**A Girl’s Guide to Voodoo Bounty Hunting**

**Book 1: The Fast and the Furriest**

**By Eden Crowne**

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## CHAPTER ONE

A toothy ten-foot electronic fish flashed fitfully in the hot morning sun. The green neon crackled as the fish opened and closed its electronic jaws. Yellow dollar signs in the fish’s eyes blinked on and off in sync to some rhythm all their own.  Below the fish, a billboard announced ‘Barracuda Bail Bonds’ in bold black letters.

Nessa looked at the address scrawled across a torn scrap of paper, then the map app on her phone, and back to the note.

Yep, this was the place.

She took off her helmet, set the kickstand on her scooter, and flipped open the top of an oversized wire basket attached to the scooter’s front. A gray-striped head popped out, peering up at the blinking sign. The cat, a stocky British Shorthair, hopped to the ground.

Pim, full name Pim’s Cup Whiskers Rampant, Grand Champion at the 1871 Crystal Palace Cat Show was invisible due to a rather unfortunate curse. On the Atlantic crossing from England with Nessa’s Great-Grandmother, he’d fallen for a saucy short-tailed Calico. The Calico’s mistress, a Gypsy witch, had taken exception to the union and poor Pim hadn’t been seen since. Except, of course, by Nessa. As her Familiar, she could see him just fine.

Looking up at the sign, he arched his back and hissed.

“I know,” sighed Nessa. “What the hell, Dad?”

Dead-beat dad had skipped town leaving Barracuda Bail Bonds holding a large bond. The fact Dad owed bail money came as no surprise. That he had skipped town was also not hot news. Finding out in a phone call at seven a.m. this morning he had left her, his one and only daughter, as collateral to a supernatural Bail Bondsman a couple of blocks on the wrong side of the 91 Freeway had been a bit of a shock.

Barracuda Bail Bonds was well-known among the SoCal supernatural substrata for financial aid on a swiftly tilting scale of crimes not necessarily against the great State of California.

It quickly became apparent Dad owed a supernatural debt rather than the more mundane cash sort. After the call, Nessa had thrown some clothes and cash into a backpack, grabbed Pim, and headed north on the Pacific Coast Highway as fast as the orange 50cc scooter could rev. They hadn’t gotten very far before Dad’s debt yanked her back, nearly bringing them to grief at a busy intersection in El Segundo.

The contract left her no choice but to turn the scooter in the direction of Compton and the Honorable Mr. Roman Barracuda.

Nessa pulled a heavy lock and chain out of the basket and fastened the scooter to the base of the neon sign. The chain had shock charms painted on each link. It was going to need them in this neighborhood.

She stood back, hands on hips, and looked at the neat one-story bungalow painted pale, sherbet yellow with white trim. Pim sat on his haunches, his long tail wrapped neatly around his front paws, and looked with her.

 It was one of only a few houses left on the street. Zoning laws must have shifted over the years. Seismically so. A used-car lot flanked the bail bonds office on one side. On the other, a furniture store that looked like it specialized in furniture that fell off trucks onto the shoulder of the 405.

She grabbed her duffel bag from the running board and slung it over her shoulder where it knocked against the faded black Old Navy backpack she always carried.

They walked up the three steps to the front porch and hesitated. A painted wooden sign was nailed at eye-level. ‘Beware,’ it said. ‘Secrets will be revealed of those who cross this threshold.’ And beneath this warning, painted in a script only the magically inclined could see was added, ‘Dark Spirit or Light, Betray My Trust at Your Peril.’

Pim turned right around and headed back to the scooter. Nessa considered how she could do the same. She had secrets built right into her DNA. Ones she could hardly bear the burden of knowing herself.

A shout of, “That door is not going to open itself!” made her jump. “Get in here young lady and bring your damn cat!”

The tether gave another yank and she gagged.

Waving Pim ahead, she tugged her sleeves over the bracelets circling both wrists and they stepped inside together.

A big black man with big black hair sat behind an oversized dark wooden desk directly opposite the door.  He was wearing a lime green and gray geometric print shirt with an oversized collar. It was shiny. Seventies K.C. And the Sunshine Band shiny. He had a pair of violet-tinted granny glasses pushed halfway down his broad nose and he peered over them at her, his wide mouth turned down in a frown.

Nessa swallowed drily and looked around. The inside of the office was painted the same creamy yellow as the outside. Long rows of bleached-blond wooden blinds softened the view on the barred windows facing the street. The wooden floors were the same color as the blinds. Old-style travel posters for the Caribbean brightened the walls with splashes of pink, yellow, green, and blue.

 “You took your sweet time, Miss Scott,” he said gruffly.

“Um,” replied Nessa with typical articulateness.

“What’s your Familiar’s name?”

She was startled and didn’t try to hide it. “Most people can’t see him.”

He looked at her over his glasses. “I am not most people.”

Obviously not.

“His name is Pim, Pim’s Cup Whiskers Rampant.”

“Fine. So, Miss Vanessa and Mister Pim, your daddy owes me a debt which he seems to think he can run from. He cannot. You were left as collateral. As I explained on the phone several hoursago,” he said the last few words with heavy emphasis.

Okay, yeah, she tried to run and then when that was denied her, stopped for gas and maybe a leisurely coffee at Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf with a fat butter croissant to share with Pim.

“Slavery is illegal,” she protested.

“Not in magic,” replied Barracuda clearly unimpressed. “I am collecting on your father’s Bond. Do you know what I do here?”

“Kind of…” she mumbled.

Boy, she was just sparkling with conversation this morning.

“I am licensed to chase and capture those who think they are above the laws of God and man and choose to turn aside from the path of honesty. In other words, they take my money and run.” He turned his head calling, “Ladies, could you join us please?”

There was a shuffle of sound from a connecting room. Nessa could see a couple of desks and rows of metal filing cabinets in what must be the back office.

Quite the largest women Nessa had ever seen emerged through the connecting doorway. They were identical twins and well over six feet tall. They looked to out-weigh their boss by a dozen pounds. Not that they were fat. Far from it.

The women were squeezed into identical black leather jumpsuits that hugged every bulging muscle and feminine curve. And their hair! Red as a tropical sunset. Tossed and teased into an up-do that added several more inches to their already impressive intimidation factor.

They were also, Nessa was certain, only marginally human.

 Barracuda gestured at the women. “Meet Pansy and Rose Marie La Rue, my Bond Enforcement agents and valued partners.”

They gave her surprisingly charming smiles.

Nessa automatically tried to smile back but her mouth muscles refused to respond. Gravity had inexplicably increased around her as the reality of Barracuda Bail Bonds sank in. Breathing was an effort. Her heart thudded against her chest.

One of them — Pansy or Rose Marie, she didn’t know who was who — walked over and held out a hand for Pim to sniff.

Well, well. They could see him too.

“Hello there, young man,” she said, her voice deep and musical with a bit of a Caribbean lilt, “aren't you just the handsomest Tom around. Yes, you are!”

Pim preened and gave the woman’s hand a head butt before turning to the side and letting her stroke him.

He was a whore for a compliment.

Were these women going to chase her dad? And if they caught him, would she still be collateral?

Those were important questions. If only her tongue wasn’t stuck to the roof of her mouth so she could ask.

“Skip Tracer, Bounty Hunter or as we say here in California, Bail Recovery Enforcement Agent, whatever you choose to call it,” Barracuda continued, “bond enforcement is a big part of this business.  Pansy and Rose Marie can handle the sorry asses of all the murderers, rapists, bank robbers, and arsonists who leave slime trails across my door. However, and this is a big however, not all my clients are human. I also keep supernatural bonds for a variety of magical tribunals and demonic agencies on the books. Recently, one of my supernatural skip tracers had an unfortunate encounter with a machete.” He paused and sighed deeply. “May he rest in peace.”

The two large women sighed as well.

Brightening, he gave her an expectant look. “Your daddy’s bond came due just in time. Looks like your it.”

 “I’m *it* what?” Nessa had lost track of the conversation somewhere around the words killers and rapists.

He grimaced. “Keep up! You, young lady, are my new supernatural skip tracer. For those special bond runners.”

“How?” she said in one strangled word for what had to be obvious to the very large Mr. Roman Barracuda.

Nessa was a scrappy five-feet-two inches tall. A hundred and ten pounds on a good week when there were regular meals. She had dark brown bra-length hair and what could best be described as regular features. Few people had a chance to see the brilliant smile and deep dimples that transformed her face.

He gave her a dispassionate up and down.

“Supernatural Skip Tracing is not based on brawn alone. You have brains, or so your father says, as well as other gifts. Powerful ones.”

She was going to protest but shut her mouth. He wasn’t wrong. She was an Elemental, a Blood Witch with control over the air. She’d inherited it from her mother’s side of the family. Among other less desirable things.

Barracuda pulled open a drawer and tossed a pair of metal handcuffs over.

“You will need these.”

She stared at the cuffs.

Pim jumped up onto the desk and batted them with his paw knocking the cuffs to the floor. He threw a feline sneer at Barracuda, laying his ears flat.

Barracuda read the expression correctly and frowned at the cat.

Pim spun around, tail high, showing the man his butt hole. A cat version of ‘Up yours!’

Barracuda rolled his eyes, “Don’t you give me attitude Mr. Pim. You’re what, Miss Scott? Twenty-five?  Twenty-six?”

“Nineteen.”

Barracuda tilted his chair away from his desk and adjusted his glasses.

One of the enormous women snorted.

Barracuda’s eyes shifted to them. They suddenly got busy looking around the room like they’d never noticed those colorful travel posters before.

Their boss cleared his throat noisily and shifted through the papers on his desk.  He pulled out one sheet with something paper-clipped to it and frowned.

 “Never mind. In the great state of California, you can get your Bounty Hunters license at eighteen.”

“No way,” Nessa protested.

“I assure you, it’s true.”

“I can’t buy alcohol but I can chase down and capture felons?”

“This is a wonderful world,” he said with a grin.

“Isn’t there...like...a test or something?”

He nodded. “You are absolutely right. Two separate State-administered exams. I am happy to report you did wonderfully and will have copies of the certificates to prove it.”

“What about a license?”

“In California, a license is technically not necessary if you have written permission from me. Which you will. A Private Investigator’s license though goes a long way.”

Pulling at the paper clip, he tossed a driver’s license-sized card to the woman nearest him.

 “Pansy, please date that appropriately. Rose Marie, a photo if you will.”

Rose Marie tugged a cellphone from her back pocket.

“Smile!” she said before clicking a picture.

“What?” said Nessa, startled.

The two women gave their boss a snappy salute and stepped into the back office.

“We will adjust your Driver’s License to match.”

He held out his big hand and wriggled his fingers.

Nessa scrounged in her backpack for her wallet. She pulled the license out and handed it over. It did indeed say Vanessa Scott, though Scott was not her real last name.

Barracuda got up from the desk, stepping over to the back office to hand the license to his assistants.

He returned and scooted his big chair back into place. “You also successfully completed the forty-hour police training course. And a twenty-hour insurance-approved pre-licensing class. Very diligent of you.”

Nessa felt the whole situation was spiraling into farce.

“Wait, wait,” her voice cracked. “I can’t do this. A forty-hour class? Twenty-hours for insurance? That means there are rules. Lots and lots of rules. And procedures. Legal ones. I don’t know any of them. I don’t know! Please.” Her voice had taken on a pleading tone but she didn’t care.

“As a supernatural Skip Tracer, there are no rules.”

“What about as a human bounty hunter?” she persisted. “Cops are always around when you don’t want them.”

Growing up with a magical scam artist for a father, Nessa knew that only too well. The police seemed to have a sixth sense for magical mischief.

 “By working for me, you are legally in pursuit of felons. There *is* paperwork and I will supply you with that before you leave here today. You must keep these papers on you at all times in case the police become involved.” He gave her a squinty-eyed stared at her hard over his glasses. “Which they had better not. With the paperwork I mentioned, slightly adjusted for the magical sort, you have every right to apprehend them, even entering their home without a search warrant. The use of deadly force is frowned upon.”

There was a bark of laughter from the other room.

He shifted his eyes in the direction of the laugh, “Though sometimes warranted.”

There was another raucous laugh.

Pim tugged at Nessa’s sleeve. He looked as puzzled as she felt.

“I’m not a detective.”

Pim meowed.

“*We*are not detectives.”

“No. Mr. Pim is a werecat under a rather unfortunate invisibility curse but with his own defensive arsenal. You, too, can be lethal, Miss Scott.”

Nessa squirmed inwardly. How did he know? Pim was a werecat. A rare and deadly magical beast able to transform at will. Then she realized Dad must have told him. Selling the Bail Bondsman on the value of his daughter and Pim. Or had Pim and her secrets revealed themselves when she crossed the threshold?She had rather a lot of secrets for someone her age.

“Do you have a car?” he said changing the subject abruptly.

“What?” The interview was going too fast; she couldn’t keep up.

“An *au-to-mo-bile.*” He paused on each syllable like she was ESL or something. “A mechanical mode of transportation.”

“I have a scooter.”

Barracuda threw his hands up in the air. “A scooter? A damn scooter? How are you going to pursue felons, handcuff thugs and/or demons, or scrape up the remains of your quarry, and bring them to judgment on a damn scooter?”

Heat was building behind her eyes, spreading down her neck and shoulders into her fingers.

God damn her father. God damn this man. God damn them all.

She jumped out of her chair and slapped her hands down on his desk. “I don’t know!” she said, her voice cracking. “It was never an issue I had to consider until this moment!”

  A gust of wind blew through the bungalow. Then another, stronger this time.

“I don’t know how to...” she pounded on his desk again causing her bracelets to spark. “How to do this! I am not my deadbeat father’s keeper!”

Her eyes were burning.

“I am a college student at Santa Monica Junior College,” she said. “I have a scholarship and I am going,” she slapped the desk, “to go on to University as God is my witness.”

Pansy and Rose Marie rewarded her with a burst of applause from the other room.

Barracuda, however, seemed unimpressed with her outburst. He gave her a look she couldn’t interpret, “Oh, we both know you are so much more than a college girl.”

Nessa’s stomach slid into her shoes.

‘So much more...’

How much did he know? About her.

The bad stuff? The worse stuff? The worst?

The wind flowed faster and one of the framed posters on the wall tumbled to the floor.

Nessa’s hair floated up from her shoulders as a spider web of shadows spun from her fingers onto the desk.

Barracuda leaned forward, watching Nessa, eyes narrowing. Opening a drawer, he pulled out a colorful string of metal amulets.

She felt the snap and crackle of energy building across the desk. A familiar shiver of electricity sparked in her palms.

Pim yowled. His fur bristled, absorbing the rogue electricity zipping around her. His claws and fangs began to lengthen.

Pansy and Rose Marie stepped out from the backroom to stand by their boss. They did not look happy.

Roman snapped his fingers.

Around her, the floor changed. Wooden planks became a black, viscous liquid.  Monstrous shapes began to ooze up from the ground.

Nessa caught her breath.

The heat behind her eyes flamed.

‘*Crap, crap, crap*,” she chanted silently. She could not afford to lose another pair of contacts.

Despite the scary floor shift, she did not believe she was in danger from the Bail Bondsman. Like most of magical LA, she knew Barracuda was a Voodoo King. She also knew he followed Legba, the guardian of the crossroads between the living and spirit worlds. He stood on the side of righteousness. The profitable side of righteousness but, nevertheless, not the opposite.

She was just scared and freaking out. Freaking out was not good for Nessa or anyone nearby. Bad things happened.

Abruptly, she wrapped her hands over her chest, tucking them into her armpits. She forced herself to sit in the chair, close her eyes, and count backward from one hundred. Pim stayed where he was, a menacing growl rumbling in his throat.

‘Breath in, breath out,’ she told herself.

‘Breath in, breath out.’

At seventy, she opened her eyes.

The wind died with a sigh. Her hair settled around her shoulders. The snap and crackle dissipated into wherever snaps and crackles went.

Roman Barracuda’s expression had changed from fierce to one of concern. He laid the amulets on the table and made a dismissing motion to Pansy and Rose Marie. With a shrug, they returned to forging her license. At least that’s what Nessa assumed they were doing.

Pim had stopped his transformation. His fur was still bristling and his ears lay flat against his head. The cat stalked over and pushed his face right up to the big man’s. He angrily flicked his long tail and voiced a series of yowls, digging his claws into a sheaf of papers under his paws.

“If your Familiar is saying ‘damn fool,’ I agree,” Barracuda said in his deep, resonant voice. “I am used to dealing with…” he paused, “individuals of a more recalcitrant nature. That was perhaps too much information delivered too forcefully.”

“Ya’ think?” breathed Nessa.

Pansy or her twin stepped over to hand Barracuda a laminated card. Pim backed up, though he stayed on the desk, the growl still rumbling.

 Barracuda pushed up his glasses, carefully looking over the card front and back before handing it to Nessa.

Nessa had no frame of reference for Bounty Hunter or P.I. licenses. The thing looked official. State Seal, serial number, office address. Nessa groaned at the photo. And she thought the one on her driver’s license was bad.

Barracuda shifted in his chair, clearing his throat. “Miss Scott, your father’s debt must be paid. The Bond has been signed in blood. The contract is valid and I can neither undo nor ignore it. My hands are tied.”

She looked up from the card to meet his eyes.

 “Better to owe me than someone else,” he said more warmly. “There are far worse collectors out there. Your father understood. It’s why he came to me.”

Nessa shuddered inwardly. An image of burning houses, blinding black smoke, and cries of despair flashed in her mind’s eye. A man shaking her hard, ordering her to bring the lightning.

He was right. There were worse people to owe.

While Barracuda tugged some papers out from under Pim’s paws, Nessa mentally tallied up her current situation.

Fact one: Today she had become an indentured servant thanks to her father.

Fact two: The bond was magical. No escape from that except death.

Fact three: The Bondholder was a Voodoo King with monsters living in his floor.

Conclusion: Her life was even more royally screwed up than before. Given her curse, how was that even possible?

He cleared his throat, sat up straight, and shifted to all-business mode. “You have some unique talents which I believe will help you adapt to this job in no time. Yours has been, shall I say, an unconventional life?”

Nessa said nothing but sniffled several times. Her nose had started to run.

 “Will I…” she took a deep breath and tried to steady her voice, “will I get paid?”

Barracuda laughed loud and long.

Nessa cringed, “I have a cat to feed.”

Pim had a sticky note on one back paw and was trying to vigorously shake it off. Nessa leaned over to pull it.

 “Rent...” she started to add.

“You live with your Aunt Emerald in the little apartment above the garage. I know for a fact she does not charge you rent.”

Not exactly. Aunt Emerald traded Nessa’s help with her psychic clients for room and board.

Insert shaky voice, “I feel the spirit wind.”

Cue Nessa and the wind charm.

Insert shaky voice again, “It carries the chill of the grave....”

Cue Nessa for a temperature drop.

And so on, and so forth.

“Gas?” she pursued.

Barracuda laughed again. “I will see to it that neither you, your cat, nor your transportation starves. Though we must see about finding a car for your bond enforcement work. It is difficult to transport miscreants of a supernatural nature without a back seat and a set of iron manacles bolted to the floor.”

“Amen to that!” chorused the women from the back office.

Manacles?

Nessa swallowed again.

“Now when you capture your victim, I mean, um...quarry, do you know what to say?”

She looked at him blankly.

He gave an impatient sigh, “Bail Fugitive Recovery Agent. Say it.”

“Bail...bail recovery...”

“Bail Fugitive Recovery Agent.

She took a shaky breath, “Bail Fugitive Recovery...”

“Agent.”

“Agent. Bail Fugitive Recovery Agent.”

“Be sure you announce yourself.” Barracuda handed her a manila envelope. “Leave your duffel bag and get your skinny little scooter on over to the South Bay Cultural and Event Center in Torrance. You know where that is?”

Nessa nodded, clutching the envelope tightly to her chest, her hands trembling.

Okay, she had no idea. But the almighty Map App on her phone would find it.

“The details of the case are inside. This gal is not going to give you any trouble. Just bring her to the Infernal Court’s regional officein Redondo Beach. The address is there,” he pointed at the folder. “She’s attending a meeting. Starts at noon.”

“She’s a witch?” asked Nessa hoarsely.

 “Indeed she is. A naughty one.” He shook his head making unhappy clucking sounds. “Wastin’ the time and money of her elders. Don’t let me down, Miss Scott.”

Nessa wanted to say how could she let him down when she had no idea what she was doing?

“What are you standing there for? This girl is not going to catch herself!” He shooed her off like a bug.

Nessa turned without a word and ran out of the office with Pim at her heels.