

Devil up Close With Bated Breath Collection—Chapter One

Jagger's fist tightened around his cell as he listened to the voicemail for the third time. Vincent Sullivan. The name instantly took him back. To a time when he *wasn't* Jagger Hames, sole owner of Hames Protection Services, LLC.

Summer 2003: Columbus, Ohio

The guy was loaded. Like black-limo-and-driver type loaded. Even if Jagger hadn't seen him getting out of the car, he would've been clued in by the gold watch strapped to his wrist. It wasn't a cheap knockoff. Jagger could always tell the real thing from fake. His crisp grey suit and shiny black shoes told him the rest. He probably had one of the fancy offices downtown. The kind Jagger would never see the inside of because he'd never get past the security at the door. When Mr. Suit placed his wallet on the table and looked away, Jagger knew it was his one shot. He'd had nothing but restaurant dumpster scraps for the past six days. He was hungry. Hungry and desperate.

He took in his surroundings. The street café bustled with activity. It was the dead of summer and everyone was soaking up the rays while they ate food that wasn't coated in mold. He shoved his hoodie over his head to conceal his appearance, and hide the scars on his cheek, then shuffled along. He made a show of staring at the phone in his hand. Like any other ten-year-old. Never mind that the phone was broken and nothing more than a prop.

Once he was within a few feet of the table, Jagger grabbed the wallet and ran. Furious shouts echoed all around him, but he wasn't stopping and he sure as hell wasn't going back. When he reached the alley leading to the shitty one-bedroom apartment his mom rented, Jagger breathed a sigh of relief. He'd sprinted ten blocks without stopping. He glanced back to make

sure he wasn't being followed. No one around except the usual drug addicts, pushers, and women like his mom. Women who sold their souls for a fix. He waited until he was locked inside the bathroom before he took out the wallet and peered inside. "Jeez," he muttered. There was enough cash to feed him for weeks. Longer if he were careful with it. So, maybe he wasn't going to die of starvation.

At least not today.

Jagger pulled his brain out of miserable memory lane and hit the send button. "Hames," he answered.

"Jagger, it's good to hear from you, son," Vincent replied.

The only man in Jagger's life who was allowed to call him son. Sullivan had earned the right. "Sir, it's been too long."

"It has. I've been meaning to have you out to the house for dinner, but time gets away from me these days."

He thought of the lovely Mrs. Sullivan. "I'm sorry to hear about Isabelle. She was an extraordinary woman."

Silence, then Sullivan's deep baritone came through the line. "I miss her, Jagger. There isn't a day that goes by that I don't."

The region around his heart tightened. Jagger had never known two people so crazy about each other. If soul mates existed, then Vincent and Isabelle were it. "I came to the funeral, but I hung back," he admitted. "Didn't want to intrude."

He tsked. "You are always welcome, Jagger. You know that."

"Thank you, Sir." He paused, then asked, "Was there something you needed?"

He chuckled. "You always know, don't you? It's uncanny how you can read me. I've always thought I was rather adept at the whole mysterious billionaire thing."

Jagger grinned as he put the phone on speaker and set it on the counter, then started a pot of coffee. “What can I say, you taught me well.”

“Business has been good then?”

“Very. I will always be in your debt.”

“No, son, you aren’t. You brought so much to my life. And Isabelle felt the same way. She adored you.”

He remembered the dark-haired woman with the kind eyes and easy smile. She’d always had a batch of cookies waiting for him. A kindness he didn’t understand back then. A kindness he would always cherish though. “I gave her a hard time,” he admitted, as he recalled the foul-mouthed delinquent he’d been. “I don’t know why she put up with my shit.”

“She put up with my shit too. That was my Belle.” He sighed, then added, “I need a favor, Jagger. A big one.”

He stood up straighter and quickly replied, “Anything. You know that.”

“Can you come out to the house on Sunday? We need to do this in person, I’m afraid.”

Jagger mentally rearranged his schedule. “Of course. What time?”

“Six in the evening. Amelia will be home from work by then.”

At the mention of Vincent Sullivan’s only child, Jagger stiffened and he just barely refrained from cursing. “Does this involve her?”

“Yes,” he bit out.

When Sullivan didn’t elaborate, Jagger offered, “I’ll see you then.”

“Thank you, Jagger.”

He ended the call and stared at the coffee pot. Amelia Sullivan. Heir to the Sullivan fortune. A beautiful princess with the proverbial silver spoon. He’d seen her in papers recently, caught sight of her on the arms of several different men in the gossip column. For Columbus, Ohio, Amelia was practically a celebrity. A spoiled, rich girl who always got what she wanted

and didn't have to dirty her hands to get it. He remembered the child she'd been. Seeing her again would undoubtedly ruin his day, but he'd walk through the fires of hell for Vincent.

"Dad, you can't be serious," Amelia groaned as she dropped into the Italian leather armchair near her father's desk. "I'm not a child and I don't need a babysitter."

Her father stood and glared across the large mahogany. Men trembled at that steely-eyed coldness, but Amelia was immune. Mostly. "You forfeited the right to a vote in this when you kept those letters from me, Ames."

Guilt assailed her. She crossed her legs at the ankles and stared down at the floor. "I didn't want to worry you," she muttered, feeling all of ten years old again. Her father had a way of doing that. She suspected it was his booming authoritative tone.

He came closer and knelt in front of her. "Whoever sent them is twisted, sweetie," he softly explained. "You're smart enough to see that. I will have you protected. That's final."

"I'm not disputing this guy is certifiable. I'm just not sure we need Jagger Hames for the job. There are dozens of agencies we could contact. Why him?"

"Because he's the best," he flatly stated as he straightened and headed for the bar across the room. He poured a decent helping of his best scotch into a crystal glass and brought it to his lips. Amelia noticed he'd been doing that more and more lately. Drinking during the day. Since her mother had passed.

She thought of what he said. "I don't get your relationship with him," she mused aloud. "He's a thug, Dad. He's always been a thug. Surely, there are better-qualified candidates."

Her father turned and fired her an angry look. "You're attitude toward him is unnecessary. I trust Jagger with my life. You will cooperate with him, Ames. I want this matter dealt with."

"I—"

“Maybe a thug is exactly what you need to flush this guy out.”

That deep, gravelly voice. It wasn't her father's. Amelia turned to face the double doors leading into the foyer. Jagger stood there staring at her with that annoying scowl she'd become familiar with over the years. As if he didn't approve of her. As if the mere sight of her left a bad taste in his mouth. Jerk. Who was he to judge her? He'd come to a business meeting wearing a pair of unlaced black work boots, torn jeans, and a grey Van Halen t-shirt. Yeah, real professional. She ignored the heat curling through her as she stared at his dark hair cropped close to his scalp and that frightening scar along his left cheek. She'd never been brave enough to ask how he'd gotten it. And Jagger had never volunteered the information.

He had tattoos too. A slew of them covering both arms. The ink on his neck had always given her nightmares. It was a large wicked-looking spider. When he swallowed hard, like now, the legs moved. She just barely managed to not cringe at the sight. He had the beginnings of a beard and mustache. That was new. A diamond stud graced one ear as well. If Amelia didn't know better she'd think he was a killer. Like, for the mafia. Jesus. This was her protector?

Her dad set his glass down and headed across the room. He took Jagger into his arms and hugged him as if he were family. As if he mattered. Amelia never understood their connection. She'd asked her father once and he'd waved her question away.

“Thank you for coming, Jagger,” her father stated as he pointed toward the other chair next to her.

Jagger moved with such silent grace that it unnerved Amelia. When he sat and spread his legs wide, then placed his fists on his thighs, Amelia cursed under her breath. His gaze landed on her for a split second. She could swear there was a slight upward tilt to his lips. As if he were enjoying her suffering. Nice.

His attention went to her father when he replied, “Of course. Anytime, Sir.”

Her dad nodded, then leaned against the desk. "I suppose we should start at the beginning."

Amelia couldn't sit there and say nothing. She'd had enough of her father's controlling ways. "Dad, we need to discuss this privately," she bit out. "I mean it."

His eyes turned sad when he watched her. "The discussions ended when I saw that last letter. I'm sorry, Ames, but Jagger is hired. End of story."

She knew that tone. He wouldn't back down. A semi-truck couldn't get him to budge now. She supposed that tone had benefited him in business but as a father it was annoying. "Fine."

Jagger didn't even look her way. As if she were so insignificant. Sort of like a gnat. "You said letter," he prompted.

Her father reached toward the far side of the desk and picked up a stack of envelopes. He handed them to Jagger. "I was only recently made aware of them. There are ten in all. One each week. The last one came three days ago."

Jagger didn't bother reading them. Simply placed them in his lap. "Tell me everything."

Vincent Sullivan nodded and pointed that condemning finger her way. "Tell him, sweetheart."

Jagger turned. "How long has this been going on?"

"For three months," she explained as she shoved her hair away from her face. "The first contact was a necklace I received in the mail. I didn't think much of it at first. Sometimes I get...*things* from secret admirers."

His lips tilted up sideways. "Lots of adoring fans, huh?"

She rolled her eyes and clutched her hands in her lap. It was that or smack him. "No, lots of men wanting to date the daughter of a billionaire."

His amusement disappeared. "Go on," he gently prodded.

“The necklace was an infinity symbol.” She shrugged. “As I said, I didn’t put much thought into it. Not until the first letter arrived.”

He tapped his index finger against the stack of envelopes in his lap. “What did it say, Amelia?”

“A lot of disgusting and depraved things that I won’t repeat.” It still gave her nightmares. “Anyway, to sum it up, the guy promised to cut out my heart. He’d seen the newspaper and he was angry.”

His head tilted slightly to the left. “Why?”

“It was a picture of me and Greyson Bishop, my boyfriend. A reporter caught us coming out of a nightclub. I didn’t think it was a big deal.”

“Your admirer took offense though,” he concluded. Accurately so.

She shifted uneasily. “He explained that I belonged to him. That no other had a right to me. I was afraid for Greyson so I broke it off with him shortly after.”

He crossed his arms over his massive chest. “And how did Greyson take that?”

Humiliation threatened to suck her under. “He started dating a friend of mine the following week,” she admitted. “So, he wasn’t exactly heartbroken if that’s what you mean.”

His cold gaze warmed a fraction. “And besides the letters and the necklace was there anything else?”

“Phone calls. On my cell.”

“You changed the number?” he asked, watching her as if he could read her mind.

“Of course.” Amelia forced her gaze away from the annoying man. “But two days ago, I got another call.”

Jagger was quiet and it unnerved her. What was he thinking? Not knowing caused her to blurt out, “Well? I’m waiting for your amazing insight here.”

“Pack a bag,” he muttered. “You’re coming with me.”

Amelia stiffened. “Wait, what?”

He quirked a brow at her, clearly not happy that she wasn't jumping to do his bidding. “I need to flush this guy out and I'd prefer to keep you alive while I do it.”

Her father cleared his throat. “You want her to stay with you?”

Jagger nodded. “A boyfriend got this guy's attention. And it'll be a boyfriend that gets him to come out of hiding.”

“You want us to pretend to be...” she couldn't say it. The idea was ludicrous.

“Lovers,” he helpfully supplied as his gaze raked over her body, stopping for a heart-pounding few seconds on her chest.

“Oh, God.” She buried her face into her hands. “This is insane.”

After a beat of silence, her father asked, “You're sure this is the best route to take?”

“I am. She needs to be seen with me. A lot. Out to dinner, the movies, walking around the city holding hands. The way lovers do. I'm sorry, Vincent, but she's too protected here at the estate. At my place she'll be more vulnerable. And it'll be the last thing this guy expects.”

Her father sighed heavily. “You're hoping he'll think that Amelia is taking a walk on the wild side.”

“Pretty much.” He patted the letters in his lap. “It'll piss him off. Hopefully enough to make a move. That's when we get him.”

“Bait,” she grumbled, as a sense of foreboding skated along her spine. “I'm basically bait.”

He ignored her. “I *will* keep her safe, sir. You have my word.”

Her father watched her closely before moving closer. He took hold of her shoulders and lifted her from the chair, then brought her close for a comforting hug. “Go with him, Ames,” he pleaded. “Do this for me. I cannot lose you too.”

Hearing the crack in her father's normally sturdy voice had her caving. They both missed Isabelle Sullivan. She'd been an attentive wife and a loving mother. Her death had left a void and Amelia worried it would never be filled. She buried her face into his crisp, white dress shirt, inhaling his familiar, comforting scent for a moment, before pulling away. "I'll gather my things," she conceded.

"Thank you, Ames."

She smiled and patted her father's chest. "How many nights am I packing for?"

When she turned and caught Jagger watching her, a strange expression on his face, fear jabbed at her stomach. This time the fear wasn't only for her faceless stalker, but also for the devilishly dangerous man hired to protect her. In over her head? Check.

"Several," he growled. "These types of cases can be unpredictable."

Unpredictable and dangerous. Yep, that just about summed up her new protector.

"Terrific," she fumed as she stalked out of the room.

It didn't make sense. Vincent would never allow scum like Hames to date his daughter. Still, as he watched Amelia get into the black Dodge Charger, Hames holding the door for her, the truth became crystal clear. She'd taken a suitcase with her. When he'd gotten the alert on his phone that Amelia was in her bedroom, he'd quickly pulled up the feed. Transfixed by her grace as she'd flitted around her private space grabbing t-shirts, jeans, and toiletries. She'd packed enough to last a month. More even.

They weren't dating. Couldn't be. He would've known.

Everything Amelia did got his special attention. From the day he'd first noticed her. *Really* noticed her. She'd been no more than sixteen years old at the time, but she'd already started to show signs of the beauty she would become. And he'd been very good, waiting for the right moment. Content to let her have her fun when she'd hit her teens. The night she'd given her

virginity to that idiot Gavin from her French class had been a particularly bad time. The temptation to take a knife to the boy's too-perfect face had been nearly overwhelming. Amelia had dirtied herself. Degraded her body by giving her innocence to the first boy that smiled at her.

"My fault," he muttered as he stared at his phone, watching her dark bedroom. She was gone. *This won't be a repeat of Gavin*, he silently vowed. A real man would've stepped in and taken her before Gavin had gotten his filthy hands anywhere near her. He'd let her down then, but not again. This time he was prepared. Everything was ready. First, he needed to get her away from Hames.

"That freak will ruin her," he bit out. Destroy something precious. This time he'd prove to Amelia that she could count on him to save her. Even from herself.

Devil up Close by Anne Rainey

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