

DEFIANCE



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A **STRANGE ANGELS** NOVEL

LILI ST. CROW



An Imprint of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

Defiance

RAZORBILL

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Young Readers Group

345 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division
of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Mairangi Bay, Auckland 1311, New Zealand (a division of
Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196,
South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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ISBN: 978-159514-392-1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available

Printed in the United States of America

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For Christa Hickey, true blue.

Acknowledgments

Thanks again to Mel Sanders, Christa Hickey, Miriam Kriss, and Jessica Rothenberg. Special mention must go to Lea Day, Bookweasel and Research Helper extraordinaire. Last but not least: You, dear Reader. Let me, once again, thank you in the way we both like best.

Let me tell you a story...

Plus in mora pelliculi.
–Livy

CHAPTER ONE

Stick to the plan, Christophe had said. *Stick to the plan and everything will be fine.*
So I had.

I'd laced up my boots—knee-high red Doc Martens, good for everything from dancing to running to kicking ass—and put on the dress. It was a silvery baby doll number with spaghetti straps, and with my hair up my nape felt indecently bare. Even my *knees* felt naked. My mother's locket felt naked, too, hanging out against my breastbone instead of tucked under my shirt. I was even wearing *earrings*, for God's sake, cute little diamond studs Christophe had insisted I needed. I'd picked out a gauzy silver scarf sewn with little seed pearl things, hoping it would take the emphasis off my lack of cleavage.

Nathalie even managed to get me into a bra that didn't have "sports" in front of its name. An actual underwire. With padding. Another case of someone insisting and me going along with it, but with Nat I didn't mind. At least she took all of the mystery out of shopping

for bras. I'd always wondered about that. Even though there was no real need, with my chesticles impersonating gnat bites.

I mean, seriously, is a baby doll dress for the breastless? *I* don't know. I only ever wore a skirt when Gran made me dress up for church, and even she quit it the third or fourth time I left Sunday school and somehow got rolled in mud and whatever gingham or flowered cotton she'd put together for me was torn all to hell.

I never told her it was the other kids. I know she suspected, though.

Nathalie had actually got some foundation and powder on me too, high-end girtastic stuff she'd dragged me to some huge store downtown to buy on one of our sneakabout-during-the-day excursions. The effect was okay. My skin was pretty much behaving these days; any zit I felt pressing up under the surface never seemed to break free. I sometimes got a small red spot, but nothing like it used to be.

You'd think that would make me feel better.

It didn't.

I hit the dance floor, wincing a little bit as the DJ looped feedback through the throbbing of a useless song about someone playing poker with his face or something. Sometimes hyperacute senses are so not worth it, even when you can concentrate and tone it down a bit. When I finally hit my blooming—the point where I got the speed and strength of a *djamphir* reliably, instead of in emotion-fueled bursts—I'd be able to tone it down as a matter of course. But for right now, I was stuck.

One good thing about this, though. I like dancing. Or at least, hopping up and down on a crowded floor, people hemming me in. I never thought it was anything I'd be happy about, especially since I've got the touch. You'd think that many people in one place *think-*

DEFIANCE

ing would drive me crazy. But when they're all happy and sweating and dancing, it's like white noise. It can help you relax.

When you're not watching out for bloodsucking fiends who would just as soon kill you as look at you, that is.

I stayed on the periphery, far enough into the crowd to get some cover, close enough to the edge that I could get away in a hurry. This rave was being thrown in a huge weird building called Pier 57, full of chemical fog and cigarette smoke. And other kinds of smoke, too. Glow sticks and bare flesh and sweat, it smelled like menthol and cigarettes, the musk of weed, and an indefinable tang that's all youth. Plus the smothered salt smell of sex in dark corners. There were enough hormones in here to fuel a rocket out to Orion.

I raised my arms when the crowd around me did, colored lights flashing. It was a migraine attack of red blue orange yellow, except for when they got fancy at certain points and made it all blue and green, or all orange and yellow. The music would crest, then whoever was doing lights would flick off everything but the mirrored ball, a tiny bit of spots to make everything glitter, and the black lights to make lipstick and synthetic fabrics glow oddly.

With the touch loose inside my head—just a little, not enough to drown me in a wash of sensation from every random stranger bumping against me—I drifted, letting my body slide through like a little fish in a bunch of water weeds. A minnow. Something too small to catch.

At least, I hoped I was too small.

Stick to the plan. Well, I was sticking to the plan.

The problem with vampires is that they *don't* stick to plans.

The first shard of hate, sharp and bright as an icicle under full sunlight, jabbed into my head. I kept moving, edging for the outside of the crowd. If I timed it right, the wheeling movement of the

dancers—because if you watch a time lapse of a dancing crowd, they do always go in a wagon wheel—would take me right to the best exit Christophe had shown me on the layouts, his arm warm and comforting over my shoulders and his voice just a murmur in my ear. *Don't worry. You're fast enough and trained enough, or I wouldn't send you in.*

The thought made me flush all over, the healed fangmarks on my left wrist tingling slightly. At least he'd let me *do* something, not like some of the others on the Council. Hiro was having kittens about me being involved in an actual operation. Bruce just got That Look, the one that said I was Too Young and Too Irresponsible and Too Precious and the Hope of the Order.

It made me want to punch something.

If tonight went south, I might even get to.

The taste of rotting, waxen oranges slid across my tongue, paying no attention to the fact that I was chewing on a wad of spearmint gum. Gran called it an *arrah*—an aura. I was calling it danger candy nowadays. I always felt like spitting it out, but spitting would only make it worse.

Plus, spitting on a dance floor is damn rude. I was raised better.

I slipped my hand into the tiny net purse hanging at my side. Nathalie said it ruined the line of the dress, but I had to have someplace to stash lip gloss and the little thing I pulled out now, reaching up as if to brush a stray brown curl back and fitting it over my ear. It looked like a wireless headset for a cell phone, a sleek silver one. I pressed the button and let some of the curls hanging from my updo fall over it.

Noise-canceling earphones are a blessing. I just wished he'd given me two of them. Or earplugs. Earplugs would've been just jim-dandy.

DEFIANCE

“We read you, Dru.” Christophe’s voice, as crisp as if he was standing right next to me, overriding the attack of the music. Now it was some retro whitewashing of an eighties song, about a girl named Eileen and how she needed to come on, over thumping, thudding bass. “We have a visual. Primary team, move in.”

This was, he’d told me, the most dangerous part. Before the other *djamphir* infiltrated the building, while I was still dancing. I was just about to break free of the crowd and head for the exit when another bright shard of hate lanced through my head.

I drew back instinctively, and the exit I’d been planning to take suddenly had a flicker of movement around it. “Shit.” I wasn’t even aware I’d said it.

“What?” Christophe didn’t sound worried, but I could almost see him sitting at a sleek black desk in Mission Central at the Schola Prima on the Upper West Side, tense, his head cocked and the aspect slicking his hair down and back, the fangs peeping out from under his upper lip. His fingers would be poised over a slim black keyboard, and his blue eyes would be cold and far away, completely closed off. He would be coldly handsome, and I would almost feel . . .

No, I was never afraid of him. Not really. But it was easy to see how I could be, when he looked like that.

I had other problems right now. “Primary exit’s blocked. I’m using secondary.”

“Dru—”

But I was already moving. It wasn’t a mistake, because the flickers at the door resolved into three teenage-looking males. One blond and two dark, all of them cute enough to get a second glance from any reasonable girl. If she was smart, the girl would see the hard edges of their smiles, or the nasty glitter in their dark eyes, or even just the way they moved. And she would run like hell.

But normal people don't look too closely. They glance, slot you into whatever hole they think you fit in, and bebop along right into the jaws of whichever slice of nasty is looking to feed. Dad and August used to argue over whether or not people *wanted* to know about the Real World, about the things that went bump in the night. Neither of them ever won the argument.

Me? I'd had nothing to say. I'd just been a kid.

I was still following the plan. I headed for the secondary exit, Christophe muttering in my ear as he sent the secondary and tertiary teams to their backup positions and gave the primary new orders. There was an odd echo to his voice, as if the signal was getting bounced around or he was outside.

I wished he was a little closer than the Schola, to tell the truth. But he was my control for this run, and Mission Central was where he belonged, coordinating. I drew in a nice deep breath, trying to force my galloping pulse to slow down. We were about to serve the vampires hunting the rave scene a really bad plate of kickass, Christophe had finally judged me competent enough to work inside a very limited seek-destroy operation, and the thought was comforting. Like I was doing something *real*, for once, instead of just training. Even if this was the closest thing to safe you could get when dealing with vampires.

That was when everything went bad. Because another quick movement near the secondary exit caught my eye, and the bass hit a smashing, rollicking rhythm. Everyone raised their arms, the crowd's mood turning on a dime into a breathless anxiety under all the roller-coaster fun, and I realized the secondary was a no-go too. My scarf fluttered a bit, seed pearls rasping against my suddenly damp neck.

Unfortunately, I'd just stepped out of the mass of normal kids and into a clear space, a sort of walkway for anyone who needed to

DEFIANCE

escape the dance floor. I should have kept moving as if I was heading for the bathroom. When you freeze and stare at a rave, you stick out.

The lead vampire at the secondary exit lifted his head. His eyes shone flatly, the black of the hunting aura eating the irises and spreading into the whites, oddly like oily rainbows on wet pavement. The older ones have those black oily eyes pretty much all the time, but it takes a while for the younger ones to develop it.

He sniffed, aristocratic nostrils flaring, dark curls falling over his forehead.

Oh shit. “Secondary exit blocked,” I muttered. “Switching to Plan C.”

“Wait.” It wasn’t often I heard Christophe sound baffled. “What’s plan—”

The curly-headed vampire stopped sniffing. His head moved a little, and he looked right at me. His lips moved, and I knew what he was saying.

I swear to God I heard him, too, a whisper bypassing my ears and sliding right into the center of my brain.

“Svetocha.”

The name for what I was—part vampire, part human girl, poisonous to suckers and all kick ass once I bloom and finish getting trained.

If I survived tonight, that is.

I swallowed hard, wished I hadn’t. “Plan C is where I improvise,” I said through the sudden thickness of danger candy, and bolted.