

Zen and the Art of Vampires

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Chapter One

“Experience the romance of Iceland under the starry summer night sky with a descendant of the Vikings of yore, that’s the what the brochure said.”

Eyes a startling shade of unadulterated grey considered me seriously.

“Thus far, my starry summer nights have been trying to figure out why my hair dryer adapter keeps blowing out the hotel lights. I don’t suppose you are free tonight for a little star-gazing?”

The grey eyes didn’t blink, just continued to watch me cautiously, as if their owner expected me to suddenly leap onto the tiny round metal and glass table at which we sat, and start dancing the can-can. “Star-gazing?”

“Yes, it means looking at the stars. Speaking of which, your English is remarkably good. But I assume your lack of enthusiasm means you’d rather pass on the idea.” I sighed. “I kind of thought so. It’s par for the course, you know. Well, par for *my* course. A couple ladies on the tour have done well for themselves thus far.”

Three women danced by in progression. The first two were strangers, but the third one, Magda, was a decidedly plump, buxom lady of Spanish descent who had snapping black eyes, and a wicked sense of humor.

“Pia, you’re not dancing?” Magda called as her partner, Raymond, whirled her around to vaguely Germanic music, complete with accordion. It was the middle of June, and all of Iceland was celebrating their Independence Day with much abandon, even the tourists. Small booths of crafts and food vendors lined the square, filling the air with an intriguing mixture of smells that ranged from floral (a dried lavender seller) to mouth-watering (a Mediterranean gyro stand). At the far end of the square a stage had been set up, and various bands ranging from country (who knew Iceland had country music?) to easy listening had played all day. I gathered that the more raucous bands were to grace the evening’s stage.

“Not this time, no,” I called back.

“You should!” she yelled, her deep, throaty voice carrying surprisingly well over the noise of the music and people. “The music is divine!”

I thought about pointing out the obvious, that thus far in the trip, no blond, blue-eyed descendant of Vikings had asked me to join the throng, but a small morsel of pride kept me from bellowing that out to Magda.

My tablemate swigged down the last of his beverage and belched, politely excusing himself.

I eyed him doubtfully for a moment, before deciding beggars couldn’t be choosers. “Would it be forward of me if I asked you if you would care to dance?”

He looked thoughtful a moment, then nodded, and stood up. “Dance is good.”

I was a bit surprised at his easy acquiescence, but determined to enjoy myself no matter what, I took his hand and wound my way through the crowds perched at café tables to the part of the square where the dancing was taking place.

“Do you two step?” I asked my partner politely.

He glanced down at my shoes. “Two feet.”

“Yes. It’s a dance. I assume you don’t know it?”

“No.” He shook his head. “I like dance.”

With careful deliberation, he put his faded-sandal-clad feet directly on top of my sturdy, if somewhat scruffy, leather walking shoes, and looked up with expectation.

“It’s a good thing you’re a small as you are, and I’m as big as I am,” I told the boy, taking his hands and moving in gentle, vaguely dance-like motions that would keep him from being dislodged. “How old are you, exactly?”

The boy scrunched up his face for a moment as he sorted out the proper word. “Four.”

“Really? Then your English is even more remarkable than I thought. I couldn’t say squat in another language when I was your age, and here you are dancing with me and chatting away like crazy. Well, all right, I’m the one doing most of the chatting, but you seem to understand what I’m saying, and as I am probably the only person on Sgt. Patty’s Lonely Heart’s Club Tour who has yet to hook up with either a fellow tour mate, or a handsome local, you’re pretty much it as far as available conversationalists go. What’s your name?”

His brows pulled together again for a moment. “Geirfinnur.”

“What an interesting name. I’m Pia Thomason. I’m from Seattle. Do you know where that is?”

He shook his head.

“Let’s see, what’s Seattle known for...Microsoft? Have you ever heard of Microsoft? Starbucks? Google?”

He shook his head again.

“Geirfinnur!” A man appeared from out of the dancers, gesticulating at my feet as he spoke in Icelandic. My dance partner reluctantly stopped off my shoes, shooting me a chastened look.

“Are you Geirfinnur’s dad?” I asked, as the subject of his ire’s eyes started to fill with contrite tears.

“You are English?” I could see the similarity in their faces, and the same clear grey eyes. “I am very sorry that he is behaved so poor with you.”

“He wasn’t behaving badly at all,” I said quickly, ruffling the boy’s hair. He rewarded me with a toothy grin. “In fact, just the opposite. He wandered past while I was sitting and watching everyone, and kindly kept me company and helped me eat ice cream. He speaks English so well, I’m really quite amazed at how young he is.”

“My wife is from Scotland,” the man explained, giving his son a fond look. “You say thank you to the English lady.”

“American, not English. I’m from Seattle.”

Geirfinnur’s father adopted the same look of concentration as he obviously tried to pinpoint Seattle.

“It’s in the Pacific Northwest. Upper left-hand corner of the country. We have Boeing and Amazon.”

“Seattle?” the man said, his brow clearing. “Nintendo!”

“Yes, we have that, too,” I answered, smiling as my dance partner leaped around us shouting, “Nintendo, Nintendo! Super Mario Brothers!”

“You are here as a tourist? I am Jens Jakobsson. That is Geirfinnur.”

“Yes, I’m with a...uh...” I waved a vague hand, suddenly shy about the fact that I was on a single’s tour. “It’s a three week tour of Europe.”

“That is most excellent. You enjoy *Island*?” He pronounced the word Iceland with its native inflection.

“Very much. Dalkafjordhur is a lovely little town. We’ve been here two days and have three more to explore Reykjavik and the area before we move on to Holland.”

“This is good,” he said, grinning. “You are so kind to Geirfinnur, we will show you around tonight, show you places tourists don’t normally see. We know a good place to see fireworks. You would like that?”

“I would love it,” I said, sincerely pleased at the thought of meeting some local folk. My happiness was short-lived as I pulled up a mental image of the tour itinerary.

“Only...drat. I think our tour is going out into the countryside tonight, to see some ruins.”

“Ruins are very pretty here,” Jens said. “But not as pretty as fireworks, I think.”

“Fireworks!” Geirfinnur parroted, suddenly rushing me and wrapping his arms around my waist as he looked up. “Fireworks are good!”

“Geir, do not annoy the lady. She has a tour to go with. What ruins are you going to visit?”

“It’s some sort of protected forest with a ruin contained within. I’m afraid I don’t remember the name, but evidently it has some tie in to a cult that was supposed to be very prominent around midsummer, and since that’s just a couple of days away—”

“Ilargi!” Jens gasped, his expression suddenly horror-filled as he snatched his son from where he was bouncing up and down on my feet. “You are Ilargi?”

“Me? No, I’m Irish. Mostly. There’s some German on my mom’s side.”

Jens eyed me warily. “If you are not Ilargi, are you from the Brotherhood?”

“I’m not overly religious,” I said slowly, confused by his reaction. “I’m sorry, maybe we’re having a communication issue, despite the fact that your English is exceptional. This Ilargi place that we’re going to visit tonight isn’t an abbey or a religious house, it’s a stretch of untouched forest, which I gather is rare. It’s supposed to have some sort of pagan meaning, but I’m afraid I kind of skimmed that section of the itinerary.”

“Not pagan,” Jens said, picking up his squirming son and backing away. “Not good. Stay away from Geirfinnur. Stay away from Ilargi.”

Before I could ask him just what the dickens that meant, he turned and bolted, Geirfinnur’s hand waving the last thing I saw before they were swallowed up by the dancing crowd.

“Well, how do you like that?” I asked no one in particular. I was answered by a brutal jab to the back, reminding me that there were better places for contemplation of confusing Icelanders than the middle of a dance floor.

I made my way back to my table and ordered another lemonade, nursing it as I watched the people swarm around me. What on earth was so wrong with the Ilargi forest that it triggered such a strong reaction in Jens? Did Audrey know about it, I wondered?

Before I could mull over what I wanted to do next, a dark-haired woman plopped down in the chair that had previously been occupied by Geirfinnur. She shot a glare over her shoulder toward a very handsome blond man as he bumped her back while escorting two children wearing blue and white horns past us. “Hey Pia. You look like I feel. Did you hear? The trip to the forest is off for tonight. And a good thing, too. I could do without being eaten alive by mosquitoes and god knows what other kind of insects there are around here. I don’t suppose you’ve seen Audrey? She disappeared right after she told me about the cancellation, and I didn’t have time to have a word with her about the serious lack of men on this tour.”

“Not since lunch, no,” I answered, digging out my disposable camera to snap a picture of the be-horned kids as they waved flags madly. “I think she said something about checking on the accommodations in Amsterdam.”

Denise, the fifth woman on the tour, and my least favorite of all the members, curled a scornful lip at my answer. “Bah. We don’t go there for three days. Not that I won’t be glad to get out of this country. I’ve just been in the most appalling bookshop over there. Ugh. They didn’t have anything printed in the last hundred years. And the spiders! Who’d have thought that Iceland would have such big spiders? Positively tarantulas! Here, you! Diet Coke. Coca Cola. You understand?” Denise grabbed a passing waitress and shook her arm. “Pia, you have a phrasebook—how do you say that I want a Diet Coke?”

The waitress gave her a long-suffering look. “I speak English. We do not have Coke. I will bring you a Pepsi.”

“Whatever, just so it’s cold.” Denise released the waitress and used my napkin to mop at the sweat that made her face sparkle in the bright afternoon sunshine. “Sorry I just sat down without asking you, but we big girls have to stick together. You weren’t waiting for anyone, were you?”

Sharp, washed out hazel eyes peered at me from beneath over-plucked eyebrows, a gloating glint indicating an answer in the affirmative would surprise her greatly. I adopted a polite smile and shook my head, my teeth grinding at both her expression and the big girl comment. I had come to grips with the fact that I was what my mother euphemistically termed “big boned,” but I didn’t need to be reminded of it every few minutes, as Denise was wont to do.

“Didn’t think so,” she answered with sour pleasure. “Women like us never get the guys. It’s always the ones who put out who end up having all the fun. That Magda. Did you hear her last night? She was at it all night long. I asked Audrey to change my room, but she says the hotel is full and they can’t. Honestly, why on earth did I spend two grand on a single’s tour of romantic Europe if the only men on the trip are old, perverts, or gay, and I have to spend every friggin’ night listening to Magda get her jollies. Oh, Raymond! Harder! Harder, my stallion of love!” she all but yelled in an obscene parody of Magda’s Spanish-inflected voice.

“Shhh,” I cautioned, frowning at the startled looks we received from people seated around us. “Others can hear you.”

“So what?” She shrugged. “They can’t understand us, and even if they could, I’m not saying anything that isn’t true. Has Raymond hit you up yet? He tried me this morning, but I wouldn’t have anything to do with him. I don’t take her leftovers.” She cast an acid glance toward the dancers.

I had no doubts at all—Magda and I shared a bathroom, and noises from her room were audible through it—that Raymond and her were actually hitting it off rather well, but it was almost impossible to believe that he’d want anything to do with Denise. She was pretty enough, with dark brown hair that was carefully coiffed, a heart-shaped face, and an overall impression of neatness despite the trials of traveling out of one bag, but her personality did much to ruin the first impression.

“Sorry.” She raked me over with a scathing look. “I didn’t mean to rub it in that Raymond wants into my pants, but not yours. Not that you’re missing much, despite Magda’s histrionics. Have you ever seen such a motley collection of men as the ones on

this tour? We're expected to hit it off with Ray the lounge lizard, Gary, who has to be right off the set of Queer as Folk, Ben, who is clearly sixty if he's a day, or Alphonse, the Mafia pervert. And we paid money for this? Audrey sure has some sort of a scam, and we're the suckers who fell for it. Romantic Europe, my ass."

I'd lived with Denise's negativity and overall nastiness for three days now, and was sorely tempted to tell her just what I thought, but I reminded myself that we had another eighteen days together, and it wouldn't actually kill me to turn the other cheek. Instead I indulged in a fantasy wherein she was left behind on a remote fjord.

"Have you dated much lately?" she asked, obviously sharpening her claws for another attack.

I smiled, and threw in a couple of hungry wolves prowling along the edge of the fjord. "I live outside of Seattle in a small town in the mountains. There aren't a lot of people there to begin with, so it's kind of hard to meet guys. That's why I decided to go on this tour, to open my horizons."

"At least you're not opening your legs for everything with a penis, unlike some people I could mention," she said with another waspish look toward Magda. "I think we've been had, though. The men on the tour are useless, and as for these Icelanders...they may be descended from Vikings, like Audrey says, but I don't see any of them panting over us. Mind you, if you said the words 'green card' to them, that would change things fast enough, but that's not going to happen."

"We've only had three days so far—" I started to object, but was cut short when she slammed her glass down on the little table.

"You don't get it, do you? Pia, look at yourself! You're, what, forty? Forty-five?"

"Thirty-nine. I won't be forty for another ten months," I said defensively, trying to keep a grip on my temper. I had spent every cent I had to go on this tour, and I absolutely refused to let one sour woman ruin what was sure to be the trip of a lifetime.

"Close enough to count. You're forty, with no man, no looks, and a dead-end job in some insignificant little town."

"Hey!" I objected. "You don't even know what I do. My job is quite nice."

"You said at the orientation that you were some sort of a secretary."

"I am the administrative manager for an animal shelter that specializes in elderly pets who have been displaced," I answered, my fingers curling into fists beneath the tabletop. "It's a very rewarding job!"

"I'm sure it is," she answered with a half sneer. "But there's hardly any room for advancement, is there?"

I gritted my teeth and said nothing. I didn't have to defend myself or my job to this harpy.

"Face it," Denise said, grabbing my arm as she leaned forward across the table.

"Women like us get the shaft our whole lives. You may think that there is a man out there for you, a Mr. Wonderful who will be everything you want, but there isn't. Look around you, Pia. Look at who has all the handsome men—it's the pretty ones, the skinny ones, the ones who don't give a fuck about anything but getting what they want. They've got no morals and don't care who knows it."

"I don't buy that," I said, jerking my arm out of her grip. "I know a lot of nice women who get men. Sometimes it just takes a while, that's all."

“Something your mommy told you?” she asked, her words whipping me like a scorpion’s tail.

“I really don’t think—”

“No, of course you don’t. That’s because everyone is so politically correct these days. But let’s cut the crap, shall we, and get real. We’re the last pick on the volleyball team, Pia. We get the leftovers. I can tell you don’t like to admit, so I’ll prove it to you.” She scooted around in her chair, waving a hand toward the stage.

The music had stopped while one group of musicians was being replaced by another, leaving the dancers to catch their breath, and the square half empty. The sun was low in the sky now, little fiery orange and red tentacles streaking upwards, long indigo shadows beginning to edge their way across the square. A few people strolled through the shadows, mostly families, the kids leaping about less enthusiastically as they started to wind down from the day’s activities.

“That guy, that one there, the blonde guy with the receding hairline. You think he’d like you?” Denise asked, pointing at a man who stood with his arm twined around a slender woman. “Or how about that one, the man with the beard. He looks like an accountant. Maybe he’d go for you.”

My lips tightened. I refused to tell her that she was perfectly welcome to live in her misanthropic world, but I preferred a much happier place.

“Oh! Those two! Those two across the square, coming out of that building. Oh my god, they’re gorgeous. That’s what I’m talking about—perfect eye candy specimens. Both tall, both dark haired, although I don’t like long hair on a man, and both absolutely and completely out of our reach.”

I looked where she was pointing. “Oh, I don’t know.”

She swiveled around in her chair to pin me back with a maliciously triumphant gaze. “You’re never going to have a man like that, Pia. Neither will I. If we’re lucky, we’ll get some balding, paunchy couch potato, but the good ones are not for us.”

“There’s nothing wrong with a man who is balding and has a bit of a paunch,” I protested.

“Oh, come on! They all end up that way, sure, but you don’t want them to start out looking like that!”

“Not all men are alike,” I pointed out. “Just like women don’t always go for a handsome, incredibly sexy man. And some men like more than a body. It’s perfectly reasonable to expect that we could have one of those eye candy men.”

A hard look settling on her face. “You just refuse to face reality, don’t you? Well, let’s put our money where our mouths are, OK? You go talk to those two hunks and see what happens.”

“I didn’t mean those two specifically,” I said quickly, my palms suddenly sweating at the thought of the humiliation that would follow should I even think of approaching the two men in question. “I just meant eye candy in general.”

She stood up and scanned the crowd for a second before sitting down. “I don’t see anyone as gorgeous as those two who aren’t with someone already. Mind you they could be gay and a couple, in which case I will still win, but let’s go on the supposition that they’re not gay, and not married. You go talk to them and see if one of them asks you out.”

“This is not a contest, Denise.”

“Sure it is. You think you’re right, and I know I am. You think you can date someone as gorgeous as the two male model wannabes, and I say they won’t even give you the time of the day. Prove me wrong, that’s all I’m asking.”

“They could have wives or girlfriends who aren’t here,” I protested, a slight feeling of panic making my stomach tighten. “Or maybe they just broke it off with someone and aren’t looking for a relationship. There are any number of reasons that they wouldn’t want to ask me out.”

She flicked the wadded up paper straw wrapper at me. “That’s a cop-out, but I’m willing to give you the benefit of the doubt. How about this—you walk past the two guys, just walk past them, and see if one of them is interested enough to watch you.”

I opened my mouth to protest that catching a man’s eye wasn’t going to prove anything, but the triumphant gleam in her eyes was too much for the tenuous grasp I had on my temper. If nothing else, I would be able to escape her presence. “All right, you’re on. I’ll walk past them.”

“I’ll be here, waiting, when you come back. Alone,” she said with a smile that made my palm itch with the need to smack her.

“I am not a violent person,” I muttered as I gathered my things and shuffled my way around the people at the café. “It is illegal to kill a tour mate, no matter how provoked I am.”

The square was still partially empty as people took the opportunity offered by the band switch to refresh themselves at the cafes and food stands that lined the area. I paused a moment at the edge of the square, having no trouble in finding my quarry.

The two men continued to stand in the shadows cast by a tall, sculpted stone building, evidently having some sort of a conversation since one of them periodically nodded, while the other spoke, his hands gesturing quickly.

Bright bluish white lights suddenly blinked on around the perimeter of the square, causing me to squint for a minute as my eyes adjusted to the brightness. The sun in this area of Iceland never quite set during midsummer, but it went far enough down on the horizon to bring on a sort of twilight, what was called “white night.” The sky was a glorious palette that ranged from a gorgeous amber to deep blues, the glow enough to see by, but dark enough to leave everything a bit softened about the edges. A little ripple of excitement filtered over to me as people started to drift away from the square, heading to the nearby park that sat overlooking the waterfront, where the evening fireworks were to be held.

I eyed the two men who stood in conversation. They were both clad completely in black, one carrying a leather jacket, the other wearing one despite the heat of the day. The jacket wearer was furthest from me, his face too shadowed to see in detail, but I did notice he had short curly chestnut brown hair. The one turned slightly away from me, holding onto his jacket slung casually over his shoulder, had long black hair pulled back in a pony tail.

Despair welled in my gut as I edged my way around the square toward them, my mind frantically trying to find a way out of the untenable situation I’d managed to create. “What on earth are you thinking, you foolish woman? So Denise has stung your pride with her constant cracks about your appearance and likelihood to get a man. Do you seriously think there’s anyway on this green earth that you will ever be able to garner

even a momentary flash of interest from the two gorgeous men, let alone a second glance?”

I glanced back at Denise, hoping against hope that she might have given up on me and gone to see the fireworks, but doubting she'd miss the opportunity to do a little old fashioned gloating when I failed at my goal.

“I hate being right,” I said under my breath. Denise stood at the table, the café nearly empty now as more and more people headed to the park. She made shooing gestures toward me.

I edged my way past a tiny clothing shop and pretended interest in racks of dusty books that sat outside an even dustier bookseller. This must be the spider-filled shop Denise had mentioned. I glanced toward her. She had her back to me as one of the men on the tour stopped to talk, gesturing in the direction of the park. Excellent! She was distracted! Now was my chance.

I ducked into the spider-filled bookshop, scurrying to the back, grabbing a couple of books with English titles to pretend interest. “She’s not likely to come looking in here for me if the spiders are as bad as she said. I’ll just hide out for a little bit. There’s no shame in hiding. She’ll figure I skipped out, and go look elsewhere for me, right? Right.”

My relief lasted about two minutes, after which shame got the better of me. Being a coward wasn’t my style. I started toward the front door, stopping when a tiny, wizened old man coughed at me, looking meaningfully at the books in my hands. Hastily I dug out a couple of bills and gave them to him with a word of apology.

A careful and covert survey of the square from inside the bookshop confirmed my hunch. Denise was disappearing down a street opposite, clearly on the hunt for me. “Yay for insight into the human nature.”

I strolled out of the bookshop, adopting a casual, not in the least bit stalker-like air as I meandered toward the two men, eying them critically as I got closer. “Maybe I’m just too cynical. There’s nothing wrong with me, other than there’s a bit too much of me. I don’t have any vices or bad habits other than talking to myself. I like animals. I am open to new experiences. Is it so out of the bounds of reason that one of those two guys might actually look at me?”

One of them gestured in my direction. The other turned to look. I spun around and feigned interest in a bakery window. When I glanced back, they were continuing their conversation.

Denise was still nowhere to be seen, but I was not about to chicken out now. This had gone beyond a silly dare. “My honor is at stake, dammit!”

Ignoring the fact that the very same sense of honor had been lacking a few minutes before, I squared my shoulders and turned to face the two men. “Just get it done, Pia. Think positive, and get it done.”

The two men loomed closer as I strolled confidently toward them, my belly roiling with anticipation of what was sure to be a deflating experience. “Maybe I could bribe them. Maybe I could offer them a few bucks if one of them would walk back to the hotel with me...ugh. Is this what it’s coming to? Bribing men to pretend an interest in you? For shame, Pia. For sha—oof!”

A woman whumped into me with enough force that it sent us both reeling, my books and her large bag falling to the ground.

She excused herself in French.

“Do you speak English? I’m afraid my French is pretty rusty,” I said, kneeling to help her gather up the items that had spilled out of her bag. I handed her back the usual assortment of items—keys, cell phone, compact, and a paperback—before gathering up the couple of books I’d purchased.

“Oh, thank you. Yes, I do speak English. I am so sorry, I am very late for an appointment and wasn’t watching where I was going,” the woman said in a delightful French accent, her delicate-boned face perfectly framed by fluffy blond hair. She had that air of fragility common to French women, the one that screamed “gamin.” That she plowed into me with the force of a Mack truck mattered little, I suspected, to the men who no doubt flung themselves daily at her feet. “Did I step on you? No? Good. I am very distressed, you see. I’ve lost the address where I’m supposed to go, and none of the bookshops seem to be the right one. Ah, there is another one. I will try there.”

“Beware of spiders,” I warned as she tucked her things away in her bag.

The smile she flashed me faded. “Spiders?”

“Yes, evidently some big hairy ones.”

She shuddered. “I detest spiders! Perhaps that shop is not the one…” She eyed the bookstore with obvious distaste.

“If you’re looking for a current book, they probably aren’t going to have it. It seemed to be mostly old and antique books.”

“Antique,” she said thoughtfully. “That does not sound correct. The Zenith was most specific it was an English book with the man and woman on the cover dancing…oh, la la! The time!” She had glanced at her watch, hoisting her bag onto her shoulder. “I will try another one; that does not look like a shop to have the dancing books, does it?”

“Naw, the only thing I found there was an old Agatha Christie and some Regency romance,” I said, gesturing at my books.

“*Bien*. It is good I run into you, I think!”

“No problem,” I called after her as she started off. “Always happy to save a fellow tourist from death by dusty spiders. But you’re not going to the fireworks? The park is that way.”

She paused and looked at where I was pointing. If she was a tourist like me, perhaps she didn’t know where the festivities were to take place.

“Fireworks?”

“They’re supposed to be having some fabulous fireworks show that you won’t want to miss. For the Independence Day stuff.”

“I cannot, I’m afraid,” she said, over her shoulder as she hurried off across the square. “I’m so very late, you see, and I lost the name of the shop. The light be within you, sister.”

Her voice trailed behind her even after she was gone from sight.

The light be within me? That was an odd thing to say. “She must belong to one of those religious groups, like the celebrities were always touting,” I said to no one.

I shrugged and turned back to my quarry, who were still standing in close conversation.

“Boy, I give you guys a chance to go away and cut me a little slack, and you refuse. Fine. Be that way. I might as well get this over with, not that Denise is here to witness it.”

I clutched my books and took a deep breath, then without any further dillydallying, marched myself toward the two men, determined to… I didn’t know exactly what I was

determined to do. Maybe smile at them as I passed, and hoped one of them smiled back? If I did that, at least I could face Denise with a clear conscience over the breakfast table.

“Well, hell,” I said out loud, stopping abruptly as the two men evidently having finished their conversation, split up, heading in two different directions, neither of which encouraged them to so much as glance my way.

Denise’s crow of laughter rolled over the square. She had come from the side nearest the park, arriving at the perfect moment to see the two men walk away from me.

“Worst timing ever,” I ground out through my teeth as I forced a smile, waving a hand at Denise to show that I heard her and admitted defeat. “I don’t have to take anything more than that, though,” I added softly to myself, hoisting my bag, camera, and books higher.

With one last look at the nearest of the two gorgeous men as he melted into the shadows of a connecting street, I lifted my chin and took myself off to the park.

I was going to have a good time, dammit, even if it killed me.