



My Mr. Vampire

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Description: No longer living in fear of her dangerous ex-boyfriend, Chanel Taylor was all in with her new man. Zand Valentine was mysterious, handsome, and rich. Chanel could overlook his one red flag. He was a vampire. Madly in love, Chanel would never let a little violence, blood-drinking and immortality stand in the way of a future with her new man. Just when she thought all her problems were gone, Zand's evil vampire ex-wife blow into town to wreak havoc. Fighting for Zand was one thing. Fighting his crazy vampire ex-wife was something entirely different.

My Mr. Vampire is Book 2 of The Valentine Vampires Series.

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PROLOGUE

ZAND

People will never understand us. Vampires aren't otherworldly beings. We're just vampires. We didn't all go around acting like bloodsucking perverts. We live perfectly normal lives. Some of us go to jobs, some of us have families, and some of us pretended we were still human. Honestly, the vast majority of us pretend to be mortals. We were born human, and it's the only way we've lived for years. Imitating the life we once had seemed natural to us.

After decades of living, we didn't really see ourselves as completely different creatures from our human counterparts. Vampirism was just our everyday normal existence. I viewed it as like growing up White, Black, Korean or Puerto Rican. It's all we've known for a very long time.

Did people wake up and say, hey I'm White? No, they didn't. Vampires don't wake up and say, hey I'm a vampire. It's just what we are. We are vampires. Sure, we're keeping it a secret from society. But it was no different from any other secret that humans kept in their day-to-day lives. We hid in the shadows for our own survival. But the reality was we were always hiding in plain sight.

We could go decades without anyone ever suspecting we were vamps. That was my plan, to blend into society and live a normal life in a new city. Five years in Chicago and things were going as planned until— I met a girl. She means everything to me. She is the reason I want more out of my immortal life. I could just be in love with her for as long as she will have me. At least, that was my plan.

I couldn't believe she chose me. She teased me with her clever love notes. Even though she didn't know who I was in the beginning. It was like she had some special vampire radar. Calling me a vampire before knowing I was an actual vampire was kismet. There was absolutely no other way to explain it.

One thing I knew for sure, my plans always seemed to be derailed. But that didn't mean I shouldn't have a plan. Sometimes I had a plan A, a plan B, and a plan C. She was never supposed to know my true nature.

Never say never. The cat was out of the bag. Or the vampire was out of the coffin. I could no longer conceal my true identity from the woman I loved. I had to put it all out on the table to save her life, regardless of the consequences.

This wasn't at all how I saw my future with the love of my everlasting life. I considered what telling my secret would look like. But I never imagined it would look so brutally violent. I never thought it would start with me killing her former lover. I wasn't left with any other options. He was a vile, despicable human. My love for Chanel wouldn't allow me to see her hurt by that low life. I had to end his life to give her peace.

I was living undercover for so long. Then it all blew up in my face when I received uninvited visitors. They were from my past, and Chanel was my future. In the present I had Chanel. She hadn't run away from me even after she saw the monster. I thought that I got rid of the beast. I had gone years without killing anyone, but I would kill for Chanel many times over.

If things go as planned, I could just go back to being a random nobody, the reclusive club owner. There was no evidence of a crime. Investigators couldn't connect Alonzo Lopez's body to Chanel or me in Illinois, or anywhere else. That's if he ever washes ashore in the Great Lakes area. Typically, bodies floated to the surface in the springtime, if ever. I hoped for never. Without a body, there was no crime.

I had gotten rid of one problem. Now it seemed Gillian, Teresa, and Harlen had sprung back into my life. Years ago, they were the only family I had. Now, I didn't want to have anything to do with them. I didn't need them anymore. I had a new family at The Castle and with Chanel. They were all I needed in my quest to build a kingdom of my own.

I wanted to leave my past in the past. I respected Gillian as my maker, but I didn't want to see him. His place was in Los Angeles and my place was in Chicago. Then there was my brother Harlen. He was unpredictable. After betraying me I only wanted him to leave town peacefully. But my ex, Teresa, was a wildcard. I have a feeling she will be trouble.

My mind, heart, and body only belonged solely to one person. I didn't have any room for the vampires from my past. They were all dead to me, and I happily walked amongst the living.

CHAPTER ONE

CHANEL

I was on a never-ending quest to get my life back on track. I had to act like things were normal. After everything that happened, it appeared to be an impossible task. I didn't feel like I had much of a choice. I didn't have time to take a vacation from the trauma I had recently experienced.

As minutes, hours, and days passed, things became more real, more vivid, and more rooted in reality. There was this new world that opened up to me. It was a world I never could've imagined, a place where vampires were no longer a fairytale.

Alexander Valentine was a vampire, just like in the horror movies. Well, not exactly like the movies, but a vampire, nonetheless. It was going to take me a minute to wrap

my head around all of this. All jokes aside, this was my new reality.

I saw him transform with my own eyes. I saw Zand beat Lonzo like he stole something. If I didn't know any better, I would've thought I'd seen a monster. But Zand wasn't a monster, even though his actions seemed monstrous.

Monster was too harsh of a descriptor. He was the man I loved more than any other man— ever. He was the man who would protect me by any means necessary. I felt safe, secure, and loved because of him. His protection and comfort were my happy place. I didn't want it to end.

I couldn't lie. I was happy Lonzo was dead. He was the real psycho. He murdered three people while I was only a few feet away. Then he acted just like it was nothing. Lonzo didn't want me to testify in the state's case against him. I was sure he had come to Chicago to kill me. Were it not for Zand, I wouldn't be here. I owed him my life.

Lonzo killed four people in total. There were the three strangers back in Minnesota he callously gunned down with me only a few feet away. Then Lonzo confessed he took Craig's life. Craig was innocent. He didn't even know Lonzo. I didn't even think they met. Craig wasn't into drugs or any of that illegal stuff Lonzo was into. Craig died because of his affiliation with me. He's dead because of who I stupidly chose to date. I would never forgive myself for putting my friends in danger. Those were just the four murders I knew about. I was sure there were more people Lonzo killed.

Lonzo was some infamous Mexican cartel drug lord. I didn't notice any of the signs of criminal activities until it was too late. Craig was dead, and I can't use my foolishness as an excuse. I didn't know how I was going to tell Morgan the truth. My best friend didn't know that I was the reason her boyfriend was no longer with us.

My connection to Lonzo led to Craig's fatal car accident. I thought about not telling

her at all, but I couldn't keep it from her forever. The guilt would eventually eat me up inside. I couldn't look my best friend in the eye, knowing that I had caused her so much pain.

I hoped Morgan wouldn't hate me. It was me who dated a drug lord. I brought that psycho into my life and the lives of the people I loved. I afforded him the chance to go after the people I cared about most, and he took it.

I couldn't lie to myself any longer, but I didn't have the courage to tell Morgan. I needed time to formulate the correct words. There were no words that would soothe her or bring her boyfriend back, but I had to come clean one day.

There was no hurt worse than not knowing the truth. The truth provided closure. I couldn't rob my best friend of that. If she didn't want to be my friend after I told her, it would hurt me deeply. If I were Morgan, I would want to know the truth.

I didn't want to think about that. Instead, I wanted to think about him. Zand treated me delicately at first. I could admit I had been through a lot. I audibly witnessed three murders. To escape Lonzo, I uprooted my life and fled my home state. His sister Marisol physically attacked me in the parking lot of my apartment complex. And later I was assaulted and held hostage in my apartment by Lonzo.

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After everything that happened, Zand moved me from The Castle to his luxury loft downtown. I didn't have to pack any of my things. Zand shipped most of my belongings from my apartment to his place.

It put my mind at ease knowing I didn't have to go back to the place where Lonzo brutally attacked me. I knew one day I would have to go back and face the pain. Thank God that day was not today. It had only been two weeks, but I was still a bit shaken by the extreme violence I witnessed firsthand. I didn't fear Zand. It was just the fact this wasn't a horror movie. This was real life. This was my life— my life with my vampire boyfriend.

It was very important for things to go back to normal. I needed my regular routine. So, I showed up at work every day. I made it through the days with a fake smile on my made-up face. I didn't want anyone to know what I'd been through.

I was safe, but being away from Zand while I was at work made me a little antsy. His presence gave me comfort. His vampire strength made me feel safe and secure. He was powerful and he could protect me if anything jumped off.

Although I knew the threat was terminated, Lonzo had a notorious family full of criminals. There was his psychotic sister, Marisol. I still couldn't believe she drove all the way to Chicago from Minnesota with her violent cousin to beat the shit out of me. Maybe their plan was to kill me. I still didn't know what Marisol's intentions were. I knew she always disliked me. Her first gripe was I wasn't Mexican. She made sure I knew I wasn't welcomed in the Lopez family. That was back when I didn't know who these people really were.

As far as I knew, she only was aware of the location of my apartment complex, and I didn't stay there anymore. I didn't know how much information her brother had shared with her about me. I wondered if she knew he was coming to Chicago to kill me.

Did she have anything to do with Craig's death? Before Lonzo's demise, he mentioned Marisol attacked me. Sure, Lonzo was dead, but there could be some other relatives of these lunatics I had to worry about.

There was the female cousin. I had no idea what she looked like or her name. Lonzo didn't call her by name, so I didn't have any clue who she was. After two weeks, I hadn't seen any of them. I couldn't help but take that as a good sign.

I had to always be on guard and looking over my shoulder before Lonzo was killed. That was why I felt the safest when I was with Zand. I knew I couldn't be with him twenty-four seven, but I wished I could quit this job or take some kind of leave of absence. Mentally, I needed to get myself together. I had been through hell and back in the last few months. Some months were good. Some of that time was extremely bad. Finding Zand and falling in love with him was the best part.

The drama of my recent past made me anxious and jittery. I tried to hide it from my coworkers as best I could. I didn't know how long the feeling would last. This might have been some form of PTSD, I wasn't sure. I didn't have anyone to share my inner personal thoughts with. I couldn't talk to a therapist because I couldn't be honest about the vampires. Sharing what I knew with Morgan was impossible for me. She had a lot on her plate.

I didn't know all the rules of the vampire people, but I was sure they wanted to remain in the dark. Also, it just wasn't a good idea to give Morgan more to worry about after her boyfriend's passing.

After getting through my nine-hour shift in the office, I was chauffeured to my new home. Josh drove me to and from work in a black Rezvani Arsenal SUV with dark tints. I'd never seen or heard of the truck before. I googled the truck that looked like a tank and read it had bulletproof glass, bulletproof body panels and run-flat tires. If I didn't know Zand was loaded, the quarter of a million-dollar luxury armored truck he chauffeured me around in made that perfectly clear.

Josh worked security for Zand at The Castle. He was a tall, blonde bulky guy that looked like he could rip someone's head off. He also looked like he could be a stand-in for a superhero. Josh was super chill, but he was a brick of a man. He wasn't the type of guy you would want to make angry.

My bodyguard, slash driver, was nice enough on the quiet rides to and from the loft. I wondered if he was a vampire or a human. I had my suspicions, but no concrete proof. There was something in his coloring that didn't give anything away. He was a pale White man but not pale in a way that told me he was a vampire. Every White person was pale in the fall and winter months. I just couldn't see anything in Josh that gave me a clue. I was smart not to stare at him, but I watched him closely and covertly.

I didn't know why I wanted to know his origins so badly. I was curious. Zand's mysterious life intrigued me, and I wanted to know about everyone in it. Some of his employees were obviously vampires.

It didn't take a genius to figure out that Natasha, his head of security, was a vamp. At first, I didn't even notice it. But now, with everything I've learned, it's so evident. Her strong Russian accent and overall demeanor exuded power and strength like that of Wonder Woman. Unlike other women, she didn't seem afraid or intimidated by men. She could walk the streets at night without any cares or concerns. Her confidence was next level and now I knew it was because she was supernatural.

I had so many questions. I was reluctant to ask. I hoped Zand would provide the answers I so desperately craved. If not, I would just be more confused. I needed to know how to maneuver in his world.

Josh was pleasant for such a big, hulking man. On the ride to the loft, he was mostly quiet. Today was like every other day. I looked forward to seeing Zand. He made sure he slept during the daytime, so he would be up when I got home from work.

I leaned back into the leather seats of the truck and almost drifted off to sleep. Then my cell phone rang in my purse that lay beside me on the seat. I reached into the side pocket and retrieved my cell. Peering down, I read the screen. I answered as soon as I read Morgan's name.

"Hey." I tried to sound like my old self. The problem was, I could barely remember my old self.

"What you doing girly-pop?" She asked.

"I just left work."

"Good. I was trying to give you time to get out of there."

"I'm out now and on my way home." Not a total lie. I was just on my way to Zand's home.

"How was your day?" She asked me, and I was probably the one that should be asking her that question.

"It was fine, a lot of sick kids, a lot of flu shots. How was your day?"

"Ah, same ole lackluster bullshit. I was thinking about coming down to visit you for a

few days. I really need to get away from this place.”

“You work remote. What are you getting away from?” I asked.

“Girl, boring Bloomington.”

I hadn’t mentioned to Morgan that I didn’t live in the apartment anymore. I withheld information because if I told her a little part of what was going on with me, she would have questions. The more questions she had, the more things I would have to reveal, and I couldn’t lie to her. She knew me too well.

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“Hello, Coco, you still here?”

“Yeah, sorry. I’m here.”

“Well, what you got to say about me coming down there?”

“Of course you can come.” I couldn’t tell her no. She needed me.

“It feels so weird being inside my place alone. Sometimes I wake up and forget that Craig is gone.” Her voice trailed off.

I didn’t know what to say. I was sure losing her boyfriend was taking a severe mental and emotional toll on Morgan. She was really tough on the outside, but she was fragile on the inside. I would never call her a tragic mulatto, but she did have a few identity issues.

“When are you coming?” I asked, hoping it wasn’t too soon.

“Tomorrow. I can be at your place when you get off work. We can hang out, drink, eat, and drink some more. I could really use a drink or two or three.” She giggled.

“Okay, that sounds good.” Navigating this reunion was going to be very tricky. I hadn’t been back to my apartment since that incident happened. I was afraid to even see what it looked like. Zand told me it was back the way it was before the fight with Lonzo. But I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes. There had to be blood everywhere. Did he clean it all up? I hoped so.

“You sound weird. Are you okay?” She asked, knowing me better than any other person.

“Yeah, I’m good. Probably just tired. You know work is a lot.”

“Is your man wearing you out in the bedroom?”

“No, no, I just have a lot of things on my mind.”

“That raggedy ass Lonzo? Have you heard from him?”

“Yeah, no. No, I haven’t heard from him.” There was no way I could elaborate. This felt weird. It felt like I was speaking in code. I’d never been this way with my best friend. She knew me better than anybody. She was the only family I had left after my mother died. Lying to her seemed so wrong.

“Have they contacted you?”

“Who?” I asked because at this point, they could be any damn body.

“The state’s attorney, or whoever, was handling that bastard’s murder case.”

“No.” That much was true. I hadn’t heard anything from the Minnesota district attorney’s office or from the detectives that were investigating the case.

“No news is good news. I will see you tomorrow.”

“Call me when you’re on the way. You know, before you get here. I want to make sure I’m there already. You know, at the apartment.”

“I can wait in your parking lot if I get there before you.”

She was right, and I didn't want to argue or tell her any more information. Morgan knew I got robbed outside my apartment. Which was a lie. They didn't take anything from me. I didn't want to tell her I got my Black ass beat in the parking lot by Lonzo's kinfolks. I just didn't want Morgan to worry about me.

"Just call me when you get close to Chicago. Please, just do that."

"Yes ma'am. I should bring Donna with me." She joked.

"You better not bring your groupie with you."

"Girl, I'm just playing with you."

"I know you are. I do not mess with her." I chuckled. Talking to Morgan made me feel like I was home. She made me laugh even when I was the one that should be making her laugh.

"I think you're jealous you don't have your own hype-man."

"Yeah, that's what it is." I agreed. "You can have Donna all to yourself. She irks the shit out of me."

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“I’m going to let you go. I know you have to prepare for my arrival. You’re one of those people that has to clean your house before you have company.”

“True. But you’re family, not company.”

“You still going to clean when it’s already clean.”

“You know me so well.”

“Bye girl.”

“Bye.” I waited for the call to end and placed my cell phone back into the side pocket of my purse.

I exhaled deeply. I had twenty-four hours to figure this out. Morgan would be here tomorrow. That gave me no time at all to get my shit together. I had to talk to Zand about Morgan’s visit. Maybe it was time for me to tell her that Lonzo murdered Craig by making a fake road rage accident. We all had our doubts about the circumstances that led to his death, Morgan included. Even the witnesses said someone in a white pickup truck made him cross into incoming traffic and get hit by a semi. I would be a shitty friend to keep this from her any longer. I was going to have to ask Zand’s opinion. This decision needed a third party’s input. I didn’t know what I should do in this situation.

I knew that keeping secrets never went well for me.

CHAPTER TWO

CHANEL

When Josh pulled into the parking garage attached to the loft, I started feeling anxious. Once inside, the garage went directly underground. I gathered my purse. I walked with my personal security guard. Josh always made sure I got into the elevator safely. There were security cameras all throughout the parking garage and on the exterior of the building. This place was just another property that Zand owned. I wondered what else he owned. He had money, but I didn't know how he acquired it. I didn't think there was anything illegal he was doing to gain wealth. But I didn't know a lot of things about him.

When I entered the loft, Zand was waiting for me. He removed my jacket and took my purse. Then he greeted me with his crooked smile. He pulled me into his chest and embraced me. I needed this hug more than he knew.

"Hey babe, how was your day?" He kissed my forehead as he pushed back from my body to stare into my eyes.

"It was a day."

Zand placed my belongings on the table that sat behind the couch. "Was it good or bad?"

I had to think about it. I didn't have an answer, so I went with something else. "Morgan is driving here tomorrow. She wants to see me. You know, hang out." I blurted my thoughts out without even thinking about how this was all going to work out now that I knew about vampires.

"Is there something wrong?" It was nice to see he was genuinely concerned.

"No, I don't think so."

“Is this visit a good thing?” Zand’s eyebrow arched to gauge my honest opinion.

“It’s good. It’s good. I just haven’t told her about a lot of things that happened here in Chicago. You know the things that happened after Craig’s funeral.”

“What did you tell her?”

“Nothing about you. I didn’t tell her about who you are.”

“That’s good, but that’s not what I meant. Did you tell her you were attacked?”

“I didn’t. I didn’t want to worry her. She flipped out when I told her I was beat up outside in the apartment parking lot. I didn’t want to have to lie to her about this other situation.”

“I understand. Lonzo is dead, so you don’t have to worry about him coming after Morgan. Both of you are safe.”

That was true. There was no danger for us I could foresee. I just wished I had a warning about what Lonzo was up to, so I could’ve warned Craig.

“You don’t have to worry. Your friend will be safe here with you.” Zand assured me.

“She’s meeting me at my apartment tomorrow after I get off of work.”

“I thought you didn’t want to go back there.”

“I don’t. But I was caught off guard when she called. I couldn’t tell her my apartment was a crime scene.”

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Zand chuckled. “There is no crime scene. Your place is clean. There is no sign that anything happened there. No blood, no bullet holes, not even a dish in the sink. It’s spotless.”

“I believe you, but I think I need to see it with my own eyes.”

“I have to go to The Castle tonight. You can come with me, and we can stop by your place so you can see it for yourself.”

“Thank you. I just don’t know if I can stay there right now.”

“You don’t have to stay there. You can meet Morgan and bring her here to the loft. I have plenty of rooms. This place is big enough for three or four families.”

He was right. His place was massive and cozy. It used to be a warehouse that made metal cans. Zand told me the property was vacant for twenty years before he purchased and renovated it.

“She can come here?”

“Of course.”

“Thank you. I appreciate this more than you know.”

“You don’t have to thank me. I would do anything for you.”

He meant it and I knew it for sure. His words melted my heart, and his sincerity

cuddled me deeply. He committed murder for me. Somehow, that fact should terrify me, but it didn't. As a vampire fan, I was more intrigued about the whole thing. I had questions, so many questions, and Zand was literally the only person I knew that could answer them for me. But would he? Would he share that mysterious part of his life with me?

His honey-colored eyes burned as they looked at me. "There's more. I can see it in your eyes." He could read me, but how?

"I have questions. So many questions. There are a few things I was thinking about?"

"Sit. Tell me. What kinds of questions?"

Zand took my hand and guided me over to the couch. I sat down and waited until he joined me.

I needed to broach the subject delicately. "I have vampire questions." I whispered as he leaned back into the plushness of the couch.

"You don't have to whisper. Babe, we're the only ones here." His lips curled into a heavenly, sinful smile. I loved this man, but I was determined to stay focused on my Q and A.

I felt like an idiot and giggled to play it off. "Right."

"Okay, well then, hit me with your vampire questions. I knew you would have some, eventually."

That was smart of him. Did he really think he could spring this vampire life on me without any questions and concerns? I reached over and grabbed my purse. I removed my cell phone from the side pocket. "I put the questions in my notes so I wouldn't

forget them.”

“Good idea. What’s the title?”

“The title?” What did he mean?

“Yes, what did you put your questions under? What’s the heading, the title?”

“Ah, ah.” I stuttered.

“You have one? Don’t you?” He asked.

“Yes, I do.” I didn’t think he would ask that, and now I was getting flustered.

“Let me hear it. I’m curious. Your title.”

“Okay. It’s nothing fancy. I just have the question mark symbol (?) with an (s) and the number (4) and (My Mr. Vampire).”

He instantly put it together. “Questions, for my Mr. Vampire. Cute.” He grinned.

“Really, that’s very clever. Is that really there? Let me see.” He requested.

I turned my cell phone screen to face him and tried to hide my embarrassment before quickly turning it back to me. “I didn’t really think about it. I just jotted something down.”

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“I think it’s nice. You claimed me as your own vampire. I love it. I prefer my Mr. Vampire to dear Mr. Vampire.” He looked away and then back at me. “No, I actually like them both.”

My smile spread over my entire face. “I aim to please.”

“Chanel.” His face morphed into seriousness. “You know you can ask me anything. I will always tell you the truth.”

“Okay, my, Mr.Vampire, let’s test that theory. One of the questions I have, it may seem stupid, but I really don’t know the answer.”

“There are no stupid questions, babe. Especially from someone as smart as you are. Give it to me.”

“How do you walk in the daytime, the sunlight?” I really needed the details on this one.

Zand let out a slight snicker. His lips curled up on one side. The urge to lean over and kiss him crossed my mind, but I couldn’t. I had to be cool. I had to keep my hoe in check. I had real vampire stuff to learn.

“Sunlight killing us, that’s a myth, our skin feels human. You know this. You’ve touched me all over. Vampire skin is very resilient. We don’t feel temperatures the way that you do because of this thick durable dermis. You will never see me sweat. The need for a jacket or a coat doesn’t exist. I wear them to blend in with everyone else during the seasonal changes. I don’t have a scientific explanation. We can

withstand the sun and UV rays.”

I thought long and hard and I could honestly say I’d never seen Zand sweat. Even in the cold night air, I’d never seen him shiver. He never complained about being hot or cold. Even his skin just seemed to always be the right temperature when I touched him.

“Chanel, does that answer your question?”

“Yes.” My eyes moseyed down to the notes screen on my cell. “Okay, well, how did you become a vampire? Like, who bit you, or whatever the process is?” I waited for his response and when he didn’t answer right away, I said. “You don’t have to tell me if it was traumatic or triggering.”

Zand smiled at me. “No. It— the transformation— was a bit traumatic. I wouldn’t describe it as triggering. I’m not one of those vamps that have been around for hundreds of years. I was made in the winter of 1977 shortly after Christmas day. I remember it vividly. Not just because it was the year I was turned. It was also the year serial killer Ted Bundy had escaped a Colorado jail and went on his last killing spree. It was right before he was recaptured that next year.”

“Ted Bundy wasn’t a vampire. Was he?” The question seemed illogical, but it popped into my head and out of my mouth without me even thinking about it.

“No, he was just a regular human killer. Some vamps, a few vamps kill, but we’re not like them. Blood is needed for our survival. It’s sustenance. Those deviant human killers are just mammals with deprived brains and weird fetishes.”

“Some vampires kill humans?” I just knew it. They were depicted as predators in movies and T.V. shows. Some of the things in movies and T.V. were modeled after real life.

“Yes, some, but not many. Those types of vampires are shunned. They usually stop acting out if they want to be a part of a clan, coven, or group. Killing humans brings attention to our kind. We want to blend in. We long for community because the life of an immortal can be long and lonely.”

“Can you tell me if there are other vampires around?” My curiosity longed for information.

“Around?”

“Like here in Chicago? Are there other vampires here in Illinois?”

“Yes, we are everywhere. All across the country and the world.”

“Are there vampires at The Castle?”

“Yes.” He grinned because he probably knew I already had the answer to that question.

“But you’re not going to tell me who these vampires are?”

“I can, if you would like to have that information.”

Why wouldn’t I? “Yes, I want to know. I don’t like secrets.” Not after Lonzo. I hated being in the dark.

“I can respect that. Everyone on my security staff is a vamp.”

“Everybody?” Images of the faces of his security staff appeared in my mind.

“Yes.” He bobbed his head. “It’s a job that a vampire is good at.”

“That means Natasha, right?” I asked.

“Yes, she is. I’m sure you knew that.”

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I did. “Josh?”

“Yes, of course.” He smiled as he brushed my hair behind my ear. “I wouldn’t leave your safety up to a human. We’re faster and stronger.”

“Thanks, I guess.” I pursed my lips as I consumed all the information.

“I think we should play it safe for now. Lonzo is dead, but he had an entire organization of people. We don’t know if he came to town by himself. We don’t know if he informed anyone where he was going, and who he was going to see. I want to be cautious where you’re concerned.”

This was something I hadn’t fully thought about. Zand had the same concerns that I had. Lonzo had people. He had family and people that worked for him. It felt like my problems were over, but I couldn’t be sure. His sister, Marisol, had come totown to assault me and maybe she knew her brother was coming to Chicago.

When I thought about her, I got angry. That bitch jumped me. She was a little thing, and I probably would’ve whooped her ass if we fought one on one. After what she did to me, I couldn’t believe she would be stupid enough to put her freedom in jeopardy by coming back here.

I set that aside. I had the ultimate question. “Can vampires die?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“It’s a secret.”

“I thought you said we didn’t have secrets.”

“It depends. Are you trying to kill me?” He joked or at least I thought he was joking.

“That’s not funny. I would never try to hurt you.”

I could tell he was thinking about it. He’d been hurt before, by an ex. He told me that was the reason he came to Chicago in the first place. “Seriously, I want to know for my own safety. When we’re together, I’m the minority. There are vampires all around me.”

“That’s a good point. We can die by fire. It must be an intense, continuous fire. Not just fire by itself. I can run into fire as long as I am able to run out. But I can’t stay in the flames for minutes, a few seconds perhaps.”

“What about a stake through the heart?”

“No, that doesn’t work. Knives and bullets don’t kill us. Knives make us bleed, but aren’t very painful. Getting shot is a nuisance, of course, but not deadly.”

“So, what happens when you’re injured?”

“We heal. Not instantly like in horror films, but sooner than humans, depending on the injury. It’s a shock to our system, but nothing that stops us completely.”

I took a few seconds to let the knowledge sink in.

“Have you made someone into a vampire before? You know, like turned them like you.”

“I have.” Zand looked from my eyes across the room. “My ex. I turned her.”

Oh, hell no! His ex-girlfriend is a vampire. “She wanted it? Or you just did it because you wanted it?”

“Oh, she wanted it. She wanted to be like me. She begged me. I tried to talk her out of it, but I was served with an ultimatum. She pleaded with me to change her. I had to, or she was going to leave me.”

Why would she want that? I wanted to ask him, but the question probably wouldn’t give me an answer that made sense. “You’ve been a vampire since 1977. That’s a long time. Did you turn anyone else other than your ex?”

“Yes.”

“Wait, did you have a wife and kids back in the seventies?” That random thought popped into my head.

“I didn’t have a family.”

“Are you sure?”

Zand chuckled. “I’m very sure. If I had a child, they would still be alive, and I would never abandon a child, my child, a human child. That’s something I can never have.”

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“Right. I’m sorry.”

“No need to apologize. I wish I would’ve had a child when I was human, but I was turned when I was single. Before I was made, I just worked and went home at night.”

“As what?”

“A roadie.”

“What’s that?”

“I was a technician on the road. I traveled on tour with a musician from state to state, setting up the stage for the performances.”

I knew what a roadie was, but I couldn’t see Zand as one, so I thought maybe there was another meaning. “You went on tour, with like singers and a band?”

“Yes, well, only one singer.”

“Who?” I wondered if I knew the person.

“Elvis.”

“Elvis who?”

“Elvis Presley?” My mouth dropped. “The King?” Or should I say the thief that stole his whole entire vocal style and movements from Roy Hamilton.

“Yes. Sadly, he died in 1977, months before I was made a vampire. I wished I’d been made sooner. I could’ve made him one too. But of course, things didn’t happen that way. Life has a way of not making any sense at all.”

It took me a few seconds to let it all sink in. He was on tour with Mr. Jailhouse Rock. Zand didn’t have any reason to lie to me. He didn’t have to make up stories to impress me. I was already impressed. He was a goddamn vampire. That was impressive enough for any-damn-body.

“How old were you when it happened to you, when you were turned into a vampire?”

“I was twenty-eight. That is the number I have proclaimed my lucky number.”

“Okay, so you made your ex-girlfriend a vampire. You said there was someone else you made into a vampire?”

“Yes, recently. I made a vamp. I’ve only made two vamps.”

“Like recently, what does that mean?”

“Months ago.” He shrugged nonchalantly. Like this was normal, and not a thing.

To me, it was a thing. Was this other person even willing? Did they want to be a vampire?

“Did this happen since you’ve known me?” Was a better question.

“Yes. I met him because of you.”

I felt some way about this unknown recently turned vampire. I tried to keep my face neutral, but I had even more questions on this topic. “Was it a woman?”

“No, a man.”

I was so confused. When did all this bloodsucking or blood drinking happen? Was there some ritual? Was it sexual? Damn, was Zand a bisexual vampire. Could vampires be bi, or pan, or gay? I didn't know anything about his life.

“Chanel, you look worried.”

“No.” I lied. “I'm just surprised. You were busy making vampires.”

“No, no, a vampire, just one. Love, please, at the time you didn't know what I was. I couldn't tell you about him without telling you I was a vampire. I didn't have a way to explain it to you.”

“But you had to explain it to the man you turned, right?”

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“If I can be brutally honest, I don’t even know why I did it. I might have turned him because of you.”

“Because of me.” What did he mean?

“But I did turn him and now I have a son.”

“A son?” I could feel my eyebrows arch back into my hairline.

“Not that kind of son. He’s an adult. It’s taboo to make children into vampires, but of course, some of us do make children vampires for selfish reasons. It’s not a big deal. You can meet my protégé at The Castle tonight.”

“Your new vampire son?” I practically choked the words out.

“Yes.”

My mind did cartwheels. I glanced back down at my cell phone screen. “I know what you said earlier. Can vampires procreate?” Somehow, I knew the answer to this question, but I asked it anyway. I had to be sure.

“We cannot. Not the way humans do. Our only children will be the ones that we turn or adopt. I believe our internal organs are dead.”

“Huh, so that means you have a maker.”

“I do. He’s older. His name is Gillian.” Zand shifted his weight on the couch. “I

believe he's in L.A. where he should be.”

Something in Zand's tone let me know there was something going on with his maker. Now wasn't the time to ask him about this man. I had a hundred and one other questions I wanted to ask. As soon as I asked one question, a million others popped into my head.

The sound of Zand's cell phone ringing interrupted my thoughts. We both had the same cell phone, but I was holding mine in my hand.

Zand removed his cell phone from the front pocket of his black jeans. He looked at me before answering.

“Yes... The Castle...I will be there tonight... No... I thought he left town...” Zand stood and left the room, leaving me sitting on the couch. I didn't mind. It was clearly something urgent regarding the club. He had to run a business. All my vampire questions could wait for another time.

CHAPTER THREE

CHANEL

I had grown accustomed to taking naps during the daytime so I could hang out with my man, my man, my man, in the nighttime. I loved calling him my man. Praying to the good lord to keep me from being possessive wasn't working. I was just happy I was keeping all those feelings on the inside.

Because he owned and operated a nightclub, as his girlfriend, I had to make my presence known. I had to let these goofy groupies know that the boy was mine. I only had to show up and be with him. That was literally all I wanted to do. So, it worked out for me. Spending time with him was my drug of choice.

I didn't know which vampires knew I was aware of their secret. I tried to treat everyone the same way I did before I knew about their little secret society. I tried not to stare at these deadly people. Pretty difficult when I was surrounded by vamps, and something about that level of danger was odd and exhilarating.

I was dressed in a skintight leather dress and peep-toe black Louboutin pumps. Both the dress and shoes were gifts from my mister vampire. I strolled inside the club on his arm with my pediatric nurse hat off, and my baddies Midwest hat fully activated. Zand was proud to show me off.

As we entered the club, I told Zand that I loved being his girlfriend, but I didn't really need him to announce it to the world. I didn't want a target on my back. Plus, a single club owner was more appealing than one in a serious relationship. I wanted to make sure his business stayed successful. If women come to The Castle because of the handsome club owner, I was going to have to deal with it.

Zand made me feel loved. So, I didn't need to be claimed in the way I did with the men from my past. I was secure in this relationship. He was opening up to me. Even though he was a vampire, I didn't fear he was going to snap one day and kill me. I felt fear when dating human men so many times there were too many instances to count. And since every six hours a Black woman or girl was killed by a man, mostly in domestic situations, I thought that maybe I was safer dating a vampire. This was me, in the woods, choosing the bear. My bear was a vampire.

"Do you need a drink?" Zand asked, bringing me out of my morbid thoughts and into the moment.

"Yeah, but I can go get it myself."

"Go to Marco. He'll hook you up." He pointed toward the bar.

“Purple hair and tattoos?” I asked.

“Yes, that’s Marco.”

I never knew his name. I remembered he was nice to me and Morgan the first time we came to The Castle. He looked Hispanic.

I pushed the see-through curtain back and left the table in the VIP section, and I couldn’t even get up good before Natasha rushed over and sat right where I was sitting. I fought the urge to roll my eyes when I looked back at her. She was so damn extra. I could tell her and Zand never had anything sexual between them. She was more like an annoying little sister.

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The bartender, Marco, was a vampire. I confirmed this with Zand on the ride over here, even though I didn't know his name at the time. Marco wasn't security, but he was a vamp. Now I was going to have to mentally question if everyone I encountered was a vampire.

After Marco greeted me, he started pouring my glass of Sauvignon Blanc. I was taking a break from my normal Pinot Grigio order. Several men and women eyed me while I was at the bar. I wasn't sure why. I didn't think I was that cute tonight. I was still a baddie, just not the baddest bitch. That was Trina. Some of these women looked like supermodels. Some probably were. I ignored the gawkers and waited as Marco poured my drink and handed it over.

There were a few more eyes on me as I walked across the dance floor to the VIP section. I approached the table with my drink in hand. Instead of Natasha, there was a young Black man sitting in my seat. As soon as he saw me approaching, he frantically stood. Zand stood too. The young man rushed out of my way and parked his bottom in the chair on the other side of Zand.

Smiling widely. "Chanel, this is the guy I was telling you about."

"You were?" I was slow to connect the dots.

What guy? Zand has never mentioned a Black guy. Now that I thought about it, he didn't have any Black friends. He didn't know any Black people besides Morgan and me. She was White presenting. If I was keeping it real, she didn't even count. You had to squint your eyes, be nearsighted and farsighted, to even catch a minor glimpse of her blackness.

Why was I just realizing this? I was the only person of color in Zand's life? I had to table that thought for another time. There was a young Black man staring me down and skinning and grinning at me. Oh my, the guy had a neck tattoo.

Zand took one good look at me. He saw I had no idea what he was talking about. 'Harpo who this man' came to my mind, but I couldn't say it out loud. Damn, had Zand even seen *The Color Purple*? Can vampires be racist? I had added even more questions to my list of never-ending questions. I was in dire need of another round of interview with the vampire.

"Chanel, this is my son, Donté?"

Huh? Oh okay, this young guy is straight up African American. Who the hell is Donté? My memory is too damn good to forget the name Donté. I stumbled back into the moment and spoke. "It's nice to meet you." This is his son? Ain't no way.

"It's nice to meet you too." I looked down at the guy's hand extended at me and I took it and let the handshake commence. This young man was a vampire. Why would Zand turn a Black boy and make him his son? All of this didn't make sense to me. Just why?

Blink twice if you need help, young brutha, I said in my mind like this Donté guy could hear my thoughts. I forgot to ask Zand if vampires could read the minds of humans. I was sure they couldn't.

"You're the son?" It wasn't really a question, but it came out that way.

"Yes, I am. Lucky me." Donté looked at Zand with respect and admiration.

I noticed that something else caught Zand's attention. "Natasha needs me. I will be right back." Zand rushed away from the table, leaving me alone with his new

vampire— his son.

I needed information. This was all so strange. Just call me Olivia Benson because I was about to launch a whole ass investigation. This was operation S.V.U. Special Vampires Unit.

“So, you and Zand. How did you meet Zand?” I asked, as I gave him another penetrating stare.

“At UIC Medical Hospital. I didn’t know you were Black. Father didn’t tell me that part.”

Oh Lord, this Black boy is calling Zand, father. I took a sip from my glass to stop me from passing out. I already need another glass. Not wine, whiskey.

“You worked there?” He didn’t look like a nurse or candy-striper. Did candy-strippers still exist? He didn’t even look like he worked maintenance. There was no way he was a doctor. I could spot healthcare workers a mile away. I was one.

“No ma’am. I was sort of a patient. I mean, I was probably dead on arrival, but the doctors tried to work on me and bring me back to life. They did the best they could, but I was outta there. Multiple GSW’s, four.”

“GSW?” What the hell was that?

“Gunshot wounds.” He explained.

“You died?” My voiced raised to opera mode. I was trying to make sense of this.

“Yeah, but I can’t ‘member that part. I ‘member standing out in front of my fam’s crib on 63rd, and Aberdeen. Someone driving up in a silver sedan, like a Kia. I see the

car one minute out my peripheral. Next minute they lighting up the spot. I jetted through the gangway. Multiple shots was ringing out, like pla-cow, pla-cow, pla-cow, blam, blam, blam. These G.D.'s unloaded the clip on us. It was like it was happening in slow motion. I 'member seeing all the blood. I 'member knowing I was hit and feeling all this fire go through my body. I 'member hearing screams and voices I didn't recognize above me."

He took a moment to think. "When I woke up, I was looking at Zand. He explained my transformation. Fam told me what happened to me. He said this was my second chance at life. I was like, man, get the fuck outta here. Ya know, like cause, I couldn'tbelieve what this White man was telling me. I thought maybe I was in heaven cause like, for real, for real, I wasn't that bad. On God, I was a good dude doing bad shit. I hadn't ever killed anybody, that I know of. Maybe I had made it to heaven, and I wasn't in hell. It wasn't hot. Ya' know what I mean?"

Not really. There was too much slang in his sentences, and I had to pick the words out I understood. I didn't know anyone in a gang if you didn't count Lonzo. I guess I had to count him. I just didn't want to. My curiosity was piqued in other ways. "Were you scared of being a vampire?"

"Nah, not really. Being scared wasn't a thing where I come from. I lived a violent life. I was banging since I was ten. And I never had a father and then this random White man shows up and says I'm your father. I didn't even put up a fight cause, I was so tired of ducking and dodging bullets. I always wanted a different life, but I was stuck in that hood shit, and I couldn't get out of it. Dying was the best thing that happened to me. Being reborn a vampire was the greatest gift I ever got." Donté shrugged.

"You think it's a gift?" I was asking a serious question because it didn't seem that way to me.

“Hell yeah. I miss my mama and my grandma, but I wouldn’t change a thing. Being a vampire is what’s up.”

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I couldn't imagine it— being a vampire. I wasn't Bella in Twilight. I didn't want to be a vampire. I liked the person I was. No more catfish. I liked food and wine and most of the things that came with being human. I didn't want to experience life as a vampire. Even though it held a certain allure, it just wasn't something I aspired to.

I was a pediatric nurse because I loved caring for kids. I had the best mother, and I always assumed I would one day be a mother. One thing about the movies was true. Even Zand confirmed it. Vampires can't make new life. They can't make babies and that was reason enough for me to remain human. Regardless of my bad track record with men, I hadn't given up on being a wife and mother.

I didn't even know how I felt about Zand taking this inner-city Black teen and making him into a vampire. He could've picked anyone in the whole Chicagoland area. Why Donté? What was he thinking? Did Zand own Donté or something? Or was he really just going to mentor this troubled young man like a father figure? What could it hurt? Donté only mentioned his mother and grandmother. Did he even have a dad?

This wasn't my Black business. This was vampire business and had nothing to do with me. I wasn't even sure Donté considered himself Black now that he was a part of this vampire coven. Did they call it a coven? There was so much I didn't know.

“So straight up, you're really okay with all of this?” I rolled my neck and hit him with a full Black girl attitude.

“Yeah.” He shook his head up and down. “I'm cool as fuck. I'm in my muthafuckin' bag with this superhero shit. Sorry, Zand told me to cut back on the cussin'. I mean

profanity.”

This young man had gang ties. He probably had already killed someone, even though he told me he hadn't. I didn't know why it bothered me so much that he was a vampire. For the umpteenth time, I had to remind myself that this was vampire business.

Zand came back to the table looking like something was bothering him. After a night of greeting his guests and being a good and dutiful club owner, he left with me earlier than expected. I was okay with him staying and handling business. I was the one that had to get up in the morning for work. I was going to be so tired tomorrow, but it was a small price to pay being included in this new world. I wanted to learn so much. I wanted to know everything. I had more questions, and I was going to make sure I got all the answers. For now, I had to sleep and prepare for Morgan's arrival.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHANEL

The drive home was quiet. Something was on Zand's mind. He looked worried, and that worried me. I could sometimes feel his emotions. Maybe he was just as exhausted as me. I couldn't wait to get home. When we pulled into the garage, I felt like I could relax. I walked into the bedroom and Zand followed me. Stepping out of my high heels, I turned to him.

“You didn't have to come back with me.” I said. I could see his mind was back at the club.

“I had enough for one night. My staff has everything under control.”

“Are you sure?” I just knew there was more.

“What do you mean?”

“Natasha seemed a bit disturbed.” I noticed she was scowling more than usual.

“She likes to worry for no reason.” He changed the subject. “Did you like Donté? He’s quite a character.” He was grinning like a real proud father. It was weird because he couldn’t really know Donté well.

“He seemed fine.”

“You didn’t like him?” Worry appeared in his caramel-colored eyes.

“No, no, he was just so young.” Which was true.

“I know. I know.” He started unbuttoning his black oxford styled dress shirt.

“Why did you pick him?” I unzipped my dress and waited for his response.

“When I came to see you in the hospital after you were attacked, there was a commotion in the emergency waiting room. I overheard there was a nineteen-year-old GSW victim.”

“GSW?”

“Gunshot wound.”

“Oh!” I forgot that Donté had told me what the letters stood for earlier that night.

Zand continued. “He was pronounced dead. I went up to see you and I couldn’t stop thinking about his life and how it was cut short. When I left you, something compelled me to go and see him. A few hours later, he was no longer in a room. I

snuck into the morgue. He was there, and it was the first time I ever felt compelled to make someone a vampire. It's a hard feeling to describe, but I wanted, I needed, to turn him. It was a feeling that I never felt. I needed to do it."

"You needed to."

"Yes."

"Without his permission?" I wasn't trying to be a smart ass.

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“Huh, well, that would’ve been impossible. He was dead.”

“Right.” I couldn’t hold back. I had to say what I had to say. “I want to be clear. I don’t want to be a vampire.”

“I think I knew that already.” He replied, as if my statement was silly.

“You did?”

“Yes. Why would you? You would have to give up so many things. I love you just the way you are.”

“I love you too. I just wanted you to know that.”

“I know, and I’m glad you made it clear.”

“I have another question.” I was tired, but this vampire world was fascinating to me.

“Oh, okay. Ask me anything.”

“You drank my blood once before.”

“I did.” He scratched at the hair on his chin.

“Does it taste bad to you, my blood?”

He cracked a crooked smile. “Ah, no. No, not at all. Actually, it’s quite delicious.”

His eyes flashed brightly. It happened so fast. I questioned if it happened at all.

“Why haven’t you done it again?”

“I didn’t want to scare you away. I wasn’t sure you were into it. Bloodlust is terrifying for some.”

Bloodlust, now that’s a word. “Are you biting other women?”

“No, of course not.” He chuckled, although his face remained serious. “Where is this coming from?”

Jealousy, self-doubt, all the above, and above the all. Why would a vampire want me? I’m cute, but a rich vampire could have anyone.

Zand removed his shirt and tossed it on a chaise lounge. His body was sculpted by the gods. I couldn’t help but look. He walked over and stood in front of me. Slowly removing my dress, his hands roamed smoothly down my torso.

He pulled me close to him. “You know I only love you.” His cool breath ignited my core and drew my nipples to fine points.

I was only in my black lace panties, and I could feel a moist pool gather in between my legs. Zand took my hand and led me to the bed. The two drinks I had at The Castle were enough to start me up. I wanted to feel him inside me. I craved it. I yearned for his dick. It had become something that I thought about when my mind was quiet.

I lay naked on the bed and watched Zand remove all the rest of his clothing and his shoes. His nude body was a work of art. He wasn’t too small or too big. He had the chiseled body of a god. His muscled tone was a marvel. He could be the new Captain

America. He wouldn't even need a stunt double. Damn, are there any vampires that are actors?

Was there a such thing as vampire actors, models, singers, politicians? That was a question for another time. My thoughts were on getting my back blown out, and my pussy being stuffed until I exploded.

Zand dimmed the lights and crawled into bed. He hovered over me and stared down into my eyes. My juices leaked from my hot spot when he made his eyes glow an icy diamond color in the darkness.

"Tell me this love is forever." He leaned down and whispered in my ear. "Chanel, tell me."

"I will love you forever." I panted, hoping he was positioned to thrust his vampire dick deep inside me.

Zand pulled back. He moved down my body without bothering to touch me. At first, I thought he was going to lick my pussy, but then I felt the extreme prick of pain when he plunged his fangs into the fatty meat of my inner thigh.

As soon as his razor-sharp fangs pierced my flesh, the pain sent shockwaves through my body. The pleasure that followed devoured the depths of my core. My skin went hot and cold all at once. The sensation surged through me like wildfire. I was left with a tingling feeling that spread through my body. I could barely breathe as he took my blood with his greedy lips. At first, my heart hammered in my chest. After a few seconds, the primal rhythm slowed. It pulsed with a hypnotic beat that pulled me under his spell and sent me far away.

I bit down hard on my lower lip. I tried to hold back the cry that rose in my throat, but sound never came out. A relaxing warmth spread through my veins, teasing every

part of me to the brink of madness. With each draw of my blood, something else rushed in to replace it. There was a dizzy, euphoric wave, drowning me in delightful sensations. I felt fragile and alive in ways I'd never imagined.

I cracked my eyes open to make sure I hadn't levitated off the bed. I was convinced Zand had sent me spinning and raised me up like I weighed nothing at all. My vision blurred as I tried to look through the cloud of my lashes. I reached out blindly, wanting to anchor myself to him and feel his solid weight. My fingers curled against the bedding.

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The world existed just for the two of us. My heartbeat thundered in my ears. I wondered if he could feel it, too. He must have. I trusted he knew how much blood he could take without taking me out. There was so much pleasure entwined with this trust. And I do trust him with my life.

Now was the height of our connection, the point of no return. I was lost in him, and he was lost in me. His mouth remained clamped onto my thigh, drinking from me as if he were a man dying of thirst. I realized with startling clarity that I was enjoying feeding him my blood. The thought should have terrified me. Instead, it thrilled me.

His cool hands moved restlessly over my heated flesh, tracing paths that left goosebumps. I arched beneath his touch. A whimper escaped my lips as his fingers found their way to my breasts. His mouth on my thigh and the teasing pinch of his fingers on my nipples sent waves of pleasure through me.

Abruptly, he lifted his head from my thigh. His eyes glowed with an intensity that made my heart stammer in my chest. I sat up in bed to get a closer look.

A trickle of blood slid down from the corner of his mouth. I reached up and wiped it away with my thumb. He caught my hand mid-air and brought it to his mouth. He licked slowly along my thumb as he savored the taste of me in this strange way that didn't seem strange anymore.

Zand's vampire eyes morphed back into their usual creamy coffee color. He looked at me with an expression teetering between concern and something else I couldn't quite decipher.

“Chanel.” His voice was raw and gravelly. His gaze bore into mine as he cradled my face in his palms. “Did I hurt you?”

“No.”

“Not yet.” He said, made a shrugging gesture with his face and not his body.

Not yet? What did that mean?

Without proper warning, he grabbed both of my legs and bragged me down so that I was once again flat on my back. Even if I wanted to protest, I couldn’t. His vampire speed was fast. Not freakishly fast, but faster than a regular human man. He removed my last piece of clothing, my lace panties.

Zand’s hand glided over the roundness of my ass. His fingers trailed up the side of my waist and scaled along the sides of my body. He caressed the curves of my ribs as I wriggled off the mattress and arching like a contented cat.

I slowly scooted upwards. I wasn’t trying to flee. I wanted him to pull me close and restrain me. With his power, he could pin me down and allow me to experience every inch of him. His palms eagerly danced over my taut nipples. His hands journeyed to my supple mounds.

Zand’s fingers cupped them. He pulled at the soft tissue and clawed at my breasts. He tugged hard until all five of his fingers converged and pinched the very point of my nipples.

I let out a squeal of pleasure as his twisting fingers burned the sensitive skin of my nipples. My body shivered, even though he hadn’t entered me yet. I closed my eyes and moaned into the air.

When I opened them, I saw Zand hovering over me with a satisfied grin. Then I felt him pierce my wet hole. My legs automatically wrapped around him. He roughly thrust deep inside me and I gasped in response.

Zand rested his elbows on the bed at the sides of my face. He placed his weight on his arms. He pushed into my pussy and rocked into me slowly. I placed my palms on his shoulders and wrapped my fingers around his muscles. I turned my face away when Zand dove deep into the sweetest part of me. My entire body shivered like a cold gust of wind had filled the room. I should be embarrassed by the effect Zand was having on my body. But I wasn't.

"Chanel, look at me." His voice jarred me back into my pleasure filled reality.

I opened my eyes to his perfect face. He was staring into my eyes and putting me into a tantric trance. What was he doing to me?

"Do you feel this?" Zand rolled his cock in slow circles and massaged my inner walls with care.

"Yes." I moaned. I felt it. I felt every single inch of him.

"Oh, you feel like...heaven." Zand collapsed down onto my body. His face lay lodged in the place between my neck and my collarbone.

Zand moved his hips in ways that made my limbs lose circulation. He knew how to work his body. He knew those special places on my body and inside my body. He was skilled in ways I had never experienced. He rolled his hips in rough zigzags until my legs dislodged from his waist and fell to the mattress. Zand amped up his thrusts and groaned into the skin of my neck. I pressed my lips together to force the cuss words from escaping from my lips.

My eyes rolled to the back of my head, and my orgasm shot out of me. Zand's body stilled, and he unloaded all his cum inside me. I could feel his huge dick gyrating as he released everything he had.

I was exhausted, although I had spent the entire session on my back. I had just enough strength in my arm to push Zand's hair back off his forehead. I noticed he wasn't sweating. One of the perks of being a vampire.

He bent to kiss my cheek. "I'm not done with you." He sighed in my arm. "I want more."

"Whatever you want." I couldn't believe I said that when I didn't have an ounce of strength left in my body.

I listened as Zand's breathing started to become steady. I wondered why he hadn't pulled his generous dick out of me.

My throbbing pussy walls made it impossible to drift off to sleep. Even though I was tired as hell. His weight wasn't crushing me yet. I smiled, thinking about how Zand could always give me an orgasm better than the last one. I loved him more than he knew, more than I could love any man.

It had only been a few minutes, and I felt his dick growing inside my over-worked pussy. I still didn't understand how his body parts worked, but they worked to perfection. No matter what he said about vampires having dead internal organs, there was one organ that was alive and thriving and that was his massive dick.

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I couldn't believe how rapidly he was swelling inside me. I could feel him filling me up and pressing snug against my taut walls. I was getting wetter, thinking of the magic that was coming to life inside my sugar walls.

Zand reached up and grabbed a huge chunk of my hair. He lifted his body above me.

"Chanel." He looked deep into my eyes. "I love you so much."

"I love you too." The words were so simple, but so meaningful.

Zand released my hair. He took both his hands and pinned my legs flat on the mattress at my knees. He pulled his dick out of me and slammed it back down hard inside me. I screamed out into the night as he split me open and burned my clit in the process. With more power, he plunged inside me over and over, faster and harder. He was like a madman on a robotic rampage.

I choked on my own saliva. I silently prayed he wouldn't shatter my pelvis. In between my screams, I muttered his name. I cupped my own breasts in my hands and would have balled up in the fetal position if he didn't have my knees pinned flat to the mattress.

"Zand!" I screamed his name as my orgasm crippled me. He continued to thrust inside my bruised pussy. He needed to cum so I could get some rest, but he was on a mission to beat my pussy up.

Just when she thought I would pass out, he released my knees and flipped my limp body over onto my stomach. He pushed his firm erection back into my swollen and

sore kitty cat. My walls sucked him deep inside me. He leaned his chest down on my back and rested there.

“Ohhh!!!” I moaned.

“It’s okay babe.”

But was it okay? “Please go slow.” I begged.

Zand rolled inside me with the faintest, perfect semi-circles. “Is this slow enough?” He whispered into the back of my hair.

“Oh, yes!!!” I moaned into the pillow. I stiffened my velvety walls around his large member. I clenched my inner muscles and squeezed him tight. Was I really going to have another orgasm? It only took a little effort on my part and Zand came inside me just as I came. Our bodies were in sync.

Zand kissed my bare shoulder. “I could fuck you forever.” He mumbled.

I smiled into my pillow. That was the best compliment ever. Forever for me may be a few hours, but I would take it. I would take whatever Zand was giving.

There was no other man like Zand. Mr. Valentine was my mister vampire, and I was hooked forever and that was truer than anything I knew in this life.

CHAPTER FIVE

CHANEL

The next day, I had a plan. I was going to get to my apartment before Morgan met me there. I left work an hour early so I could clean my apartment. Everybody didn’t have

the same interpretation of clean. Zand told me it was clean. Did that really mean clean, clean? Or just surface clean?

I didn't want to spook Morgan by cleaning while she was there. She knew I had already kept a tidy place. I had to go see my apartment firsthand. As expected, Josh came with me. He drove me to the apartment complex and parked the truck in the lot.

I was triggered when I glanced over at the dumpster. As I entered the building, I glanced down at the flowerpot and was comforted by the thoughts of the love notes that used to be stored under the planter.

I had soreness on the inside of my thigh where Zand had his way with my blood. I thought he left his mark on purpose. He wanted me to remember him. He was right. I would never forget it. He knew how to take our lovemaking to brand new heights.

Two Advil helped ease the discomfort. I couldn't complain. At least I wasn't weak or walking funny. Now and then, I would get a tingle in my lower abdomen, reminding me of our night of pleasure.

"Did you want me to come up with you, Miss Chanel?"

"Yes, just for a minute."

Josh sprinted in front of me. He took being my bodyguard slash chauffeur very seriously. Maybe Zand paid him well. Was he afraid of Zand? There were so many things I didn't know about this new domain.

When we hiked the stairs to the second floor everything was quiet. I put my key in the lock and opened the door wide. Josh stepped in front of me and entered through the door first.

He moved through all the rooms so fast I was still standing idle at the door.

“There’s no one here.” He stated.

I didn’t think anyone was, but it was still nice for someone else to check it out first.

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“Thanks for taking a look.”

“It’s no problem. You’re safe. Nothing is going to happen to you. Zand protects his people.”

His people. What did that even mean? It implied Zand was their leader in some way.

Josh sensed I needed privacy.

“Miss Chanel, I’ll go wait in the car. Call me if you need anything.”

“Okay, thanks. I will.”

I stood there and waited for Josh to leave. I closed and locked the door behind him. Sucking in a deep breath, I took my time going into my bedroom. That was the room where all the violence took place. When I peeked in, the closet was open, so I knew no one was hiding in it.

Zand was right. The place was spotless. It was just as if nothing criminal ever occurred. I sat down on the edge of the bed and looked around the room. How was I going to tell Morgan the truth? I had so many truths. I knew the one about the vampires was going to have to stay with me, but I didn’t want to keep everything from her.

I made some coffee and hoped the creamer was still good. It wasn’t. I remembered I had some powdered creamer in the cabinet. My nerves were getting better the more time I spent in the apartment, and the hot coffee seemed to help soothe all my doubts.

Morgan texted me when she was in the parking lot of my complex. I texted her back to come on up. I couldn't wait to see her. I had Zand but nothing could beat being in the company of your best friend, the one person on earth that knew you better than anybody.

I opened the door and stood and waited for my bestie. Morgan was dressed head-to-toe in her favorite color, black. She looked like one of them. She looked like a vampire. If she were one of them, she would fit right in with her dark outfit. I laughed inside and she could handle anything.

"Hey girl." Morgan greeted me with an infectious smile. "I'm still in mourning and my favorite color is black, so get ready to see me in black for a few more months." She added.

"Okay girl." I giggled. "Get your butt in here!"

Morgan rolled her luggage halfway inside the apartment and removed her Fendi sunglasses even though there was no sun.

She opened her arms, and I welcomed her with a hug. "Coco, you look so stressed. What's wrong with ya?"

"Nothing, just come all the way in so I can close the door. You are letting all my heat out."

I helped Morgan by grabbing her tall, rolling suitcase. "Did you bring wine?" I asked.

"Now you know good and well, it's right in the bag." She removed the black duffel bag that connected to the suitcase handle and handed it over to me.

I noticed her hair was a few shades lighter, but still curly. "You dyed your hair

blonde.”

“Yeah, they say them hoes have more fun. So, I’m all about that life.”

“It’s cute.”

“Thank you. I see you getting your inches back. Don’t cut it again.” She warned.

She removed her coat and placed it on the barstool chair. She followed me into the kitchen. I grabbed the wineglasses from the cabinet and the corkscrew from the drawer.

“Is it okay if we do the red?” I asked.

“You want a headache? You never pick red.” She was speaking facts. That was true, but Zand drank red.

There was always red wine in his club, in his apartment. And even in his loft. He needed red to camouflage all the bottles of blood he drank. I wondered how long bottled blood lasted. Did they add something to it to preserve it? Where the hell did it come from? Was there a company that manufactured and distributed it locally or internationally? That was one of many questions I had to add to my lists of inquiries.

“I took an Advil earlier. I will be good with the red. This bottle looks a little fancy. Is this expensive?” I asked as I observed the pretty shape of the bottle.

“It costs more than that ghetto corner store wine you buy.”

“There is some good wine out there for \$4.99 a bottle.” I explained.

“Child, this is why you need me in your life.” I struggled with the corkscrew but was

finally able to open the bottle. I poured Morgan a full glass and did the same for me.

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“Coco, you know, if we got Black girl wasted now, we got to have food delivered. We can’t be out here drinking and driving.”

“I will order something for us if we decide to stay here.” I slid the full wineglass across the kitchen island over to Morgan.

“Where were we trying to go in the cold?” She asked.

“I didn’t tell you this, but I was sort of staying over at Zand’s.”

“In the basement of this apartment building?” Morgan’s face distorted. She was appalled with her boujee ass. There would have to be a zombie apocalypse before she would live underground.

“No, he has another place, a loft downtown.”

“A condo?”

“No, it’s like an old building that used to be like a warehouse or factory. He fixed it up.”

“You’re trying to tell me he owns this apartment building, that nightclub near here and a whole other place, downtown Chicago, where I’m sure it’s expensive to live? What else does he have?”

I shrugged before I took another sip of my wine. “I don’t know.”

“Why didn’t you ask him?”

“I’m not going to ask that man about his properties.”

“Why not? That’s your man and y’all Facebook official.”

“It’s called Meta now.” I corrected and rolled my eyes. “Zand does not have any social media. So, we’re only real-life official.”

“Yeah, and you don’t think that’s weird? Hold up. Hold up. Why did you tell me to come here if you don’t even live here anymore?” Morgan pursed her lips.

“Because you are my best friend, and I wanted to see you.”

“Oh. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” My voice squeaked.

“You’re not fine.” She inspected me with her gray eyes. “Did Zand do something to you?”

“No, Zand is great. He told me to invite you over to his place downtown.”

“Ah, I came here to hang out with you, not him.”

“His place is enormous. You will still be with me. He works at the club on weekends, so he’s not going to be around much.”

“Why didn’t you tell me all this before I drove my ass up here?”

“I told you I wanted to see you. I’m in Chicago all by myself. I only know Zand and

his friends. I missed you too, damn girl.”

“Okay, I’m here. Are you sure you’re okay? Have you heard from Lonzo?”

I didn’t know how to answer her question. “I know he’s out.”

“Yeah, we all know they let him out of jail. Have you heard from that asshole?”

Morgan glared at me. “What? Coco. What’s up?”

“No. He’s probably long gone.” I didn’t want to give anything away. Right now, wasn’t the right time.

“Wait. What? Long gone, where?”

“I don’t know. Either he’s somewhere in Minnesota, laying low, or maybe Mexico.”

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Morgan was quiet for what seemed like forever. “I hope he’s gone forever. I had some suspicion that he had something to do with Craig’s death. I just didn’t want to say anything to you about it. I know that sounds all conspiracy theory, but all of it was so sudden. Craig is not road raging anybody.”

“It was sudden.” I tried to say it convincingly, but I was sure she wasn’t convinced.

“You must know something about his whereabouts. Did anyone reach out to you?”

“Not yet. I just know Lonzo did some bad things to a lot of people.”

“If he’s gone from the face of this earth, that would be good news.” She added.

“He’s probably gone.”

“I think you know something. You don’t have to tell me the details. I’m just glad you’re safe.”

“Do you want to stay here or go back to Zand’s loft apartment? I have a room ready for you. It’s close to lake Michigan and you can see the entire Chicago skyline from the roof.”

“Fine, whatever. You convinced me. I will go back to your man’s other place with you.”

“I promise. It’s all good girl. Zand is going to go into work tonight so we can just hang out.”

“Fine. We can stop off at the store and get some more wine. You better not be taking me to a dump in the hood. I don’t know the good neighborhoods from the bad ones, and you don’t either.”

“Morgan, you saw the nightclub that he owns and that’s not a dump.”

“True. That club looks expensive. Is he leasing? Or does he own it?”

“He owns it, I think.”

“Does Zand have any brothers?”

“No.” He has one Black son, but I couldn’t tell her that. “Drink up so we can take your bags down to the car.”

“What’s the damn rush?”

“I just want you to see the place. It is so nice, and I know you’ll love it.”

I wasn’t afraid to be in this apartment anymore. I had just made myself at home at the loft. Morgan didn’t know Lonzo had assaulted me only a few feet away. I just wanted to get out of here. It didn’t take long for Morgan to grab her things.

I made sure I locked up. We took the elevator down to the first-floor parking lot.

“Hey where’s your car?”

“It’s not here. I left it at Zand’s place. I got a ride.” I looked around the parking lot and noticed Josh sitting in the car alone. As soon as I sat comfortably in her vehicle, I sent Josh a text message stating we were headed back to the loft.

As soon as we pulled out of the parking lot, Josh pulled out behind us. I hoped Morgan wouldn't realize we were being followed. I didn't tell him to keep his distance, but I also didn't want to scare Morgan.

When we arrived at Zand's place, we parked in the underground garage and took the elevator up. Josh didn't pull into the garage behind us. He knew to give us some space.

Just as I suspected. Morgan was wowed by the three-story red brick building with large windows and an opulent view of downtown Chicago. The place was decorated beautifully. Morgan could roam around freely without figuring out Zand was a vampire.

Zand had a special place for his blood stash. He rarely drank blood in front of me. But at this point, I wouldn't mind either way. I knew full well he needed to survive.

After hours of drinking and catching up, Morgan wanted to go out and party. I suggested The Castle. It was the only place I knew about. She was all for it. I thought about calling Zand and then decided to pop up on him. I needed to make sure he was being good.

We had been drinking like fish. So, I made sure Josh drove us to The Castle. Morgan was too lit to question why I had a driver. Maybe Josh would tell Zand we were coming, but I didn't bother to ask him.

Morgan was dressed in an all black cat suit with sheer cutouts on the legs and stomach. I was wearing something a little more modest, a long green dress with a plunging neckline. My hair was wavy, and I felt sexy as memories of Zand biting my inner thighs flooded my mind. Maybe I will let him bite me tonight if we get to see each other privately. I didn't feel woozy after he took my blood yesterday. Then again, I should probably wait a few days before I gave him more of my crimson

delights.

Josh dropped us off at the front door. We were ushered to the front of the line as soon as Layla saw us. It seemed the Charlize Theron look-alike was always there. She took my hand and guided me right over to the bar. This time, I knew the bartender's name. I also knew he was a vampire. Times had really changed in such a short period of time.

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“Hey Chanel.” I believed all the vampires knew me by name.

“Hi Marco.” His purple mohawk was now a brighter shade of purple.

“What are you ladies drinking tonight?”

“Two glasses of red wine.”

“Coming right up.” He said as he winked at Morgan.

She gave him a coy smile. Which meant practically nothing because she was a huge flirt and used to getting a lot of attention from men.

“Coco, quick question.”

“What’s up?”

“Do you think it’s too early for me to date?”

“Date?”

“Yes, date a man. Go on a date.” She reiterated.

This was an odd question. I didn’t have an answer. I don’t know how long Craig had been gone and buried. With my own problems, I didn’t keep up with the date he died.

“I don’t know. That’s up to you. Do you feel like you’re ready to go on dates?”

“I don’t think I am. But I think I need a distraction. I need something new, someone in my face, someone else to think about.”

“I understand.” I did. Too much time alone made it hard to come out of despair. Going back to business was a way we both coped.

“I don’t know. Like maybe even a one-night stand, or something like that. I don’t know what I need. Maybe I need a new place, or a new city, a new something, I don’t know.”

“Well, you don’t have to figure it out tonight and you definitely don’t have to figure it out while you’re drinking.”

“Two glasses of red for you ladies.”

“Thanks Marco.” I smiled and turned away from the bar to look over at the dance floor. I swear some people could not dance. But it was entertaining the watch.

“So, you don’t have to pay for drinks anymore?”

“My man owns the club, you know that.”

“I know, girl. It must be nice.” She joked.

It was more than nice. I felt safe and taken care of. Taking a sip of wine, I scanned the room for a glimpse of my vampire. I didn’t see Zand anywhere and the crowd of partygoers. I didn’t see him in the VIP section.

I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned to see Natasha standing firm and right behind me. She was in a candy apple red skintight vinyl jumpsuit. “Chanel, what are you doing here?” Her accent was so heavy it took me a few seconds to decipher her entire

sentence.

“I came with my friend Morgan.”

“My boss doesn’t know that you’re here.” She seemed surprised in her neutral way.

“Okay.”

“If you want to see him, he’s in a meeting.”

Why was she breaking her neck to tell me this? “I didn’t say I wanted to see him. But who is he in a meeting with?”

“I don’t know if I should tell you.” Her accent was heavier than Heavy D & the Boyz.

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Well, why did she bring it up? “Is it a woman?”

“No, it is not a woman.”

She was pissing me off being so vague. I couldn’t show my anger with her because she was a vampire and she could rip my head off, but I wanted to cuss her ass out. I was standing here by the bar with my best friend, minding my business, when she came over, bothering me for no reason.

I didn’t come here to catch Zand cheating on me. But she was acting like he was in some top-secret meeting.

I had a little guts. “So, if it’s not a woman at this nighttime meeting, take me to see him.” I ordered.

“Are you sure?”

Bitch! Don’t play with me.

“Damn lady! She sure. Take her to see her man already.” Morgan was irritated and spoke up for me.

“Zand is in a meeting with one of us.” She whispered, for my ears only.

The way she said it. I knew exactly who she was talking about, a vampire.

“Well, he wouldn’t mind because he’s already told me who you are.”

“I like you better now that you know. Follow me.” She declared with a sly smirk.

When Natasha walked through the crowd, I followed at her heels. Morgan was right behind me. She grabbed my shoulders and pushed her face to my ear.

“Girl, who are they?” She said. She heard the exchange with me and Natasha and she wanted answers.

I whipped my head around. “I will tell you later.”

Morgan was watching Natasha like she was ready to peel her wig cap back if she looked at me sideways. If Natasha was setting me up to see Zand with another woman, I was going to be devastated. I had never been anything to her but Zand’s girlfriend. I didn’t know if she like me or just tolerated me.

Natasha guided us past a tall security guard. I didn’t know his name, but I knew he was a vampire. The guard was standing in a dimly lit hallway. I looked back at Morgan, and she was having the same reaction I had when I first traveled this path.

We reached to the end of the hall where the private elevator was. Natasha typed a code into the elevator keypad. The elevator doors quietly parted. I wanted that code. I didn’t have a good reason to have it, but I wanted it.

We stepped into the elevator behind Natasha, and I glared at her while she glared at Morgan. Natasha didn’t have any manners when it came to staring someone down to the ground. No manners at all. We rode the elevator in silence, which was fine with me.

When we got to the right floor, I didn’t even know what floor we were on. We stepped out of the elevator into the blood red hallway. The red painted walls were the source of what I thought was real blood when I first saw them. Zand told me he

painted them himself with Behr paint in the color Fire Cracker.

The journey down the hall to his office seemed long. I took a deep breath when we reached the closed door of his office. I could handle whoever was on the other side of that door. I was so happy Morgan was with me. If I had to drag a bitch by her throat, Morgan was going to pull a plug out her wig cap. That was only if this ho-bag was human. If not human, I was going to get my ass beat yet again, this time by a vampire.

Natasha knocked twice.

“Come in.” I heard Zand’s heavy voice from an intercom, but I didn’t know where the speaker was located. I looked up and there was a video surveillance camera pointed directly down at us. These were all things I hadn’t noticed before now. Maybe the alcohol was making me super sensitive to my surroundings.

This place had topnotch security. Did they really need it with a club full of vampires?

CHAPTER SIX

ZAND

I was at the club alone tonight. Chanel’s best friend was in town, and I had to give her some space. I didn’t want to crowd her. She needed community with her kind. Once she knew what I was, I didn’t want her to feel trapped in this relationship. I believed she loved me, but there was always a bit of self-doubt swimming in my brain. All my past relationships failed. Was I worthy of her? Most human women wanted children, and I couldn’t give her that. It was something I thought about on occasion.

If I was lucky, I could leave here in the early morning hours and push my concrete cock inside her while she slept. Time wouldn’t be a constraint if she didn’t work. She

didn't have to. I was fully ready and willing to take care of her financial needs.

Before I could look over the books, I got a call from Natasha. My vampire brother was at the backdoor of the club asking to see me. He was my brother, because he was adopted by my maker, Gillian. This made him my brother by default.

Why wouldn't he just go away? I knew why. He was alone, and that was the one thing he feared more than anything. Ourmaker favored me over him. I knew it. He knew it. And that was that. I was finally ready to see him and hear him out. I wasn't as upset with him like I had been in the past. We had spent years apart, and the hurt he caused me had faded.

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I sat behind my glazed marble desk and waited for Natasha to escort my traitorous brother to see me. We had some good times so many years ago. Now he was just a nuisance I pitied and didn't want to be around.

Harlen scrolled in with a huge grin on his face. His long dark hair was loose and falling on his shoulders. His baggy clothing was far from any fashion I could comprehend. He looked like a scruffy bum. His look was akin to a man that hadn't betrayed me and slept with my wife— correction, my ex-wife. I stood as he eyed my office furniture and decor. The degenerate sat down in one of the plush chairs in front of my desk, even though I didn't offer him a seat.

I lowered myself back into my chair and tried to remain calm. I waited for some falsehoods to hail from his lips because I knew they would come soon enough.

“Brother.” He called out to me without giving me any direct eye contact.

“What do you want?” I barked.

“I wanted to see you.”

“Harlen, cut the bullshit. What are you doing here? I told you to skip town and leave me the hell alone.”

“I know. I know. That was my initial plan. I was going to leave you alone.”

“Again, why are you here? Don't you love frolicking around in foreign lands?”

“I do, but I saw Teresa snooping around and I just couldn’t leave town without telling you she was here.”

“Stupid excuse. I don’t need you to warn me about her.”

“I know, but you know how she is. You know what she did to that pilates instructor.”

He didn’t have to remind me. I knew exactly what she’d done. Teresa was one of the reasons I left L.A. so abruptly. I went on two dates with a nice Armenian woman who taught pilates in the Hollywood Hills, and Teresa murdered the woman. I could barely live with the idea that I was the reason that innocent woman died.

This was a woman named Artemis that I had no feelings for. Teresa was unhinged. I wanted to get as far away from her brand of crazy. Killing an unassuming, harmless woman for dating me was above and beyond anything I could ever forgive.

Teresa had no morals. She had sex with my maker and my brother. Then she killed a human woman. Being a vampire gave Teresa strength and an ego that I wasn’t prepared to deal with. I wished I’d never made her into a vamp. She didn’t deserve the power that came with a gift of immortality.

I gazed at Harlen. “You didn’t have to come here to remind me of the past.”

“It looks like you need my help getting rid of her.”

“I don’t need your help with anything.”

“I believe Teresa is up to something.” He leaned forward and rested his elbows on my desk.

“Don’t you think you’ve done enough?”

“I’m very sorry, brother. I would do absolutely anything for you to forgive me. Sharing is no longer caring. I promise I’ve changed.”

I never wanted to share my wife with this idiot.

“Changed into what, exactly?” I shouted and reined myself back into calmness.

“I don’t know. I just can’t leave things the way they are. Now that I’ve found you, I want to make things right.”

“Leaving me alone would make things perfectly alright.”

“But I miss you. I miss us.”

“Bullshit!” I spewed.

“No really. I don’t want to be alone in this life. I want to be with you. Just like when we were younger. I beg you to give me another chance. Give me a chance to be a part of what you have here.”

“Look, I’m very busy right now. I have my own things going on and I don’t have time for you.”

“I promise I will stay out of your way.”

“Your promises don’t mean shit.”

“Where is your girl?”

“What girl? What are you talking about?”

“I’ve seen you come here with a pretty human girl.”

“That’s none of your concern.” I leaned forward to glare at him.

“I can help around here. I can help with anything you have going on.”

“The only problems I have are you and Teresa.”

“Brother, I am no problem to you. I promise.” He graveled.

It was exhausting talking in circles and listening to his apologies. “Seriously Harlan, what do you want from me? Do you need money?”

“I want a second chance.” He confessed.

“Okay, fine, you go right ahead and have your second chance, your third chance, and your five hundred and sixty-second chance.”

“I’m serious. I will not do you any harm. I promise.”

“Another empty promise.” I was tired of his never-ending stream of apologies.

“Brother, I don’t have anywhere to go.”

“Any place in the world is where you can go.”

“Can I please stay here in Chicago? Just for a trial period. You’ll see. I won’t do anything to embarrass you.” He pleaded.

“I told you I’m busy. I have a business to run, and I have a life that doesn’t involve all this vampire bullshit.”

“I understand. I can stay out of your way. Give me one week. Just one week to prove myself. I assure you things will be different this time. I’ve been going from shitty hotel to shittier hotel. Please give me a place I can stay?”

Seeing his pathetic face was making my resolve fall. “Harlen, I will give you one fucking week. If you fuck up, I will end you.”

“I won’t. I mean it.” He sat back in his chair, happy that I was giving him yet another chance.

“Cut your hair. You look ridiculous. You can stay at my apartment for now. I’m saying somewhere else.”

“Thank you, brother.” He clasped his hands together like he was praying and pulled his hands to his lips.

“Don’t get in my way. Don’t fuck with any of my people. Don’t feed on the locals. I have a blood supply.”

“You have a blood supply set up here in Chicago?”

I answered him with my eyes.

“You were always the smart and resourceful one. Your operation here is wonderful.”

“Harlen Corbin.” I was compelled to use his first and middle name. “You get zero fuck ups. Even if I don’t have the heart to kill you, I have people that will end you without hesitation. Don’t make me cross the line.”

“I won’t.”

“Thank you, brother. You won’t regret this.”

“You can’t stay in the apartment for free. If you plan to stay here, you better fit in. You will be assigned a job.”

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“A job?” He frowned. “I don’t have any skills, but I will figure it out.”

“Don’t come back here. Stay away from my club. Don’t try to ruin my new life.”

“What are you going to do about Teresa?”

“That’s none of your business. I’m sure she’s long gone.”

“No, she’s still here in town. I’ve seen her at some fleabag motel on the west side of town. She didn’t see me, but I saw her. She’s still here in Chicago. I believe she’s determined to win you back. Why else would she be in town?”

“I don’t care what she’s doing or where she’s located.” I wasn’t being honest. I cared because Teresa was unhinged, and she’d already killed one woman that was associated with me. Plus, she knew about Chanel, and my relationship with my girl was the real deal.

“I think you should care. I’ve heard some really wicked things about her after you left L.A.”

“I don’t care about her. I don’t want to hear anything about her. I don’t want to see her. Why is this so difficult for you to understand?” My voice raised. I left Teresa in the past. Why wouldn’t she stay in the past?

“I believe you. But she’s been a mentally ill bitch for five years. She did some horrible things back in L.A. after you left town. I just know she’s planning something. Why else is she still in town? She tracked you down and came here. She’s

stalking you.”

I needed to remind him. “You tracked me down and came here. You’re also stalking me.”

He ignored the dig. “I’m telling you, she’s gone mad. Do you really think she’s going to leave without a fight?”

“There is no fight. I don’t want her. I don’t love her. She is dead to me. Teresa is for the streets.” For the streets, a saying I got from Donté. It was too soon to tell Harlan I had a son. He would be jealous.

“Never underestimate a woman scorned.” He warned as if I didn’t know this.

“She’s scorned me. I dumped her. End of story.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“I know I’m right. I have an army of vamps that will fight for me. She is just one lonely, destitute vampire tramp.”

Harlan had wronged me so many times. Against my better judgment, I knew I shouldn’t welcome him back into my life. It was easier to forgive him because I no longer had any feelings whatsoever for Teresa. Holding a grudge toward him seemed futile. I only loved Chanel. Harlan’s affair with Teresa was like a faded memory that I no longer had use for.

If he was here begging for my forgiveness, that meant he was desperate, and I’d seen him this way before. He wasn’t as strong as I was, and I had to pull him out of fire once before. If he got too low, he could try to end his vampire existence.

I wasn't saying I was going to let bygones be bygones. I just didn't care about the past or what he had done to me. All I wanted to do in my long life was to be with Chanel, protect Chanel, and love Chanel. Nothing else mattered.

There were two knocks on my office door. I looked over at the security camera screens.

I frowned at Harlen. "Act like you're human."

"Why? Humans are savages." He teased.

I gave him a look that let him know I meant business. "Come in." I spoke toward the closed door.

I waited for the door to open.

Natasha didn't walk in; she just held the door. "Boss, you have visitors. What is he still doing here?" She hissed, referring to Harlen. I confided in Natasha. She knew how he betrayed me, and she didn't like him one bit.

"He'll be leaving soon. Please, come in." I waved to Chanel and Morgan. The ladies walked into my office. They both had wine glasses in their hands that were more than half full. Natasha closed the door, but I was sure she was somewhere near on the other side of it.

Harlen leapt from his chair like his ass was on fire. "Please, sit." He extended his hand to the chair he occupied a second ago and the other vacant chair next to it.

Chanel took a seat first, and Morgan followed.

"Chanel, Morgan, this is my brother, Harlen."

“It’s nice to meet you ladies.” Harlen bowed his head. He didn’t rush to kiss their hands, hug them or give them two cheek air kisses. So maybe he was turning over a new leaf.

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“Nice to meet you too,” Chanel spoke, and Morgan just looked at him.

After a bit of silence, I cleared my throat. “You came to the club tonight?”

“It was my idea.” Morgan spoke for Chanel.

“If I knew you were here, I would’ve come down and greeted you properly.”

“We haven’t been here long. Natasha spotted us and brought us right to you,” Chanel explained. “I’m just happy to meet your brother.” Chanel gave me a look that signaled I was in trouble. I hadn’t told her I had a brother, and she could probably tell he was a vampire. I tried to remain calm, but I knew I fucked up. I hadn’t told her about Donté and now here was Harlen, another secret I was keeping.

I stood up. “Morgan, can I have a quick word with Chanel? I promise I will bring her right back.” I had already moved over to where Chanel was seated and taken her hand in mine. Chanel was reluctant to stand, but slowly rose to her feet.

“No problem.” Morgan said. “I will let your brother, what’s your name?”

“Harlen.” My brother answered.

“Entertain me.” Morgan finished her sentence.

Although I didn’t want to leave her alone with him, I knew he would be on his best behavior. Most women thought he was charming for reasons unknown to me.

I led Chanel from the room and turned back to see Harlen moving to take Chanel's newly vacant chair.

Once the door had shut behind me, I guided Chanel down the hallway to a small private bathroom that looked more like a closet. There was a lock, but I didn't bother to use it. I didn't want to frighten Chanel.

"Hey, I'm sorry." I led with an apology because I already knew I was in hot water.

"Zand, you have a whole fuckin' brother?"

"Yeah, I forgot to mention it."

"How convenient." She blew air from her red painted lips. "These aren't secrets. These are lies."

"No, no, I'm not lying to you. Some things just never come up. They're not important."

"So, when you told me you had a father, you didn't think that was a good time to tell me you had a brother."

A good point. "I don't know, maybe. I thought he left town, so I didn't give it much thought."

"Bullshit." She hissed.

"Babe, don't be mad at me."

"Don't keep fuckin' secrets from me. I know there's more. I know you have more things to tell me."

“I will. I will tell you everything you need to know.”

“When? When I just walk into your office and find out on my own.”

“No.”

“Do you have any more brothers or sisters or anything? I definitely have to ask you because you’re not going to volunteer any information on your own.”

“Come on, that’s not fair. That’s not true.” Shit! We were fighting.

“You have a father. You have a brother, and you got a goddamn son. What else do you have? What else aren’t you telling me?”

“There’s my ex. She is considered my ex-wife.”

“You were married?” Her eyes grew large.

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“Not legally, but it was regarded as marriage because we took a blood oath.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“Means nothing at all to me now. I love you.”

“Oh, my god. So, this ex-wife is a vampire?”

“Yes, she is.”

“And you didn’t think I needed to know this?” Her eyes squinted so I couldn’t see the whites, only the browns.

“I didn’t think about it.”

She was pissed. “I’m leaving.”

“No, you’re not.”

“How are you going to stop me?”

“I’m a vampire. Did you forget? I can stop you.”

Without thinking, I wrapped my hand around her forearm and pulled her into my embrace. Chanel slammed into my chest, too startled to resist. I smashed her back against the wall and pressed my body into hers. Latching onto her neck with my mouth, I used my tongue to nibble at her skin. I felt her try to push me away, but her

female human strength was no match for me.

I wasn't going to let that happen, so I pressed my tongue into her mouth and kissed her deeply, slowly, passionately, vampiric-ly. My hands roamed her body. I used my hands to hike her skirt up to her waist.

Chanel moaned in my mouth as I took her breath away. I felt the lace of her panties on my fingertips and used my nails to rip the lace away from her body. Her shaved pussy was exposed. I used my index finger to wipe her sweet juice as it pooled outside her tight cream pie. There was no hunger like the hunger I felt for her.

I quickly unzipped and unbuttoned my pants and let them fall to my ankles. Taking hold of my cock, I lowered it down to Chanel's lower lips. I let my cock glide around, and when I couldn't take it anymore. I lifted Chanel off the floor and wrapped her legs around my torso. Slowly I guided my member into her sopping wet hole. When I was at the opening, I rammed inside her violently. So roughly I knocked the wind out of her chest. I heard her gasp for air. It didn't stop me. I had to make this right. I was determined to fuck all the doubts she had about me away. She was the only one for me, because we were one. She needed to know this.

I clawed at the smooth skin of her butt as I pushed her body down on my pole. Launching deeper inside her, I had the strength to hold her like this forever. I fucked her tight pussy hard as she wrapped her arms around my neck. She moaned louder the faster I pushed inside. She tried to stay on my slippery hard member.

Unwarranted threats of leaving me would never be tolerated. Even if she didn't know all my secrets, she knew my number one secret. I would never harm her, but I would never let her go. I would do anything to keep her with me, beside me and near me. She was my last love, my only love, my eternal love. And that meant fucking forever.

I was drowning inside her. I couldn't hold it any longer. The vice grip she had on my

cock was driving me crazy and after three more thrusts, I exploded inside her once again, knocking the wind out of her lungs. Her face fell on my shoulder as her orgasm vacuumed me in and contracted around me. I was sucked deeper inside of her warmth.

I regained my composure and took a few seconds to kiss her collarbone, her neck, her jaw, and then her plump lips.

It was never my intention to make her upset. I only wanted her to be happy, to feel loved, to feel protected. I only wanted her to feel as good as she felt right now.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHANEL

Instead of going back to Minnesota, Morgan stayed at my apartment so we could hang out again next weekend. I would've preferred her staying at the loft, but she didn't want to be there in the daytime with Zand while I was at work. There was no danger now that Lonzo was dead, so I agreed.

Knowing my best friend was close by made me feel better. Being away from Minnesota, the place that reminded her of Craig, helped her. She didn't know what I'd been through, but her presence in my new city was something I needed.

I couldn't erase my past, and I knew this day would come. My old drama followed me everywhere. I had two visitors at my job on Tuesday afternoon. I wished they would've caught me outside the packed pediatrician's office. Not my luck. They came barging in right when the waiting room area was full of sick kids and nosy parents. All my coworkers were also there with eyes wide and ears open.

Of course I was embarrassed. Of course, I looked like a common criminal. My

coworkers weren't privy to my life outside of work. They didn't know anything about all the drama I had in Minnesota and how I fled for my own sanity and protection. I came to Chicago for a clean start and all my damn problems jumped on a damn freight train and followed me here.

I made an appointment to see my visitors after I got off of work. I didn't want my business all over the office. Immediately, I called Zand because I knew I would need him to prep me on my story and be with me for moral support.

Instead of Josh picking me up from work, Zand was waiting for me outside in his old Chevy. Seeing him gave me a sense of comfort, but I knew it would be short-lived. I had been given an address to meet the detectives that were on Lonzo's case. It took them a while to reach out, but I assumed they knew he was no longer in Minnesota. Whatever ankle monitor or tracking device they had on him may have given it away. Or maybe they were watching him or something. I hoped that wasn't the case. If they were watching him, they knew he disappeared here in Chicago. I prayed they didn't know much of anything.

We drove to 26th and California on the west side of Chicago. Zand knew actually where it was located, and he didn't need to use navigation. We arrived at the 14th district and entered the building. I was led into a conference room by a female officer. She didn't say anything to me. Her job was apparently to follow me down a long hallway that led into an old, bland interrogation room that was painted a neutral color.

My nerves were all over the place. I didn't want to sit in a conference room at the police station. Conference sounded better than interrogation room. What the Minnesota police were doing in Chicago was the mystery. I probably could come up with many reasons, but Zand told me to be cool. He told me to not let my imagination run away with me. He said to let them do most of the talking. This wasn't the easiest thing to do, given the extreme circumstances.

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Zand told me to not volunteer any information to the police. It was good advice, but I had to make sure I didn't put my foot in my mouth or start rambling on and on.

I recognized the detectives from Minnesota, the same ones that were at my job earlier in the day. These were the guys handling the case from day one. They were the ones I had the contact with throughout this long arduous process. The one detective Crowley was the guy that was the most passionate about locking Lonzo up forever. He was the one I preferred, even though I didn't want to be in this situation at all.

"Please Ms. Taylor, take a seat." I sat in the cold metal chair across the table from Detective Crowley and Jamison.

"We've been trying to track you down. You are a hard lady to locate."

"Oh, I haven't been to my apartment. I moved in with my boyfriend."

"You didn't feel the need to relay the information to us?" Jamison barked.

"I didn't know I was supposed to." I played dumb.

"Your boyfriend?" Crowley asked.

"Yeah."

"The stiff guy sitting outside?" He asked.

"Yeah." I was using one-word answers. So far, I was doing great.

“You should inform us when you change locations.” Detective Jamison scolded me.

“I didn’t really think about it. I’m staying with him, at his place, but most of my things are back at the apartment. The move wasn’t planned or anything.”

“We’re going to need his address.” Jamison slid a pen and a notepad across the table toward me.

“Okay.” I took the cheap pen. I had to think about the numbers of the address for a few seconds. It came to me, then I scribbled Zand’s loft address on it.

“Does this new boyfriend know anything about your case?” Crowley glared across the table at me as he retrieved the note pad.

“No, I didn’t tell him anything.”

“What’s this boyfriend’s name?”

“Oh. Zand.”

Crowley raised an authoritative eyebrow at me. “Zand, what?”

“Alexander Valentine.” Now I was bringing Zand into my mess.

Crowley jotted Zand’s first and last name down on the notepad. “Huh? That’s his real name?” Crowley asked.

“Yeah.” Did he think I was lying? Well, I was lying about some things that were necessary.

“After what happened last time, do you think it’s wise to date so soon?”

“Ah.” Was it too soon? Crowley was judging me. I didn’t like his tone. Holding my tongue was starting to get more and more difficult. “I didn’t know there was a time limit on how long I could be single.” I smarted. Cause what they not gonna do is make me feel a way about moving on. Cops are always doing too much. They needed to stay focused on the murderer they let escape.

Jamison shot Crowley an odd look before he spoke. “Well, did you at least do a background check on this Alexander guy? You can do that online.”

“No, I didn’t.” I admitted.

“We have bad news.” Jamison tapped his index finger twice on the table.

“Bad news?”

“Alonzo Lopez is no longer in custody.”

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“What?” I gasped and pretended to be upset. I clearly already knew that. They were a little late telling me this.

Jamison pressed his lips together and raised his brows until his forehead lines deeply creased. “Mr. Lopez is missing?”

“Missing?” My jaw dropped open in surprise. I tried to appear as shocked as possible without overdoing it. I wasn’t going to win an Oscar, but maybe I was a contender for a Golden Globe.

“Yes. He’s somewhere on the run. The bastard slipped away from us. He somehow escaped his ankle monitor and put it on a relative that resembled him. We had some undercover officers staking out his house, but he managed to evade us.”

“You don’t know where he is?” I asked in my scared voice. I tried to make myself look upset.

“We don’t, but we have a few leads. Have you had any contact with him? Has he reached out to you?”

“No, I haven’t heard from him. I thought he was back in Bloomington on house arrest because that’s what you told me the last time we talked.”

“Anything strange happening, like blocked numbers calling you, strange mail or anything odd or abnormal happening lately?”

“No, everything has been quiet.”

“We need to warn you that there is footage of a man that resembles Alonzo driving through a tollbooth into Wisconsin and then that same man in a vehicle coming into Illinois.”

“When?”

“Well, the footage is two weeks old. He, or the person we believe to be Lopez, was headed toward Chicago. You could be in danger. If he was coming here for you, it seems he hasn’t found you.”

“I’ve been away from my apartment. I’ve been staying at my boyfriend’s place.” I reiterated.

“We believe Lopez could be in the area. If you can stay away from your apartment for a few days, that would be great.”

“I will.”

“Have you had any contact with Alonzo Lopez?”

“No, none.” I already told them that. They were trying to trip me up, and I peeped it.

“Has there been anything suspicious that has happened in the last few days?”

“No, everything is normal.”

“We don’t want to scare you, but you may have to go into protective services. He might come after you.”

“Why would he? I don’t think so.”

“Why do you think that?” Jamison asked.

“Because it would be stupid to come after me. Lonzo isn’t stupid.” I said isn’t, instead of wasn’t. I was good at this. “He has to know that you guys are either watching me or protecting me in some way.”

“But you didn’t have a protection detail.”

“I didn’t before. He doesn’t know that. But now that you know he’s on the loose, I’m sure he thinks you’ll be watching me in order to find him.”

“I’m sure he thinks that, but we can’t leave you unprotected.” Crowley added.

“I understand, but if you send someone here, that will be more people that know my whereabouts. I don’t know how many people know that I’m in Chicago.”

“It’s just us. Me and Crowley.” Jamison said.

“I’m not trying to be difficult, but I would like for it to stay that way. I trust you guys. I don’t want any other people to know my whereabouts.”

“Listen Chanel, we didn’t know he was gone. He has the upper hand. He could be anywhere.”

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“He’s Mexican. He’s probably hiding in Mexico.”

“Why would you think that?”

Why would I think? Was he serious? Because he’s a Mexican drug lord. “I know he has family there. He mentioned his abuelato me before.”

“Yes, he has family in Mexico. But there’s no evidence he crossed the border. Without you, there is no case.”

“Without me? I’m here. Without Lonzo there is no case.” I corrected them.

“So you’re not worried he’s coming after you?”

“Ah, no, that’s not what I’m saying. I’m reasonably worried, but I don’t think he’s going to find me. I live with my boyfriend. My name isn’t on his property. I don’t think he will find me in the vast sea of millions of Chicagoans. I pay for almost everything in cash like you guys told me to.”

“We’re happy to hear that you are taking every precaution. But you have to understand whom we’re dealing with. Alonzo Lopez is very dangerous.” Crowley warned.

“I know he is. I know that better than anyone. I’ll be extra careful.”

“So, you don’t want the protection detail.” Jamison huffed.

“No, I don’t want more people to know my whereabouts. I googled Chanel Taylor and found seven women with the name spelled exactly the way I spell it in Illinois. I didn’t show up in the search. I did like you said. I deleted all my social media accounts.” Even my LinkedIn profile.

“That was the best thing to do until he is back in custody.”

“I’m staying hidden. I really believe Lonzo left the country. It would be easier than coming after me.” I was talking too much. I wasn’t a cop, and I was trying to feed them this false narrative. I needed to shut the hell up before I said too much. Or worse, said something that would incriminate me and Zand.

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe he left the country. We have a warrant to trace some of his relatives’ phones and maybe he’ll try to contact one of them.”

“I hope so. I would sleep better if he was in custody.”

Jamison looked at me straight on. “Chanel, you have to be careful. Remember, there is footage of someone that looks like Alonzo passing a toll booth into this state.”

“I will. If anything suspicious happens, I will call you guys right away.”

“We’re going back to Minnesota soon. If you feel you’re in danger, call the local authorities.”

“I will.”

“Well, it’s good to see that you’re safe. We will give you an update as soon as we have more info on his whereabouts.”

“Thank you so much.” I just wanted this to be over.

“Do you have any questions for us?”

“No, I think I’m good. I’m still a little shocked that he escaped or disappeared or whatever.”

“We are going to do everything we can to find him.” Crowley ensured me.

I didn’t know what to say. “Until then, I’m going to be careful.”

“Okay, Ms. Taylor, that concludes our interview.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHANEL

As we stepped out of the police station, the chill of the night air enveloped me like a shroud. I pulled my coat tighter around myself, feeling the weight of the day’s events pressing down on me. Lonzo was dead, and I had just endured an incredibly tense interrogation with the detectives. My mind raced with questions, fears, and a desperate need to talk to Morgan. I didn’t know what I wanted to say to her, but I had to come clean about some things going on in my life.

“Zand,” I said as we climbed into his black 1967 Chevy Impala. “I need to go see Morgan. I just, I need to talk to her.”

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“Of course,” Zand replied, his amber eyes filled with concern. He started the car, and the rumble of the engine seemed to echo how I was feeling. “Is she at your apartment?”

“Yeah, she’s still there. She’s working remote but I think she should be done for the day. It’s late. I think she’s off the clock.”

Zand looked at the dashboard clock. “It’s a little after seven.”

I leaned back in the seat, trying to steady my racing heart. The car pulled away from the curb, leaving the police station behind in the distance.

Zand’s presence was comforting. He offered me a sense of safety that I desperately needed right now.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Zand asked gently, glancing over at me.

“I’m okay, but I think talking to Morgan will make me feel better.” I admitted, twirling a strand of my hair nervously.

“I understand.”

“She’s always been there for me, even when things were terrible.”

“Friendship is a powerful thing,” Zand observed, his hands gripping the steering wheel tightly as we navigated the streets of Chicago.

“What about the bond you share when you make someone a vampire?” I asked, still curious about how this vampire stuff worked.

“It’s similar. It just depends on the person.”

“I’m shocked you made Donté a vampire. Why him?”

“When I went to the hospital to see you, my emotions were high. I let my feelings take over. I knew he hadn’t been dead for long. I just wanted to save his life.”

“But he can’t go back to his old life. He can’t see his family.”

“Yes, but he has a new family now. I wanted to give him a second chance at life.”

My thoughts drifted to the triple murder I witnessed and the sound of Lonzo’s gun firing. This had to be what PTSD felt like. Even with Lonzo dead, I couldn’t shake that initial feeling of panic.

“Coming to Chicago was a second chance for me.” I explained. “I just wanted to get my life back. Now that he’s gone, I’m hoping things can go back to normal, whatever that means now.”

“Normal is relative.” Zand replied. “The only thing that matters is that he’s dead. Things will go back to normal in due time.”

As we approached the apartment complex, I took a deep breath. Gathering my courage, I tried to steady my breathing.

“Thank you for bringing me here.” I whispered as we pulled into the parking lot. “For everything, really.”

“I would do anything for you.”

I believed him. He killed someone for me. That was next level.

As we went into the vacant parking spot, I couldn't help but feel a wave of nostalgia wash over me. This was the place where I met Zand. This was the place we exchanged our secret notes. To me, Zand would always be my dear Mr. Vampire.

“Let's go to my place first. I want to pick up a few things and then I'll walk you upstairs.” Zand offered.

“Okay.”

We both stepped out of the car and made our way across the parking lot, walking hand in hand. Zand opened the door for me, and we took the elevator down.

We entered his basement apartment. He went right into the kitchen and removed two small bottles of wine. After a millisecond of thought, I believed they were bottles of blood. I didn't want to ask. It seemed rude.

Zand lifted one of the bottles and looked at it closely. “Huh, I thought this was full. I don't remember drinking from it. I'm going to get my leather jacket from the bedroom. Wait, do you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

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Whispering, he said, “I think someone’s here. Fuck! I forgot about him. Natasha must have given him a key.”

“Who?” I whispered back.

Zand shook his head as he crept toward the bedroom. “My brother.”

“Your vampire brother?” I asked.

“Yes, Harlen. He must have a human here. I warned him. I hear human breathing.”

Even while holding my breath, I didn’t hear anything, but I followed a few steps behind him. Zand’s temper was turning up.

As we turned the corner to the doorway of the bedroom. My eyes widened at the sight before us. Harlen, his brother, was sprawled across his bed, tangled up in the black silk sheets with my best friend Morgan nestled against his chest.

The floor held a messy mix of clothing sprawled about, making it clear what had transpired between them. My mouth hung open, and I had to think to close it.

“Damn it, Harlen!” Zand yelled out, a bit too loud for my human ears.

I stood there, too confused to do anything until I could find my voice. It came quicker than I thought it would.

“Zand?” My voice drifted from the doorway.

Zand's bark rattled the unlikely pair. A disheveled Morgan and a groggy Harlen were sitting up in bed, staring at us.

"Harlen," Zand called out sharply, his voice just loud enough to wake the dead. "What the fuck? What's going on?"

"You told me I could stay here." Harlen mumbled groggily.

"Coco." Morgan spoke up. "I know this looks bad, but I can explain."

Morgan really didn't know what she was getting herself into when it came to Harlen. I didn't even know him. Was he safe? I just knew he was a vampire. Was he the kind of vamp that killed people? I really didn't know. I knew his character was questionable.

"Look," Harlen said. "We're all adults."

"You're an adult. You're a fucking moron." Zand didn't have any problem expressing himself.

"What did you do to her?" I asked, piggy backing off of Zand's attack.

Harlen looked puzzled, but ignored me. "Calm down, brother. I had consen?—"

"Bullshit!" I don't know why I said that. Morgan wasn't crying and screaming.

"Chanel, please, let me handle this," Zand interrupted Harlen's response to me before he could get a word out. Zand motioned toward the door. "Take Morgan upstairs. I need to talk to Harlen."

"Come on, Morgan," I said as I started picking my friends' belongings off the floor and out of the chair. I slung her purse over my shoulder and didn't watch as she

wrapped herself in the heavy duvet.

After a second or two, I glared at her and told her to hurry her ass up with my eyes. I roughly guided my friend away from the tense situation. I couldn't let her see two vampires fighting. What did that even look like? I wanted to get her as far away from the brothers as possible.

As soon as we were outside the apartment and in the hallway of the complex, I rolled my eyes at my friend. I prayed no one would run into us. It would be my luck if Miss Hampton in apartment 1B was going for a walk and bumped into us. I couldn't explain this walk of shame if my life depended on it.

I climbed the steps, with Morgan trailing behind me. We made it to my apartment door without incident. Fishing my keys out of my purse, I fumbled with them for a second before unlocking the door. I sighed when I was able to get us both inside the apartment without any of the tenants seeing or hearing anything scandalous.

"Morgan, what are you doing with him? Yuck!"

"Ah fucking." She spoke to me like I was slow.

I squinted my eyes at her. "Seriously? Why? What are you doing?"

"Coco, I know it looks bad." Morgan walked into my bedroom and sat down on the edge of the bed.

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I followed her into the bedroom. “It looks like you fucked some random stranger.”

“Well, yes, that is technically what happened, but?—”

“But what?”

“I was just lonely. So, it’s whatever. It’s just dick.” She shrugged.

“You could’ve just stayed at the loft with me and Zand.”

“Third wheel? I’m not that kind of lonely.”

“What does that even mean?”

“I’m not going to be hanging with you and your man twenty-four seven.”

“What are you even talking about?”

“It’s not an excuse, but I miss Craig, and Harlen was coming on to me. I just wanted to forget everything bad for just a little while. I’m tired of being sad and depressed.”

“You’re depressed?” This was news to me.

She shrugged. “I know it’s too soon to be laid up with some man, but I’m tired of crying. I’m tired of being down bad.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were feeling like this?”

“Because you have your own problems. Lonzo isn’t in jail, and he could be anywhere. Criminals know how to get out of ankle monitors.” That was a good guess and exactly what happened. “They can do anything if they put their criminal minds to it. Craig’s car accident didn’t seem like a car accident. I just don’t know. What if Lonzo comes after you? What if I was the one that led him here to Chicago?”

“Wait. Lonzo is not your fault. He’s not coming after me.”

“How do you know that?” Morgan was really concerned.

“I know. I went to talk to the detectives today.”

“You went back to Minnesota?”

“No, they came here.”

“Why?”

“Because Lonzo had got out of his ankle monitor and disappeared. They have footage of him at a tollbooth in Wisconsin and another tollbooth close to the Illinois border. They came here to warn me.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this?”

“I just found out today when I talked to the detectives.”

“I knew he wouldn’t stay put when he bonded out. He’s not going back to prison.” She added.

“They came to Chicago to tell me to be careful because he’s out here somewhere?”

“Did they give you protection?”

“I asked them not to.”

“Why?”

“I don’t need it.”

“Bullshit. You got a whole psycho coming after you.”

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“He’s not coming after me.” I tried to sound convincing.

“You don’t know that.” She pressed.

“Yes.” I stared into her sad gray eyes. “Morgan, I know he’s not coming after me or anyone.”

“Why?” She asked.

“Because I know he’s not coming!” My voice raised an octave.

“How do you know?” Morgan quietly examined me. “He’s dead.” She said it and she didn’t ask it. I couldn’t say the words out loud. I just shrugged. “Fuck! And you wasn’t going to tell me anything.”

“There’s nothing to tell. I don’t have to worry about him, and you don’t either.”

“It’s over.” Morgan breathed in a sigh of relief.

“You shouldn’t be with Harlen.” I quickly changed the subject.

“Why not? It’s just sex.”

“I just met him myself and Zand doesn’t have good things to say about him.”

“Well, it’s his brother, so I wouldn’t expect that.”

“No, for real. Harlen is dangerous.”

“What does that mean?” Morgan frowned and wiped her eyes.

“I can’t explain it.”

“Does he have a criminal record or something?”

“I don’t know.”

“So, what are you talking about? Like, give me some real information chick, cause you sound crazy.”

“I don’t know him. I’m just going off what Zand told me.”

“Okay, but what did Zand tell you?”

This was hard to put into words. I had to be delicate. Shouting Harlen is a vampire wasn’t an option. “I don’t know much about Harlen, but I know there were some issues Zand had with him over a woman.”

“Girl, what the fuck does that have to do with me?”

“Nothing. I guess I just don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I’m grown.” She countered.

“I can’t tell you what to do. I just want to warn you.”

“Warn me about what? You haven’t told me anything.”

“Well, girl, I know that. I just want you to be careful.”

“I will. I had sex with the guy one time. We’re not getting married.”

“Okay, just be careful.” I cautioned.

“I will. I need to take a shower. I smell like Ba-dah-ussy.”

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I hadn't heard that word in ages. But I had to agree. She did smell like balls, dick, and pussy. "Please, shower."

From what I could see, there weren't any bite marks on my friend. I hoped Zand checked his brother because I know how to kill a vampire.

CHAPTER NINE

ZAND

I was so disgusted with the low life I once called my brother. As soon as I gave him a chance, he went and did this. I stood at the foot of the bed and tried to think about not beating him to death. He was a vampire, so that wasn't an option, but a vampire could dream.

"Zander, I—" Harlen spoke, something I was wholly against.

"Save it!" I growled, my anger momentarily overshadowing my concern for Morgan. "I will deal with you later. Right now, I need to focus on keeping everyone safe."

As I turned to leave the room, I couldn't help but wonder how much more chaos I could accept in my vampire family. My temper got the best of me, and I turned on my heels and walked over to the bed.

I stood over Harlen. The image of him entwined in Morgan's arms, the woman who meant so much to Chanel, was burned into his mind. I clenched my fists, struggling to contain the fury surging through me. Morgan had been through enough, and now my

fiendish brother had to add to her despair.

“Harlen,” I snarled. “Explain yourself.”

Harlen blinked, groggy and disoriented, before his eyes settled on my enraged expression.

“I thought you were going to deal with me later?” Harlen scrambled to sit up completely; the sheet sliding off his bare chest. “Brother, I, it wasn’t what it looked like.”

“Really?” I sneered. My voice was laden with sarcasm. “Because it looked like you were in my bed with Morgan, completely disregarding she’s a human.”

“Who cares? Humans are great, sometimes. Your girlfriend is a human. Look, I didn’t know she was off limits.” Harlen stammered, rubbing his temples as if to will away the grogginess. “I met her at the club, and we just connected.”

“Connected.” I couldn’t believe this bullshit. I had enough to worry about.

“I swear I didn’t mean for any of this to happen. She was willing. I mean, she wanted it.”

I took a deep breath. “Get the fuck out of my bed.”

“You told me I could stay here.”

“Get up.” I ordered.

Harlen stood, exposing himself to me. I stormed out of the bedroom and back into the kitchen, where I opened the bottle of blood I left there minutes ago. I opened the

cabinet and grabbed a clean, empty glass and poured the blood into my glass and drank it down. This spectacle was exactly why I left L.A. The vampires of my past were living in a Greek tragedy. While I was here, living in a contemporary romance.

After a few minutes, Harlen emerged wearing a wrinkled black t-shirt and black jeans.

“How do you like my haircut?” He joked, rubbing his buzz cut.

I was in no mood for his bullshit. “Fuck you.”

“Zand, I’m sorry. I didn’t think she was some sacred person to you.”

“If you ever put Morgan or anyone else I care about in harm’s way again, you’ll answer to me,” I threatened. My voice was low and dangerous.

“Harm’s way. What are you talking about? I fucked a girl I met at your club.”

“You don’t know everything about her.”

“Well, fill me in. If I had some information, then I would know whom I could fuck and whom I couldn’t fuck.”

“I don’t trust you with anything. At all.”

“I shared with you that Teresa is in town.”

“I knew that already, genius.”

“Well, she’s up to something, and I know exactly where she is.”

“And why do you have this information? Are you conspiring with her?”

“Of course not. I told you, after you left, she’s been a menace. Gillian and I have tried to steer clear of her. I don’t trust her.”

“That makes to of us.”

“Give me a chance to fix this,” Harlen said, his voice reeking of desperation.
“Please.”

I sighed, knowing that despite everything, I still loved my brother and wanted to believe in him. But trust was something that had to be earned, and right now, it was hanging by a thread.

“Look, stay away from Morgan.”

“Why? I like her.” His pitch rose a note.

“What? No, you don’t.”

“I do. She’s funny. She’s beautiful. She smells good. I like her.”

“Morgan is Chanel’s best friend. Morgan’s boyfriend died recently. She’s not

thinking straight.”

“I know. She told me.”

I didn’t expect that and didn’t know what to say. “She’s human.”

“We were once human. We’re not that different from them. We’re not aliens from another planet. Why is it okay for you to have a human and I can’t have one?”

“Because I said so.”

“Wait, what’s going on here?” He probed.

I could practically see the wheels turning in his head.

“Zand, does Chanel know you’re a vampire? Fuck! Does she know that I’m a vampire? Oh, shit!”

My face apparently gave away my answer.

“Zander, why, why, why would you tell a human our most precious secret?” Now he was scolding me. The nerve.

“She’s not just a human, and I didn’t have a choice.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means it’s none of your business.”

“It’s vampire business and I’m a vampire.”

“Look, there was a possible threat.”

“Teresa?”

“No, someone else.”

“Brother, please stop talking in riddles. Tell me what’s going on?”

I poured myself another blood drink in my empty glass and guzzled it down. “I want to make sure Morgan isn’t in danger.”

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“Why would she be?”

“It’s a long story.”

“We’re immortal. I have all the time in the world to listen to a story.”

“Harlen.” I pleaded.

“What? I can help. I’m here right now, and you can’t be everywhere at once.”

“I don’t need your help. I have my people.”

There was too much backstory. I hadn’t even told Chanel that while I was waiting for her at the police station; I pulled up camera footage from the apartments. After scanning over the last few days, I came across the video of Marisol snooping around the apartment complex. In this footage, her face wasn’t covered. She was alone, and she was clearly looking for her brother or Chanel. It was obvious Marisol was going to be a problem. I immediately sent the footage to Natasha and asked her to look up video from the outside and inside of the club for this Marisol. Before The Castle opens tonight, I scheduled a security meeting. I needed my staff to be on the lookout for Marisol Lopez.

When Chanel suggested coming back here, I was good with it because I didn’t feel it was safe for Morgan to stay here alone. I wasn’t in the habit of killing humans, but the thought of removing Marisol from this earth did flash before me. If she was going to be in town looking for her brother, that would be a problem. I may not have a choice. News concerning Lonzo had to be kept from developing in this city. I needed

law enforcement to believe he fled to Mexico.

I didn't want to scare Chanel with this Marisol news. So, I kept it to myself. I was just going to come up with a way to get Morgan out of her apartment.

"Zand, if there's something going on, you need to tell me."

I weighed my options and decided to tell Harlen a fraction of the details. "My girlfriend is being stalked by her ex-boyfriend and his sister."

"Stalked by humans?" He chuckled.

"Yes."

"Why? Can't you just kill them?"

"I'm not going to do that?"

"Why not?"

"It's a police matter."

"You think so?" He scowled.

"Yes, I do. But these people are from Chanel's past and they have been looking for her."

"And?"

"They want to harm her. This is why she's been staying at my other place."

“The Castle.”

“No.”

“How many places to you have in Chicago?”

I ignored his irrelevant question. “These people have been here before, and Morgan is Chanel’s friend. They could do something to her to get at Chanel.”

“So what? Do you want me to watch over Morgan?” He asked as he sat in the chair by the kitchen island.

“I don’t know. I’m trying to handle this quietly.”

I took a deep breath, trying to gather my thoughts. “Chanel’s safety is my top priority right now.”

Harlen nodded thoughtfully, his brow furrowed in concern. “I get it, brother. But you know you can count on me if you need help.”

I appreciated his offer of support, but I knew I had to approach this delicate situation carefully. “I might need to ask for your help soon, but for now, I need to figure out the best way to handle this without causing more trouble.”

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Harlen leaned back, crossing his arms. “Okay, but just remember that I’ve got your back, no matter what.”

Maybe Harlen had a good idea. I was supposed to give him a job to prove his usefulness. “I think keeping an eye on Morgan might be a good idea for now. If those people are really after Chanel, they might try to use Morgan to get to her.”

He scratched his chin thoughtfully. “Yeah, that makes sense. Consider it done. Who the hell are these people? I need details.”

“Can I trust you with this information?”

“Of course you can. I like Morgan, and I haven’t fancied a human in a very long time. I want her and her friend safe.”

“There is a woman named Marisol Lopez from Minnesota. She is looking for her brother, Alonzo. He is the ex-boyfriend of my Chanel.”

“Why would this Marisol think he’s here?” Harlen asked.

“He was here and now he’s gone for good.”

“Oh.” Harlen knew gone for good meant dead and gone.

I took a moment to gather my thoughts, trying to decide how much more to reveal to Harlen.

“Marisol believes Chanel knows where Alonzo is because he came to Chicago a few weeks ago looking for Chanel. I have proof she’s been here more than once.”

“Here? At the apartment?” He asked.

“Yes. She seems determined to find her brother at any cost.”

Harlen’s expression hardened, his eyes narrowed. “So, this Marisol woman is willing to go to extremes just to track down her brother?”

“Yes, and I’m afraid she might involve others in her search, putting Chanel and those around her in danger.”

Harlen rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “And you think Morgan might be one of those people who could be used against Chanel?”

“It’s a possibility I can’t ignore,” I replied solemnly. “These people are bad people.”

“Who could be badder than a vampire?” Harlen snickered.

“They don’t know what we are and they can never know. I have built a life here and I want to stay here and continue to be a citizen.”

“Why? The weather here sucks.”

“The weather doesn’t matter. We’re dead. We don’t feel the cold.”

“True, but don’t you miss the burning sun and massive palm trees?”

“No, I don’t miss it at all. If you do, you can return to California.” I taunted.

“I can’t leave you now.” Harlen let out a low hoot. “Sounds like you’ve got yourself mixed up in some serious trouble.”

“I wouldn’t call it trouble. I would deem it a pesky inconvenience.”

“To-may-toe, to-ma-toe.”

“I never wanted Chanel to be pulled back into this dangerous world from her past,” I admitted, feeling a weight of responsibility pressing down on me.

“Is there anything else I should know about these people?” Harlen asked, his tone indicating his readiness to assist in any way he could.

I hesitated, debating whether to disclose even more information. Finally, I decided it was necessary for Harlen to have the full picture. “Marisol and Alonzo have ties to a criminal organization that Chanel broke free from. She was a witness to multiple murders, and she fled Minnesota to get away from these people. She is free of Alonzo, but he has dangerous family members.”

“Humans can’t hurt us.”

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“True, but they can hurt our humans.”

“You’re right.” Harlen’s eyes widened in realization.

“Chanel’s safety is at stake here, and I need all the help I can get.”

Harlen nodded. “I’ll do whatever it takes to keep her safe, Zand. Just tell me what you need me to do.”

“I need you to worry about Morgan, and I can worry about Chanel. Can you handle that?”

“Yes.”

“That means you can’t bite Morgan or drink her blood.”

“Why would you say that? I wasn’t planning on drinking her blood.”

I could tell Harlen was lying. “Seriously, these people have guns.”

“We’ve dealt with guns before.”

That much was true. Harlen could handle himself. I just hoped he had enough humanity left in him to care about the lives of the humans I let him be around. It would be a great help to me if he could look after Morgan. It would be odd for me to interfere with whatever they were doing together. Vampires weren’t savages. We all had the ability to control ourselves. I was going to have to discuss this with Chanel. If

she was onboard with Harlen protecting Morgan, then this would work.

CHAPTER TEN

ZAND

As I stepped out of my Impala, I slammed my car door shut and trekked across the parking lot to the back-alley entrance of The Castle. Since the club took up the entire corner and an entire block, some considered the back-alley as the side of the building.

This was a busy night at my club. My eyes scanned the area, searching for any sign of trouble. My club had an hour before we were officially open. Nick was standing guard at the back door. He greeted me with a head nod as I entered.

Making my way to the private elevator to the upstairs office, that was more of a conference room. I couldn't shake off the feeling that something was amiss.

"Alright, everyone," I called out, gathering my security staff in the dimly lit room. "I needed to have an urgent meeting. I'm sure you're wondering why."

A tense atmosphere settled over the room like a heavy fog. Their faces were etched with concern as they took their seats around the large wooden table. I felt the weight of responsibility settle on my shoulders. I was the boss, and without me, things didn't happen.

"Listen up," I began, my voice low and steady. "Our vigilance is more important than ever. There's a potential threat we need to be aware of. Her name is Marisol Lopez."

I turned to face my staff; their eyes locked on me with an intensity that reflected the gravity of the situation. The word threat would do that for any vampire. "To give you all some context," I began, my voice steady but impassioned, "For those of you that

don't know. Marisol Lopez is the sister of Alonzo Lopez, a dangerous man who has caused me trouble in the past. He is no longer a threat." My eyes flickered around the room, gauging their reactions. They all knew what that meant.

My security staff exchanged intense glances. Some of them knew about Alonzo. They either helped clean up the mess in the apartment or wiped the security footage that I had him in it. Memories of her brother Alonzo and the chaos he'd caused was still fresh in my mind, and the thought of another Lopez causing trouble was unsettling, to say the least.

"Marisol Lopez has already been snooping around one of my apartment buildings," I continued, my gaze sweeping over each person in the room. "We cannot afford to let our guard down. Not even for a moment. We will send photos of this woman to your cell phones. Be on the lookout. She will probably be armed."

They all nodded. I trusted them to do what was necessary to keep our patrons and staff safe. Chanel and Morgan weren't the only humans I had to worry about. I couldn't have any violence at my club. Trouble brought the law and an investigation.

Marco spoke up. "This woman, is she human?"

"Yes. If you spot her, I want her brought to me."

"Dead or alive?" Marco asked. He wasn't just a bartender. He was one of the first people I met when I arrived in Chicago.

"Alive would be preferable. Thank you all. Any acts of violence should be handled discreetly," I said. "Any questions?" I waited for a moment. "That is all."

As the meeting adjourned, I couldn't help but feel a deep sense of foreboding gnawing at the edges of my thoughts. Marisol's presence at my apartment had stirred

up a storm of dangerous emotions and memories. Her brother had made me turn into a monster. I didn't want that to happen again.

This time, I wasn't going to let the other Lopez sneak up on me. I was one step ahead of her. Marisol didn't know I was supernatural and that I would do whatever it took to protect those under my care.

Everyone but Natasha, my head of security, left the room. "Boss." She stepped forward then, her Chechen accent adding a hard edge to her words. "We have reason to believe she's already been scoping out the club." She glanced at me for confirmation, and I nodded, giving her the green light to proceed.

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With a few deft clicks on her iPad, Natasha brought up surveillance footage. I looked down at the screen and saw that date. It was from earlier this week. The grainy black-and-white image showed Marisol lurking outside our doors, her dark eyes scanning the area as if plotting her next move.

“Look at her,” Natasha said, disgust dripping from her words like venom. “She’s clearly up to something. I will be prepared for whatever she has planned.”

“Did you share this with the security team?”

“Not yet. I wanted to show it to you first.” She added.

“I don’t need this right now. Harlen seems to think Teresa is still in town and she will try to stir up trouble.”

“You have two women trying to cause you problems.”

“It sure seems that way.” We exchanged uneasy glances.

“Boss, there’s no need to worry. We cleaned up after the Alonzo situation and we’ll do the same with Marisol if need be. Teresa, on the other hand, may be more difficult to track down because she is a vampire. But I can send her picture out also.”

“We need to be prepared for anything. Harlen seems to think Teresa is up to something.”

“Do you trust your brother is telling you the truth?”

“I don’t know. But he seemed genuinely concerned.”

“Either way, we will be on the lookout.” Natasha was good at sounding confident.

“She might try to infiltrate the club. Marisol or Teresa.”

“I will never let that happen.” Natasha assured me. “Marisol is just a human, and Teresa was a human just a few years ago.”

“Less than ten years.” It was somewhere around seven or eight years.

“She could never best me or any of the guys. We are trained. She is not.”

As much as I hated to admit it, Natasha was right. My concerns were probably unwarranted. I just wanted to keep Chanel and Morgan safe. My need to protect after what happened to Morgan’s boyfriend was clouding my judgment. The thought of moving Morgan out of the apartment complex felt like an admission of defeat, a sign that we were letting Marisol dictate our actions.

“Natasha, I know I sound concerned,” I said finally, my voice heavy with the weight of my decision. “We need to ensure their safety. But they’ll stay close to me. That’s the best way to keep them safe.”

“Boss, you don’t have to worry. Nothing will happen to your humans,” she vowed like a good obedient soldier.

“We’ll face this threat together, as a family. That’s what we’ve always done, and that’s what we’ll continue to do.”

As my words filled the room, I could feel the resolve of my head of security strengthening. Natasha’s loyalty was unwavering, even in the face of danger. We

were bound by love, trust and respect, and nothing, not even Marisol Lopez, could tear us apart.

“Come to my office.”

I went down the hall to the office with Natasha close behind me. The image of Marisol lurking in the shadows outside the club haunted me. I paced back and forth in my office, rubbing the back of my neck in frustration.

“Boss,” Natasha said. “I understand your loyalty to Harlen, but we can’t ignore the risk he can pose to everyone here. We need to do something before it’s too late.”

I stopped pacing. “Like what?”

“We need to keep an eye on him. He can’t be in the inner circle until he proves his worth. I understand he is your brother. But the maggot isn’t my brother. I do not trust him. He shows up here at the same time as your ex.”

“I asked him about that, and he made it appear to be a coincidence.”

“Whatever. I still don’t trust him.”

“Natasha...” I began, feeling the conflict swirling inside me. It was a battle between my love for my brother and my responsibility to protect those who depended on me. “You’re right. Something needs to be done. What do you propose?”

“I can have someone watch him 24/7. And needs to report to me. If he wants to be part of the team.” She asked, raising an eyebrow.

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“Agreed. Harlen works for you and reports to you. He needs to go to you first to get to me.” I added.

“He can keep his little job of keeping Morgan safe, but I have plans to give him assignments to prove his loyalty.”

“I’m sure you do.” I replied. “Have someone tail him just to make sure he isn’t conspiring with my ex.”

“I already have that in place.” She smirked.

And this was why Natasha was my head of security. She always had my best interests at the forefront of her educated brain.

If my brother could pass whatever tests she had for him, I knew he could be trusted.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHANEL

My hands trembled as I paced the worn hardwood floors of my old apartment. The secrets I had carried for so long felt like a physical weight on my shoulders. I had to tell Morgan the truth about Lonzo, about what really happened to Craig. I waited long enough. Morgan already had her suspicions. She deserved to know, even if it meant reliving the pain and terror of that awful night.

I drew in a shaky breath, smoothing my dress with unsteady fingers. Get it together,

Chanel. You can do this. You have to do this. For Morgan. For yourself. I needed to finally be free of the lies and the guilt.

The click of the door lock startled me from my racing thoughts. I turned to see Morgan stride into the apartment, her black leather jacket hugging her curves, her sandy colored hair tumbling over her shoulders. She flashed me a confident grin, but I could see the uncertainty in her stormy gray eyes, the tension in her jaw. Something was bothering her.

“Hey girl,” Morgan greeted me, dropping her bag on the floor with a thud. “Sorry I’m a little late. You would not believe the traffic.”

“No worries,” I replied, forcing a smile. “I’m just glad you’re here.”

Morgan cocked her head, studying me intently. “You okay, Chanel? You’re acting strange.”

I wrapped my arms around myself. My body did a little shiver despite the warmth of the apartment. “Yeah, I’m fine. It’s just,” I trailed off.

Morgan took a step closer, concern etching her features. “What is it? Are you mad about me and Harlen? Yes, I was out with him. It’s not that deep.”

“No. It’s not that.”

“What’s up? You know you can tell me anything.”

I nodded. Morgan was more than just my best friend— she was my sister. If I couldn’t trust her, I couldn’t trust anyone.

“I know. And I will. But first,” I gestured to the couch. “Why don’t you sit down and

tell me what's on your mind? Why Harlen? I don't understand. He's not your type. This isn't like you." I don't know why, but I chickened out. I needed her to talk first.

Morgan hesitated. A glimmer of vulnerability crossed her face before she quickly masked it with a shrug. "It's nothing. I'm sorry I didn't tell you about Harlen."

She sank onto the couch, crossing her long legs. I settled beside her. Morgan had been through so much. Losing Craig couldn't be easy. I hated seeing her hide her pain, especially when I knew I was partly to blame.

"You can tell me no matter what?" I said softly.

Morgan was silent for a long moment, staring down at her French manicured nails.

"I'm not going crazy. Sure, I don't know what I'm doing with Harlen. With any of it. Being in Minnesota is too much. Everything there reminds me of Craig."

Her words hit me like a punch to the gut. Oh Morgan, if you only knew the secrets I've kept from you. The lies I've told.

Taking a deep breath, I removed my hand from her knee and placed it in my lap. It was time to reveal the truth, no matter how much it hurt. Morgan deserved that much. We both did.

"Morgan, there's something I need to tell you."

My heart raced as I gathered the courage to unburden myself. The weight of my secrets threatened to crush me. Morgan's hand tightened in mine, her gray eyes searching my face with a mixture of concern and apprehension.

"What is it, Chanel? You're scaring me." Her voice faltered.

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I swallowed hard, my throat suddenly dry. “It’s about Craig, and Lonzo.” The names felt like shards of glass on my tongue.

Morgan’s body stiffened. Her gaze hardened. “What about them?” Her tone was guarded and defensive.

I closed my eyes briefly, toughening myself for the impact of my words. “Lonzo, he’s the one who killed Craig. And I, I knew he did it. I’ve known for a while now.”

“What?”

The thick silence that followed was deafening, broken only by the sharp intake of Morgan’s breath. She stood abruptly, pacing my small living room like a caged animal.

I didn’t want to repeat it but— “Lonzo killed Craig.”

She stopped in her tracks and whirled around to face me. “What do you mean, you knew?” Her ashen eyes blazed with a mix of disbelief and betrayal. “How could you keep something like that from me?”

Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes as I rose to meet her, my hands outstretched in a plea for understanding. “I wanted to protect you, Morgan. I thought, I thought I was doing the right thing. I didn’t want to add to your grief.”

Morgan scoffed. “You didn’t even warn me. He could’ve tried to kill me next.” Her voice was raw with pain.

“When I finally knew for sure it was him, you were no longer in danger. I wanted to protect you from everything.”

“Protect me? By lying to me? By letting me think Craig’s death was just some random road rage car accident?”

I flinched at the accusation, knowing she was right. “I’m so sorry, Morgan. I never meant to hurt you. I was just, I was scared.”

Her expression softened slightly. Her anger was giving way to a profound sadness. “Scared of what, Chanel? Of me? Did you think I was going to fight you or something? You were afraid of me.”

“No, never of you.” I shook my head vehemently. “I was scared of losing you. Of losing our friendship. I was afraid of dragging you into a world you didn’t understand. A world I barely understand myself.”

Morgan sank back onto the couch, her shoulders slumping under the weight of my revelation. “What world, Chanel? What are you talking about?”

I sat beside her once more, our knees touching as I leaned in close. “The underworld, Morgan.”

“What? The world of drugs and cartels and shit. I already know about that. It’s the reason you left Minnesota. And now it’s the reason my boyfriend is dead.”

“It’s all my fault. I’m the one who dated that asshole.”

“You didn’t know Lonzo was a criminal. I met him twice, and I didn’t even know he was a criminal. He didn’t have a sign on his forehead. He looked like a regular guy.”

“I know, but all this shit is my fault. I didn’t want you to have to think about any of it ever again.”

“Well, I have to think about it. Lonzo is still out there somewhere.”

“Well, not exactly. Lonzo is dead.” I admitted. I stood and did some pacing of my own.

“How do you know he’s dead? He could be in Mexico. You told me those detectives questioned you because he escaped his ankle monitor and he’s out here on the loose. He’s missing, right?”

“He’s not missing. He’s dead.” I stated bluntly.

“How the fuck would you know that?” She pressed. “How do you know for sure?”

“I saw his dead body.”

Morgan stood and closed the gap between us. Her anger had fallen from her face and was now replaced with curiousness.

“Tell me everything.”

“Lonzo came to Minnesota and attacked me in this apartment. He held my hostage and tried to rape me. I really think he was planning on killing me.”

“He found you?”

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“Yeah, he was here, but Zand showed up at my apartment and took care of him.”

“Took care of him?”

“Yes.” The gruesome scene played over in my head in 4K. The images I pushed away were now back inside my brain in vivid colors.

“Did he shoot him?”

“No, but he killed him. He didn’t need a gun?”

“What? Did he stab him or something?” Morgan asked.

“No.” I thought about my words before I said them. “Morgan, I want to tell you everything.”

“Hell yeah, and you betta tell me everything. That muthafucka killed Craig. I’m your friend and I deserve the truth.”

“You do. I know you do.” I sighed and licked my lips. “There’s our world that we live in and there’s this criminal world that people like Lonzo live in.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“But there’s a third world, a secret world.”

“Look, you better not come at me talking about no illuminati bullshit.”

“No, the other world is supernatural. There are other people out here that are like magic. When I tell you this, you have to keep it a secret. You have to swear never to tell anyone what I’m telling you. Look at me. I’m not bullshitting you. This is a secret society that exists.”

“Coco, I swear I’m not going to say anything. Please tell me. I can see the fear in your eyes. Please, just tell me.”

“Here, in Chicago, there are vampires. A vampire killed Lonzo.”

Morgan’s eyes widened; a flicker of disbelief crossed her face before her features rested into a mask of curiosity. “Tell me everything, Chanel. No more secrets. No more lies. I need to know the truth.”

“Okay let’s sit.”

We both sat on the couch facing each other and this time I hoped we stayed seated. With a heavy heart, I was going to unravel the tangled web of my recent past. I prayed the strength of our friendship would be enough to see us through this convoluted dumpster-fire that was my life.

I took a deep breath, steeling myself for the painful memories I was about to revisit. “It all started when I met Lonzo. He was charming, mysterious, and he had this way of making me feel like I was the only person in the world who mattered. You know all of this already.”

Morgan leaned forward, listening intently. “Lonzo, he fooled all of us.”

I nodded, my throat tightening with emotion. “After I left, and he was arrested, I started living my life again. I knew I was going to have to come back and testify, but I felt safe in Chicago.”

“You seemed happy here.”

“I was. I started seeing Zand, and everything was going good until I was attacked in the parking lot. I never mentioned it to you because I didn’t want you to worry. Later, I found out it was Lonzo’s sister, Marisol. They jumped me and I couldn’t see any of their faces. I didn’t think it was Lonzo because he was still locked up and I’m practically in witness protection. I thought it was just random Chicago street violence and crime. Zand nursed me back to help and then I heard about what happened to Craig. I swear I thought it was just a car crash at first, but Zand didn’t think so. I later found out the detectives had lost Lonzo and were looking for him. Lonzo told me he killed Craig. He confirmed his sister jumped me in the parking lot. Lonzo wasn’t long gone, like we all thought. He broke into my apartment to kill me. I was the witness. Without me, he could get off for those murders. The state’s attorney had charges, but they were banking on a conviction for the triple murder charge that I was a witness to.”

“This is so fucked up. They didn’t protect you at all.”

“No, they didn’t. He was too dangerous to even get a bond. Lonzo broke into my place through the sliding balcony door in my bedroom. He beat me and tried to rape me. Zand knew something was up and he came into my apartment, and he took care of Lonzo.”

“He killed him?”

“Yes, Zand is not human. He’s a vampire. That’s a secret I’ve been holding from you.”

“What?” Morgan gasped. “You look serious.”

“Because I am. I’m not crazy. I’m not making something up to shock you.”

Morgan's eyes glistened. "I can't believe this. We wrote silly letters and slid them under his basement door."

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“We did. And all this time, Zand was a vampire. He was hiding it from me. He knew all along who I was.” I reached out and grasped her hand tightly in my own. “I know this shit sounds Kanye crazy. But I swear on the life of my dead mama, what I say is true. You are my best friend. I wanted you to know. I’m the only person who knows and I have nobody to talk to. You have to believe me.”

She squeezed my hand in return. “I’m here for you, Coco. No matter what.”

“But do you believe me?”

“Of course I do. You are literally the sane-ness person I know. Who the fuck would lie about something like that? Zand is nice and all, but he’s too mysterious and weird. And Harlen is his brother, but they don’t look anything alike. Plus, he’s just as mysterious and weird. Harlen isn’t scary. He’s just acts different. And both of y’all was freaking out because I was fucking Harlen like he was some kind of monster that was going to eat me or something. I’m not slow. I could tell something was going on.”

I felt a wave of relief wash over me, the weight of my secrets finally lifting from my shoulders. “Me and Zand were upset because Harlen is a vampire too. I don’t know him well and I didn’t want you around him. They drink blood just like in the movies. Some of them kill people. I just found this out recently, so I don’t know all of their rules. I just know Zand told Harlen not to bite you and he probably told him not to harm you. They are really strong. I don’t know much. I just know he threatened Harlen when it came to you.”

We sat in silence for a moment, the gravity of my revelation hanging heavy in the air

between us.

Then Morgan spoke. “Fuck a duck. This is a lot to take in. I believe you, but where’s the proof?”

I nodded, my mind already racing. “Ah, I say the fangs. I saw the superhuman strength. I’ve seen Zand drink blood.”

Morgan’s eyes widened. “Harlen? What about him? Does he do all those things?”

“They all do.”

“So, vampires are real?”

“Yep.”

“The nightclub, The Castle. I know some of those people in there are vampires.”

“Some are.” My heart was beating fast. I didn’t know if I was even allowed to share this with Morgan. “I know it’s a lot to take in. But you have to understand, Harlen is dangerous. He’s unpredictable, and he has a way of getting into trouble.”

“You don’t think I can handle myself?” Morgan’s tone was defensive, her jaw clenched as she rested her eyes on me.

“That’s not what I’m saying,” I reassured her, my voice gentle but firm. “I just want you to be careful. Harlen may seem charming, but he’s not to be trusted.”

Morgan was silent for a moment, her gaze distant as she processed my words. Finally, she spoke. “I just don’t want to lose anyone else, Chanel. I can’t go through that again.”

My heart broke at the pain in her voice, and I pulled her into a tight embrace. “You won’t lose me, Morgan. I promise. We’re in this together, no matter what. We have this secret that bonds us forever.”

As we held each other, the weight of our shared secrets glued us together like that chick that put Gorilla Glue in her weave. We were stuck with each other now. We were two women that knew about vampires, so we were locked in tight.

“Thank you, Chanel. For being honest with me.” She drew in a shaky breath, her loyalty unwavering despite the shock of the revelations. “I know it couldn’t have been easy to tell me what happened to Craig, or what Zand and Harlen are. But I’m glad you did.”

I nodded. “I should have told you sooner. I’m sorry I kept it from you for so long, but it was so hard for me to wrap my head around the things I had witnessed with my own eyes.”

Morgan shook her head. “No, I understand. But from now on, no more secrets.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “Child, you are the only person I can talk to. You don’t know it yet, but they are everywhere.”

“Seriously?”

“Girl, there are vampires all around us.”

“Damn, they must be just blending into society like the rest of us.”

“Yes, the bartender with the purple hair and tattoos at The Castle.” I tilted my head.

“Damn, he’s a vampire?”

“Yep.”

“What about that tall Charlize Theron looking chick that came and got us the first time we went to that club?”

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“Uh-huh, Layla, she’s one of them.”

“Damn, they got bloodsuckas every fuckin’ where. Oh shit! Is bloodsucka a racial slur like the N-word?”

“I don’t think so. I don’t think they care about stuff like that, but I will ask Zand.”

“It doesn’t really matter. They aren’t supposed to know that I know. I should only call people by their names, even if I know they’re vampires.”

“Facts.”

“What about Harlen?” Morgan’s expression grew serious as her thoughts turned to him.

“What about him?”

“Am I supposed to act like I don’t know what he is?”

“Ah, you can just stop talking to him. You ghost his ass.”

“I’m not going to do that. I like him.”

“What? Morgan, is you cool? I just told you he was a vampire, and he is not one of the good ones from what I’ve been told.”

“I like him. His dick is amazing, so I’m not going anywhere.”

“You can find more amazing dicks.” She really could. She was what the men called exotic. Morgan was bright and White presenting and could live her life White passing if she wanted to. She didn’t have to go looking for more dicks. The dicks would line up and down the street for her.

“I don’t care about his vampire status. He’s what I’m doing right now. I told you. He’s not scary. He comes when I call him. He does what I tell him to do.”

I could tell she meant that shit, so I wasn’t about to argue with her. “I know you’re drawn to him, but you need to be careful. Harlen is unpredictable, and his intentions aren’t always clear.” My voice was soft but firm. I only repeated what Zand told me. I assumed it was all true.

Morgan’s eyes flashed with defiance. “You think I can’t handle myself around him?”

“I don’t know. I just want you to be safe.”

“I’m not some naïve little girl, Coco. I know how to handle myself.”

With a vampire, girl please, I thought, but didn’t dare to say. “I mean, you grown.”

Chanel twirled a strand of her long, wavy hair. “You slept with Zand, and he didn’t hurt you, did he?”

“No, he didn’t.” I told her the truth, knowing it wasn’t going to matter either way.

I could tell the idea of Harlen being dangerous thrilled her biracial ass. It had to be Harlen’s vampire status that she loved because she wasn’t even the type to date White men. Craig was Black. The guy before Craig was Black. The real estate guy was Arab, and the old doctor guy was Nigerian African Black.

“I can’t just ignore what I feel for Harlen. There’s something between us, something I can’t explain. It was there before I knew he was a vampire.”

“I’m not asking you to ignore your feelings. I just want you to be aware of the risks and to be cautious. They can kill us easily. They can drink our blood and drain us to death.”

“But they can’t hypnotize us, right?” She asked.

“No, they can’t do that.” I clarified.

“Can they mind control you?”

“Ah, no. They can’t mind control you. They can basically kill you in many ways if they feel like it. Zand told me it goes against their normal rules. He said they want to just live amongst us, but in the shadows. He told me most of them just want to blend in with society without bringing any attention to themselves. He said they don’t have to kill humans to survive.”

Morgan blew out a breath of sheer relief. “Okay, well, that means what I’m feeling is real. Harlen didn’t glamour me like in True Blood or mind control me or anything. I had control of my mind and body, and I just wanted to be with him.”

Well, that was a way of looking at it. It was one hundred percent clear she was going to date, sleep with, and whatever else with Harlen, despite the danger.

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A serene silence settled between us. I guess I was going to date a vampire and so was my best friend. While warning her, I realized I should have been warning myself. I loved Zand more than any man ever, but his lifestyle was different.

Was he going to live forever while my ass grew old and gray? Was he going to eventually leave me for another woman? What if that woman was a vampire? I couldn't fight a vampire chick. Since I knew his secret, does that mean he would have to kill me if he wanted out? I couldn't believe I was even thinking these things. I was really feeling insecure. Honestly, it didn't matter. I loved my mister vampire, and he loved me. Now. Today. That's all that mattered, the love we shared in the moment. I could dream that the moment lasted forever.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ZAND

The glow of the laptop screen illuminated my furrowed brow as I pored over the latest surveillance footage of Marisol. The muffled thump of bass from the nightclub below pulsed through the floor, but my focus remained razor sharp. Chanel and Morgan were safe and sound at the loft. Tonight, I wasn't worried about them, but there were so many more days and nights in our future.

Harlen leaned over my shoulder. "So, what's the deal with this Marisol chick?"

I sighed, pausing the video. "She's a serious threat, Harlen. Connected, strategic, and ruthless. We can't underestimate her."

“Come on, bro. We can take her.” Harlen’s eyes gleamed with reckless enthusiasm. “I say we storm her hideout. Catch her by surprise and take her out.”

I shook my head, exasperated by his impulsive nature. “It’s not that simple. We need to be smart about this.”

As much as I appreciated his eagerness to help, Harlen’s lack of foresight worried me. Marisol was human, but not an enemy to be trifled with. One misstep could spell disaster for Chaneland Morgan. I could escort Chanel to and from work, but I couldn’t go inside the doctor’s office. I had no way to screen the staff or the patients that entered the office.

Harlen paced the room, his agitation palpable. “Alright, so what’s the plan, then? We can’t just sit around waiting for her to make a move.”

I turned to face him, my voice measured but firm. “We gather intelligence first. We need to spot her and follow her. We need to find out where she is staying, because I’m sure she’s not in Chicago alone. We strike when the time is right. When we’re sure we have all of them.”

Nodding, Harlen cracked his knuckles. “I’m in. Whatever it takes to protect our people.”

A flicker of pride warmed my chest at his determination, despite our complicated history. Our people. He’d only been sleeping with Morgan for a short time, and he had already grown attached to her. This wasn’t like him. In moments like these, I could see glimmers of the brother I once knew—loyal, passionate, and ready to fight for what mattered.

I turned back to the laptop, my resolve hardening. Marisol may be formidable with her ties to the cartel, but she had no idea what she was up against. Together, Natasha,

Harlen and I would ensure the safety of our world and our people, no matter the cost.

I leaned back in my chair, the weight of our situation heavy on my shoulders. “Marisol is no ordinary adversary, Harlen. She’s well-connected. Her ties to her brother’s criminal network ran deep. She is a part of a branch of the Cartenegra cartel in southern Mexico.”

Harlen’s brow creased as he absorbed my words. “If her brother Lonzo is out of the picture. How much power does she really have?”

I pulled up the latest intelligence reports on my laptop. I had Natasha hack the DEA and Homeland security files on the Lopez family and their affiliates. “Marisol maybe next in line to take her brother’s spot once word spreads that Lonzo is unofficially dead.”

Harlen’s eyes scanned the reports, his fingers tapping nervously on the desk. “I see, but I don’t think this human woman is much of a threat.”

I nodded grimly. “She knows where Chanel’s apartment is, and she knows where The Castle is. I don’t need her to find out where Chanel works. I suspect she’s planning something. She’s just not here looking for her brother.”

Rising from my leather chair, I walked over to the far wall that displayed my most expensive art piece. My favorite art piece was my original 1963 portrait of Andy Warhol’s Double Elvis. I owned one of the twenty-two silkscreen paintings. The untrained eye would think it was a replica, and not the rare art piece worth over 40 million dollars. One of my safes was behind Double Elvis. I lifted the art piece like I was opening a door. With one hand, I pressed my index finger to the keypad and waited for the yellow indicator light. Then I punched my six-digit code in and waited until the screen flashed green. With a soft click, the door swung open, revealing a stack of photographs. I grabbed them and spread them out on the desk before Harlen.

“These were taken by our surveillance team over the past few weeks. Marisol’s been spotted all around town. She’s been outside The Castle. She’s even been back to the apartments. I was hoping she would be picked up by law enforcement.”

Harlen studied the images. “Law enforcement. What a joke.”

“If she gets arrested and shipped back to Minnesota, our problems will be solved.”

“Temporarily. I hope you know she’s never going to give up. She’s looking for her brother, her family.” Harlen’s jaw clenched with barely contained anger. “She’s not even trying to hide her movements. It’s like she wants us to know she’s up to something.”

I tapped one of the photographs, a candid shot of Marisol, outside a seedy westside bar. “That’s precisely what concerns me. She’s too smart to be this careless. It’s almost as if she’s baiting us, daring us to make a move.”

Harlen’s fist slammed against the desk, rattling the framed photos on the wall. “Then let’s take the bait. We can’t let her continue to threaten our world, our people.”

I placed a hand on his shoulder, my voice low and urgent. “We will stop her, Harlen. But we have to be smart about this. All she knows is her brother is missing. She connected me to Chanel. Maybe she followed Chanel. Maybe she was at the funeral I attended in Minnesota. She knows Chanel didn’t do anything to Lonzo. She can only speculate I had something to do with his disappearance. One wrong move, and we risk exposing ourselves, putting everything we’ve built at risk.”

Harlen’s shoulders sagged, the weight of our responsibility settling over him. “I know, I know. It’s just... I can’t stand the thought of her out there, plotting against us. If she noticed you, she may have noticed me, and she sure as hell knows Morgan is in town.”

I understood his frustration all too well. The very idea of Marisol threatening those I loved, especially Chanel, sent a chill down my spine. But I couldn't let my emotions cloud my judgment. Not when the stakes were this high.

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“We’ll keep Chanel and Morgan safe, Harlen. We’ll keep everyone safe. But we have to do this the right way. No reckless plans, no impulsive moves. We need to be strategic. Gather the intel we need to take Marisol down quietly.”

Harlen nodded, his expression hardening with determination. “You’re right. We’ll do this your way, Zand. But when the time comes, I want to be there.”

I clasped his shoulder, a silent understanding passing between us. “Not a problem. I’m sure she’s not alone. I don’t want to involve too many people in the capture.”

“And kill?” Harlen added.

“Yes, if it comes to that.”

“It’s the only option. Her brother is gone. He’s never coming back. She’s not going to just go away.”

“I know. I just don’t want to take a human life.” I hated the feeling of ending someone.

“From what I know, she’s scum, and so is her brother.”

“What do you know? I’ve only started sharing information with you.”

“Morgan told me some things.”

“You’ve been talking to Morgan?”

“She told me Chanel was running from Lonzo and a little about the case and the cartel.”

“She did?” Morgan hadn’t known my brother long enough for the extensive pillow talk.

“Well yeah. I like her and she likes me, so we talk.”

I couldn’t do anything about their budding relationship. I didn’t feel the need to scold Harlen again. He knew better than to cross me. I had exiled him long enough for him to feel my absence him his life.

I leaned forward with my elbows resting on the polished mahogany desk. I fixated on Harlen with a piercing gaze. “Listen carefully, Harlen. I have a task for you, one that will require all of your skill and discretion.”

Something sinister dancing behind Harlen’s dark eyes. “I’m listening.”

“I need you to infiltrate one of Lonzo’s old haunts, a place where Marisol might be recruiting new allies.” I pulled up a map on the laptop, pointing to a nondescript building on the outskirts of the city. “This is where Natasha’s intel suggests Marisol has been operating from since she arrived in Chicago.”

Harlen studied the screen in deep concentration. “What exactly am I looking for?”

“Any information you can gather on her plans, her movements, her associates. We need to know what she’s up to.” I paused, holding his gaze. “But Harlen, you must be discreet. We can’t afford to tip her off or draw any unnecessary attention.”

Harlen’s lips curled into a smirk, a glimmer of his old, reckless demeanor shining through. “Discreet is my middle name, dear brother.”

I raised an eyebrow and suppressed a hint of a smile. “Since when?”

Harlen chuckled. “Since now. I’ll get you the information you need, Zand. And I’ll do it without anyone being the wiser.”

I nodded, the weight of our mission pressing down on me. “Remember, Harlen, we cannot afford any mistakes. I’ve been operating in this town for years with zero run-ins with CPD.”

Harlen’s posture straightened. “I won’t let you down, Zand. I’ll find Marisol and report back to you.”

“No, you report to Natasha.”

“Why?”

“If you have to ask why, you don’t understand how things work around here.”

“Sorry. No problem. I will report to the blonde lesbian Russian lady.”

“She’s Chechen.”

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“She’s in America, so no one really cares.”

“She cares. Go. Talk to Natasha.”

As I watched him, a newfound sense of purpose etched onto his features, I couldn’t help but feel a swell of pride. Despite our tumultuous history, despite the scars that marred our relationship, Harlen was still my brother. And together, we would face this threat, no matter the cost.

As Harlen left the office, I leaned back in my chair, the weight of my thoughts pressing down on me. Despite the confidence in my brother’s words, I couldn’t shake the nagging sense of unease that crept along my spine. Harlen’s impulsive nature had always been a double-edged sword, a trait that could either lead to brilliant success or devastating consequences.

I closed my eyes, the hum of the nightclub below fading into the background as I lost myself in contemplation. What if Harlen’s actions inadvertently exposed our world to Marisol’s prying eyes? What if his eagerness to prove himself to me would lead him down a path from which there was no return? The questions swirled in my mind. I had made my home here, and I didn’t want to leave.

The sudden chime of my phone jolted me from my reverie. I glanced down at the screen, a frown etching itself onto my features as I read the message from my head of security.

“Suspicious activity reported near the eastern entrance of The Castle. Possible attempt at security breach. Advise immediate action.”

My jaw clenched, the urgency of the situation crashing over me like a tidal wave. If this was Marisol, there would be hell to pay.

I rose from my seat, my fingers flying across the screen as I typed out a response. “Increase patrols and notify me of any further developments.”

As I hit send, my anger rose to a new level. There could be no room for hesitation, no margin for error. We had to act fast and strike before Marisol and her cohorts.

I strode towards the door, my mind already racing. Did she really have the balls to show up here looking for her scum sucking brother? As much as I didn’t want to take another life, it was clear she was going to end up in Lake Michigan with that murderous bastard.

I barreled down the hall and into the private elevator. In seconds, I stepped out into the pulsing chaos of The Castle. I had people that handled problems, but I needed to see for myself. I was headed to the eastern entrance, the one that led to the alleyway.

As soon as I stepped out of the elevator doors, Natasha was standing there to meet me.

“Boss.”

“Who’s out there?”

“It’s your ex-wife.”

“Fuck! Why won’t that bitch just leave me alone?” I walked down the hall with Natasha that led to the rear of the club.

“We could always take care of her.”

“You know we are not supposed to kill our kind.”

“True, but if she is this much of a nuisance, I could always get rid of her discreetly.”

I sighed. “I was hoping she would just leave town. It’s been over and I have moved on. She knows this. I don’t understand why she can’t get it through her fucked up brain.”

“The offer still exists. I could kill her and keep between us.”

“I hear you. Teresa is smart. She hasn’t harmed anyone here in Chicago that I’m aware of. If I kill her, word will get out. I don’t want my people to think of me as a killer of my own kind.”

“I understand, but the offer still stands. I can take her out and then only you would know, and I would know.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ZAND

Natasha and I exited through the back of The Castle into a narrow alley that seemed to tighten as we move deeper into it. Nick stood there guarding the door. Dim lights flickered against brick walls, creating an uneven strobe of illumination that caught the gleam of someone up ahead. She was waiting for me, Teresa. Her arms were folded defiantly. I signaled to Natasha, knowing that Teresa has already spotted us approaching.

Teresa’s silhouette took shape beneath the low beam streetlights, the angles of her body were as sharp and cutting as her demeanor. She never got the hint. She wanted the attention, my attention. I could see her eyes narrow in our direction. She produced

a half-smile on her lips like she knew a secret and couldn't wait to spill it. She didn't understand that I don't give a shit.

Natasha followed me at a distance. She was close enough to hear us and close enough to access any threats that could be lingering around us.

“You brought your Russian attack dog,” Teresa called out, her voice echoed like the wicked witch she'd always been, the witch I didn't notice when I thought I loved her. I ignored the insult. Natasha didn't take too kindly to insults, but she knew how to keep her cool. She was trained in ways I didn't even understand.

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“Alexander, we have things to discuss.” She said evenly.

Her words hit with the force she intended, but I kept moving closer to her. I sensed Natasha’s steady presence behind me.

“Does your dog know how to sit and stay?” Teresa tilted her head and pretended to look puzzled. Her mockery clawed at my patience.

Teresa waited for a reaction, any hint that she unsettled me or my head of security. We would never give her what she wanted. I will never give her what she craved—me. The woman I once thought was so sweet now smelled like a dying, wilting flower.

“Do your vocal cords work, Zandy?” She taunted.

“You should leave Chicago,” I said as I stood inches from her smug face.

“Still bossy, I see,” Teresa replied and cackled like a hyena. Her laughter was sharp and annoying. “You can’t force me out without starting a war.”

“You sound ridiculous. What war?”

“You’re one vampire. I’m the one with the army.” I glanced back at Natasha, who was stone-faced and ready to pounce.

“You don’t know what I have.”

That was true, but I didn't care what she was alluding to.

"I've warned you so many times."

"Ha, warned me. Who are you to warn me? I get what I want or there will be trouble. We both know you don't have the stomach for a real fight."

"Why would I fight you when I could just as easily kill you? I don't care about your life. You are the past."

Teresa rolled her eyes. "If you think I'm the past when I am clearly standing here in the present, you are an idiot."

"The name calling doesn't move me. You better leave Chicago. You better leave the state of Illinois. On second thought, you better leave the entire Midwest."

"Valentine, Valentine, my fucking, Valentine. I have the right to live in any state I choose." Teresa turned away slightly, feigning disinterest.

"Vampires don't have rights. It's laughable that you think so."

"Semantics." She smirked. "You always have to be right."

"I could end you and absolutely no one would care."

"But you're not. You have vampire morals."

"You think you know me so well."

"I know you better than you know yourself."

Teresa wasn't going to make this easy for me. Not that I expected her to.

"This is all about your stupid little nurse. I won't kill her if you would just forgive me."

Now it was my time to chuckle. "You fucked my father and my brother. There is no forgiveness."

"Why must you harp on the past? I did what I did, and you did what you did."

"You are fucking delusional. I didn't do anything to you."

"Maybe, maybe not." She added. "You don't scare me. You never did. She is a human, but I, I, would die for you."

"Good! Go die! Go die far away from me!" I found myself yelling and reeled myself back in.

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“Chanel, your precious pediatric nurse will die before I do.”

“Don’t you dare threaten my girl.”

“I just did. What are you going to do?”

“There are so many ways to torture a vampire. I didn’t teach you anything about us.”

“Teach me. We have been separated for five long years. I picked up some things along the way. You’re not the only vampire in the world.”

Our pointed conversation halted when a human couple entered the dark alleyway, laughing. Me, Teresa, and Natasha stood frozen as the couple walked hand in hand toward us.

“Hey, is this where the party is?” The tipsy women asked.

“No, ma’am, it’s inside.” I answered while nodding at her male companion. He wasn’t as jovial as the lady. There was a tinge of fear in his eyes. I wasn’t sure if I was the one that looked menacing or maybe it was Natasha.

“Woo hoo, that’s where I want to be.” The woman proclaimed.

“Have fun!” I said as the couple passed us in the alley.

“Oh my god, you are so fucking hot.” The woman drunkenly declared as her eyes roamed over my body.

“Sorry, mister. She’s ya’ know.” He removed a hand from the lady to mimic drinking from a cup.

“No problem.” I responded in the friendliest voice I had locked inside me.

The man grabbed the woman closely. “Shut the fuck up before you get my ass kicked.” The guy gritted his teeth and whispered in his drunk companion’s ear. But as vampires, I believe we all heard it.

We waited until they turned the corner where the sidewalk led to the front of the building.

“Teresa, this is your last chance. Leave town.”

I glanced over at Natasha, catching the gleam of her eyes. She’s ready for anything. Her loyalty to me was absolute. As much as Natasha loved women intimately, she also loved having one as an opponent.

Teresa looked between us with a mocking smile tugging at her thin lips.

“I’m not afraid of your pit bull. You have a whole security team now.” Teresa looked down the alley at Nick, standing at the side door in the distance. “Why aren’t you man enough to talk to me alone?”

“I’m not a man. I’m a vampire. You seem to forget I gave you a new life. I brought you into my world and I can take the life I gave just as swiftly.”

“Well, you’re not vampire enough.” She teased.

The insult didn’t work. I was more than vampire enough. I had already had a one-on-one conversation with her. I was tired of talking.

“This isn’t a negotiation. There are no terms.”

“Then why does it feel like you’re begging me to leave town?” She asked, turning her back on me and taking a few steps. She wanted me to follow. I kept a safe distance between us. I didn’t trust her.

Teresa was too calm. She was up to something. So, I called her out. Maybe she would show her hand.

“You’re planning something.” I stated. “What is it?”

She stopped and spun around to face me. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

I pressed my hands into fists, then released my fingers to dangle at my sides. “You should return to Los Angeles. I don’t want to involve Gillian.”

The mention of my father’s name registered in her eyes and made her jaw clench. “He’s your father, not mine. Fuck him and fuck California. I’m not afraid of Gillian. Zand, I came from you.”

A take a long breath out. I couldn’t let her see how much I was fighting to keep control. “There’s nothing here for you.”

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Teresa gave me a look that sliced through the chilly night air. “We’ll see about that.”

We’ve reached the end of the alley. A siren wailed in the distance. I knew the sounds of the city well. This time, it was an ambulance. I turned to her once again. This time my words were measured and final.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Teresa shrugged. Her confidence was unshaken. “Warnings aren’t worth much from someone who can’t back them up.”

She was so wrong. Teresa didn’t understand the lengths I’d gone to in order to protect Chanel. She didn’t know I’d already killed one person who dared threaten my Chanel. Lonzo was floating in Lake Michigan because he harmed the woman I loved. Teresa didn’t know I was on track to kill Marisol for stalking the human I vowed to protect.

I look backed at Natasha. She was right. I was going to have to take Teresa out myself or give the order to Natasha. We had delivered the message, even if Teresa refused to hear it. I felt it now. I was going to have to let Natasha kill my ex. Taking lives, human, or vampire lives wasn’t my way of life, but in this instance, I was going to have to get rid of all the threats. I wanted things to go back to normal.

Although I didn’t see any prying eyes around to witness our feud. I couldn’t kill her now with so many humans walking the streets. They tended to appear from out of nowhere sometimes. I couldn’t kill Teresa this close to my place of business. The city was riddled with video cameras, some residential and some posted by law

enforcement.

“This could all be over if you would dump the nurse and let me take my place by your side.” Teresa stared at me with eyes dark and calculating. “Does your Chanel Taylor know you’re out here with me?”

I didn’t respond at first. I had to gather myself and answer her with a steady tone. “I will never be with you. You must know that you disgust me.” I could see in her face that she felt the weight of my hateful words.

Teresa looked at me with defiance. “That’s too bad. I don’t have anything to lose. If you are willing to risk your little human’s life, then so be it.”

My clenched jaw felt like it could shatter. I inhale. “There’s nothing to risk. Accept your life if you don’t remove yourself from mine.”

“Do it then! Kill me!” She dared.

I was tired of repeating myself. But it seemed I owed her at least one more warning before I plotted and planned her final death.

“I warned you.” I said to her, knowing I was speaking to deaf ears.

“You used to be more fun,” she said, moving around me like a shark smelling blood. “Or have you forgotten?”

“I haven’t forgotten,” I said, turning to follow her movements. “If I wasn’t fun, you would’ve been dead a long time ago. I remember every moment of our past, every betrayal, every lie and every deceitful minute.”

“That was the past. You have to get over it.”

“I don’t have to do anything.”

“It’s like I said. You’re not man enough to do what it takes.”

Her words sunk deep. “What you want is a war,” I tell her. “And I won’t give it to you.”

“I just want you to be honest,” she said, feigning innocence. “If that’s still possible.”

“Honest about what?” I asked.

“Chicago isn’t big enough for me and the nurse?” Teresa smiled like she had already won.

“It won’t be if you stay,” I said. “Think about what happened last time.”

She moved to stand right in front of me. Too close. She loved pushing the limits. “I have,” she said. “Maybe it’s your turn to remember.”

I stared at her, refusing to back down. The muffled bass of The Castle thrummed like a distant heartbeat.

“There’s nothing left for you here.” I tell her again. “You have to know that.”

She takes her time, letting the silence grow before answering. “If you’re so sure, then why are you so scared? Make a move.”

I hold my breath, willing myself not to react. “You’re the one who’s scared,” I said. “Of being alone. Of being nothing.”

Natasha remained behind me, solid and sure. I took strength in it; in knowing I’m not

alone in this fight. “Your cat and mouse games are boring. Your time is up.”

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Her callous laughter bit into the night. “We’ll see.” She taunted.

I closed my eyes for the briefest second, pushing away the bad memories that I shared with Teresa. I pictured Chanel, my real future, what truly mattered. Teresa watched me, taking pleasure in the conflict she created.

“Don’t pretend you’re not enjoying this. You have two women that want you. I know you too well.”

But she doesn’t know me at all. Not anymore. “Then you know you can’t win,” I said, feeling the truth of it with everything that I love—Chanel.

“We’ll see.”

We have walked the length of the alley, only to end up back at the private entrance where Nick was standing firm.

The doorway comes into view, and with it, an unwanted surprise. Harlen. I stop short. So does Teresa. So does everything. It’s a suspended moment, all frozen with anticipation. Teresa is the first to move. She stepped forward with a breezy familiarity.

“Didn’t expect to see you here,” she called out, her smile her only weapon. It didn’t work. Harlen’s immediate response cut through her pretense.

“I bet you didn’t.” He snapped. His voice ricocheted off the walls.

Teresa kept up the act. But she was surprised to see him here. “Always such a pleasure, Harlen.” She stopped just short of the entrance, standing at an angle, her head cocked like she was amused by all of this. But I knew she was more confused and upset.

Harlen stepped forward. “Why are you here? Haven’t you ruined enough lives?” He said, his focus so intense I almost expected to see scorch marks where his gaze hit her.

Teresa acted unfazed. “I could say the same of you,” she retorted. “So what? Are you two brothers again?”

I could hear the hurt in her voice. I’d forgiven him, but I hadn’t forgiven her.

“Harlen will always be my brother.” I boasted. But it was true. I had known him far too long, and I knew his flaws. He never pretended to be a great vampire. Teresa was the one I cherished and believed would never betray me.

“I heard you’re terrorizing Chicago now.” Harlen said. “Need me to send you on your way again. Just like I did in LA.”

Did Harlen run her out of Cali? This was the first I was hearing about it, and now I was intrigued.

The space between them was a live wire. They had a history that I didn’t know about. I never thought about what happened after I was gone.

“You never ran me from anywhere. I left because I was bored with you.”

“You don’t belong here.”

“You can’t tell me where I belong.”

“This is my brother’s city.” Harlen proclaimed.

“Your brother’s city.” She smirked. I was sure she didn’t know what to say or how to say it. Seeing me and Harlen together had to be jarring for her.

“You two deserve each other.” She chimed.

She looked at me. There was a challenge in her eyes, and something else. A hint of fear.

“Guess I’ll be seeing you both,” she said, leaving it open, leaving it dangerous.

We stood there, Teresa, Harlen, Natasha and me. I should’ve seen this coming. I should’ve known how this would play out. Our shared history made this inevitable, with all of us back where we started.

We waited, none of us willing to be the first to leave. It’s an impasse. A stalemate. A question of who will break first. Teresa shifted her stance, preparing for the next move. I knew her too well. It’s a game she won’t win. Not this time.

Harlen stood guard at the door, making it clear whose side he’s on. I nodded to Natasha. She nodded back, ready as ever. We stayed a little longer, letting Teresa feel the weight of my presence, my refusal to back down. Then I turned. We headed back inside The Castle, leaving her there and hoping the next time I saw her she will be no more.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CHANEL

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Morning light spilled into the kitchen. Morgan sat across from me. Her curly hair was still messy from sleep. She scrolled through her phone while I absently stirred the cream into my coffee. She was spending more nights here with me.

The TV hummed in the background. It was just enough noise to fill the comfortable silence between us. A certain tone in the news anchor's voice made us both look up. Our movements were synchronized like besties who've rehearsed the same routine.

"We begin this morning with breaking news from the Southside," the news anchor stated. Her professionally somber face betrayed just enough emotion to signal that whatever came next wasn't your everyday tragedy. "A United States postal worker was found dead early this morning in the West Woodlawn neighborhood in what Chicago police are describing as a targeted attack."

Morgan raised an eyebrow, her finger pausing mid-scroll. "That's terrible. Is she black?"

I half shrugged, wondering the same thing when the anchor continued.

"The victim has been identified as 37-year-old Chanel Taylor, who had worked for the postal service for over eight years. An investigation is underway. So far, there is no one in custody."

My spoon clattered against the porcelain. The name, my name—hung in the air between us. The news flashed a candid photo of the lady on the screen. It was a pretty woman with darker skin than mine, hair pulled back in neat box braids, and a smile that suggested she was caught mid-laugh when the photo was taken.

“That’s so weird. She has your exact name.” Morgan said, putting her cell phone down completely now. Her pewter eyes were wide while voicing the strange coincidence.

“Yeah,” I managed one word. My voice sounded distant even to my own ears. “Weird.”

The anchor droned on about police having no suspects yet, about how Ms. Taylor was beloved in her community, about how anyone with information should call the number at the bottom of the screen. I couldn’t fully focus on the words. Instead, I was caught with the uncanny feeling of hearing my name attached to a murder victim. It was like glimpsing at my own ghost.

“It’s not like it’s an uncommon name,” I said finally, trying to sound casual. “I mean, Chanel is pretty popular for our age demographic, and Taylor is practically Smith these days.”

Morgan tilted her head. Her cascading curls fell over one shoulder. “Still. Exact same name, same city? That’s some freaky shit right there.”

“In the grand scheme of weird and freaky, I think the stuff I told you about the paranormals’ top that news story.”

“Well, ain’t that the truth.” Morgan’s face softened immediately. “Sorry, Coco.” She used the nickname that’s become her exclusive right, except for her brother Mitchell. He called me Coco, too. “But you have to admit it’s odd.”

“It is, but I know there’s a lot of Chanel Taylor’s out there in the world.”

“Maybe you should tell Zand when he gets here.”

I shook my head, perhaps too quickly. “He’s got enough on his plate with whatever’s happening at The Castle. Besides, it’s just a coincidence.”

Morgan shrugged, but her eyes lingered on me with that look she gets—like she’s trying to read between lines. I didn’t even know I was writing. That’s the thing about friendship that survived trauma; it creates a shorthand, a sixth sense for when the other person is more affected than they’re letting on.

I turned back to the TV, where they moved on to the weather.

“You’re thinking about it too much,” Morgan said, reading me like a true best friend. “It’s just one of those things.”

“What things?” I asked, genuinely curious about her thought process sometimes. This time.

“One of those flukes. Like when you see the same number over and over again all day long. Instead of playing the lottery that day, we ignore it and the next day we forget all about it.”

I almost smiled. Almost. But the chill in my chest hadn’t dissipated, and I couldn’t help wondering if this was more than statistical probability.

In my old life, before Zand, before vampires became more than fiction, I would have dismissed this happenstance entirely. Now the boundaries between possible and impossible have blurred beyond recognition. Seeing the victim with my government name gave me the creeps. Could it be a bad omen or just a coincidence?

“I’m going to go and login to the J.O.B.”

“Already?”

“Yeah, I got to make that money. Your man should be home soon.”

“Oh, it’s that late.” Which was early morning.

The loft elevator door opened, and we both turned to see Zand. He moved with a fluid grace that still caught my breath. He’s been at The Castle all night.

“Ladies,” he said, his voice was low and gravelly. He shrugged off his black coat, revealing a crisp black shirt with the top buttons undone. Despite his obvious look of exhaustion, he was still impossibly handsome. Vampires were like humans. They needed sleep, and they got exhausted, just like the rest of us.

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Morgan raised her coffee mug in greeting. “Morning Zand. Did you have to kick any drunks out of your club?”

Something flickered across his face. “Not tonight.”

His eyes found mine, and I saw a hunger there. The more time I spent with him, the more I could read him. This hunger was for blood. It was three days since he last fed from me. He prefers it. We tried to space it out, to keep the balance between his needs and my personal health.

“You look tired.” I said, raising from the table to meet him halfway across the room.

His hand found the small of my back, a gesture of possession that I loved coming from him. “I’ll be fine after some rest.”

Morgan jumped to her feet and clears her throat theatrically. “Time to go to work. Thanks for letting me crash in your guest room, by the way. I’m not sure if I said that.”

“No problem. Stay as long as you need,” Zand told her. He’s always been generous.

As Morgan gathered her cell phone and coffee, I considered mentioning the news report. The words formed and dissolved on my tongue. I couldn’t find any good reason to mention it. I didn’t want to worry him. No matter how hard he tried to hide it, I knew he worried about me. Morgan headed toward the guest room.

“Anything exciting happen while I was gone?” Zand asked, almost as if sensing my

hesitation.

“Just breakfast.” I pointed to my cup of coffee.

Zand’s eyes narrowed slightly. He could always tell when something was being left unsaid. He didn’t press. Which was a good thing. I didn’t want to sound like a paranoid lunatic. His hand tightened around my waist.

“I need to get some of you.” His words carried multiple meanings. He wanted me sexually, but he also wanted to drink my blood. I could never deny him. If there was a way to drink a person’s blood in the most sensual and alluring way, he was doing that to me. He was gentle every time, and he didn’t scare me.

Zand slowly pulled me to the staircase that led upstairs to the bedroom we shared. Our bedroom was a sanctuary of shadows. The blackout curtains were drawn tight against the daylight outside. Zand moved with purpose. His fingers lingered on the small of my back as he guided me upstairs and through the doorway.

In the dim glow of the bedside lamp, I saw his face and all its sharp angles. Time had taught me to read the tension in his jaw. Maybe it was something with Marisol. Maybe Donté, his new protégé, was giving him problems. It was all speculation. I had to push it all away so I could enjoy the moment.

Zand locked the door behind us. This was a habit born of necessity rather than privacy. Vampires were vulnerable when they slept, and a locked door gave the light sleepers time to fight if need be.

Zand’s honey-colored eyes darkened. I stepped closer, close enough to feel the unnatural coolness that radiated from his skin. “You know you can tell me anything.”

A ghost of a smile touched his lips. His hand rose to cup my cheek. His thumb traced

my lower lip. “I know. But right now, I need something else from you.”

The words sent a shiver down my spine that had nothing to do with fear. Two months ago, I might have been terrified by the implication. Now, my body responded with certainty.

“You haven’t fed from me in three days.” I purred. My hands found the buttons of his shirt.

“Three days, fourteen hours.” He corrected while watching my fingers work. “But who’s counting?” He smirked.

We had established boundaries that kept me safe. The feeding never took too much from me. He never left me weak. Still, there was always that edge of danger that made the feedings feel thrilling.

“Did you have your processed blood?”

“No. I wanted to wait for yours. Your blood tastes better when I abstain from the blood bags.”

“You should’ve said something.”

I pushed his shirt from his shoulders to reveal the marble perfection of his chest. No matter how many times I saw him like this, it still took my breath away.

“I wanted you to recover from the last time.” His cool hands found my waist and slipped beneath my nightgown to meet my bare skin.

Zand’s touch sent sparks across my skin. His fingers trailed up my ribcage, mapping the territory he had claimed countless times before.

“I’m fully recovered now.” I whispered, arching slightly into his touch.

Zand lifted me effortlessly, as if I weighed nothing at all. He carried me to the bed. His supernatural strength no longer startled me. He laid me down with gentleness. His body covered mine with his weight carefully distributed, so I didn’t feel crushed.

“Your heart is racing.” He observed. Zand pressed his lips to my throat, right where my pulse quickened. “Is it fear or anticipation?”

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“Both.” I readily admitted. Feeling his lips smile against my skin.

Zand’s mouth traveled upward to my neck until he reached the spot just below my ear. This was the spot that he savored. The spot that was hypersensitive from months of devoted attention.

“Yes.” I breathed, although he never asked a question. I threaded my fingers through his dark hair and held him close.

There was a moment of a dreamlike delay before his fangs pierced my skin. The initial pain felt like a sharp lightning strike of sensation that made me gasp. Then there was the rush in my heartbeat. The flood of endorphins transformed my pain into need. Then the pleasure washed through me in waves. It radiated from the puncture site to the tips of my fingers and toes. It soared through the soles of my feet and pooled hot and unrelenting between my thighs.

Zand drank slowly, reverently, one hand cradling the back of my head while his other slid beneath my gown with his palm flat against my stomach. I felt the tremor in his fingers. It took restraint for him not to gulp greedily. Each pull of his mouth drew a soft moan from mine. The sensation made me whimper even when I tried to suppress it.

My body responded to the feeding in ways that were sexual. It wasn’t just arousal. It was a surrender more fulfilling than ordinary sex could ever achieve. Zand was literally taking a vital part of me into himself. He was consuming my essence. This level of intimacy boarded on spiritual.

His hand moved higher, cupping my breast through the thin fabric of my nightgown. My nipple pebbled against his palm, sensitive to the point of almost pain. I arched into his touch, silently begging for more. He obliged by pushing my gown up, exposing me to the cool air and his hungry gaze.

When he finally broke the seal of his mouth against my neck, I felt grief despite knowing it was necessary. Zand was careful never to take too much. His tongue traced over the puncture wounds. His supernatural saliva sealed the wounds instantly. It would still take hours for the fresh wounds to heal.

“You taste like sunshine.” He whispered. His voice was raspy from his blood-induced intoxication. His eyes had changed, glowing with amber fire, pupils dilated.

Now I was smiling. When I reached up to touch his face, he captured my hand in his and turned it to press his lips against my wrist. “This vein I will save for next time.”

Next time can be now! Before I could answer, his mouth claimed mine. The metallic tang of my own blood was on his tongue. His kiss was demanding, almost desperate, as if he’s still hungered for my body despite having fed on my blood. I now understood that blood was only part of what he craved.

My nightgown disappeared over my head. His remaining clothes followed. His body had heated up. Something that happened when he was against me. Where I was soft. He was hard. Paradise was when his hard invaded my soft.

“I need you.” I whispered against his mouth. I needed him to massage this ache building inside me.

Zand’s hand slid down my body. He traced the curve of my hip to the length of my thigh. When he found the wetness between my legs, he groaned.

“Are you ready for me?”

The blood loss had left me light-headed, more sensitive than usual. Each circle of his thumb sent butterflies to my stomach. With each gentle press of his fingers, I bit at my bottom lip to hold my moans inside my throat. My hands clutched at his shoulders, trying desperately to summon him to move faster.

“Please.” I managed to say the word, hoping it would force him out the starting gate.

Zand positioned himself above me. His powerful arms help a push-up beside my head. His eyes locked onto mine. The bond formed through my blood heightened everything between us.

My man, my man, my man slowly pushed inside me. I closed my eyes tightly and gasped at the friction. He filled me completely, stretching me in ways that bordered between pleasure and discomfort. My body yielded to accommodate his size. His first thrust was measured and careful, despite the hunger I knew raged through him.

“Zand.” I begged for more with just one word. I wrapped my legs around his waist, changing the angle of my body to take him deeper inside me.

Something primal flashed across his face—the animal, the monster, the vampire I had seen just one time before. I watched as he pushed that creature down and turned back into the other man, the one that was human-like. What would happen if he let the vampire out—completely?

His next thrust was harder, more insistent. I cried out in approval. His rhythm built steadily. Each movement pushed me further up the bed until my head tapped the headboard. Suddenly, one strong arm hooked beneath me, lifting my hips to meet his. His deep thrusts sent shocks of pleasure through my core.

My vision blurred as the pressure built low in my belly. Each dominant thrust brought me closer to the edge. Zand's movements became more robotic, more deliberate, more focused, and lustful.

"I'm going to break you in half." He threatened.

I knew he could actually do it. The fear of the thought made me wetter and warmer inside. My pussy contracted so tightly his slippery thrusts felt like punches to my belly. He turned my head to the side and felt a pool of drool ooze from my mouth.

"You're mine. Forever." Zand grumbled against my earlobe.

His words, combined with the skillful movements of his massive dick and the relentless rhythm of his hips, were pushing me over the edge. My orgasm crashed through me like a breaking wave.

I cried out his name. "Zand!" My back arched off the bed. My inner muscles clenched around him in rhythmic pulses.

The intensity of my climax triggered his own. With a guttural sound that was mistakenly animal, Zand pounded deeply inside me one final time. His body shuddered against mine as he found his release. It was a perfect moment of ecstasy. We were connected in ways that even I couldn't put into words.

Then slowly, he collapsed beside me. He draped his arm possessively across my waist, keeping me close to him. I struggled to catch my breath. My heart pounded frantically while his beat at a much slower pace. I didn't know how his heartbeat when movies and TV told me otherwise.

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“For the blood. Thank you.” He muttered against my temple before pressing a kiss there.

I turned to look at him, studying the softness that returned to his model features. His eyes had returned to their normal honey color. His supernatural glow had faded back to normal.

“You never have to thank me.”

His smile was tender, almost human until he licked his lips revealing his fangs. “But I do.”

We laid in comfortable silence for several minutes. The pain from the puncture wounds on my neck had already subsided. There was a pleasant tenderness that would remind me of this moment throughout the day.

This was pure bliss. Yet, there were still so many questions I should be asking. For now, though, they would have to wait. I nestled closer to Zand’s side, allowing myself this moment of peace before whatever was coming next.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

HARLEN

I was on the team now, per my brothers’ instructions. I had a meeting with Natasha, and I still wasn’t sure if I liked her. She was important to Zand, and she was a part of the package if I wanted to stay in his good graces.

I walked into her office and took in all the surveillance cameras mounted on the walls. I slouched down in the chair across from her desk, waiting for her to acknowledge me. Her fingers moved across the keyboard with military precision. Tap-tap-tap was the sound merging with the soft hum of the six monitors arranged in a horseshoe around her enormous desk. The head of security had summoned me. But now she wanted to ignore me.

Things had changed so drastically from when Zand was back in LA. My meek and well-mannered brother was a vampire boss. He was in charge of a clan. People were in his organization, and they listened to him. He was, in some ways, their vampire king. This was in complete opposition to the vamp he was just a few years ago.

My brother Alexander Valentine had amassed an empire. My brother was a king to his people. I was proud of his accomplishments. Being the brother of the King had to come with perks. I didn't know what they were yet, but I was going to wait around and see. Chicago was a new start for me, too.

In this town, I had Morgan. She was the human whose company I enjoyed. Just like Zand, I wanted Teresa out of the picture. As much as Zand didn't want to be reminded of her betrayal. She was a reminder that I had betrayed him. She had to vanish, and I didn't care if that meant a voluntary disappearance or an ultimate death.

"What are you doing?" Her heavy accent jarred me from my daydreams of Morgan's tits. "Why are you fidgeting like a child?" Natasha asked without looking at me. My eyes went down to my knees. I hadn't realized I was even moving. "Sit still." She ordered.

I forced my knees to stop bouncing. I leaned back and crossed my arms instead. Natasha Ivanova, The Guardian, as she was known in our secret circles. She was the closest thing to a Wonder Woman vampire that I've ever encountered. Not that I'd tell her that to her face. She'd probably shot me with a flamethrower for the

comparison, or torture me in some sadistic way.

“I’ve been sitting here for five minutes,” I said, glancing at my wristwatch. “If you wanted me to watch you type, you could’ve just sent a video.”

The corner of her mouth twitched. “You believe yourself to be funny. Patience is a virtue, Harlen Corbin Valentine.” She said my first, middle, and last name like it offended her.

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on her spotless desk. “Yeah, well, I have patience. But I thought I was here about Teresa. I thought you had some news.”

Natasha looked up from her keyboard. She fixed her cobalt blue eyes on me, eyes that seem to catalogue every weakness. “This is precisely why I called you here. Come, to this side of my desk.”

I rose to my feet, walking around the desk and took my place behind Natasha. She tapped a key, and suddenly all six monitors sprung to life with different camera angles. My eyes focused on the grainy black and white footage from what I recognized as Chicago’s Street cameras. It took me a moment to realize what, or rather who, I was looking at.

“Teresa.” I mouthed the name of the woman that seduced me into betraying my brother.

My brother’s ex-wife moved through the footage like a ghost, her posture perfect, her stride purposeful. Even in the grainy surveillance footage, there was something seductive and predatory about the way she navigated the night streets. She wove in between humans with the grace of a shark moving through a school of fish.

“How did you find this?” I asked, leaning over Natasha and closer to the screens.

“I hacked into the law enforcement database and city traffic cams CCTV network.” She explained with no sense of remorse.

Now I really understood why Natasha was Zand’s right-hand man or woman. Not only was she beautiful, but she was also a skilled fighter. She was smart. She was the total package and someone you would want on your team. Now I wondered how he found her. Or did she find him? Zand was surrounded by people that would fight for him, and I didn’t know any of these vampires. I had no origins or backstory.

“And I’m sure you acquired those tools legally.” I joked.

Natasha ignored me, typing commands that make the footage advance frame by frame. “I tracked her from where you and Zand confronted her two nights ago. We last saw her at The Castle’s side entrance. She walked down the alleyway going east.”

The screen showed Teresa emerging from the alley. Her face was turned away from the cameras. She swiftly moved east, then south, crossing through areas where the camera coverage was spotty. Natasha had pieced together her route like a puzzle, sometimes with only seconds of footage before Teresa disappeared again, only to resurface a few paces away.

“Do you think she knows where the street cameras are?” I asked.

“Maybe, but she’s not that smart. All the cameras aren’t visible to the general public. I find that the newer vampires seem to forget the things that were so common when they were humans. Teresa is a new vampire. She doesn’t have the time we all put into being vamps.”

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“Yes, she’s young. I think it’s only been seven years for her.”

“Even if she’s aware of all the cameras, there is no reason she thinks we have the resources to track her. The worst case is she wanted us to track her and find her. She may think she’s setting a trap, but there’s nothing I’ve seen of this vampire that leads me to believe she’s some mastermind. I only see an entitled human that was made into a vampire and can’t handle vampirism or rejection from her maker. Vampires love their makers because we are grateful to them, not because we are sired to them. Her behavior with Zand is just the lingering feelings of possessiveness that humans feel. Sometimes it takes up to ten years for human feelings to dissipate and the vampire genome to completely take over.”

“How do you know all of this?” I asked, intrigued by her information.

“I’m a student of Heinrich August Ossenfelder and Richard von Krafft-Ebing.”

“Who?” I never heard of those dudes.

Natasha turned back to glare at me. “And they say Americans are stupid.”

“Who said that?”

“You American vampires know nothing about your vampire history. You people really need to read a book.”

“How old are you?”

“None of your business. Stupid questions get zero answers.”

“Sorry, I asked. You must be very ancient.”

“Enough of this useless banter.” Natasha tapped another key, and one monitor enlarged to show Teresa approaching a building with a neon sign. “She was here at Club Bailar Caliente. It’s a Mexican club on the West Side. She enters at 11:42 PM and leaves at 2:17 AM. Go, back, and sit.” She orders me and I do as I am told.

My fingers drum against the arm of the chair. “A Mexican club? She was White. I think maybe Polish before she was turned. She’s not exactly the nightlife type. She did work in a small dive bar when she was human.”

“Maybe she’s hunting.” Natasha said. “It’s easier to bleed and kill the people of color. When they go missing, the public doesn’t seem to notice or care. Minority mysterious deaths rarely make the news. Black and brown people are safer and easier targets for vampires.”

The implication hung between us. Teresa, like all of us, needs to feed. But unlike my brother Zand, who has established rules and protocols for feeding within his territory, Teresa has always been a rule breaker. Keeping our existence a secret has meant that we had to stop killing humans. We don’t need to murder to survive and most of us adhere to this rule of not taking human lives. We know we’re stronger and superior. Therefore, we have nothing to prove.

“I did a deep dive and hacked all the cameras outside the club. Teresa has been back three times in the past week.” Natasha continued, pulling up more footage. “Always alone, always leaving alone. But she stays for hours.”

“Are there any cameras inside the club?”

“I don’t think so. I can’t seem to pick up on anything inside.”

I ran a hand through my short hair. I sometimes forget that I cut it all off. “So, what’s at this club? What is she doing in there?”

“This is what you will find out.” Natasha swiveled in her chair. “I need you to stake out the club. Follow the lovesick bitch if she emerges. Find out what she is doing, who she is meeting.”

My stomach tightened. “Why me?” I asked, though I already know the answer. “Zand has an entire security team.”

“Because I can’t leave Zand unprotected, and I know you want her dead just as much as I do.” Natasha said bluntly. Then, seeing my expression, she softened slightly.

“How do you know I want her dead?”

“She is the only thing left that stands between you getting your relationship back with Zand. Teresa is living proof of the knife you shoved in your brother’s back. If she is dead, the reminder of your betrayal is dead, too. You want to be in Zand’s inner circle. You want his love back more than anything. Look at me and tell me I am wrong?”

She had read me like she had a direct line into my brain stem. “You’re not wrong. I want things to go back to the way it was before Teresa came into our lives. I want my brother back. I want his forgiveness, not his tolerance.”

“Your honesty is what makes you the perfect vampire for the job. You know Teresa. You can recognize her patterns, her body language. Things others might miss, you will see.”

I couldn't argue with that logic. "Fine." I said, leaning back. "But I'm not walking the city streets. I'm going to need a car."

Natasha nodded and reached into her desk drawer. She pulled out a set of car keys and slid them across to me. "Dark sedan, unmarked, parked in the private lot. Tank is full."

Next came a cell phone—old-school flip model, the kind that couldn't be easily tracked. "Burner phone. My hot number is only one programmed. Call if you see something significant. Text for minor updates. Do not take your personal cell phone. If you are captured or killed, there is no way to get the numbers of Zand's people."

I pocketed both items, already mentally preparing for a long night of surveillance. "Anything else I should know?"

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Natasha's expression grew severe. "Do not engage unless absolutely necessary. You observe, you report back. This is reconnaissance only. There is a time to take her out and that time will be planned without any mishaps."

"Got it. I'm a shadow. Just watching, not touching."

"This is serious, Harlen." Her voice took on an edge that made me pay attention.

I nodded, understanding the gravity of what she was asking. Despite my reputation for impulsiveness, I knew when a situation calls for caution and discretion. "I'm not going to do anything to fuck this up."

"I may have found a way to kill a vampire without the loud and noticeable use of fire. I need to see if my potion works. Teresa will be my test dummy."

"What? A potion?"

"It's a secret potion. In these modern times, we need to move with secrecy. Setting vamps ablaze and watching them burn to ashes is just prehistoric. I've been working on something. I need her alive to test my quiet death."

Was Natasha a scientist too? Did she really have some poison elixir that could kill vampires? "Wait. What are you talking about?"

"You heard me. It's my secret weapon. If it works, we will reign without the threat of any vampires who dare challenge us."

“Does my brother know about this?”

“Of course he does. He funded my research. He knows, I know, and now you know. Don’t fuck it up. We’re counting on you to report back with no incident. Can you do it?”

“I can. I will.” I stumbled over my words. I was still trying to keep up with all the things I learned in this brief meeting.

“You start tonight. Club Bailar Caliente becomes busy after ten. Teresa typically arrives by midnight. Go.”

I looked down at my watch. It’s 9:15PM. As I stood to leave, Natasha stood.

“And Harlen?”

“Yeah?”

“Zand is counting on you.” This was my chance to prove myself useful, to show that I’m more than just Zand’s reckless younger brother.

“I won’t let him down.” I said, and I actually meant it.

Natasha’s only response was a skeptical arch of her blonde eyebrow before she returned to her screens, dismissing me with the wave of her hand.

As I left her office, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was walking into something much bigger than a simple surveillance job. Teresa never does anything without purpose, and if she’s frequenting a Mexican club in Chicago’s West Side, there’s got to be a reason.

Three hours into my stakeout and I was feeling like this wasn't going to produce any intel more than Natasha had already acquired. I was slumped so low I was practically horizontal. My eyes were fixed across the street on the entrance of Club Bailar Caliente. The neon sign bled red light onto the sidewalk, turning the faces of patrons into crimson masks as they stumbled in and out of the establishment. Bass-heavy Latin music pulsed through the walls. I checked my watch: 11:12 PM. If Natasha's intel was correct, Teresa should arrive soon. Or was she already inside?

I twisted open a bottle of blood, AB positive, sipping it to pass the time. The car Natasha provided smelled like leather and a tropical fruit air freshener. The car was suspiciously clean for a surveillance vehicle. I wondered how many stakeouts had happened in this same sedan. Maybe none. I wasn't sure Zand had any troubles before Teresa, Marisol and Marisol's brother blew into town. His life in Chicago appeared to be pretty sweet.

The club itself didn't look special. It was just another hole-in-the-wall nightspot with peeling paint around the windows and a bouncer who checked IDs with practiced boredom. What drew Teresa to this place? It wasn't up to vampire standards. We all didn't live like the rich, but we felt we fit in better in middle-class settings. It was easier for us to blend in, and being undetected was paramount for our kind.

A Hispanic couple emerged from the club. The woman was laughing too loudly and clutching her companion's arm for balance. The man was stone-faced. He scanned the street with quick, darting eyes. A drug dealer, probably. They disappeared around the corner, and I returned my attention to the entrance.

The night drug on. I watched people arrive in groups. The young ladies wore less clothing than strippers. They didn't appear to be twenty-one, but they could still gain entry. The neighborhood wasn't the worst in Chicago, but it's not somewhere tourists would venture after dark. Perfect hunting ground for vamps. Plenty of people no one would immediately miss.

I stretched in my seat, fighting the urge to doze. Maybe Teresa wasn't coming tonight. Maybe Natasha's intel was dated. Or maybe Teresa sensed she was being watched and changed her routine. She's paranoid enough for that.

Just as I'm considering calling it a night, the crowd outside the entrance parted.

"Teresa." I muttered softly to myself.

Even from across the street, I'd know that silhouette anywhere. She moved like a predator, like a new vampire that wasn't used to her body. Some people would call her movements masculine, but they were normal for a newer vampire. A severe knot at the nape contained Teresa's blonde hair. She was wearing a simple short black dress that somehow looked more elegant than the flashy clubwear around her.

She didn't bother to look around as she exited. There were no furtive glances, no checking to see if she was being watched or followed. Either she was confident that no one was watching, or she didn't care. Both possibilities were unsettling. Did she really think she had a chance here in Chicago? I had been back in my brother's life for just a short time, but it was clear to me that he loved Chanel, and he would, and had killed anyone that threatened his human.

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I waited until Teresa was half a block away, moving north, before I slid out of the car. Following on foot was risky. Some vampires had heightened senses. Teresa was a young vampire. I didn't think she had any special skills or heightened senses. I didn't know much about her outside of the sex I wished I could take back.

The Chicago streets were too desolate for a moving car at these early morning hours. I had to go out on foot. I couldn't risk losing her if she spotted me in a vehicle.

The night air hit me with a barrage of aromas. There was the thick humidity, the scent of the city, exhaust fumes, yesterday's rain and the stench of wet garbage. I kept my distance, staying in the shadows where possible, using gangways as cover when needed. I pulled up the hood of my jacket, keeping my head down.

Teresa walked briskly, never looking back, but taking a route that seemed deliberately complex. She strolled down the sidestreets, through an alley and across a small park. Is she trying to lose a tail? Or does she just enjoy the complexity of this walk?

After fifteen minutes, the scenery changed. The buildings look better maintained. The streets were cleaner. We were approaching a college campus. It was the university district. Student housing and affordable apartments have replaced the liquor stores, fried chicken shacks and check-cashing joints of the previous neighborhood.

Teresa slowed her pace as we entered a well-lit area with manicured trees lining the sidewalk. Ahead stood a large brick building with a carved stone arch above the entrance. The tall building was a university dormitory.

This wasn't where I expected her movements to lead me.

Teresa approached the entrance with confidence, pulling something from the pocket of her dress—a key card? She swiped it at the door. It opened, and she slipped inside.

I hung back, processing. Why would Teresa have access to a university dorm? She's not a student, and she certainly wasn't faculty. Unless she was using an alias? Or maybe she stole the card from someone.

I approach the building slowly, trying to look casual, like I belong. The lobby was visible through large windows—brightly lit, with a security desk that appeared unmanned. A group of three young women approached the entrance, laughing and talking animatedly, key cards already in hand. This was my chance.

I quickened my pace, timing my arrival to coincide with theirs. One swiped her card, and as they pushed through the door, I followed close behind, flashing a friendly smile that suggested I'm someone's guest. They barely glanced at me, too absorbed in their conversation about an upcoming exam.

The lobby was clean and complete with the smell of floor cleaner. Flyers for campus events, tutoring services, and roommate wanted ads were plastered a bulletin board. At the unmanned security desk, a sign reads “Be back soon.”

Lucky timing. I didn't believe the sign. It was probably just there to make strangers believe there was some security. This early in the morning I doubted there was anyone working the desk.

I scanned the area quickly. Two hallways branched off the lobby, and a staircase rose to my left. An elevator stood opposite, its display showing it was currently on the third floor. I was sure it was Teresa inside the elevator.

I waited until the three students have moved down one hallway. I didn't want to follow them, so I disappeared into the stairwell. I kept my footsteps as light as possible on the tiled steps. I held the metal handrails as I ascended upward. I moved cautiously, listening for sounds above me.

When I reached the third-floor landing, I paused and peered through the small rectangular window. After a few moments, I opened the door and moved through it. The hallway beyond was carpeted, lined with identical doors bearing room numbers and small whiteboards with messaged scrawled in colorful markers.

I couldn't see Teresa. I believed she was somewhere inside one of the dorm rooms. But which one? I mulled about trying not to look like a creeper. My senses heightened as I examined the hallway for any other movement, any witnesses. It was quiet. Most students had to be out for the night or asleep behind their locked doors. I waited, giving Teresa time to do whatever she came here to do. I didn't like the possibilities that sprung to mind.

Three minutes passed. Then five. I checked my watch, and I wondered how long I should wait before investigating. I wasn't supposed to do anything but tail her. I parked myself around a corner and hoped she was in one of the rooms close to the elevator.

Just as I was debating my next move, I heard a door open. It had to be Teresa, but I couldn't look around the corner. She would surely see me. I couldn't have that happen here.

I pressed myself into the wall around the corner. I became still as stone, barely breathing. Instead of the elevator, I heard the door to the stairwell open. I peeked my head out just in time to see her disappear through the closing doorway.

I waited until I was certain she was gone. I walked down the hall near the elevator

and noticed room 317 was slightly ajar. No light spilled from the crack in the doorway. No sound came from within.

My instincts were heightened. I placed my fingertips against the wood, feeling the grain as I push the door open wider. The smell hit my nostrils immediately, rich, metallic, unmistakable.

Blood.

Fresh blood.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

HARLEN

The coppery scent of blood hit me like a physical punch to the gut. I pushed the door open wider. My fangs instinctively descended from my gums. It was a Pavlovian response I hated but couldn't always control. I forced my fangs back with effort. The matchbox room was dark except for the glow of a small pink desk lamp. Before tonight, the room was a girly safe space for a college student. Now it was just another crime scene.

I took a step inside, careful not to touch anything. Lifting my foot, I kicked the door, listening as it clicked shut behind me. I was alone with death. A place I hadn't seen in a long time.

Across her bed, a young Black girl lay sprawled out with one arm dangling over the edge. Her fingers were still curled around her cell phone. She was possibly trying to dial 911. The student's neck was torn open. There were no neat punctures of a controlled feeding, but the savage ripping of flesh from someone who wanted her to suffer. Her wide, glassy eyes remained fixed on the ceiling, capturing an eternal

moment of terror.

Blood soaked into the floral bedspread beneath her, darkening the cheerful pattern to something obscene. The crimson syrup dripped onto the floor, pooling on textbooks scattered there. Amongst the blood, I could read the book covers: psychology, sociology, mathematics.

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The room itself told the story of a life interrupted. Posters of musicians covered one wall. Family photos lined a small bookshelf with the victim, smiling with what must be her parents, a graduation photo, a younger sibling. A desk held a laptop, and a coffee mug printed with “Black Girl Magic” that held pens, highlighters, and plastic utensils.

I didn’t touch the body, but I leaned closer, examining the wild wounds. Teresa wasn’t feeding for sustenance. The typical vampire bite was precise—two puncture marks, minimal tearing, designed to heal quickly and leave the victim confused but alive. This was different. This was rage. Or something else.

The girl couldn’t be more than twenty. Her braids fanned out on the blood-soaked pillow. A silver necklace with a small cross gleamed at her throat.

Why her? Why here? Chicago had no shortage of easier targets. There were the homeless people and drunk partygoers. There was anyone Teresa could feed on without drawing attention, the police or the local news.

I scanned the room for anything that might explain Teresa’s dangerous choice. A corkboard next to a dry erase board above the desk held more photos and what looked like concert tickets.

Nothing about this young girl immediately jumped out as a connection to Teresa or vampire business. There was no indication this girl was involved in our world at all. She appeared to be just a student, bright and ambitious, with her life violently cut short.

I backed away from the bed, wiping my palms on my jeans, though I hadn't touched anything in the room. The scent of freshblood was making my head swim. The tangy aroma brought my hunger to the surface. I swallowed hard, forcing it down. Not here. Not from her. Only the lowest of the vampire species would drink from the dead.

Teresa's motivation for this careless crime didn't make sense. This murder would draw the attention of the campus police and probably CPD detectives. The crime was messy and risky for all vampires in the city. We worked hard to keep our kind under the radar of human notice. Teresa knew that. So why would she break the rules so flagrantly?

Maybe that was exactly her intention. Maybe she wanted to create chaos and to challenge my brother's authority. I had to face the possibility she wanted to send Zand a message. Or perhaps the message wasn't for Zand at all.

I checked the room once more for anything I might have missed. No sign of a struggle beyond the immediate area of the bed. The girl was likely asleep when Teresa entered. There was no indication of theft. Just a brutal feeding that crossed the line into a vicious murder.

I had to report this to Natasha, but not yet. I traced Teresa's movements tonight and believed she might return to Club Bailar Caliente. I needed more intel before I contacted Natasha. I needed to see what Teresa was up to and who she was acquainted with. This random killing felt like a part of something larger. I needed to understand the complete picture before bringing my findings to Zand and Natasha.

I needed to be inside of Club Bailar Caliente. But I also needed to blend in at a Mexican club. I only knew of one person who can blend in at any function. Morgan. With me, she wouldn't be in danger. She was what humans called multi-racial or racially ambiguous. Morgan's striking good looks would help me blend in. With her, we were just another couple out for a night on the town. With her, I wouldn't appear

suspicious.

I slipped out of the dorm room, using my sleeve to close the door behind me. There was no need for some student to walk down the hall and glance inside at the gruesome scene. The hallway remained empty at this late hour. It was eerily quiet compared to the horror that had taken place just a few feet away. I moved quickly toward the stairwell. I wanted to avoid the elevator. Inside the metal box, I would be trapped in close quarters with the residents.

I stepped outside and the night air felt clean compared to the blood-scented room. I gulped the air in, trying to clear my head as I pulled out the burner phone Natasha gave me. I should call her first, report what I've found. But she'll order me back, pull me off the surveillance. And something tells me I needed to stay on Teresa's trail, especially now.

When I was free of the dorm, I walked to the curb and took one last glance back at the dormitory. The building looked peaceful. Its inhabitants were unaware of the predator who walked their halls tonight. Unaware of the death in room 317. Tomorrow, there will be screams. Police. Questions. But tonight, the girl died alone, her blood cooling on sheets that once held only her personal dreams.

I took a leisure trek back to my parked car. I sat in the driver's seat and shoved the burner phone into my jacket pocket. I leaned over into the passenger seat and reached into the glove compartment for my personal cell phone. I dialed Morgan's number from memory. She answered on the third ring.

"Where are you?" There was no greeting. Just a question laced with a possible accusation.

"Morgan, it's Harlen."

“I know that.” I could almost see her eye roll through the phone. “Where are you?” She barked. I liked this possessive, bossy version of her. This was the woman that knew I was a vampire but didn’t care. We had a brief conversation about my affliction and that was that. I like her too much to keep it from her. Plus, I had a feeling she already knew. She didn’t ask to see my fangs. There was no mention of holy water, garlic, or crucifixes.

“I’m out on a job for Natasha.”

“When are you coming back?” Did she mean back to the loft or to the apartments? “I need a favor.”

“A favor?” There was a pause, presumably as she checked the time. “At midnight?”

“I didn’t know it was that late.” I did.

“What’s the favor?”

“Natasha wants me to check out this nightclub.”

“Okay and?—”

“I was thinking you could come here and be with me.”

“To the club?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you serious?”

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“Dead serious.” My word choice made me wince. The student’s lifeless eyes flashed in my recent memory. “I want to see you. I need you to meet me somewhere. It’s important.”

“Important like you’re-in-trouble important, or important like you’re-bored-and-want-company important? Because if it’s the second one, I’m hanging up.”

I could picture her sprawled out on my bed in those black silk pajamas she loved. “I’m not in trouble. I just want you to come and be with me. I need you.”

That gets her attention. “You need me?”

“Yes. I want to go inside this club, and I don’t want to go in alone. I need backup, and you’re the only one I can ask.” This wasn’t entirely true. I could ask Donté.

“Where?”

“A nightclub called Bailar Caliente on the West Side. Wear something sexy. Something...” I search for the right word. “You can dance in.”

Morgan chuckled. “Sexy? Dance? Harlen, can you dance?”

“I can do a lot of things.” I teased.

“You know what I mean. Dress like you’re there to dance, have fun, and make out with your boyfriend.”

“My boyfriend?”

I was just now realizing we hadn't put a label on our relationship. After I was turned, things like that seemed so trivial. “Yeah, your boyfriend.”

“Fine. But you're buying me a lot of drinks, and you're going to tell me exactly what this is about when I get there.”

I hesitated. I couldn't tell her everything about Teresa. Not yet. I could never tell her about the dead student. “I'll explain everything I can. Just trust me, okay?”

There was a pause, long enough that I wondered if she'd hung up on me. Then: “Wait. This club isn't some sort of vampire den or something?”

“No, that would be The Castle.” I joked.

“Funny.”

“Morgan. It wouldn't matter. I would never let anything happen to you. You know that, right?”

“I know. I need thirty minutes to shower and dress. And this better not be some bullshit, Harlen.”

“It's not. I'm sitting outside the club, and I can't leave this location. I need to send a driver for you.”

“A driver?”

“No, not a car service. Someone on Zand's security staff.”

“A vampire?” I heard her sigh.

“Do you prefer a human?”

“I guess it doesn’t matter. There are vampires everywhere.”

“Where are you? Where should I send the car? Text me when you’re close.” I ended the call before she could ask more questions.

My mind raced while I sat in the sedan. I should call Natasha and tell her about the body. But there’s a larger game at play here, and I needed to understand the pieces before I made a move. Why was Teresa at a Mexican club? Why did Teresa kill a college student? None of it made sense.

As I gripped the steering wheel, I checked the time. Nearly 12:25 PM. The club would be open for at least another two hours. Enough time to go in and see if Teresa the ripper was inside. I hoped to get another glimpse of her.

A few minutes later, Morgan arrived at the club entrance in a dress that made me forget, for half a second, why we’re here. The crimson fabric cling to her curves like it was painted on. The color was vivid against her olive skin.

One of Zand’s security men idled at the curb in a black SUV until I reached Morgan. His eyes scanned the street with practiced vigilance before he pulled away. Morgan’s gray eyes flicked over me with amusement. “Okay, boyfriend,” she said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

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I offered her my arm, leaning close as if sharing an intimate joke. “Thanks for coming. You look sexy.”

“Sexy for what?” She took my arm. “You still haven’t told me what we’re doing here.”

“Surveillance,” I murmured, guiding her toward the entrance. “I’ll explain inside. Just follow my lead and pretend we’re having the time of our lives.”

She arched an eyebrow. “So, you dragged me out of my pee-jay’s and into this hooker dress for a stakeout?”

“Sort of.” We passed the bouncer who didn’t bother to card us or check for weapons.

“And you couldn’t do this alone?”

“No one knows who you are. But there are people that know me.” I handed the cash over to the cashier, who barely glanced at us before waving us through.

The door opened, and we’re hit with a wall of sound and scent. Reggaeton was pounding through speakers, the percussion so heavy I could feel it in my inner ears. The air was thick with perfume, sweat, spilled tequila, and the undertone of desire. Bodies pressed together on the dance floor, a churning mass of humanity moving to the rhythm.

“So, what are we looking for?” Morgan asked. Her lips weren’t close enough to my ear to be heard over the music.

“Not what. Who?” I guided her deeper into the club, one hand at the small of her back. “I’ll let you know when I see them. For now, let’s get drinks.”

Morgan twisted her lips, but allowed me to lead her to the bar. The bartender, a bald guy, nodded at us.

“Tequila,” Morgan said before I could order for us. “Double. Neat.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Pace yourself. We might be here a while.”

“If I’m spending my night playing spy, I’m not doing it sober.” She accepted the glass when it arrived, downing half in one smooth swallow.

I ordered a whiskey I wouldn’t drink. Alcohol was a show. My kind only needed blood. I scanned the club over the rim of my glass. The club’s lighting was designed for anonymity.

The VIP section occupied the far corner of the room and was elevated slightly above the main floor. That section was designed with plush booths separated by beaded curtains. This place was nothing like The Castle. I could look around and conclude the owner didn’t put much money into this place. My eyes lingered there, searching for Teresa, and for any sign of why she’d been coming here.

Morgan leaned against the bar. “Are you going to tell me what this is all about? Or should I just enjoy the music?”

I set my drink down after pretending to sip from it. “Dance with me.”

“What?”

“I need a better vantage point.” I took her hand, pulling her gently toward the dance

floor.

Morgan followed. Her expression was skeptical, but her body was already moving to the beat. We found a spot near the center of the floor where I could turn in any direction. The song was something fast with Spanish lyrics I couldn't quite catch over the noise of the crowd.

I placed my hands on Morgan's waist, pulling her close to me. She looped her arms around my neck as our bodies found the rhythm together. We were close enough that any observers would think we're just another couple, too absorbed in each other to notice anything else. I wanted to be this with her.

"Now will you tell me?" Morgan said against my ear.

"I'm looking for someone. A vampire named Teresa." I kept my voice low, my lips close to her ear as we moved in tandem. "She's been coming here, and I need to know why."

Morgan pulled back slightly. "Teresa? As in Zand's ex-wife Teresa? The one who is out here threatening my bestie?"

I spun her around, using the movement to scan the room again. "That one. How did you know?"

"Chanel told me."

"Teresa was here earlier tonight, but she left. I'm hoping she comes back, or that I can figure out why she's been frequenting this place."

"And you needed me for this because?—?"

“Because a lone guy lurking in a club looks suspicious and like a creeper. A couple enjoying a night out doesn’t.” I pulled her close again as the song changed. “I don’t think Teresa has ever seen you.”

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“What does Teresa look like?”

“She’s platinum blonde and average height and weight.”

“I’ll be on the lookout. She would stand out in this club full of Hispanics.”

I smiled into Morgan’s neck, happy that she was onboard with my plan. I continued the surveillance. My eyes constantly moved over the crowd, the bar, the VIP section. An hour passed with dancing, pretending to drink, and watching. Morgan played along and being around her made me more enamored with her.

We were back on the dance floor when I saw her. Not Teresa. But someone better.

She was sitting at a VIP table in the corner. A beaded curtain partially obscured her. Her dark hair fell on her shoulders. Even from a distance, I could see the harsh angles of her face. She was with two other people, a woman with long brown hair and a burly man whose back was to me.

My body tensed involuntarily, and Morgan noticed immediately.

“What is it?” She asked as her fingers tightened on my shoulder.

“Don’t look.” I murmured, spinning us so that I could keep the table in my peripheral vision. “But that woman in the corner booth sitting in VIP? Dark hair, black dress.”

Morgan silently laughed as if I’ve said something amusing. Her hand slid down to rest on my chest as she casually glanced over.

“Wait. Is that?”

I pulled her closer, lowering my voice further. “Marisol Lopez.”

Morgan stiffened in my arms. “Lonzo’s sister.”

“Yes.” I guided us into a turn that gave me a better angle of the table. “I can’t believe she’s here. Zand’s been looking for her since Lonzo disappeared.”

“Disappeared is a nice way of putting it.” Morgan muttered. “He’s dead. Your brother killed him.”

How the hell did she know that? It was clear we needed to do more talking and less fucking. Maybe not less, but we needed to have conversations with our clothes on.

“Zand killed Lonzo to protect Chanel.” I explained.

Morgan’s expression darkened. I forgot she knew Lonzo and that she’d been friends with Chanel when Lonzo was in the picture. There were so many things going on before I arrived in Chicago.

“Do you know who she’s with?” Morgan asked.

I maneuvered us again, trying to get a glimpse of the man’s face. “The woman I don’t recognize. The man I can’t see clearly.”

“I don’t want her to notice me. I never met her in person, but she probably knows what I look like if she had something to do with Craig’s death.”

Craig, the man before me that Morgan never talked much about. The dead boyfriend.

We danced for several more minutes, slowly working our way across the floor until I have a better angle on Marisol's table. The man of Mexican descent turned slightly, and I get my first clear look at his profile. I didn't recognize him. The other woman could be a relative. She resembled the picture of a cousin, but her hair color was different and from this distance, I couldn't be too sure.

"The lady with Marisol could be a cousin." I told Morgan. "The guy could be an uncle, or a cousin, maybe someone in the cartel. I'm not sure. I just know her still being in Chicago isn't good."

"Marisol is looking for her brother, and she's never going to find him."

"If Marisol is here with a cartel member, it can't be a coincidence. Not when Teresa has been coming to the same club."

"Do you think they're working together?" Morgan asked, following my train of thought. "Teresa and Marisol?"

"I think there's only one reason Marisol Lopez would be here in Chicago." I held Morgan's gaze. "She's looking for Chanel. For revenge. She has to know her brother is dead if she hasn't heard from him. I have a brother. We can't go more than a few days without communicating."

Morgan's expression hardened. "How the hell did Marisol run into a vampire?"

"Teresa is here to start trouble. Who knows how long she's been watching Chanel." I glanced back at the table where Marisol was now leaning forward. She was engaged in an intense conversation with the man.

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“This is scaring the shit out of me. I want to leave. We need to tell Zand.”

“Not yet. We need more information.” I held her closer as the song changed again. “If we go to Zand now, he’ll lock Chanel away, maybe move her to a different location. But we won’t know exactly what they’re up to.”

“And you think hanging around this stupid club watching a cartel meeting is going to give us that information?” Morgan’s voice dripped with skepticism. “This is dangerous, Harlen.”

“I’m a vampire and I can take three humans. I need to get closer so I can hear what they’re saying.”

Morgan grabbed my arm, digging her nails in deep. “No. That’s insane. They’ll notice you.”

She was right, of course. These weren’t regular people. These were cautious criminals. Marisol would notice a stranger lingering too close to her private conversation. I needed another approach.

“You need to report this to that scary blonde security lady that works for Zand.”

I nodded reluctantly. “I know. I just want to see if Teresa comes back.”

“Comes back. Was she here earlier?”

“Yes. I need to see if there’s any direct interaction between her and Marisol.”

Morgan moaned. “Fuck that shit. I’m not a vampire. I don’t even have my gun.”

“What gun?” I asked. Did Morgan have a gun?

She ignored my question. “I know Marisol and her people are strapped. Get, me, the fuck, out of here. Now.”

Morgan glared into my eyes, and I instantly knew my time was up. She was right. I didn’t have a plan, and I didn’t want to put her life in danger. My suspicions could be wrong. I hoped this was a weird coincidence that Marisol and her cohorts were at the same club Teresa had frequented. I had something to prove to my brother, but this wasn’t the time and the place to do that.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ZAND

My footsteps echoed against the silence as I entered my loft. I was home before sunrise, and Chanel was still asleep. As much as I wanted to spend more time with her, I felt like I had to go to The Castle every night. That was, at least until I took care of the threats against my people. I wanted things to go back to normal. I wanted my girl to feel safe.

The elevator doors shut behind me, but I sensed I wasn’t alone in the open space. There, hunched like a crow on the edge of my leather sofa, was Harlen. He was waiting for me. Why? What was so urgent?

“She didn’t see me.” He whispered. “But I saw her.” His face was grave, not at all like his normal fun and games expression.

Harlen’s unexpected seriousness overrode my physical and mental exhaustion. I

dropped my keys on the table. My eyes moved back to Harlen. I stood there waiting for more.

“She?”

“Marisol Lopez.”

I nodded, more of a gesture of understanding than a greeting. “Well?” My single word hung in the air between us.

Harlen ran a hand through his hair. He glanced toward the steps that led upstairs to the bedrooms, ensuring our privacy. I sensed Chanel and Morgan’s sleeping presence, felt the thrum of their heartbeats.

“Where?” I asked.

“At Club Bailar Caliente. She was with two other Mexicans.”

“What? That’s the place Teresa was last spotted. That’s the place Natasha sent you to watch out for Teresa.”

“I know, and that’s what I did. I went inside and I saw Marisol sitting in the VIP section with two other people.”

“Who are these people?”

“I didn’t recognize them. They could be her family. She kept them close like security. Real close.” Harlen’s eyes were alert.

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I paced the wood beneath my feet. My mind raced ahead, calculating possibilities, the danger, the need for action. “And?” The question was both impatient and inevitable.

“I couldn’t exactly do anything in a club full of people.”

“Yes, but did you follow her and see where she slept?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I had Morgan with me.”

“What? Why?” His careless actions always affected me.

“I wanted to go inside and blend in with everyone else. I asked Morgan to join me.”

“So, you lost Marisol because you had to bring a human as your sidekick.”

“Morgan isn’t my sidekick.”

“She’s human, and you put her in danger. Natasha sent you there for a reason, not to go on a date.”

“I know. I shouldn’t have called Morgan there, but Marisol didn’t see me. She doesn’t know me at all. I can go back.”

“There’s no guarantee she’s going back there.” I explained, thinking we missed an opportunity to capture Marisol.

“What do you mean? She’s here. Too much time had passed. There’s no way she doesn’t know her brother is dead.” Harlen leaned back on the leather sofa.

“It’s not just her. She’s got backup. Now I have to kill more humans than I imagined.” I stopped pacing and stood still. My brother’s eyes searched mine, looking for assurance or strategy or something I can’t yet give him.

“What’s our move?” Harlen asked.

“Let me think. We need to be smart.”

The loft was too quiet. I felt the pressure of time. This cat-and-mouse game had to be brought to an end.

“Did you tell Natasha about your Marisol sighting?”

“No. I came here directly. I dropped Morgan off, and I wanted to tell you as soon as possible.”

“I’ll make some calls.” I rested my hands on my waist.

“Listen, you don’t have to get your hands dirty. I can handle these humans.” Harlen offered.

“Can you?”

“Yes, of course. This is a problem for you and me. If I get rid of Marisol and her people, it’s safer for my girl, too. If she can’t get to Chanel, she might set her sights

on Morgan. All you have to do is give me the okay, and these people are as good as dead.”

“Quietly, I can’t have this blow back on me.”

Harlen stood. “Who do you think you’re talking to? I’ve killed people with zero remorse before we decided to be good vampire citizens.”

I remembered those reckless, impulsive times. “I need Marisol dead as soon as possible. I need at least one of my two problems taken care of.”

“That’s all I needed to hear. Once it’s done, I will let you know.”

“Okay, you only have to kill them. You don’t have to get rid of the bodies. I have a guy that will come and get the bodies and burn them at a crematorium. I want no trace of the Lopez gang.”

“There’s more.” Harlen said, and I instinctively knew his night might’ve been filled with more madness than mine. “I saw Teresa tonight.”

“Where?”

“At the same club. I was outside alone. This was before I spotted Marisol. Teresa exited the club earlier, and I followed her.”

Harlen’s words pressed against me and forced me to stand straighter.

“You followed her? Where?” I asked.

“A university dorm.” Harlen replied, deliberate and careful. “She left a mess. She didn’t even clean up after herself.”

Anger flared inside me. I knew what he meant, although he hadn’t given me enough information. My fists clenched and then loosened. The restraint I had was a bitter reminder of my self-control.

“She’s trying to get attention.” I said, my voice strained under the weight of my suppressed fury. Teresa’s recklessness was both typical and unprecedented. She had acted out right after she was turned. She went off and killed a few innocent people without my knowledge.

“It was more than just attention,” Harlen replied. He leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees. “The young girl’s body, Zand.” He shook his head as if he was visualizing what he’d seen. “She ripped her apart. The death was brutal and unnecessary. She left the girl in the dorm, right there for someone to find her. It was like she was sending a message.”

Teresa was chaos incarnate, but this was different. “A message for who?” I asked, unable to keep the edge from my voice.

Harlen shrugged. “For you. It’s an invitation.”

“What invitation? Why would I care if she killed some random college student? I don’t know any students. You saw the body. Who was this girl?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t think to look for any identification. I didn’t want to touch anything. She was just a young Black girl.”

“Black girl?” Did Teresa really kill some Black girl as a stand-in for Chanel? It was the first thing that came to mind.

“But that could be a coincidence.” Harlen stated, but I was sure he didn’t even believe his own statement.

“This is Teresa. I’m sure it’s not. She’s doing everything she can think of to get to me.”

“Well then, it’s a warning, a message, an invitation of something that’s coming.” Harlen blurted, as if testing the idea on his tongue.

“A threat.” I stopped and faced him. “She threatened me in the alley at The Castle, and this has to be a part of her scheme. She has to know I would never let her get close to Chanel. Teresa is ju?—”

“But can you watch Chanel forever?” Harlen cut in. His voice was sharper than I expected.

“I don’t have to watch her forever. I only have to keep her safe until Teresa sees her

final death.”

Teresa was reckless, but not usually suicidal. Didn't she know that this was the end of the road for her? I only wanted her to leave town and now I was forced with ending someone I turned into a vampire. Did she think she was untouchable, or worse, that I wouldn't follow through on my promise to end her?

“She must have a plan.” Harlen said.

“Same plan she always has. Destroy the people around her first and figure it out later.”

Harlen knew this all too well. Teresa destroyed the relationship I had with him and my father. This was why Harlen was so eager to repair our connection. The room felt too small, too crowded with memories of Teresa's previous chaos. I left L.A. to escape her, and she eventually followed me here to ruin all that I built.

“She doesn't get to destroy anything else. I'm going to take care of her.” Harlen declared.

“No, no. I can handle Teresa. Your job is to take care of Marisol and her people. Humans are easier to deal with. Is there a reason Marisol and Teresa were at the same place?” I asked, though I knew I'd get no comfort in the answer.

“I don't know.” Harlen admitted. “But it's not likely a coincidence, both of them showing up now.”

“Did you see them together?”

“I didn't, but Teresa, at a Latin nightclub, doesn't sit right with me.”

“Me neither, but I don’t know what to think. Marisol’s been careful.” I said, more to remind myself than him. “This isn’t her style.”

“They might be working together.” Harlen suggested. “Different goals, same endgame.”

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“Teresa wants me. Marisol wants Chanel.” I argued.

“Teresa probably believes getting rid of Chanel?—”

“Don’t say it. I would never go back to her. Never. Ever.” I spoke the truest words.

“I don’t think she believes that.”

“She doesn’t have to believe it. She only has to die. I need to know if they’re working together. But if you have the opportunity to kill Marisol, do that.”

“I could torture the truth out of her first.”

“No torture. Just death. I’m not going to let anyone else in Alonzo Lopez’s family fuck with my girl.”

“Sure, whatever you say.” Harlen replied. the casualness gone, replaced by something I wanted to believe in.

“No distractions. You can’t bring Morgan around these dangerous people.” I warned.

“I know. That was a mistake I won’t make next time.” He promised. His resolve looked different this time. Solid, like he meant it. “I’ve got your back, Zand.”

I wanted to doubt, to hold on to the skepticism that years of Harlen’s unpredictable nature had forged, but there was something in his voice, sincerity.

“And Marisol?” I pushed, needing to know how far his commitment went.

“Yes.”

“I want you to drain that bitch dry. Leave Teresa to me. Natasha will help me stop her. Is there anything else, anything you forgot to tell me?”

“No. But be on the lookout for the news story about the murdered girl in the dorm. I’m not sure how the law is going to handle it. Maybe they will go with an animal attack.”

“If it was as bad as you say, I’m sure they will. CPD doesn’t want too many violent crimes getting out to the public. The mayor covers up anything that would make the city look bad.”

“Should I tell Natasha what happened tonight?”

“I will give her a call and fill her in on everything that happened tonight.” I said as I crossed my arms. “When you take Marisol and her crew out, make sure you’re not seen.”

“I got you.” He nodded once. The set of his jaw and the intensity in his eyes told me he was listening to my instructions.

“I have a cleanup crew. But don’t make too much of a mess.”

“I won’t. I can do this. I can handle a few humans.”

“I know you can. I just want this problem to be over with as soon as possible.”

“It will. I’m going to go back to the apartments and get some sleep. Later tonight, I’ll

be right back at Club Bailar Caliente. If I see her, she's done."

"Avoid as many surveillance cameras as you can. I will get Natasha to wipe all CCTV evidence that she can, but it's better if there isn't much of it floating around."

"Bro, don't worry. I got this," Harlen said.

"I know. I'm not worried. I just don't want there to be any complications."

"I'm going back to the apartments, and I will text you when something happens."

We held each other's gaze. We were two brothers tied together by blood. "Harlen, watch your back." I said, wondering if I should send someone with him.

"I always do. You taught me that much." Harlen grinned and gave me a final look. He stood and then moved towards the elevator. The sun had risen and soon he would be ready to slip back into the night that belongs to us.

I looked out the window from the second floor living room. After a few minutes, I watched Harlen get in a sedan that was parked across the street and pull away from my loft. I should've felt relieved that Harlen had volunteered to remove one of my problems. But I couldn't feel it until the deed was done, and Marisol was dead.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CHANEL

A buzzing sound erupted, shaking me out of my sleep. The vibration under my pillow pulled me from my sweet dreams. The California King bed felt so comfortable before the noisy interruption. I shoved my hand under my pillow and fumbled for my phone. My eyes focused on the cell phone screen. My stomach dropped when I saw the Minnesota area code. I read the name and felt my chest tighten. Detective Crowley was calling. I rose from the bedsheets. As soon as I answered, I wished I would've declined the call.

"Hello?" My voice was a faint whisper, though I knew it would take much more than this to wake Zand during daylight hours.

"Ms. Taylor? This is Detective Crowley from the Bloomington Police Department."

His formal tone sent a chill through me. I slipped from beneath the silky sheets and scurried across the cold hardwood floor, out into the hallway where I could speak freely.

"Yes, Detective. Is something wrong?" I wiped the sleep from my eyes.

"We need to speak with you. My partner and I are at the Chicago Police Department. Can you come in this morning?"

"Right now?"

“Yes. There’s been a development we need to discuss with you.”

“A development?” What could that mean? I hated how secretive they had been since the beginning of this mess.

“It’s about Alonzo.” Crowley said, and that wasn’t enough information for me to figure it out.

“How soon can you get here?”

I glanced at the time: 7:13 AM. “I can be there in about an hour and a half. I just need the address.”

“Thank you, Ms. Taylor. I will text the address to you. Ask for me at the front desk when you arrive.”

I waited for Crowley to end the call first. I was alone in the hallway with an irregular heartbeat. A development, the vagueness of it made my imagination run wild with possibilities, none of them good.

I walked back into the bedroom. Zand was lying motionless on his back, on his side of the bed. While sleep his face lost its intensity. His skin seemed softer and almost childlike. He was still fine as hell, but he looked peaceful when he was getting some Z’s.

I had grown used to his daytime absence. He needed at least four hours of sleep and I wasn’t going to wake him with this when I didn’t know what this was. I was a big girl and could handle this on my own. He wouldn’t even know I was gone until he woke up in a few hours. Hopefully, I would be back before that time came. I wasn’t trying to spend hours of my day at a police station.

I drug myself into the adjoining bathroom. The shower ran hot as steam filled the massive room. I washed quickly, trying not to think about what the detectives wanted from me. Crowley's voice didn't give anything away.

When I closed my eyes to rinse my face, I saw Lonzo. I remembered his last expression before he died. There was the shock and the realization that he would not survive. He saw Zand, the vampire, and he had to know he would die. I snapped out of the memory and opened my eyes, forcing the image away.

I was moving too slowly. I rinsed myself off and stepped out of the shower. After toweling myself dry, I dressed in dark jeans and a gray sweater. My hands shook as I applied minimal makeup and scooped my hair up into a ponytail. I needed to calm down. I grabbed my cell phone and played the song Calm Down by Rema featuring Selena Gomez twice before I exited the bathroom. Did that calm me? Maybe a little bit.

Downstairs, the loft was quiet and vast. Morning light filtered through the windows of the living area. The smell of coffee lured me into the kitchen. Coffee. I needed it. The rich, dark aroma wrapped around me.

"Good morning, girl?" Morgan muttered, with sleep clinging to her voice. She stood by the island sipping from a coffee mug. Her hair was covered in a silk bonnet. She looked at me with prying eyes.

"Morning." I tried to sound upbeat.

"You completely dressed and not in bed with your man. What's up?" She already sensed something was wrong.

"I got a call from Detective Crowley. They want me to come to the police station."

Morgan's lips twisted. "These fools still here in Chicago?"

I nodded, pouring coffee with hands that didn't feel entirely steady. "They said there's been a development in Lonzo's case."

"What kind of development? They the dumb asses that let him slip out of an ankle monitor and escape from Minnesota."

"They wouldn't tell me over the phone." The coffee was too hot, but I sipped it anyway. It gave me something else to focus on. "I have to go in and talk to them—again."

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“I’m coming with you.”

“You don’t have to?—”

“Don’t even try it.” She cut me off with a look that said don’t argue with me this nice sunny morning. “There’s no way I’m letting you go down there alone. Those detectives are a fucking joke. At this point, none of this shit got anything to do with you. They lost old boy, so there is no trial for you to even testify at. They need to keep it pushing, cause what the fuck already.”

Morgan’s abrasive words gave me strength. Mostly because she was right. I knew Lonzo was dead, so I didn’t have anything else to add to whatever new development they had.

“Give me fifteen minutes to get ready.” Morgan was already heading back toward the guest room when I went to take another sip of my coffee that definitely needed cream and sugar.

While Morgan dressed, I called Josh. My driver answered on the second ring.

“Hello.” His voice was alert despite the early hour. I knew he was a vampire, so now I was wondering when he slept.

“It’s me, Chanel.”

“Do you need me to drive you somewhere?”

How did he know? “Yeah, I need a ride to 26th and California. To the police station.”

There was a brief pause. “Everything alright, Ms. Taylor?”

“Yes. I just need to talk to those detectives from Minnesota.”

“I’ll be there in fifteen minutes, ma’am.”

“Thank you, Josh.”

“No problem, ma’am.”

True to his word, exactly fifteen minutes later, the intercom buzzed. From the window, I could see the sleek black Rezvani SUV idling down at the curb. The dark tinted windows reflected off the morning sun. The vehicle really looked like something from a spy movie, bulletproof and menacing.

I scrawled a quick note for Zand and leave it in the bedroom as I tiptoe out.

Morgan emerged from the guest room in black jeans and a fitted gray sweater. Her makeup was flawless despite the rushed timeline. She squeezed my arm as we entered the elevator to go down to the ground level.

Josh was standing beside the rear passenger door, opening it as we approached. He greeted both of us and opened the back door so that we could climb in. After closing the door for us, his eyes scanned the street in a careful way. He was always on high alert. When Josh was around, I felt like I had my own personal Julius. He could be my bodyguard because he was, but he never let me ride shotgun.

As we pulled away from the curb, I stared out the truck window. Morning commuters were on the sidewalks with coffee cups in hand. The city seemed so normal, so

unaware of things like vampires.

“What do you think they want?” Morgan asked, bringing me back into the moment.

I shook my head. “I wish I knew.”

The traffic thickened as we approached central downtown. My phone weighed heavy in my pocket. I thought about texting Zand. I didn’t. I could tell him what happened later.

As the police station came into view, the bland stone facade made my heart feel like it was under attack. I was so tired of this feeling.

Josh pulled the SUV to the curb in front of the police station.

“I’m going in alone. I will call if I need like a lawyer or something.”

“We’ll be waiting in the lot,” Josh said with his eyes meeting mine in the rearview mirror. “Call when you’re done. I will pick you up at this spot.”

I sighed heavily. “Okay.”

Morgan reached across the seat and squeezed my hand. “Don’t let them dummies intimidate you.”

I finally stepped out of the truck. I made it up the stairs and the automatic doors part. The lobby smells like industrial cleaner. CPD officers move about with purposeful strides. These cops looked like they have seen it all. It dawns on me that they haven’t seen vampires, and I get an inner chuckle.

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At the front desk, a uniformed officer with tired eyes directs me to sign in. “I’m here to see Detective Crowley from the Bloomington Police Department.”

“I.D.” He responded, not looking up at me.

I slid my real I.D. slash driver’s license across the counter, watching as he typed my personal information into a computer.

“Wait here.” He said finally, picking up a phone.

I stood awkwardly at the counter. The fluorescent lights above casts everyone in a dull light. I looked around at a young woman crying softly in a corner chair. There was a man that looked homeless with bloodshot eyes staring blankly at a vending machine.

“Ms. Taylor?”

I turned to see Detective Crowley approaching. He looked a little different from the last time I saw him. He extended his hand, and I shook it.

“Thank you for coming in so fast.” His handshake was firm. “Follow me.”

He led me through a security door, down a long hallway lined with glass office windows.

“In here.” Crowley gestured to a small room.

The interrogation room felt smaller than it probably appeared. A plain metal table was bolted to the floor. Four hard metal chairs without seat cushions. This was a different room than the last time I was here, smaller and colder.

Detective Jamison was already sitting with a manila folder open before him. His salt-and-pepper hair was combed severely to one side, and deep lines that crossed his forehead could use some Botox.

“Ms. Taylor.” He acknowledged me with a curt nod. “Please, sit.”

I lowered myself into the chair opposite them.

Crowley began. “There’s been a development in the Alonzo Lopez case that we felt you should be aware of.”

I swallowed hard. “What kind of development?”

Jamison slid a photograph across the table. It was grainy and clearly from security footage. A woman whose face was partially obscured by large sunglasses despite being indoors. Her dark hair was pulled back in a severe ponytail. Even with the poor quality of the image, I could see the family resemblance to Lonzo. I knew her face. She hated me from the day we met.

“This is Marisol Lopez.” Jamison said, his voice flat. “Alonzo’s sister. Surveillance cameras captured her downtown at the Lakeview Hotel last week.”

My fingers hovered over the image, not quite touching it. “Are you sure it’s her?” I said, being dramatic. That was clearly the bitch that was after me.

Crowley nodded. “Her mother’s credit card was used to book the room. We’ve been monitoring the family’s financial activities since Lonzo went missing.”

“Do you know why she’s here?” I asked, though I already knew the answer.

The detectives exchanged a glance. Crowley leaned forward, elbows on the table.

“We believe she’s looking for her brother. She may not know he’s dead.”

“Dead?” Give me my Oscar right now. “I thought he was in Mexico or somewhere else.”

“Lonzo hasn’t been spotted anywhere. There is no body, or remains, but we think he’s dead.” Jamison said.

“Cartel probably killed him thinking he was going to give some of their people up in exchange for a lighter sentence.”

“If that happened, why is Marisol here looking for him?”

“She doesn’t know. She probably doesn’t think the Cartel would turn on her family.”

“We wanted to offer you protection,” Crowley said. “Protective custody until we can locate Ms. Lopez and determine her intentions.”

The thought of being locked away, even for my own safety, made my skin crawl.

“No.” I said firmly. “I’m not going into protective custody.”

Jamison’s eyebrows rose, adding more lines to his already creased forehead. “Ms. Taylor, I don’t think you understand the potential danger?—”

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“I understand.” I interrupt. “But I have my own protection.”

“You mean the club owner, Valentine?” Jamison said with a note of disapproval in his voice. “We’ve looked into him. His club. His associates.”

A spark of defensiveness ripped through my core. “Okay and?”

“He appears to be a legit businessman for the last few years. Before that, nothing.”

I held back an eye roll. “Is there anything else?”

“Everyone who was subpoenaed to testify against Alonzo Lopez is in danger until his sister is found.” Jamison said bluntly.

I met his stare with one of my own. “Then find her.”

Crowley shifted in his seat, clearing his throat. “There’s something else you should know?—”

Jamison’s hand came down on his partner’s forearm. “That’s all we needed to discuss today, Detective.”

There was tension between them. Something passed between them in that look, a warning, a battle of wills. I felt it from across the table.

“What?” I pressed. “What else should I know?”

Crowley hesitated. “Just be careful out there. Chicago can be dangerous for young women. Women like you.”

Women like me? His generic warning felt hollow. It was a poor substitute for whatever he was about to say to me. Jamison’s expression was the same, but the tightness around his thin lips suggested they were holding something back.

“Is that all?” I asked, unable to keep the edge from my voice.

“For now.” Jamison said, closing the manila folder. “We’ll be in touch if anything changes.”

Crowley escorted me back to the lobby. My mind raced, trying to piece together what they weren’t telling me.

As I walked through the automatic glass doors, I felt more unsettled than when I arrived. I knew that Marisol Lopez was in Chicago. But it was what the detectives wouldn’t say that had my panties in a bunch. Something else was coming. I could feel it. But damn, I had enough drama and mess for five lifetimes.

I stood on the concrete steps of the police station waiting not more than a few seconds. I spotted Josh turning the corner. He pulled to the curb with surgical precision, and I hurry down the steps, suddenly desperate to be inside the armored sanctuary. The door opened before I could reach it. Morgan’s face appeared.

“What happened?” She asked as I slid into the seat beside her. “What did they say?”

Josh met my eyes in the rearview mirror, his expression neutral. “Where to, Ms. Taylor?”

“Home, the loft.”

He nodded once and pulled away from the curb, merging seamlessly into the flow of traffic.

“Coco, what did Beavis and Butthead want?”

I took a deep breath, organizing my thoughts. “Marisol Lopez is still in Chicago. I hoped she would go back to Bloomington when she didn’t find her brother. They showed me a photo of her at the Lakeview Hotel downtown. She used her mother’s credit card last week to get a room.”

“That’s it. Did they say what she was doing here?”

“They think she’s looking for her brother. But we already knew that. Crowley offered to put me in protective custody again, but I refused.”

“Good.” Morgan said firmly. “We can protect you better than those incompetent ass cops.”

“Calm down Angela Davis.” I joked.

As I looked over at Morgan, I noticed something in her expression. “What is it?”

“I need to tell you something.” Morgan’s voice dropped to just above a whisper. She glanced at the back of Josh’s head, then leaned closer to me. “I’ve seen her—Marisol.”

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“What?” My hand flew to my chest.

“She was at this place called Club Bailar Caliente.”

“What? When?”

“Last night.” Morgan’s gray eyes enlarged. “Harlen called me last night. He asked me to go out with him and I thought, I don’t know what I thought. I just was trying to hang.”

“You went to a club with Harlen? Without telling me?”

“It wasn’t like that. You were asleep.” She said defensively.

I lowered my voice and gritted my teeth. “You aren’t supposed to go off with one of them without me knowing where you at.”

“Girl. You go off with them all the time by yourself.” Morgan tipped her head toward Josh.

She had a good point, but I needed to know if she was with a vampire just for safety’s sake. “I still need to know.”

“Fine. You know I’m fucking him, so I might as well go on a date with him, too.”

“I wish you would stop that, too.”

“Okay, now you trippin’.” Harlen was on some kind of stakeout. “We were just supposed to blend in, dance a little, have a few drinks. But then I saw him watching this woman in the VIP section. It was Marisol.”

“How did you know it was her?”

“Remember, after everything happened back at home? How we looked up Lonzo’s family members on Facebook? We found those old pictures of his sister. She was tagged in the one photo where she’s at her cousin’s quinceañera. She was wearing that ugly ass red dress. I recognized that bitch immediately.”

My stomach dropped as the memory surfaced. We spent hours hunched over my laptop in my old apartment. I was searching for any information about the Lopez family after Lonzo murdered three people right near me. Finding Marisol’s profile had felt like a small victory at the time.

“I forgot all about that.” I said.

“That’s why you got me. I don’t forget shit. She was with a woman and a man last night.” Morgan continued. “They acted her security. But they could’ve just been her peoples.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing. We left.”

“Did she see you?” I asked.

Morgan shook her head. “I don’t think so. Harlen rushed us out of there as soon as I told him we had to go.”

“You need to stay away from The Castle.” I said finally, turning back to Morgan.
“And from anywhere too public until this is over.”

“What about you? What are you going to do?” Morgan asked.

It was a good question. One I didn’t have a good answer for. “I need to tell Zand about the detectives. About what they showed me. And I have to tell him you saw Marisol.”

“I think he already knows’ Harlen said he was going to tell him last night.”

“Was Zand going to tell me that y’all seen her?” Would Zand keep something like this from me? To protect me? The thought sat uncomfortably in my mind.

“You didn’t give him a chance to. It just happened a few hours ago.”

“We should both watch our backs.” I said quietly.

“Always. I came prepared.” Morgan opened her purse, and I looked down to see a shiny black handgun in her handbag.

“Where did you get that?”

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“Remember, my daddy got me this when I turned twenty-one?”

“Yeah.” I forgot all about Mr. Hayes taking his daughter to the gun range occasionally.

“We know what Lonzo did to Craig. Marisol might’ve had something to do with it. You don’t have to tell me to watch my back.”

“That bitch is determined, and I know Zand and Harlen will not let her get to us.”

“I know we got them people.” She gestured to the vampire driving us. “But I got my shit just in case that bitch wanna run up.”

Could Morgan shoot someone? Sure. Now I wish I would’ve bought a gun for my own protection a long time ago. I had been too stressed to even think about gun ownership.

Marisol wanted to get to me. She never liked me from the beginning. Lonzo once told me she called me *aperra bruja negra*, black witch bitch in Spanish. The question wasn’t if Marisol found me, the question was— when.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

HARLEN

Before I went to Club Bailar Caliente to look for Marisol, I wanted to apologize to Morgan for putting her in harm’s way. I hoped she wasn’t mad at me. I wasn’t

thinking when I invited her on a stakeout with me. It was stupid and reckless. I had enough time to go visit Morgan at the loft. My brother had already gone to The Castle. I didn't have to run into him and hear him scold me about dating Morgan.

When I called ahead to let Morgan know I was coming, she didn't sound upset. I took that as a sign that I was welcomed to visit. This time I parked in the inside garage. Josh opened the garage door for me. I rode the elevator up to the loft. Morgan was waiting there for me at the elevator doors. She was wearing a white tank top and black shorts. Her hair was still big and curly like the night before. She was really a goddess. By far the most beautiful woman I'd ever been with, and I had a lot of bodies, like the young cool people say nowadays.

"Hey," she said in a neutral tone.

"Hey."

"Come back to my room."

I followed her to one of the guest bedrooms that she had claimed as her own. I couldn't help but stare at her ass. After she closed the door to her room, we both sat on the bed.

"I'm sorry I asked you to join me at the club. It was dangerous."

"Yeah, but it was also fun. We never go on dates. It was a good time until we saw that bitch Marisol."

"It was a good time. I can take you on more dates."

"I like dates, but I really like when we fuck."

“Oh, I love when we fuck, too.” I got excited by her choice of words.

“You have never shown me your fangs.”

“I know. I didn’t want to scare you away.”

“Do you think I scare that easy?” She purred and pressed her luscious lips together.

“No, I would never think that about you.”

“Well, let me see ‘em.”

“I’ll show you my fangs if you show me your tits.”

“Not a problem.” Morgan lifted her tank top over her head and tossed it. She exposed her gorgeous set of plump and firm C cups to my hungry eyes.

My mouth watered at the sight of her perfect breasts. Her pink nipples were already hard and begging for my attention.

“Your turn,” she said with a mischievous smile.

I let the change come over me. I felt my canines extend and push through my gums. I parted my lips and let her see my parlor trick.

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Morgan's eyes grew, but not with fear. She leaned closer, studying my fangs with fascination.

"Can I touch them?" She whispered.

I nodded, and she reached out, running her fingertip gently over the sharp point of one fang. The sensation sent a shiver down my spine and straight to my cock.

"Does it hurt when they come out?" She asked.

"No, it feels natural."

She moved her finger away and replaced it with her lips, kissing me softly. I was careful not to nick her as our kiss deepened. Her tongue explored my mouth, teasing against my fangs, and I groaned with need.

"I want more than just your tits," I growled against her mouth.

"Take what you want," she breathed. "I'm all yours tonight."

I pushed her back onto the bed, my hands roaming over her skin. She arched into my touch as I cupped her breasts, rolling her nipples between my fingers. The scent of her arousal filled the room, making my head swim.

"You have no idea how fucking sexy you are." I said, trailing kisses down her neck. I could feel her pulse racing beneath my lips, the blood pumping just below the surface. I had to fight the urge to bite down.

“I know how sexy I am. You just need to fuck me like you know.”

I couldn't hold back any longer. I pushed her down flat on her back and yanked her shorts down her legs, revealing she wasn't wearing anything underneath. My cock strained painfully against my jeans as I took in the sight of her wet pussy.

“Fuck, Morgan,” I growled, my fangs still fully extended. “You planned this, didn't you?”

She spread her legs wider, her fingers trailing down to part her folds. “Maybe. Or maybe I just don't like panties. Are you going to stare all night or are you going to fuck me?”

I stripped off my clothes in record time, nearly tearing my shirt in the process. My cock sprang free, rock hard and ready. Morgan's eyes darkened with lust as she watched me.

I crawled between her legs, teasing her entrance with the head of my cock. She was dripping wet. Her cream coated my shaft as I rubbed against her clit.

“Tell me what you want.” I demanded, needing to hear her say it. Her voice was like music to my vampire ears.

“I want you to beat my pussy up.” She moaned, grinding against me. “I want to feel those fangs on my skin while you pound me into this mattress.”

That was all I needed to hear. I slammed into her in one powerful thrust, burying myself to the hilt. She cried out, her back arching off the bed, her manicured nails digging into my shoulders.

“Fuck, you're so tight.” I hissed, holding still for a moment to savor the feeling of her

pussy clenching around me.

“Don’t stop.” She begged, wrapping her legs around my waist.

I moved, pulling almost all the way out before driving back in. Each thrust pushed her up the bed until she braced her hands against the headboard. The room filled with the sounds of our bodies slapping together and Morgan’s increasingly loud moans.

I leaned down, running my fangs lightly over her neck, careful not to break the delicate skin. She shuddered beneath me. Her pussy tightened in response.

“Do you like that?” I whispered against her ear.

“God, yes,” she gasped. “I fucking love this vampire dick.”

An unexpected response, but the best words my ears had ever heard in all my long years on earth. I increased my pace, pounding into her relentlessly. Her breasts bounced with each thrust, and I captured one nipple in my mouth, grazing it with my fangs. Morgan screamed. Her body trembled as she approached her climax.

“I’m gonna come,” she warned, her voice breaking. “Fuck, don’t stop!”

I reached between us, rubbing her clit in tight circles as I continued to drive into her. Her walls clamped down on my cock as she came, her entire body shaking with the force of her orgasm. The sight of her coming undone pushed me over the edge, and I buried myself deep inside her as I erupted, filling her with hot spurts of cum.

We collapsed together, sweaty and panting. I carefully retracted my fangs as I rolled to the side, pulling her against my chest.

“That was...” she trailed off, still catching her breath. “Amazing.”

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“Amazing.” I agreed, kissing the top of her head.

After a few minutes of comfortable silence, I remembered why I had come here in the first place. I had apologized, but now I had to leave to go to that club out west. I had a job, an assignment to get to. I refused to let my brother down again.

“Morgan,” I said reluctantly, “I hate to do this, but I need to go.”

She propped herself up on one elbow, looking down at me with a satisfied smile. “Marisol hunting?”

I nodded. “I need to find her before she disappears.”

“I understand,” she said, tracing patterns on my chest. “Just promise me one thing.”

“Anything.”

“Next time, show me what else those fangs can do.” Her eyes sparkled with mischief.

“That’s a promise I’ll definitely keep,” I said, pulling her down for one last kiss before I had to go.

I hurried and got dressed. I could’ve showered. But why would I wash Morgan off my body? If she couldn’t be with me in the flesh, I wanted to have her human sweat and pussy juices available to sniff, so they could comfort me when I was feeling lonely.

With one last kiss on her mouth and a quick lick of her pussy, I was out the door. I preferred my tongue to taste like her nectar. Instead of the pepper-minty flavor that came with being a vampire. I headed out and drove to my destination.

The club music pulsed around me. I was going to make good on my promise to my brother. I nursed my whiskey glass. This time I was really pretending to drink it. I was consuming the alcohol like a real human would. While my eyes never left Marisol Lopez, my stalking wasn't apparent to the patrons around me. I was watching her, and I wondered who she was watching. Tonight, I was the real predator. I was waiting for her to make one fatal mistake.

Club Bailar Caliente had a full house tonight. There were more bodies moving in rhythm to the Latin beats than the night before. Red and blue lights swept across the dance floor, making everyone look like blue-faced angels and red-faced devils. I positioned myself at the bar. I had a perfect vantage point with an unobstructed view of Marisol while remaining half-concealed in the shadows.

I ordered another whiskey. It was my fifth in two hours. The bartender, a woman with long raven hair and fake tits, slid it across the bar without a word. She didn't know booze would never intoxicate me. I wondered how many more drinks she could serve me before I was cut off.

Marisol was sitting alone tonight. No bodyguards, no friends. Just her and a glass of something clear with a lime that she barely touched. Her dark hair was pulled back. She was dressed simply in black leather pants and a silky red top. Nothing flashy, nothing memorable and nothing I would consider sexy. I spotted her female sidekick in the club on the dance floor. Natasha believed the woman was Marisol's older cousin, Eva. Her name didn't matter to me. I just wanted the ladies to stay away from each other for one night. Just so I could have Marisol all to myself.

I scanned the room with practiced precision. I took note of the exits, the minimal

security cameras, the security staff, and the lone bouncer by the front door. I had to do this right, and that meant I had to be cautious.

My fingers drummed against the bar top. I had been here for hours. It seemed Marisol had no plans to leave soon. The minutes drug on. I thought of Morgan and the softness of her skin against mine. I shouldn't have brought her here before. Zand was right. It was reckless, including her in something that could turn dangerous.

A stab of something uncomfortable twists in my gut. Is it guilt? I pushed it away. Tonight was all about redemption. About proving to Zand that I could handle this, that I could be trusted, and that he was my family, and I would never betray him again.

I pulled my phone out, careful to keep it angled away from prying eyes. The music was too loud to call Zand. My only option was text message.

I text: Been here for a couple of hours. She's here.

Zand: Don't let her get away.

I text: I won't.

Zand: I need this over with. Do you need me to send someone?

I text: No I got this. Let's keep the circle small.

Zand: Keep your eye on her.

I text: Yes brother.

Marisol stood suddenly. She moved toward the dance floor. I tensed, thinking she

might leave, but she merely accepted a dance from a tall man in a bright shiny shirt. Marisol could dance. Her movements were fluid and practiced. Her smile didn't reach her eyes, and there was something cold and masculine about her body language.

I watched as she danced with three different tall Hispanic partners over the next thirty minutes. The amigos were never allowed to get too close by her. She never left the dance floor with any of them. She was either being cautious or waiting for someone specific. Either way, it complicated things for me. I needed her to be all alone.

Patience had never been my strong suit. I shifted my weight on the barstool, watching her go back and sit in the VIP section. The artificial calm I projected felt ill-fitting and uncomfortable. My true nature was that of a predator. I wanted to strike. I wanted to put an end to thischica.

The club thinned out as 2 AM approached. The music shifted to a slower beat. They were closing down earlier today. Bartenders called for last rounds. Drunk couples clung to each other, swaying more from intoxication than rhythm.

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And finally, Marisol stood, collecting her small purse from a table. She headed toward a side exit without a backwards glance. I gave her just enough of a head-start to feel safe and secure out on the Chicago streets.

I stood up, leaving my barely touched whiskey and a generous tip. I stepped outside the exit door. It was a welcome relief after hours in the club's stench. The street was busy enough that I don't stand out, but quiet enough that I can track Marisol's walking about half a block ahead of me.

She walked alone with her head up. Not the posture of someone afraid to walk the streets at night. She was probably strapped, like Morgan suspected.

I followed at a safe distance. I was just another late-night partygoer heading home. The predator in me was fully awake now. I was hungry for fresh blood after guzzling that abomination called whiskey.

As we moved away from the busier streets toward a row of dimly lit storefronts closed for the night, I knew my moment was coming. Ahead of us was a particularly dark stretch of sidewalk. This area was perfect for what needed to be done to end this chapter.

Marisol's heels tapped against the concrete. Click. Click. Click. The sound measured the seconds of life she had left. She turned down a narrower street, lined with closed shops and parked cars, but no people. No witnesses. This was perfect.

I accelerated my pace and let the distance between us shrink. I was close enough to smell her perfume. I was close enough to see the slight tension in her shoulders. Was

it awareness? Impossible. She couldn't hear me. I was soundless behind her.

Now. It had to be now. I told myself to lunge forward with my hands and reach for her throat. I was going to force her down to the sidewalk, rendering her immobile underneath my weight.

After the lunge, something went wrong. Instead of connecting with the soft flesh of her neck, my hands grasped at the empty air. Marisol pivoted impossibly fast, and she was facing me.

“What took you so long?” She teased with a surprisingly calm tone. “I thought you were going to jump me two blocks ago.”

I didn't have a response. I shifted into a fighting stance.

“You fucking gringos.” She smirked and raised her fist.

I couldn't hold back my chuckle. Did she think she could win this fight? Marisol struck me first. There was a blur of movement that I could barely detect. Her fist grazed my jaw, and it was like being hit with a hammer. She was too strong. Too fast. Something was fucking off! Something was fucking wrong!

I recovered quickly, driving forward with a barrage of blows aimed at her face and torso. She blocked most of them, but I connected with one that sent her stumbling back against a brick wall. The impact would crush a human's spine. Marisol merely grunted. Was she on drugs? She smelled like a human.

“Who sent you?”

I didn't answer. Words were distractions. Instead, I faked left and attacked her on the right. I grabbed her arm and used her momentum to slam her to the ground. I was on

top of her in an instant, pinning her with my weight, with one hand around her throat.

“You shouldn’t have come to Chicago.” I growled, tightening my grip. “

A strange sound escaped her mouth, not a choke or gasp, but a hearty laugh.

“You, stupid gringo.”

Marisol’s face changed. It wasn’t gradual. It was instant. Her dark eyes lightened. Her red lips parted to reveal what couldn’t possibly be there.

Fangs! Vampire fangs!

“What the fuck?” The words tumbled out before I could stop them. My grip on her throat loosened from the shock. “You’re a vampire?”

That single split-second of hesitation costs me everything. Marisol bucked beneath me with her supernatural strength. She threw me off balance. Her hand connected with my chest, and I was suddenly airborne. I crashed into a parked car ten feet away. The impact dented the metal and shattered glass rained down around me.

Pain bloomed across my back. Not debilitating, but sharp enough to slow me down. I scrambled to my feet as Marisol rose from the ground with fluidity that only came from vampire reflexes.

“Tell your brother his ex-wife sends her regards!” She yelled out while running away from me. “Now I can avenge my brother!”

I took off behind her, but she had a head-start on me.

I use all my speed to dive at her. She sidesteps and delivers a kick to my knee that

would have shattered a human's joint. I staggered but didn't fall. I was ready to fight to the death. I could take a new vamp.

Something odd flickered across her new face. Marisol turned on her heels and ran away from me. I chased her toward the end of the block. I sprinted after her, pushing my body to its limits. I was faster than her, older, and more experienced but she had a head start. I started to close the distance between us. I reached up and my fingers nearly brushed the back of her shirt.

A few feet ahead a black sedan appeared on the street stopping directly in our path.

The sedan's door flung open and Marisol dove inside. I caught a glimpse of the driver, a woman with olive skin and dark hair. Before the door slammed shut, the car accelerated with a screech of tires.

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I refused to let it end like this. I gave chase for a full block, keeping pace with the speeding vehicle. They blew through a red light into busy cross-traffic. Horns blared and cars swerved to avoid a collision. I skidded to a stop, missing the minivan that was destined to crash into me.

“Fuck! Fuck! Fuckkkk!” I cursed violently as the sedan disappeared into Chicago’s maze of streets.

For a long moment, I stood there, chest heaving from rage and disbelief. Teresa turned Marisol. She created another vampire, an enemy specifically engineered to hurt my brother and his human.

My cell phone vibrated in my pocket. I removed it to look at the screen. It was Zand. I ignored it. This news needs to be delivered in person. Immediately.

There was no fucking way I failed again. Fuck! I failed again.

CHAPTER TWENTY

HARLEN

Zand was going to be disappointed with me, but not more disappointed than I was with myself. I was bested by a new vampire, a new girl vampire. My night would be unbelievable if I was there to witness this shit firsthand with my own vampire eyes.

Defeated by the night’s events, I ran back to my car and drove directly to The Castle.

I parked in the private lot and entered the staff door at the side, where a lone security guard nodded when he saw me. It was either Jim or Nick. There was another guy named Viktor too, but it wasn't him. He didn't question my disheveled appearance or the wild look in my eyes. In vampire ran establishments, you learn not to ask unnecessary questions.

I pushed through the crowd, ignoring the curious glances. My singular focus was to find my brother.

My key card granted access to the private elevator. With a key card swipe, the doors slide open with a soft ping that felt absurdly mundane, given the chaos in my head. Inside, I punched the button for the top floor. The elevator felt too slow and too confined.

When the doors finally opened. I sprinted down the red painted hallway to Zand's office. I didn't knock. There was no time for courtesy.

Zand sat behind his desk. Natasha was standing beside him. They were both poring over what appeared to be security footage on a laptop. Their heads snapped up in unison at my intrusion. Their expressions shifted from irritation to concern as they registered my bewildered state.

All the tact and decorum exited my body, and I blurted. "She's a vampire. Marisol Lopez is a fucking vampire."

Zand's face went completely still. It was a stillness that only vampires could achieve. It was the absence of unnecessary breathing and human fidgeting. Only his eyes remained alive while his body was still and lifeless.

"Explain." He commanded.

I paced the length of his office, unable to stand still. My hands gestured wildly as the words poured out.

“I followed Marisol from the club. It was the perfect ambush in a dark stretch with no people around. But she knew I was behind her.” I run a hand through my cropped hair. I still couldn’t fully process what happened. “She moved like us. She fought like us. And then, fuck, then, I saw her fangs.”

Natasha stepped forward. “You are certain?” Her accent was thicker with the tension that filled the office.

“She threw me ten or twenty feet into a parked car. No human could do that. She’s been turned.”

Zand stood abruptly. “Teresa!” He snarled her name like it was poison on his tongue.

“Marisol confirmed it,” I nodded. “Said to tell you your ex-wife sends her regards. She said Teresa gave her the power to avenge her brother.”

“That crazy bitch.” Natasha muttered.

“Marisol is a newly turned vampire with a vendetta, driven by human grief and rage?” Zand said through gritted teeth.

“I almost had her.” The failure was like a bitter pill I didn’t want to swallow. “But she escaped in a car. The driver was a pale woman with dark hair. Someone new.”

“A vampire.” Zand and Natasha said in unison.

“I don’t know.”

“We should assume they are all vampires.” Zand added, and I thought that was a good assumption.

Natasha turned her laptop around, showing traffic camera footage from downtown. “I’ve been tracking Teresa’s movements. Last three nights, she’s been in this area.” She pointed to a map with a red dot blinking near Lake Michigan. “She’s staying somewhere near Pilsen, Gage Park, Little Village or South Lawndale. Her vehicle keeps appearing on traffic cams in those areas.”

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“And look at what’s located in this area.” Zand said with his finger pointing at the screen below a familiar name. “Club Bailar Caliente.”

All the pieces aligned with devastating clarity. “They’re working together. Teresa turned Marisol to piss you off, and Marisol gets supernatural powers to avenge her brother. They both want to hurt you through Chanel.”

Zand’s expression darkens. “Check every camera around that club. Find the car the Marisol escaped in tonight. Track it to wherever they’re hiding.”

Natasha nodded, already working. “I hope the car isn’t stolen.” Her fingers typed across the keyboard, accessing Chicago’s surveillance camera network through channels I was sure weren’t legal. “

“This bullshit has gone on too long. We have to kill them both soon and anyone associated with them. No questions, no hesitation.”

The decree hung in the air. It was final and irrevocable. We were all on board and willing to hand out death sentences, even to our own kind.

“I will double the security at all the entrances to The Castle. I’m going to arm some of the guys with my new weapon.” Natasha added.

“Is it ready?” Zand asked with a worried frown.

“It’s been tested. It’s ready.” She stated.

Was this the weapon Natasha mentioned to me in her office?

“The loft needs additional protection.” I added. “Chanel and Morgan?—”

“Are my priority,” Zand finished. “Josh is already assigned to Chanel. I just need more vampires to work in shifts to protect our humans at all times.”

“If Chanel has Josh. What about Morgan?” I asked, unable to keep the concern from my voice.

Zand’s eyes met mine. “Viktor and Donté will guard Morgan and Chanel under Josh’s command.”

“And Teresa? When we find her.” I asked.

“She’s mine.” The words were ice cold. “I turned her. I’ll end her.”

Natasha looked up from her phone. “I have something.” She turned the laptop again. Clear traffic camera footage showed a black sedan speeding through an intersection. “This is from four minutes after Harlen’s encounter. License plate matches a rental under the name Maria Vasquez.”

“Fake name?” I surmised.

“Probably.” Natasha agreed. “But the car has a GPS tracker. Standard for rentals.”

Zand leaned over her shoulder. “Where?”

“Signal stops here.” Natasha pointed to a location on the digital map. “The abandoned warehouse district near the Chicago River. Perfect place to hide.”

“Or a trap,” I suggested.

“Either way, they’ve run out of time. Natasha, coordinate security here and at the loft. I want updates every thirty minutes.”

“Yes, boss.”

Zand turned to me. “Harlen, go to the loft. Guard Chanel and Morgan until the additional security arrives. Then meet me back here at sunset tomorrow. We are going to hunt together.”

His command brought an unexpected warmth to my body. We were rebuilding trust. He wanted me by his side.

“Zand, I’m sorry I didn’t end Marisol like I promised.”

“Brother, you didn’t know Marisol was a vampire. Under the circumstances, you did well. You brought us this much needed information we didn’t have before tonight.”

His praise caught me off guard. I took it for what it was, a rare acknowledgment and a step toward healing the damage in our brotherly bond.

As I turned to leave the office, I felt the gravity of what was coming. Teresa and Marisol had unleashed something they couldn’t possibly understand, the full wrath of the Valentine brothers. We were united against a common enemy, two common enemies. As much as I wanted to keep Morgan safe, the thought of someone waging war against my brother sent me spiraling.

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A human's love was only for a period of time, but a vampire's love could last for eternity. If we wanted to end them, they probably wanted to end us. I would burn the city down before I let my brother face the final death.

EPILOGUE

NATASHA

Illinois was my new home. Alexander was my new family. Chechnya, Russia, was my homeland, but I had no desire to return. I left my home country in 1991 when Chechnya declared independence from Russia. Before Chicago, I spent ten years in Germany, and I had been to the states before but only on holiday. I met Alexander in an AOL chat room for vampires in the late 1900s. We were the only real vampires in the chat, and that started our long friendship.

Over the years, Alexander had become my trusted friend and confidant. He was like a brother to me, and I, like a brother to him. And a much better brother than Harlen Corbin. I would never betray Alexander. When he said he needed me to join him in the states, to help him run a business, I did not hesitate. I was happy he left his maker and wanted to go off on his own. I knew how hard it was to leave one's maker. It was difficult for me as well.

Alexander promised me a life where I would have my pick of women, and he made good on his promise. The Castle was full of young hot American women ready to explore their sexuality. When I first arrived, I was like a kid in a candy shop.

Alexander left Los Angeles five years ago and never looked back. It was a bold step

to leave his father's family and come to the Midwest alone and to start his own clan. I knew the story of Teresa and how his maker, Gillian, and brother Harlen, betrayed him. I hoped they all would stay away from his new life. But five years later, Harlen and Teresa are here in the vampire flesh. Two unwanted guests.

I had a feeling that my boss was holding on to the past. He let his stupid brother back into his life. A brother that had betrayed him before. Then there was his ex-wife, Teresa. He turned her— and, as her maker, I knew how difficult it would be to kill her. They had taken a sacred blood oath. But in this case, Teresa was his ex-lover. She wasn't his child. He didn't banish her. He left town, and she didn't appreciate it. He could've killed her. I knew he wanted to.

My boss was underestimating her. She was no longer the person he married so many years ago. She was an evil bitch destined to wreak havoc until she faced the ultimate death. He needed to get rid of her. If he couldn't give her the final death, I had no qualms about killing her.

It seemed Teresa was determined to ruin the life Alexander created for the vampires in his clan. I would never let her do that. I knew how hard it was for Zand to kill. I knew about his past. He had confessed all of his sins to me. Like a trusted friend, I would never reveal his secrets. But I also would never let anyone ruin the life that he built for himself and his people. With my new potion, my boss will be able to defeat any vampire that wages war against him. I believe now he is willing to do whatever it takes to preserve our way of life.

I loved a good fight, and that was exactly what Marisol and Teresa had coming to them. I didn't care how many vampires they had with them. It would never be enough. Our guys were far superior in their combat training. Our senior guys had been vampires for more than three decades. And my secret weapon was the tool that would make killing a vampire almost as easy as killing a human. Alexander wasn't just any vampire. He was the vampire that would usher in a new way of life. He had a dark side, and I wanted him to tap into it sooner rather than later.