof. There was an apartment building across the street. Charlie took aim in that direction and the muzzle flashed.

I started fishing through the mess from the tabletop, hoping to find another blood donor bag, but my hands wouldn’t go where I aimed them. Charlie knelt at my side a second later and found one with a few ounces left inside. I gulped it down, then waited for my hearing to come back online. Charlie sat down beside me and pulled my finger out of my ear—both were itching furiously. His lips moved.

“What did you say?” I shouted, clicking my jaw as my eardrums regenerated.

He muttered something I couldn’t make out.

“Did you get him?”

“No.” He jammed the gun in his belt, disgusted. “*Sidekick . . .*” His eyes bounced from the table to the broken pool fence. The only thing we hadn’t ruined outside the apartment was an asphalt landing pad on the far side of the shallow end. “You know, when a guy shouts *flash-bang*, you’ve got to protect your ears.”

“I’ll know that for next time.”

“Right . . . So, what did the Arabian Elvis want?”

“Apparently there’s a ten billion dollar bounty on my head.”

Charlie whistled, then pulled me to my feet. “That’s *beaucoup de moolah*, Zack. Turn yourself in and you can pay for takeout. You made a total mess of our dinner.”

He sounded angry about it, like it was my fault this had happened. My heart and stomach were still doing an acrobatics routine, but he seemed more concerned about his girlfriend’s salad.

“In case you didn’t notice, Charlie, that guy was here to kill me! Doesn’t that worry you at all? I almost swallowed a bullet back there.”

“But you didn’t,” he said. “We sent that loser packing.” He picked up his sword. After examining the scoring on the blade, he slid it back into its sheath. “Why didn’t you lop his head off? You could have handed him his hat, with his head in it.”

What could I say? Years ago I had made myself a promise that I would never take another person’s life. It was my unbreakable rule. Even in training, I didn’t practise kill strokes.

“There has to be a difference between us and the bad guys, Charlie.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in bad guys.”

This was true. Even the worst people had *some* good in them, though it might only be their taste in embroidered cowboy hats.

“You know what I mean.”

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Charlie turned so we were face to face. I was a few inches taller, and thick from years of weightlifting, but he was a year older, and had been shaving since he was fourteen, so he often acted less like a friend and more like a life coach. I sensed a lecture was on its way.

“This isn’t a Batman comic, Zack. One day, someone’s life will be hanging in the balance. Mine. Luna’s. What if some dude is about to nix her and you hesitate? If anything happened, you’d never forgive yourself.”

I clenched my teeth. “I’d feel nothing but pity for anyone who tried to hurt Luna.”

“Yeah, but pity wouldn’t stop them.”

He was right, but I had to draw the line somewhere. Killing seemed a good place to start.

He began filling the punch bowl with ruptured blood donor bags. “Everyone has the right to self-defence. You’ve got to do what Ophelia says. Empty the mind and trust your instincts.”

I understood the theory. But being empty-minded wasn’t as easy as some people made it look, Charlie included. He could tell by my expression that I wasn’t sold.

“If I hadn’t shown up, you’d be in a body bag right now.”

I nudged him in the ribs with my elbow. “But you *did* show up. ‘Cause you’re my *sidekick*.”

I thought he was going to strangle me. Instead, he put his hand on my back, then shoved me towards the penthouse doors. “Let’s get ourselves cleaned up before Ophelia finds out about this.”

“Oh man, is she ever going to freak.”

“You don’t say. Well, that’s exactly why you’re not going to tell her.”

“Charlie—”

“Look, she’s got this place locked down tighter than the

Pentagon. I'm sick of it! If she finds out a bounty hunter came here, she'll put us under house arrest for good. It's bad enough that the whole building is full of security cameras and we're under surveillance twenty-four seven. It's worse than 1984."

"Did you even read 1984?"

"Just the SparkNotes, but that's not the point."

"Charlie, she's gonna find out eventually. If we don't tell her now, she'll go off like an A-bomb. Is that what you want?"

He tossed up his hands. Then his cellphone buzzed. He pulled it from his belt and scanned the display.

"What's the word?" I asked.

He flashed it my way. The message was from his girlfriend, Suki. It read: *r u free*.

He rattled off a quick response, his thumbs a blur. Then he pulled the bounty hunter's six-shooter from his belt and held it up like a trophy. "You wanna have a go with this?"

Firearms made me uneasy, so I shied away from the shooting range when the others practised there. If I had to suffer any more of Charlie's jokes about how good he was with his love-gun, or my being too shy to take my pistol out of the holster with a lady in the room, I was going to bite him.

"No thanks. I've got to find Ophelia. Any idea where she is?"

"Wep dep. She and Luna had some stuff to get for tomorrow."

The "wep dep" was the weapons depot, a name Charlie used to describe the sixth floor. It was where all of our guns, munitions and military equipment were stored.

Charlie turned back to stare at the mess, disappointment pulling his mouth down at the corners. "You sure you have to tell her?" I held his gaze. He sighed. "Too bad. Those rose petals were a nice touch."