

Chapter 1

"A contract of true love to celebrate."
-The Tempest (Act IV, Scene 1)

London, Autumn-1592

"Two households," murmured William Shakespeare, his gaze fixed on the family crypt of one of them. "In fair London where we make our scene."

The remains of the day were overcast, as 'twas often the case in fair London. A light rain had begun to tumble down. The dreariness of the weather fit the setting--a shadowy graveyard at dusk, the skies fair weeping over the young mistress so recently entombed.

Will's mistress. The only woman he'd ever loved in several lifetimes.

Will was a vampire, had been for so long he could barely recall when he wasn't. He wished that he wasn't, that he could live--really live--a normal lifetime with his love, that he could once again be human, but as far as Will knew a vampire was forever.

Unless someone cleaved his head or shoved him into the bright morning sun.

"From ancient grudge break to new mutiny," he whispered.

If Kate's husband found out what they had done, his grudge would certainly break something.

"A pair of star-crossed lovers," Will continued, the beginnings of a play he'd been toying with trickling through his mind. A prologue mayhap, shared by the Chorus, setting up the entire sorry mess he envisioned. He hadn't written a decent tragedy in a while. It was time.

"Whose misadventured piteous overthrows, doth with their death bury strife."

Only Kate's "death" could bury the strife with her husband. If everything went according to plan--Kate took the potion that made her "appear like death"--then Reginald should have forgotten about his wife the instant the door slammed shut on her tomb. It wasn't as if he loved her. With any luck he would have returned to the New World, and the plantation he managed there for Kate's father, on the next ship, never be seen or heard from again.

Which would save Will the trouble of killing him.

Just the thought of how the bastard had ill-treated his wife--Will's love--had Will's teeth itching, growing.

"Puppies," he murmured, forcing his mind away from bloody murder. Instead he focused on sweet, fat-bellied, balls of fur gamboling across spring grass until his fangs went away.

Will glanced at the azure sky. Now that the sun slept and the moon had awoke, the chill of a London autumn eve would soon seep into the stone mausoleum. Will had promised

he would be there to greet Kate when she awoke from her feigned death, so he hurried forth, intent on the door beneath the stone cut name.

Dymond.

That was not his love's true name, but she was a fine jewel just the same.

He reached for the door, and the portal swung open of its own accord, emitting a loud, wretched creak that caused Will to start and draw back his hand to rest atop his sword.

He'd come directly from a performance at the Rose Theater still wearing the costume of Valentine--a doublet of dark green wool with breeches a shade lighter. As Valentine becomes king of a band of outlaws, the sword was part of the show.

And proved a welcome adornment when the zombie loomed from the crypt.

"Brrrr!" it said. "Brrrrrrrrr!"

"Zounds." Will drew his weapon, the slick slide of the metal from its scabbard slicing through the heretofore silent night.

He had not expected zombies. He'd believed London cleared of them by both his efforts and Kate's. That a woman could be an accomplished zombie hunter had at first surprised, then amazed, Will. Together they had fought the undead horde set upon their queen by one who would topple

her throne and throw England into chaos. They had triumphed, but apparently at least one of the creatures had escaped.

Will would have cleaved the horror's head from its shoulders, returning the soul to God and the body to ashes, if he hadn't caught his foot on a loose stone.

There were times when he was grace personified . . .

Will landed on his arse with a thud.

And times when he was not.

The zombie, a well-to-do merchant from the appearance of what was left of his clothes, which hung in tatters revealing more than Will ever wanted to see of another man's--be he dead or undead--anatomy, blinked at the sudden disappearance of his prey. One of his eyelids came off, skating down his rotting cheek like a bit of parchment skipping off the edge of a tabletop in the wind. The bit of flesh landed on Will's upturned face, and he panicked.

He hacked at the man's legs, but the blows did no harm. The creature merely stepped out of Will's reach and disappeared into the darkened crypt.

Will frowned. Why on earth would the zombie go in there when there were fresh brains to be had right here in Will's head?

Will might be undead, but his brains still worked-- quite well if his reviews were any indication--and they were therefore a delectable meal for any shambling cretin.

Climbing to his feet, Will kept a firm hand on his weapon as he awaited the return of the creature, but the gaping, gloomy doorway remained empty.

"Thou detestable maw." Will crept closer. "Thou womb of death. Gorged with dearest morsel of the earth."

A chill went over him as he heard his words and understood why the zombie had gone in rather than stay out.

Certainly most of the occupants were long dead, their brains as rotted as the one who now walked among them. But there was one who had not begun to rot. One who lay alone and vulnerable, whose fresh and tasty brains would be a dear morsel for this gibbering fiend.

Will plunged inside, sword at the ready, just in time to see the decaying head haloed in a beam of moonlight as he bent over what had to be the resting place of Will's sweet love.

"Br--" the creature said again. "Brrrrr."

In truth, zombies rarely said aught else.

Leaping forward, Will sliced through its neck with one sweep of his blade. The zombie disintegrated, coating Will's face with ash.

"Zombies," he muttered, wiping the gritty remnants from his eyes. "I hate those guys."

An image flickered--a man in a battered brown hat sneering at other men in pressed uniforms as they goose-stepped past, arms stretched upward in a salute.

An invincible hero. The ultimate evil.

Will shook his head, and the idea disappeared. He tried very hard to bring it back.

"Something about an ark," he murmured, but it was gone, driven from his mind by more pressing matters.

Will tightened his fingers about the hilt of his sword, gaze scanning the crypt for anything that moved. But the tomb remained as still as those who inhabited it.

He moved to the flat, stone pallet where Kate should rest. Nothing was there.

Desperately, Will searched every crevice and corner. He found dozens of bodies in as many states of rot but not a single trace of Kate.

Why was he surprised?

The course of true love never did run smooth.

Chapter 2

"I would fain die a dry death."

-The Tempest (Act I, Scene 1)

I awoke to a darkness so great it seemed to pulse.

Nay! To rock.

For an instant I could not recall what had happened before I'd gone to sleep. But a memory such as that would not stay silent for long. Will's voice, as he laid out the plan, drifted through my mind.

Tomorrow night be certain to lie alone. Of this distilled liquor drink. Through your veins shall run a cold and drowsy humor. Your pulse will cease.

I had drunk of the liquor, and from that moment on I remembered naught.

And in this borrowed likeness of death you will continue two and forty hours then awake as from a pleasant sleep.

I should now repose within the Dymond family crypt. And Will should be here. He had promised.

I will come and watch you wake and we will away. This, sweet Kate, will free us from our present trouble.

I did not feel free from trouble. I felt, instead, in the thick of it. Such was the story of my life.

I am a chasseur, a hunter. For years I have stalked those whose souls are controlled by another. I call them the tibonage. You'd call them zombies.

They're everywhere.

It was because of them that I'd met William Shakespeare in the first place. Mistaking him for a zombie, I'd nearly lopped off his head. Thank goodness I'd missed. That head, and what lay in it, was far too brilliant to disappear from this world.

I tried to sit up and encountered resistance. From what, I could not see. I had never been in a place so dark in all my life.

Perhaps I had died. But if so--

My indrawn breath seemed overly loud, as if the sound had gone forth and been thrust back. As if I were confined in a very small space.

I could not be a zombie. They had no thoughts. Their brains were gruel. They said little beyond "Brrr!" unable, even, to articulate completely what they sought.

"Brains," I said distinctly. "And I feel no burning urge to partake of any." Forsooth, the idea sent a wave of nausea through me. Therefore I was not a zombie.

But I was confined and I needed, desperately, to be free.

I was also surrounded by small, hard chunks of something, which rattled when I moved and gave off the scent of a long dead fire. When I extended my right hand the articles parted, and my fingers met wood; to the left I encountered the same. I stretched my toes and tapped another board.

"God's kneecaps!" I knew a coffin when I felt one.

Why was I not interred upon a bier in the Dymond family crypt?

Family crypts were unusual in England, where the poor still went into the ground and the rich often bought a section of the local church or monastery to serve as their mausoleum. To have one's own tomb was immodest. Even the once Bluff King Hal was buried in St. George's Chapel, along with dozens of other royal corpses.

However, of late, anything Italian was the rage. It seemed that every fool in London walked around with an

Italian rapier strapped to his waist. My husband had taken the Italian fascination a step further and purchased an ancient vault to use in the Italian manner for a private family tomb. He'd even ordered what Dymond remains that remained moved into it.

So why wasn't I there?

Had Reginald tossed me into a box and buried me in the garden? Considering what I knew of my husband, such behavior would not surprise me.

To be fair, I had not been the best of wives. But I could not help it. I would love Will Shakespeare unto the end of my days. Which, at the moment, did not appear to number all that many.

Closing my eyes, I attempted to still my racing heart, my overwrought breathing, and listened. Not only was I rocking but in the distance I heard--

My eyes snapped open. "Water."

Instead of stuffing me into the family crypt then hying himself back to the New World, Reginald had brought me along. Considering he believed me a decaying corpse, such behavior was more disturbing than any of his behavior thus far.

Although it did explain the small hard items that surrounded me. Corpses were often packed in charcoal to prevent decay when they had to be moved a long distance.

I bit my lip and considered. I could not remain in this box until we reached the Virginia shore. If I did so, I'd be as dead as Reginald thought me.

But if I escaped, what then? My husband could not see me alive or our entire plot would unravel. I must be free of him, and he would do well to be free of me. Reginald wanted wealth, a title and an heir. All I wanted was Will.

We had come together but a few weeks past--a zombie hunter and the vampire with the ability to raise them, a wealthy, married woman and a playwright. In truth we would not have met if I had not been trolling the night with my sword. But once met, we could not seem to remain apart.

I had despaired of love, but I had found it in him and once touched, once kissed, once loved we could not bear a life without the other in it. So we had contrived to change things.

I brushed my fingertips across one wall of my coffin. This was the result. Mayhap I deserved worse for my perfidy, but I had discovered that without love I did not want to live.

And so, I had "died."

Determined, I clenched my fists. I would hide upon the ship, steal food and water. I would stay alive, whatever it took. And hope that when the vessel finished its voyage to the New World, it then returned to the old.

If only I had my sword. I would make short work of this box. However, when I felt about some more I encountered only splinters and the skirt of my very best gown. But the farthingale that kept the garment belle-shaped, along with the painful body-stitchets to hasp my waste were missing, along with the usual annoying array of petticoats. From what I could gather, I wore only my gown and a chemise.

In your best robes on the bier you will be borne to the same ancient vault where all the Dymonds lie.

Will had been nearly right. I wore my best robes, but the bier had born me to a ship and not the vault.

Poor Will! What must he have thought when he opened the crypt and found me absent?

Our plan had been for him to sit by my side as I awakened, then we would away to Bath, where I would tarry a while, a lady partaking of the medicinal waters to soothe her frazzled nerves. By the by I would return to London. With a few changes to my hair, my accent, my clothes, no one would believe the live Kate and the dead Katherine the same woman, and I would at last be liberated. Instead I was a prisoner.

Angry, frustrated and--I admit it--scared, I kicked both feet.

And felt a slight give in the wooden wall of my tomb.

Again, I kicked. Again, the plank bowed. Encouraged, I continued the proceedings, resting when my legs became tired, ignoring the pain in my bare heels.

Eventually my determination was rewarded with a sharp, welcome crack, and the lowermost wall of my coffin tumbled downward, landing upon the heaving floor with a clatter, charcoal pieces thumping like distant, heavy rain.

Without support, the board above me sagged. I lifted my hands and knocked it away too. Seconds later I scrambled free, then stared at what could have been my final resting place.

Though the box had been made for one who should no longer move, let alone kick, I was still amazed at the shoddiness of the workmanship. Did it reflect Reginald's parsimonious nature, or merely his opinion of me?

"The wind," came the call from above, "she be backin' into the East!"

"There be spume upon the water," another replied.

"We'd best batten down afore that squall o'ertakes us."

"Aye, Captain!"

"You there! Hie below and make sure her Ladyship does not get tossed hither and yon."

It took me several ticks of a clock to realize "her ladyship" was me. I leaped forward, snatching at the fallen timber, putting it back to rights, hoping the contraption

would not fall apart the instant it was touched and reveal an empty space. I ducked behind several barrels just in time.

A swarthy, bow legged seaman negotiated the steps and made his way to the coffin. His gaze cast about, flicking over the barrels where I crouched, coming to rest upon a coil of thick rope nearby. He snatched it and set to wrapping the piece around my empty resting place, first lengthwise, then crosswise. After tugging on the loops, he gave a nod then disappeared topside.

I crept from my hiding place, dizzy with the realization of how narrowly I'd avoided being trapped there. I, too, gave a tug on the seaman's ropes and was satisfied that the ramshackle conveyance would not collapse to reveal the disturbing lack of a body.

Perhaps Reginald would bury this box without ever looking inside, and my "death" would continue unquestioned. Even if he did take a peek within--ghoulish as that might be--I doubted he would consider that I had never been dead in the first place. Most likely he would believe my body lost along the way or stolen by the natives.

My nurse, Nounou, who had taught me of the tibonage and trained me as a chasseur in her own image, had told tales of Africa where she had been born and Haiti where she had been dragged--both dark, exotic places full of strange practices

and stranger beliefs, many of which involved the dead, or what was left of them. It would not be surprising if the New World's brutal native tribes held some of the same beliefs and would be happy to snatch a corpse if the opportunity presented itself.

The ship pitched violently, and a wash of seawater poured through the open trapdoor and splashed over my bare feet. I frowned at my toes, as filthy as the rest of me after being tossed about with hundreds of pieces of coal, then wiggled them a bit. I supposed Reginald had ordered all my velvet slippers sold. Why stick a pair on feet that would only mold? I was surprised he'd bothered to clothe me at all.

Which reminded me--I must find other attire. It would be impossible to sneak about the ship in a golden brocade gown. However, if I were dressed as a boy--something I had done often enough when fighting zombies--I should blend in.

As I turned toward the stairs a waterfall cascaded through the opening, splashing onto the floor then swirling about my ankles and dampening the hem of my skirt.

I shivered at the icy chill. The spurt of voices in the night only caused those shivers to deepen.

"We blew out a sail!"

"Strip her to bare poles!"

"Too late. We are dismayed!"

"We're going down!"

A sickening crack was echoed by thunder. The ship listed. The flow through the opening slowed to a trickle, and I took the opportunity to scramble topside.

All hands occupied with the storm, no one spared me a glance. I nearly went over the edge as the vessel righted herself, sending a sluice of ocean across the bow. I grabbed the nearest solid object, the capstan—a wooden drum attached through the deck, used like a pulley by the crew—and held on as the sky above split open, spilling brilliant white light over us all.

The scene was etched in silver--the height of the waves, the whip of the wind, the violent pitch of the boat, the cracked mast, the missing sail, the desperate scramble of everyone left alive.

I had come so far. I had survived so much. But none of that mattered in the face of the storm.

The deck split; the capstan sank, along with everything else. I hit the fiercely, foaming water, and then . . .

I knew no more.