### GRAVE NEW WORLD -SAMPLE

## DOWN & DIRTY SUPERNATURAL CLEANING SERVICES BOOK 1

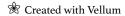
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leaning up after a vampire rave sucks.

Pun intended.

My first one, I came armed with a whole truckload of hydrogen peroxide, expecting blood stains everywhere. In my mind, they covered the walls and floors and ceilings. I expected something like what a plasma donation center would look like if it was run by someone hopped up on way too much Mountain Dew.

It turns out, though, that vampires are not messy eaters. You might even say they don't like to waste a single drop of their meal. It's sacred to them the way Ho-Ho's were to my seventh-grade math teacher.

So yeah, it's not the prospect of scrubbing away blood stains that's getting me down as I drive through the warehouse district searching each building for the 6669 the vamps paint on the wall of their chosen party spot. The number's some sort of vampire humor, I think. Or maybe not. They're hard to read and I'm not interested in getting close enough to find out anything about them beyond that they pay in cash.

"Where is this stupid place?" I ask aloud, even though there's no one else in the van with me. Although...my van is kind of sentient. Like a cross between Christine and Herbie, it's both terrifying and adorable.

Vanna was stolen ages ago. Back when she...er, *it*, was just a normal Grand Caravan with stained seats and a dented back fender from some tailgating asshole. I figured that was the last I'd see of it, but a few months back I opened my door and there was Vanna (yes, I named her and yes I hate myself for it). The same...but also totally different.

I would've sent her straight back to the impound lot where she was found if it wasn't for the fact that I was desperate for transportation. The transmission had just died on my previous van and without wheels I had no job. So I used Vanna, figuring I could just pretend she was normal. Just another vehicle.

That didn't last long.

In response to my question, Vanna takes over steering, which is always annoying. But I forgive her as she parks us in front of a building, the 6669 on the wall straight ahead.

From the outside the warehouse looks totally unremarkable. Just another big boxy building. I can't hold back a big sigh as I grasp the handles on the giant sliding door. Putting all my weight into it, I pull the door hard. With a groan it gives way, gliding open and allowing a bright shaft of sunlight to cut through the dark interior.

"Aw fuck," I say as a giant water tank fills my vision. I'm not talking about some little pet store thing; this is Sea World size. I have no idea how I'm gonna drain this thing and scrub it spotless. That's the job, though. I'm supposed to leave only the dust motes and a sparkling clean tank behind when I'm done.

This alone would be a monumental task, but as I walk

into the warehouse and closer to the tank and the moving shadows within, I know it's gonna get worse.

And it does.

Sharks. Big ones, too. They glide through the water with silent menace.

Those as shole vamps decided to have an underwater rave and feed on fucking sharks.

I thought the lions were the worst. Before that, I thought the pigs were the worst.

Clearly, I was wrong all those times. Because really, vampires are the worst. Always and forever—they are The. Worst.

I take a minute to swear viciously and creatively, cursing not just vampires but all the paranormal creatures that decided to come out of hiding a decade ago and totally screw up everything. Sometimes I hear people say that it's better to know than to live in ignorance. I disagree. The time when I believed that werewolves, harpies, and faeries were all just stories was a great time. An easier, simpler one too.

I was only in my early twenties when everything changed. My dad's cleaning business was struggling and I'd just graduated with a degree in English that I was quickly realizing was pretty much useless in the real world. Then we had a little apocalypse. Cities disappeared beneath the sea. Crops failed. And all the supes came out to play. Suddenly college degrees didn't mean much. Survival was our entire focus.

I got married to my boyfriend, 'cause it felt like we might all die and I guess I wanted to wear a white dress first? I don't know. It wasn't the greatest decision. I also went into business with Dad. But we revamped it. Pun intended.

Harper Cleaning became Down & Dirty: Supernatural Cleaning Services. Dad said we were kinda like the clean-up

crew for the Ghostbusters. "Think about it," he'd say. "Someone had to mop up that marshmallow mess, and I bet they got paid good money. Hazard pay, right?"

He was right. The business thrived. My marriage failed. But overall, life was good.

Until my parents disappeared along with a few hundred thousand other folks.

But that's another story.

Right now, I gotta figure out how to get these sharks outta this tank.

Luckily, we're in the Newark Port district. I understand now why they chose this location. But still, the Bay is a good ten minutes away. Can a shark survive that long out of water?

Pulling out my phone, I start to Google.

Some people might think I'm just a cleaning lady, but in truth, this job requires way more than just a mop and broom.

Yesterday I was choking on feathers cleaning out a frat house that had been full of chicken shifter strippers. Today I'm wrestling sharks. Tomorrow I might be scrubbing harpy droppings off some vocal Humans First protester's roof and lawn.

Down & Dirty is more than just a job. It's a lifestyle.

I'm soaking wet and stink like a can of tuna fish. The knuckles on my right hand ache from punching a shark in the face. It was necessary—those sharks were hungry and thought I might be a tasty afternoon snack. It was good to know my right hook works even underwater, but I didn't have time to ice it afterwards and now I'm paying for it.

Overall, it wasn't a great day.

But I did return those damn sharks to the sea and get that tank emptied. So technically it's a win. It just doesn't quite feel that way.

I wouldn't even bother going back to the office, except that I want to bill the vamps for the cherry picker with power lift, rescue harness, and ten miles of tubing to empty the tank. No way am I paying the interest on that shit if they don't pony up before my credit card bill is due.

The street is mostly dark. This is the type of town where the sidewalks get rolled up at nine and noise ordinances are strictly enforced. The only person still open is my business neighbor, Eye Wide Open Private Investigations. The dude is a giant werewolf with an eyepatch, so that's meant to be clever. The first time we met I told him it was "punny" and he replied that puns are the lowest form of humor. Clearly we don't see eye to eye. Pun abso-fucking-lutely intended.

I'm not gonna take tips on what is and is not funny from this guy. I think he used up any and all humor he possesses on his business name 'cause everything about Nico is dark and scary. Maybe, if I'm being honest, also a little bit sexy too. In that bad boy kind of way that my ex really should've cured me of finding attractive ever again. But my ex was bad in a prankster kind of way, whereas Nico has more of a quiet smolder thing going on.

I don't like it. And I don't like him. If a past client wasn't giving me a deal on the rent, I'd move just to get away from him. For now, though, I'm stuck with him.

Before sitting at my desk, I pull a beer out of the minifridge squeezed between my two filing cabinets. If anyone asks I say that it's to keep my lunch salads fresh. But let's be honest, some days require a cold beer at the ready. And this is definitely one of them.

Twisting the cap off, I collapse into my desk chair and then boot up my laptop. Twenty minutes later I'm just finishing up the invoicing when the bell on the door jingles, alerting me that a customer is entering the shop. Only problem is...I definitely locked the door.

I spin and roll my chair out from behind the wall of plants I use for privacy. I never had a green thumb until I inherited an aggressive Venus fly trap. The Venus fly trap was inside Vanna when she was returned to me, with a note beside her that said, *Please take care of my Vee, she prefers white mice.* 

Now I swear the fly trap actually hisses as a tall skinny man steps through the doorway and into the shop.

"Stop right there," I demand, reaching for the only weapon I have close at hand—a broom.

He smiles slightly and his eyes dance with humor. The light is low, but there's also a glowy quality to him. Which means this guy is either very into a gold-based skincare routine—or he's fae.

I'm betting on the latter.

"I come in peace," he says, laughter in his voice.

I point to the door with the very obvious closed sign. "That door was locked and these are not my business hours. Come in peace tomorrow."

He shrugs. "I suppose I could find another cleaning service, however, you come highly recommended. And since I'm being intrusive by showing up outside of regular business hours, I'll pay you double your rate."

"You don't even know what my regular rate is," I say.

"It doesn't matter. I'll pay it. And..." He reaches into the bag I hadn't even noticed slung across his shoulder. It lies flat against his hip, but somehow he pulls out a huge package wrapped in white butcher paper. "Prime steaks. Share them with your friends and family. A rare treat, I'm sure."

Ugh, I hate him. And hate the way my mouth is watering. He's right; steaks are a rare treat these days. The whole crops failing because of the apocalypse thing was not great for the food supply. While chicken, beef, and pork used to be staples on our table, these days beans and rice are way more common. The idea of a good seared steak is enough to make my stomach grumble.

"What's the job?" I ask.

"I've recently come into some property. I believe it was

unoccupied for some time. It's rundown and a bit...undesirable at the moment. I need it cleaned up."

I frown. "That doesn't sound like something for which you'd be willing to pay double."

His steady smile becomes tighter. Hard. "Perhaps to *you* it doesn't."

I take a minute to consider. My jobs for the next few days are for human clients, people who crossed swords with the supes and their property came out the worse for it. It's awful, but it's a lot easier to push them further down my schedule than it would one of my supernatural clients. As much as I hate them, they usually pay well and on time.

"Okay," I tell the fae guy. "I'll do it. Let me just get your information down."

I turn toward my desk for a pen and some paper, but he stops me with a single gesture, sliding forward with an almost liquid grace so that he's directly in front of me. "No need. Here's my card. The address is on the back. I should be on the premises, but if I'm not you may call me." He says 'call' with distaste. Supes are not good with modern technology.

As soon as I take the card, he covers his nose and quickly backs away, so he's not quite so close to the stink cloud surrounding me.

"Hold up," I say to him as I head back to my desk and grab the stack of business cards on top. In a moment of weakness, I splurged on the fancy kind. Thick paper, curved corners, and my own name on the back embossed. Paige Harper, Owner. I can never pick them up without running the pad of my thumb over those words.

Peeling one off the top, I stretch my arm far as it'll go so fae man doesn't have to enter the stink zone again. "Call me if anything changes."

"Nothing will," he assures me, taking the card. He examines it for a moment, then asks. "Ms. Harper?"

"That's me." I shrug. "I also answer to Paige, Hey you, and Cleaning lady."

"How...human," he says drolly. "My business here is concluded. I shall expect to see you at ten tomorrow morning," he adds, indicating the package of steaks and letting me know this meeting is over. Setting them on the small reception desk, he tips an imaginary hat and is gone as quickly and silently as he came.

As I turn back to my desk, I can't help but think that I'm getting too old for this shit. Sure, I just turned thirty-one, but this new supe-filled world seems to age us humans faster. Meanwhile, most of the supes appear to never age at all.

Raging at the unfairness of it all won't get me to my bed any faster.

Not that I'm in a hurry to get to my bed. There's not exactly someone in it waiting for me.

I'm wiped out, so I quickly finish up the invoice and email it. Vamps usually have a human or two doing their bidding, so I hope to get a big fat money transfer soon. Good thing too, because rent isn't going to just pay itself. And when your landlord is your ex-husband, you don't want to be late. And Jax never had a taste for red meat, so I don't think I can sucker him into letting me pay him with protein. But I'm not above trying.

Grabbing the steaks, I head out. But this shit-show of a day is not yet done. Nico, the private dick from next door, is waiting outside for me. I mean technically he's just leaning against the small slice of brick wall between our office doors, but the minute I walk out he turns my direction in a way that tells me he has something to say.

"Paige," he says, his voice a low rumbly growl that I feel in the pit of my stomach.

Ugh. I really can't stand him. He takes up more than his fair share of space, forcing me to step back or else just live with him standing uncomfortably close. At five foot nine, I'm not short, but next to Nico I feel petite. Maybe some girls

would enjoy that feeling, but not me. The world is too uncertain and dangerous for me to indulge any damsel in distress fantasies. I may not be a supe, but I *am* a badass. And I like knowing that I can take care of myself.

Nico, though, seems to have the idea that I need his help and protection. More than once he's warned me from going into certain areas he deems too dangerous. Another time he mansplained to me how best to get animal hair off couch cushions. I mean, c'mon, dude. Sure, I get that he occasionally sheds, but I've been doing this job for a long time and don't need his helpful little tips.

In his eyes, I'm just a helpless human. Soft and easy prey for his kind—the supes of the world.

I hate being condescended to. And I hate supes. All of them.

I have lots of reasons, but the main one is The Great Ghosting. All around the world in one awful second hundreds of thousands people just—POOF!—disappeared. There and then gone. Just like that.

My parents were among them. Dad disappeared right before my eyes. One minute he had a slice of pizza in his hand and was complaining that Benny's was skimping on the pepperoni lately. "What's the world coming to when a man—"

He never finished that thought. Or his pizza.

The worst moment, though, was when I called Mom. She'd become addicted to her smartphone in recent years and even took it into the bathroom with her. I could always count on her to pick up on the first ring.

But on that day it went to voicemail.

And I knew then with a sick feeling in the depths of my stomach, that I'd never see her or Dad again.

And I haven't.

To this day there are no leads. No explanations. Nothing. The supes swear up and down that they had nothing to do with it. That they lost many of their own.

It's true that supes disappeared too. But that doesn't absolve them from responsibility.

The supes have killed gods, causing earthquakes and tidal waves.

The supes have opened portals that release horrible monsters.

The supes bite off more than they can chew, and it's the normal people like me who suffer.

So yeah, I do business with supes cause a girl's gotta eat. But I don't trust, befriend, or sleep with them...anymore.

That being said...it has not escaped my attention that Nico is a very nice slice of manhood. Or half a slice, I guess. Since he's half wolf. But I've never seen that part of himalthough sometimes on full moons if I work late I'll hear howling. It always makes all my hair stand on end.

Now he leans against the wall with his muscled arms folded across his broad chest. There's not one inch of flab on him. Trust me, I've looked. It's almost impossible not to. He wears these tight white tees and beat-up jeans. In the winter he adds a worn leather jacket. It's so cheesy. Like he's doing some sort of James Dean Rebel Without A Cause-type thing.

Except...oh man, it looks good on him. Real good.

So good that I have to sometimes remind myself that I would never get involved with a supe. I mean, I accidentally married a fae, but that was not my fault. He didn't even know he was fae, at the time. That was the first thing that soured me on supes, especially the attractive ones—and they *all* seem to be easy on the eyes.

But with Nico, sometimes I wonder what he might be like between the sheets. Maybe it's just my proximity to him.

Seeing him day in and day out. I noticed the other week when he changed his cologne.

Plus...the walls between our offices are thin. Like I've-heard-him-servicing-clients kind of thin. And by servicing, I mean that sometimes when ladies find out their husbands are cheating he comforts them with his penis. To be fair, the lady is always the one initiating it. But still, it happens enough that I know the sound Nico makes when he comes, so...

As if reading my mind, Nico says, "Thin walls round here, huh?"

"What?" I ask, jumping a little.

He frowns at me like he can't figure me out. "Heard you're doing work for a fae. You know who he is?"

I shrug. "No. Why should I?"

Nico points to my window.

It reads *Down & Dirty Supernatural Cleaning Services*. And there's my logo too. Dad hated it. Said he felt like he was prostituting me. But I insisted. Sex sells and we needed every advantage we could get. So there's a sex kitten cartoon that maybe if you squint could kinda look like me. Even Dad eventually had to admit—it worked. People walk by, see it, and stop. They read the window. Maybe they don't need us right now, but later when they get in a feud with the manticore family next door and get their lawn clawed to shreds—they remember me and call.

"You wanna be in the supernatural services?" Nico asks. "Then maybe you should know a little bit more about your clients."

"I know plenty," I counter. "And I don't need your warnings. I don't trust any of—" I just barely stop myself before I say 'you'—there's no need to make this personal. "My clients," I quickly correct.

But Nico knows exactly what I mean. He grins in a way that shows all his teeth. They're nice white, even teeth—not the yellowed fangs I'd expect. But still, there's something about them that feels more threatening than a normal human's collection of molars and canines. "Sure, I know. Like your boyfriend says, 'the only good supe is a dead supe."

I sigh. I hate when people bring this up. He said this a long time ago and has apologized for it. Also, he's not really my boyfriend anymore. He's either way more...or way less. But I'm not gonna get into all of that with Nico. I give him the short version. "That was a long time ago. Tensions were high. He said something on Twitter that he regretted. As head of the city council—"

"And future congressman," Nico interrupts.

I frown at this, but have to concede, "He's running, yes. And it's on a platform of tolerance and peace. It's not like he's with Humans First or anything. And for the record, neither am I."

Nico shakes his head, smiling "Oh, so it's good to know that you wouldn't outright kill me, given the chance. But a national database of all the supes, so that we can be watched—you support that?"

I throw my hands up. How did I know we were gonna end up having this argument? Again.

"It's not fair to humans if we don't know who is and is not a supe. Trust me, I was married to one and had no idea—"

Nico cuts me off with a wave of his hand. "Let's not do this. I didn't come out here to fight or"—he wrinkles his nose— "stand upwind of you for this long." I blush despite myself, really wishing I didn't smell so fishy. "I just wanted to

tell you, I did work for that guy a long time ago. He's one of Oberon's lackeys. I wouldn't trust him. Not even a little bit."

"Who's Oberon?" I ask. "Some fae mob boss? Jimmy Hoffa with wings?"

"He's king of the fae. And not all fae have wings," Nico says. "In fact, only pixies—"

I can tell he's about to give me a whole species, family, genus breakdown for all of Faerieland, which I am 100% *not* interested in.

I cut him off before that can happen. "Yeah, don't care. All I need to know about the fae is that this one pays."

"Okay then..." Nico looks like he's gonna say more, but just shakes his head instead.

My inner voice is telling me that Nico's right. That fae dude, whose card had no name, just an address and phone number, is a big old mistake. Even with the bribe of fresh steaks. But there's no way I'm gonna admit that.

"I can take care of myself," I tell him.

"Can you?" he asks, his eyes moving from mine to something above us.

I duck instinctively, just as the *swoosh* of wings passes right over my head. A shriek escapes me, and I immediately hate myself for it. Before I have time to recoup, the harpy has wheeled back, and I'm familiar with the look in its eyes.

Harpies are ugly, but they are definitely some of the more peaceful supes. Or they were. But a few years back they discovered meth and suddenly their kind was no longer the poster child for human-supe relations. This one is amped up, and looking to take someone out. Specifically me. I don't know why. Maybe I look like the human that killed her sister. Maybe I look like the girl that stole her lover. Maybe I'm just the first unfortunate person she came

across after she zoomed on Scooby Snax. Either way, I'm the target.

"Balls!" I scream, digging into the back of my pants. I keep my Ruger there. A good old-fashioned gun is useful on humans and supes alike, and I've flashed it in the faces of more than a few creeps. But there's a problem, and that problem is my vanity.

My pants are too tight.

The gods must've invented spandex because these leggings have been working hard all day keeping my tummy in and my tush tight. A lesser fabric would be sagging after the day I've put in, but these are still fighting the good fight.

Only problem is, right now they're not just holding my muffin top in, but my gun too.

I mean, I look hot as shit, but I'm also just about to be dead shit if I can't get the drop on this harpy. There's a snarl as the harpy dives, claws out, extended for my face.

Except it wasn't the harpy that growled. I realize that the second I'm hit by 200 pounds of man meat.

Oh...scratch that. Dog meat.

Nico has shifted, knocking me flat on my back. The harpy misses her prey and spins again to take a third pass. But Nico bares his teeth, emitting a deep, low growl. His chest vibrates on mine.

I can't claim that I hate it.

The harpy considers the challenge, then turns tail and wings away to the west. The massive werewolf on top of me jumps up, sniffs once at the sky to make sure the harpy is gone, and then he's Nico again, standing above me and offering a hand to help me up, his lip curled in a wry smile.

"I believe you were saying you could take care of yourself?"

I ignore the hand and scramble to my feet, brushing dirt

from my too-tight jeans. I always worried my pants would betray me, but I figured it would be with them splitting up the middle during a deep bend over. This, surprisingly, is worse.

Trying to preserve a little of my dignity, I stick my nose up in the air.

"Yes," I say, "I can." I turn my back to him, not even offering a thanks, and Vanna does the favor of opening the driver's side door for me, somehow knowing that I'm too shaken to do it myself.

But it's not the harpy attack that's got my nerves on edge.

Later, in bed, it's not the near miss from the harpy that replays in my mind. Instead, it's the moment Nico stood over me, fangs bared and his big dog dick swinging in my face. Not that it was a turn-on or anything. I'm not one of those human girls who wants to brag about getting banged by a bear. Nico's fur-covered hindquarters will never meet mine. But still, I can't help wondering...

Does Nico's human manhood have the same impressive hang as his wolf wang?

#### END OF SAMPLE

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and

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#### **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

DEMITRIA LUNETTA is the author of the YA books THE FADE, BAD BLOOD, and the sci-fi duology, IN THE AFTER and IN THE END. She is also an editor and contributing author for the YA anthology, AMONG THE SHADOWS: 13 STORIES OF DARKNESS & LIGHT. Find her at www.demitrialunetta.com for news on upcoming projects and releases. Or join the newsletter list for DEMITRIA LUNETTA

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Marley Lynn is a lost child of the gods, who waits on the shores of Lake Erie for her parents to bring her home. In the meantime, she contents herself with reading, writing, and gardening. Find out more at www.MarleyLynn.com or sign up for MARLEY LYNN'S newsletter.

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