



Your Mr. Vampire

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Description: Zand Valentine fights to protect his girlfriend Chanel from the lingering threat. As Marisol's presence in the city becomes more aggressive, Zand enlists his brother Harlen to track her down. Zand's ex-wife uses her new allies to wage a war against Zand. With the aid of Natasha's new weapon, Zand's vampire clan prepares for a potential confrontation. Can Zand stop these new threats before they ruin the new life he has built in Chicago?

Your Mr. Vampire is Book 3 of The Valentine Vampires Series.

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PROLOGUE

DONTÉ

I pulled away from the Castle and thought of the day I died. It was on a Tuesday. Four bullets tore through my body in the Englewood streets, where I'd spent my whole life. I remembered the cold concrete of the gangway where I collapsed, the taste of copper flooding my mouth, and the distant wail of sirens that came too late. But death wasn't the end for me. It was just the beginning.

The moment Alexander Valentine decided I was worth saving. I was reborn as something more than human. I had the same face, same eyes, but I was different. Sharper. More alive, which is funny considering I'm dead as dead can be.

I had a real life now. But sometimes my mind circled back to Englewood. I missed so many things about my old life in the hood. I missed my mama's fried bologna sandwiches. I missed having rap battles with my fo and 'nem. I missed rough housing with my lil brother. I miss going over to my granny's place to play spades.

Even with the good times, my old life was a dead end. If the G.D.'s hadn't got me that day, it would've been another day they caught me slipping. Or I woulda ended up in prison like the sperm donor that I didn't remember. He was serving thirty years in federal for some RICO shit. The Black Disciples Nation gave me family when I needed it, protection when I craved it, but that life only had two exits: a cell or a casket. I got the casket and somehow walked out of it.

I lost some things only to gain so much more. I had a vampire father that cared about

me. Zand claimed me as his son and welcomed me into his strange vampire family. He was teaching me everything I needed to know to be a vampire man, how to blend in with humans, how to use my abilities without drawing attention.

He promised to take me to Paris next year. I had to learn to speak French first. I remembered wanting to be an N-word in Paris because of the rap song. My father gave me a new armored Escalade and a job at the club where I made more money than I'd ever seen in my life. I was happy with my new life, but I was driving back to my old hood early this morning.

The streets of Englewood look different through vampire eyes. I eased the bulletproof Escalade down 63rd Street. My windows were tinted so dark they were practically mirrors from the outside. Now I was back, a ghost in an expensive truck, watching the neighborhood that raised me through a predator's eyes.

On a mission, I made a left onto Aberdeen and parked. I turned off the ignition, unafraid of anything now that my body was my protection. I didn't need a gun. It felt strange living life without a blickey attached to your body at all times. I looked over at the faded gang tags that marked our territory. BD Nation used to be my whole identity back then. Now it felt like a story I read about someone else.

I parked two blocks from Carlanda's house. She was my girl before I died, the one who used to wait for me after school with her backpack slung over one shoulder, wearing those big gold hoop earrings I bought her for her sixteenth birthday. I wondered if she still wore them.

It was 6:21 AM. She walked to school early. According to the pattern I observed over the past week. She should be walking down this street any minute now, going to Englewood High, where she is a senior. She was one of those smart girls that was going away to college on scholarships. I couldn't figure out why she was ever talking to me. I was supposed to take her to prom. But I didn't, I died. It was stupid, but I had

to see her up close. Instead of being at my apartment, I was stalking my ex-boo thang in a \$120,000 truck with an envelope full of cash in my lap.

No one would recognize me in this luxury vehicle. My old crew didn't get up this early in the morning. Most of them were passed out drunk or high off something. The rest of them had dropped out-of-school years ago. The drug dealers didn't hit the street until the afternoon. Only people out this early were the people going to real jobs or the smart kids that got to school early.

I checked the rearview mirror, adjusting it to catch the intersection at the end of the block. My reflection still surprised me sometimes—same face but different eyes. They were sharper now, more intense. Zand says that's normal for new vampires. We still look like ourselves, just more.

The thick envelope in my hands contained \$10,000 in cash. Zand paid me well for my work at The Castle, and I barely spent any of it. What would I buy? I didn't eat food anymore. I didn't need new clothes to impress anyone. The apartment he set me up in was already furnished with everything I could ever want. I didn't pay rent. Being a vampire matured me. I didn't have the same interest as I did when I was a YN. I'd been saving a few dollars, planning for this moment. I wasn't sure if she had a full ride scholarship. She would probably need this money for college expenses.

I looked up and there she was. Carlanda Kyle turned the corner, and my dead heart did something strange in my chest. She was wearing her hair in long goddess locs that reached her butt. A style she used to wear just for me because I told her once that it made her look like a princess.

Her backpack was the same one from last year. She was wearing a purple hoodie that was too big for her—wait. That's my hoodie. The one I left at her place the weekend before I died. She was wearing my clothes, still.

I gripped the steering wheel. Through the tinted window, I watched her walk. She looked tired. Her grandma's got cancer. I wondered if chemo was working for Ms. Pearl.

I wait until she was almost parallel with my truck, then I press the button to lower the passenger window just three inches—not enough for her to see in, but enough for what I needed to do. In one smooth motion, I tossed the envelope out. It landed on the sidewalk, just a few feet ahead of her.

She jumped and stopped to look down at the unexpected object in her path. She glanced around, suspicious, then bent to pick up the envelope. I rolled the window back up silently.

Through the tinted glass, I watched her open it. Her eyes widened as she saw the stacks of bills inside. Her mouth formed a perfect 'O' of shock. She looked up, scanning the street, trying to find who dropped this fortune at her feet.

There was a typed note inside: Chanel helped me write it. Carlanda fished the note out to read it.

To Carlanda,

For your college fees, or whatever you need it for. It's yours. Don't tell nobody you got it. People steal around here. It's not a loan. It's a gift for only you. You don't have to do nothing for it. Hurry up and put it away before one of these crackheads sees you with it.

Signed, your Fairy Godmother.

Her eyes found my out-of-place vehicle right away. I went to roll up my window and realized I had already done that. Even though she couldn't see inside, she was looking

right at me. She was too afraid to move. I started my engine and put my truck in drive. I sped off down the block. Her body turned to follow me. I pushed a button and hid my back license plate. In the rearview mirror, I caught one last glimpse of her standing on the sidewalk in my purple hoodie. Her eyes were following my truck, and she was clutching the envelope in her hands. After a second, she quickly pushed it into her backpack.

The best thing I could do for her was stay dead.

CHAPTER ONE

ZAND

My phone vibrated against the coffee table, a harsh intrusion into my quiet evening at home. I ignored it. This was my time with my girl. Chanel was beside me on the sofa. Her head was nestled against my shoulder as we watched some action movie she picked. It was something with explosions and car chases. We took a break from the vampire movies we usually watched together. Chanel said, now that she knew vampires were real, the movies weren't as exciting as the real thing.

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The incessant buzz of my cell continued. When Natasha's name appeared on the screen, I knew it was urgent. She would never call on my day off at this late hour unless something was amiss.

"I need to take this." I said, shifting away from Chanel's warmth.

She made a small sound of protest but sat up, pulling her knees to her chest. Her eyes followed me as I answered the call and walked toward the kitchen.

"What is it?" I kept my voice low.

"You need to come to The Castle." Natasha's voice was controlled in a way that signaled danger more clearly than shouting would. "Now."

"What happened?"

"Not over the phone. I have something you need to see."

The call ended with a click. I stood frozen for a moment, my index finger hovering over the darkened screen.

"Zand?" Chanel's voice pulled me back into the present. She was standing now. Her perfect face etched with concern. "What's wrong?"

I strolled to her in three long strides. I cupped her flawless face in my hands. "I have to go to The Castle. Natasha has beckoned me." I press my lips to her forehead, inhaling the scent of her cocoa buttered brown skin. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Lock the doors, stay inside. Josh is downstairs. He'll come up if you need anything."

"You're scaring me." Her tiny fingers wrapped around my wrists. They were warm against my skin.

"Nothing scary to report. Natasha didn't tell me what she wanted. You know she's top secret about everything. You don't have to worry. You're safe here. Josh is just a precaution. I'll call you when I know more."

I kissed her quickly on the lips, then grabbed my car keys. At the elevator door, I paused for one last look at her. The urge to stay nearly overwhelmed me, but Natasha wouldn't call without reason.

"Chanel, I love you." Something I said often but now felt different and more meaningful with all the threats we were facing.

Her warm smile spread to her cheeks. "I love you too."

The elevator descended too slowly. I nodded at Josh in the underground parking garage. I was relieved that he had been training Donté for combat. I really didn't want to teach a formergang member how to fight, but I didn't have much of a choice. Almost all my people had combat skills. It was a rule that Natasha implemented a few years ago. Guns didn't work on vampires. But guns were the only way he knew to defend himself when he was a human.

My old Chevy started with a growl. I needed an oil change soon, and I didn't own an autobody shop. I should probably ask Layla to homework buying one. I didn't normally drive recklessly, but I pushed it to the limits of city driving, weaving through late-night traffic with the precision that came from decades behind the wheel.

My thoughts raced ahead of my vehicle. What could Natasha have found? Whatever

it was, it was significant enough to warrant this late-night summons.

The Castle's exterior loomed against the night sky. Strategic lighting illuminated its Gothic façade. I wanted it to have an eerie feeling when patrons saw it in the darkness of night. I wanted it to appear grand and out of place in our current time. I always bypassed the main entrance. I pulled into the alley parking lot, using the private access door. The back hallways were quiet tonight. We were closed three nights of the week, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. Unless someone bought the place out for a special event.

Natasha met me at the elevator. The doors opened to her stone face. Her expression revealed nothing but professional concern.

"Come," she said, leading me to her security command office down the hall. The room was a technological fortress, walls lined with monitors displaying every angle of The Castle and the outside surrounding areas.

But it wasn't the security feeds that dominated the room tonight. Six screens in the shape of a horseshoe that sat on her desk were on. The center display had on what appeared to be the local Channel 7 news report. The monitor was paused on the female news anchor.

"What am I looking at?" I asked.

Natasha sat in her chair behind her desk. Her red nails flew quickly over the keyboard. "Five women murdered in Chicago over the past nine days." She pulled up the first report. "All with the same name."

I leaned forward with my hands gripping the back of her chair as the headline filled the screen: "Local Nurse Chanel Taylor Found Murdered in South Side Apartment."

My stomach dropped. The woman in the photograph was not my Chanel, but there was a slight resemblance. She was a Black woman with dark hair, a curvy build, and looked to be in her mid-twenties.

Natasha clicked to the next screen. It was an image of a police file with an attached photo. “There was a second woman named Chanel Taylor killed in Bronzeville.”

A very different Black woman with the same name as my love.

Screen by screen, the sick pattern unfolded with horrific clarity. Five Black women, five murders, all the victims named Chanel Taylor.

“I talked to my contact at the CPD. They have connected the murders, but they’re keeping all the victims’ names off the news, so no one puts the killer’s modus operandi together and assigns the murders to a serial killer.” Natasha explained. “Different neighborhoods, but they were all killed the same way— violently. And as you can see, all victims’ names are the same.”

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My jaw clenched so hard I felt my fangs might descend and crack my lower jaw.

“Teresa.” I said her name, but it was barely recognizable through my clenched teeth. I recognized her signature kill, the theatrical cruelty, the message meant specifically for me. She was killing women who shared Chanel’s name as a countdown, a sick promise of what’s to come.

“Yes, boss.” Natasha pulled up another screen showing a map of Chicago with five red points marking the murder locations. “The pattern moved inward, closer to the club with each killing.”

“And Marisol?” I asked, though I already knew the answer.

“They are likely working together. But Teresa could be doing these murders all on her own. The latest victim was found this morning, less than ten blocks from The Castle. She was killed somewhere else, but her body was dumped in a gangway.”

“Harlen mentioned a college student that Teresa savagely killed in a dorm room a few days ago.”

Natasha looked me square in the eyes. “Yes, the student’s name was Chanel Taylor. She was victim number four.”

“Fuck! This has been happening right under our noses.”

“Yes, boss, but we didn’t know how vindictive your ex would be. Killing strangers for sport. It’s very childish. It’s very human.”

“I should’ve known she would do something deplorable. If something happens to Chanel, it will be my fault. I’m the one that came into her life and brought this baggage I can’t seem to escape.”

Natasha patted me on my shoulder. “We’re dealing with it now. I will assemble the security team and your employees in the conference room and fill everyone in on our new directive.”

“Thank you, Natasha.”

“Thank me when both of those bitches are ash.” She spewed.

“How many of those guns have you made?”

Natasha’s invention would normally be my last option, but I had to use her new toy. With this new revelation, I didn’t know if Teresa and Marisol had raised an army of vampires to come after us.

“I have ten prototypes of the Cripso Glocks. I’m ready to train as many men as you need to use them.”

“This weapon is very dangerous if it gets into the wrong hands.” I stopped myself from thinking of the worse possible outcome. “Are they locked away?”

“Yes, how many should I disperse?” She asked.

“I don’t want them in everyone’s hands. Me, you, Josh, Matt and Marco.”

“What about Harlen, Viktor, and Donté?”

“I don’t know if I can truly trust Harlen. And Donté is my son, but he’s too new to

this vampire life. Viktor will be next in line. Let's wait to let them in on our secret weapon."

"Oh, course. I will call the others in one at a time for extra training. I will have everyone locked and loaded within twenty-four hours."

"Very good." I groaned. "I'm going back to the loft. I have to explain this new development to Chanel."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"It would be better to hear it from me. Some rogue journalists or whistleblower could have this story out in the Times tomorrow. I have to tell her."

"You're right." Natasha agreed. "She should know to watch her back."

I hated I had to give Chanel this news. "I'll send Josh back here to get his gun and train."

"Are you leaving now?" She asked.

"Yes."

"Boss, I want to arm you first."

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I watched Natasha as she left her sanctuary. She disappeared into a small room at the rear of the office. She returned with a gun case.

“So, this is it.” I looked as she handed the case over to me with my name engraved in gold on the top.

“The case only opens with your blood and your blood only. No other vampire can use your weapon. The trigger only works in your palm and fingers.”

It seemed complicated, but she had already shown me how to use the gun. “How will the other Cripso Glocks work for the others if you need blood to unlock the case?”

“I have blood, finger and palm print samples from every vampire that works for you.”

“Right. That’s what the samples were for.” More than a year ago, I’d given her permission to retrieve blood from everyone I employed, vampire and human.

I took the gun case and exited the room. She followed me to the waiting elevator.

“Keep tracking the rental car. I want to know every move they make.” I ordered.

Natasha nodded. “Are we closing down The Castle until further notice?”

“No, business as usual.” I replied. “Teresa wants a reaction from me. I won’t give her the satisfaction of disrupting my life or my business.”

Natasha nodded once again as the elevator doors closed.

As I headed back to my car, I called Harlen. He answered on the first ring.

“I need you at my loft. Now.” I didn’t wait for his response before hanging up.

The drive back feels endless. Five innocent women were dead because they shared a name with the woman I loved. Five lives ended as a message to me. My hands gripped the steering wheel so tightly the leather creaked in protest. Teresa had always been vindictive, but this, this was something else entirely.

By the time I reached my building, my decision was made. Chanel and Morgan needed to be separated. I greeted Josh downstairs and sent him to The Castle to see Natasha. I left Viktor downstairs alone to watch the area around the loft. Donté was asleep in the apartment I set him up in, connected to my building. I needed him close, but I wanted him to still have independence.

The elevator door to my loft opened. The weight of what I needed to say made each step heavier than the last.

The scene that greeted me felt like a punch to the gut. I found the three of them already gathered in my living room. Chanel perched on the edge of the sofa next to Morgan. Harlen was leaning against the wall. His usual smirk was replaced with something solemn. Their faces turned to me in unison. They knew something was coming. They just didn’t know how gruesome it was.

“You got here fast.” I said to Harlen. I placed my gun case and car keys on a table by the elevator.

“You said now,” He answered.

Chanel rose and walked over to me. She wrapped her hands around my left bicep and looked up at me. “What did Natasha want that was so urgent?”

I gently guided her back toward the sofa. “You should sit down.”

It was such a cliché thing to say before delivering bad news.

Harlen followed Chanel’s lead and planted himself down in a chair. I remained standing to deliver news that I knew would devastate Chanel.

“Teresa and Marisol have teamed up.” I began, forcing myself to meet Chanel’s eyes. “Over the past nine days, five women have been murdered across Chicago.”

Morgan’s sharp intake of breath was the only sound in the room.

“All five women,” I continued. “Were named Chanel Taylor.”

The color drained from Chanel’s face. She gripped Morgan’s hand so tightly that Morgan tensed.

“What?” Chanel chanted out a single word.

“Coco, remember, you saw that one postal worker on the news.” Morgan blurted out. I was unaware that they both knew of a victim.

“Yes, she was one of five. Natasha found the pattern with the murders because of the name. The police haven’t released the names of all of the women because it would be all over the place. CPD has been covering the crimes up and keeping them from the public. But they all are Black women that share your name.”

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Morgan's free hand flies to her mouth. "Jesus Christ."

"The murders are getting closer to us." I explained, pacing now, unable to stay still with the anger coursing through me. "The most recent was less than ten blocks from The Castle."

"This is Teresa sending a message." Harlen added.

"What message?" Chanel asked, her voice stronger than I expected. "That I'm next?"

I stooped in front of her, taking both her hands in mine. "I won't let that happen. We're increasing security. No one is going to get to you or Morgan."

I stood up and looked at them. "We need to separate you two. It's safer that way."

The words landed like physical blows. Chanel and Morgan exchanged a look that spoke volumes.

"That's not happening," Morgan said flatly.

"It has to." I tried to keep my tone gentle but firm. "Teresa and Marisol are working together. We know the Lopez family killed Craig. Your association with Chanel puts you in grave danger. We need to assume they are hunting the both of you. If you're together, you're an easier target. If you're apart, they will have to split their focus and their resources."

Harlen quickly stood and stepped forward. "He's right."

“Where would I go?” Morgan demanded, crossing her arms over her chest.

“With me.” Harlen replied before I could answer. “Somewhere they won’t think to look.”

I nodded, grateful for his quick understanding of the dire situation.

“But where?” Morgan asked.

I had this part already figured out. “I have a two-bedroom condo in northern Michigan that no one knows about. It’s in a large building with a lot of tenants. It’s upscale, secure, with a state-of-the-art security system. You’d be safe there until we eliminate the threat.”

“And what about Chanel?” Morgan’s gaze shifted between me and her friend. “She just stays here as bait?”

“She’ll be surrounded by guards every minute.” I insisted. “And I’ll be with her. With me is the safest place for her.”

Chanel was quiet. Maybe she was in shock. When she finally looked up at me, her expression was a complicated mix of emotions.

“How long is it going to take to kill them?” She asked, and we all paused to let her question sink in.

“It won’t be long. We have leads, and we have a way to take them out from a safe distance.”

Morgan shook her head. “This is crazy. We should both go to this condo. Splitting us up feels wrong.”

“It’s a good strategy.” Harlen explained. “Two separate targets are harder to hit than one. And they won’t expect you to leave the city. They’ll waste time looking for you here while you’re safe up north.”

“I was supposed to be going back to work soon. I can’t extend my leave forever.” Chanel complained. “I was planning to go back next week, but?—”

“That’s not happening.” I said firmly. “You’re not going anywhere in public. I have money. You don’t have to work at any job.”

Chanel shot me a look that informed me I’d said something wrong.

Morgan took Chanel’s hands. She turned to face her directly. “I don’t like this. I don’t like leaving you.”

“I don’t like it either.” Chanel’s voice cracked slightly. “But I guess it makes sense. I can’t let something happen to you after what happened to Craig.”

Their connection was something I once shared with my brother. Their friendship had survived so much already. Asking them to separate now felt cruel, but necessary.

“When should I leave?” Morgan asked, looking at me.

“Tonight.” Harlen answered for me. “Now, if possible. The sooner you’re out of the Chicago area, the better.”

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“You can take my Jeep.” I added. “It’s less recognizable than Harlen’s car. You’ll drive straight through, no stops, except for gas. Seven hours to the condo. No social media posts, no responding to texts from unknown numbers and emails.”

“This is bullshit!” Morgan barked. “This all started over some low-life drug dealer that isn’t even here anymore.”

She was right. “Lonzo might have started this, but Marisol has taken over with the help of Teresa. Now we have two vampires to worry about. Maybe more.” There was nothing else to hold back. I wanted them to know the danger they were in. They needed vampire protection.

“I still can’t believe Marisol is a vampire.” Chanel said like she was talking to herself and not to us.

“Believe it. I saw it with my own eyes. She’s a fucking vamp.” Harlen barked. He’d seen it firsthand.

I’d seen Marisol as a vampire, too. It was from a private businesses outside surveillance cameras. So far, Harlen had been truthful with me. I felt I could trust him.

I continued outlining the plan and emergency protocols. I shared the layout of the condo and handed the keys over to my brother. Harlen’s focus surprised me. There was none of his usual flippancy. He understood the gravity of the situation and the responsibility of keeping Morgan safe. At first, I thought he was just eager to win me over and get back on my good side. Now, I believed he really had a thing for Morgan.

I'd never seen him like this, and I didn't know how to react to it.

Morgan disappeared into the guest room. She returned minutes later with a small duffel bag, a backpack and a large rolling suitcase.

"I'm packed."

Harlen took all of Morgan's bags and left her with only a small purse. "Chanel, I won't let anything happen to her."

I studied my brother's face. He was different. I could see there was determination, focus, and a hint of the responsibility he's long avoided.

In minutes, we were standing at the elevator door. Morgan pulled Chanel into a warm hug. Their arms were wrapped tightly around each other.

"Don't you dare get yourself killed while I'm gone." Morgan whispered as she pulled away. It was her attempt at humor in a terribly dangerous and uncomfortable situation.

"Same goes for you." Chanel replied, holding back tears.

They broke apart reluctantly. Morgan glared at me. It was a silent command to keep Chanel safe. She turned to follow Harlen into the elevator.

As the doors closed on them, Chanel's fingers found mine. She didn't speak. She didn't need to. I wanted to tell her we would all survive this. But I didn't because I didn't think she would believe me.

CHAPTER TWO

HARLEN

I went back to Zand's old apartment and grabbed a few things for the road. I packed a few essentials and tossed them in the back of the Cherokee with Morgan's things. We were on the highway a little after 6 PM. Zand texted the address to his condo in Cheboygan Michigan. I wanted to text him back and ask him how the hell did he hear about Cheboygan and why did he purchase a condo there. I chose not to. This Midwest version of Zand differed completely from the West Coast version of him. I was still trying to figure out where I fit into his new life.

The highway stretched out for miles before us. There seemed to be more semi-trailer trucks sharing the road with us than passenger cars. My hands gripped the steering wheel like never before. I was immortal, but Morgan was far from it. I'd never thought about dying in a car accident until today. I wouldn't be the one to die. Knowing my driving and the driving of others could affect Morgan made her mortality ever-present in my mind.

I found myself scanning the road for debris and discarded tires. I was on guard for any deer and small animals trying to cross the lanes. I looked for anything that could be a hazard. Morgan was sad. She didn't want to leave her friend. She sat next to me in silence.

Three hours into our journey north, and we've barely spoken. The radio played music neither of us was listening to. I could hear Morgan's stomach growling, though she hadn't mentioned it. After stopping for gas in southern Michigan, I was relieved when she finally started talking to me.

"I need to eat something." She finally announced when there was a lull in our conversation.

I glanced at her, then back at the empty road. "We should keep driving. Zand

said?—”

“I don’t care what Zand said.” Her tone wasn’t angry, just matter of fact. “I’m human, remember? I need food, bathroom breaks, all that inconvenient shit that you don’t need.”

She had a point, though I hated to admit it. I’d been so focused on getting her to safety that I forgot about her basic human needs. It had been a while since I had to think about such things.

I remembered a sign I saw a few miles back. “There’s a diner at the next exit.” I flicked on the turn signal, though there was no one behind us to signal to.

The 24-hour diner sign glowed in the darkness. I pulled into the nearly empty parking lot. I parked the Jeep as close to the entrance as possible, positioning it for a quick exit. Not because we were in danger, but because I could see how exhausted Morgan was. Some humans got tired after eating and she was already exhausted.

Morgan raised her arms up in the air and stretched when she exited the Jeep. We walked inside the diner that smelled of burnt coffee and cooking oil.

This wasn’t the type of place with a hostess that greeted you at the door. I searched the place and led Morgan to the corner. Morgan slid into a vinyl booth that had seen better days. The red covering was cracked and patched with duct tape that was a few shades off. I sat across from Morgan, positioning myself to face the front door. No reason, just a habit.

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While waiting, I noticed two truckers occupying stools at the counter and an elderly couple sitting silently in a booth by the window. Soon, an older waitress in a headscarf and with faded tattoos on her forearms came toward us.

The waitress approached us with laminated menus.

“I’m Peggy, your server. Just take a look at the menu and I’ll be right back to take your order.” She placed the two greasy menus on the table and walked away.

There wasn’t much to choose from on the menu. Morgan retrieved hand sanitizer from her purse before she would even open the trifold menu. Little things like that made me like her. I more than liked her, but I wasn’t willing to admit that yet.

When Peggy returned minutes later, Morgan ordered. “Cheeseburger, no onions, fries, and a diet coke.”

“We only have regular coke.” Peggy said with a sound of disinterest and the voice of a two-pack a day smoker.

“Okay, regular coke.”

“What size?” Peggy asked.

“Uh, uh, medium.” Morgan stuttered.

“Anything for you, hon?” The waitress asked me, pen poised over her notepad.

“Just coffee, black,” I replied, knowing I wouldn’t drink it, but I needed to appear normal.

Morgan raised an eyebrow after the waitress walked away. “You should at least pretend to eat something. You look suspicious as hell just watching me eat.”

I leaned back against the cracked vinyl. “Sorry, I forgot the human instruction manual where it says I need to pretend to eat disgusting diner food at almost one in the morning.”

She laughed at that, a genuine sound that brightened her face. I loved she could still laugh at a time like this.

“You’re actually funny sometimes. You know that?” She said, unwrapping her silverware from the paper napkin and inspecting its cleanliness.

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me. We’ve only been on one date.”

“Harlen, I know you not calling that fiasco at Club Bailar Caliente a date?”

“I am. I’m going to call this greasy diner date two.”

“Okay, I guess. Tell me something I don’t know about you.” She leaned forward, resting her chin on her palm. “We’ve got time. Entertain me with tales of your long, boring undead life.”

I hesitated. I was uncertain how much to reveal. Most of my existence wasn’t grand. My life as a vampire was sort of dull.

“I don’t even know where to start.” I said, trying to think up the past.

“Start with before you were turned, or made. I don’t know what you guys call it. When did this even happen to you?”

“It happened in 1984. I’ve been ah, ya know, a Dracula, for a few decades but I’m not old and ancient. The 80s. Those were the good ole days. I used to be in a hair band.”

“What’s a hair band?”

“A rock band basically, but we all had long, big hair and wore makeup.”

“Oh god. You’re not joking. I have to see the pictures.”

“I burned the pictures.” I lied. I had a few photos back in L.A. tucked away in a safe place.

“I don’t believe you. I know you have pics.”

“Maybe.” I grinned. I was so happy she asked about my life and even happier to share something from my past with her. “

“What was the name of this rock band?”

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I shook my head. I couldn't believe I was going to share this information with her.
“We had a stupid name.”

“I'll be the judge of that.”

“We called ourselves the Rock It Boys.”

“Ah, okay. You're serious. I don't love it, but I don't hate it. What instrument did you play? Let me guess, the tambourine.”

“You really think you're funny. I did not play the tambourine. I played a little guitar, and I was the lead singer. Me and the drummer wrote the songs.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing really. We played a few dive bars.”

“Why'd you stop? What happened to the Rock It Boys?”

“We weren't that good, and we didn't make any money or land a record deal. We all had to get real jobs after a while. Then the keyboard player got arrested for solicitation of a minor. The bass player got married and had a kid. The drummer got in a car wreck and died.”

“Jesus, that was sort of depressing. When did the vampire thing happen?” She asked.

It felt strange talking about being turned, but I kept talking, regardless. “I was a

thirty-two-year-old forklift operator at an office supply warehouse. On Friday nights, I would drive about six or seven towns over and play guitar and sing at this open mic. I don't know why. I just wanted to perform just to— I don't know, get the songs out, or just relive the old times. One night, there were these two guys with money that came into the bar. We got to talking and drinking. Then we went to another bar, and they convinced these ladies to come back to their house and party. We did coke and swam naked in the pool. Partied until dawn. Gillian, the older guy, was my maker, and the younger?—”

I stopped talking when I saw Peggy walking toward us. Morgan's food arrived, piled high on a white ceramic plate. Morgan dove in, taking a massive bite of her burger. I watched, oddly fascinated by her enjoyment of something as simple as a cheeseburger.

“God, this is good. Or I am starving.” She mumbled through a mouthful of processed beef.

“I think you were starving.”

Morgan popped a French fry in her mouth. “Must be weird, watching people eat all the time.”

“Not anymore. I got used to it.”

“I don't think I could ever get used to drinking blood.” Morgan's delicate faced morphed into a frown. “What happens if you don't drink it?”

“I'm not sure. I don't know any vamp that starved themselves. There are human blood bags walking around everywhere. Why would we deprive ourselves of the one thing we crave?”

Morgan stopped chewing to gaze at me. “Where are you getting blood from?”

“Zand has it stockpiled.”

“Where does he get it from?”

“A blood bank. He owns one. He’s not the only vampire that owns one. Zand gives some of the blood to local hospitals, so it doesn’t look suspicious. He only keeps enough of the blood to feed a few of us regularly.”

“The blood doesn’t have to be fresh?” Morgan asked.

“No, we can live off the donated blood. We don’t have to drink it fresh from humans. Which means we don’t have to kill.”

“What about animal blood?”

“Yes, we can drink it. It just doesn’t taste the same. Maybe the difference between a Diet Coke and a regular Coke. I’m curious. Why now do you have so many questions?”

“Because I never got the chance to ask you anything, really.” She paused. “Harlen.”

“Morgan.”

“Have you ever drunk my blood?” She asked.

“What do you mean?” I was never the smartest, but I really didn’t understand the question.

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“Just what I said. Have you ever drunk my blood?”

“No, how would I do that?”

“I don’t know. You tell me?” She was serious.

“Morgan, you’re the one that asked to see my fangs.”

“I know, but I was thinking about it. And how do I know you haven’t been stealing blood from me while I slept in bed next to you?”

“What?” I laughed out loud. “You know it because it never happened. I wouldn’t bite you without your consent.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t do things like that anymore. Since I hurt my brother, I’ve been trying to change. I’m not perfect, but I’m what they call a work in progress.”

“You swear you have never bitten me?”

“I swear.” I didn’t know who I was swearing to, but I had to plead my case. “You would know if a vampire bit you. It would hurt. The fangs would leave a mark and sometimes a bruise. Depending on how much blood the vamp took from you. And you would feel tired from the blood loss, and you could faint. Tired from sex wasn’t the same as tired from blood loss. I’ve only made you tired from sex.”

“Okay, okay, I believe you. It’s just all of you look so normal.”

“And not like monsters?”

“Well, yeah.”

“We can behave like monsters, and some of us do. Most of us try and succeed at acting civilized.” I explained.

“Okay. It’s just weird. All of it.”

“You think I’m weird?”

“No.”

“Why did you continue to have sex with me if you had all these questions and doubts?”

“I don’t know.”

“You asked to see my fangs, and you asked me to bite you the next time we had, you know, sex. What’s going on with you?”

“I don’t have a good answer. My boyfriend died. Then I find out he was murdered. I have sex with you. Then I find out vampires exist, and my best friend is dating one. And then I find out you’re one of them. Everything is happening so fast. It’s not like I had time to figure out what I was doing. I’m overwhelmed.”

“Do you want Zand to replace me with a human— for your protection?”

“No, I don’t want to replace you. I want to keep you.”

“I want to keep you, too.”

Morgan shrugged once. “It’s settled. I’m keeping you. You haven’t tried to hurt me.”

“Morgan, I would never hurt you, ever.”

“What if the earth’s blood supply gets depleted and me and you are the only ones left on earth?”

“What? I still wouldn’t hurt you. I would still ask for your consent. Please, woman, eat.”

The absurdity of the conversation stopped, and Morgan finished her meal. I noticed her eyelids growing heavy. The adrenaline that kept her going was fading fast.

“We should get back on the road.” I said gently. “Cheboygan isn’t that far away.”

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She nodded, stifling a yawn. I paid the waitress in cash, and we headed back to the Jeep.

We arrived just after 2 AM. Zand's condo sat at the edge of a small resort town, near Duncan Bay. The high-rise building stood tall against the moonlit night. Perfect for hiding out in an obscure community.

I pulled up to the front entrance, where the security lights illuminated the circular drive.

"I can let you out here and I'll go park in the garage." I told Morgan. I was sure she wanted to get upstairs as soon as she could.

"Okay, I can't wait to lay down. I'm so tired."

"It's the twentieth floor. The elevator needs a key card." I handed her a small plastic card with a large letters Z, and V, embossed on it along with the numbers 2112. "I'll bring up all your bags."

She hesitated while her hand rested on the door handle. "Can you carry everything by yourself?"

"Morgan, I'm a vampire." I whispered it out the car door like it was a secret.

"Oh shit. I forgot." She chuckled through her tiredness.

"Go on up. I'll be right behind you."

Morgan took the key card and her purse. I watched her walk through the glass doors into the lobby, and past the front desk. My eyes didn't leave her until she stepped safely into the elevator.

I pulled around to the underground garage, finding the reserved spot marked with Zand's number. I parked in spot 2112 and I cut the engine off. I gathered Morgan's luggage from the back, along with my lone bag. More alone time with Morgan made me happy, and it also made my cock hard.

Locking the Jeep doors with the key fob, I headed toward the elevators. I couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right. I blamed it on my paranoia. This was the first time I was solely responsible for a person, and this person was human. Morgan wasn't just any human. She was a human that I cared about and loved. I would have to be drained of all my blood before I admitted this weakness for a human out loud. Pretending that I wasn't in love with her was getting harder to conceal. But I knew I could do it. I had faced bigger challenges in all my years, human and vampire.

CHAPTER THREE

HARLEN

The elevator climbed as the floor numbers lit up in sequence. At the twentieth floor, the doors slid open with a soft chime. The hallway stretched before me. The plush carpet muffled my footsteps and made it hard for me to push the large rolling suitcase at a brisk speed. Lifting the luggage wouldn't be difficult, but I didn't want the handle to break off. Companies didn't make sturdy and lasting products like they used to.

After a short trek down the hall and around the corner, I approached the condo door. I felt it. Something wasn't right. The door was slightly ajar. Morgan was probably too

tired to close it behind her when she entered. There was a sliver of light coming through the doorway. I pushed the door open enough for me and all the bags to fit through.

Stepping inside the condo, I dropped the bags on the floor in the entryway.

“Morgan?” My voice sounded too loud in the dead silence. I waited, but there was no answer.

She couldn’t be asleep this soon, and I didn’t hear the shower running. I moved deeper into the condo. The living room was empty. There were no signs that Morgan had entered the space. I turned toward the hallway leading to the bedrooms.

“Morgan, hey, you in here?” I called again, fighting to keep my voice steady.

An eerie, child-like laugh floated through the air. Not Morgan’s laugh. I followed the foreign sound toward the master bedroom. The door to the bedroom was wide open. I took a step inside, and the world tilted beneath my feet.

Past the bed, Teresa stood on the balcony. How was she here? Her dark silhouette appeared against the night sky. Her flaxen hair whipped around in the wind across her pale face. She looked the same as when I followed her to that poor student’s dorm room. She could even be dressed in the same clothes or something similar.

Teresa was here in the flesh and Morgan was— FUCK! there, pinned against the balcony railing. Teresa’s hand was fastened around my lover’s throat. She was holding Morgan suspended partly over the edge of the metal railing. Twenty stories up, Teresa had Morgan hoisted in the air and leaning on the edge of the railing. Morgan’s feet were dangling over the railing on the safe side of the balcony. But there was no real safe side in her current position.

“Harlen, my lover.” Teresa crooned. Her voice annoyingly scratched at my eardrums. “Right on time. I was worried you might miss the show.”

Morgan’s terrified eyes found mine. The look of horror in her eyes gnawed at me. Morgan’s lips tried to form my name, but no sound came out. Teresa’s grip on her neck was too tight and unyielding.

“Let her go.” I said, while moving slowly toward the balcony door. “She has nothing to do with this.”

Teresa giggled. “Ha! Nothing to do with this? She has everything to do with this. Darling, she’s a message for your brother.”

My hands clenched into fists. “Whatever beef you have with Zand, it’s between you two.”

“No?” Teresa tilted her head, studying my movements carefully. “You’re here, aren’t you? Playing fetch for your big brother again.”

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Morgan struggled against Teresa's grip. Her feet scrabbled against the balcony bars until one of her shoes fell from her feet. Teresa tightened her hold, and Morgan's eyes bulged as she gasped for air.

"I always knew you'd kiss his ass." Teresa continued. "You were always his sidekick. Always the weak one, the follower."

I took another step forward. My brain calculated speed, distances, and possibilities. The balcony was about fifteen feet away. I could cross it in less than a second with vampire speed. But Teresa would see me coming. Morgan would be over the edge before I reached them.

"What do you want?" I asked, stalling for time.

Teresa grinned. "I want what Zand promised me, together forever."

"And this doesn't get you any closer to that."

"It's the first step." Teresa said, her fingers flexing around Morgan's throat. "Call your brother. Tell him what's happening. I want him and his little nurse to hear this."

"I'm not calling anyone." I said, taking another cautious step forward. "It's just you and me. Let's talk this through and come up with a compromise."

Morgan's eyes locked with mine, desperate and pleading for my help.

"Wrong answer." Teresa's evil grin vanished. "There is no compromise. You have to

see that. Harlen, you picked the wrong side. Zand left me and started a new family. Gill, you and Zand kicked me out. So, it was my time to start my own family.”

“Marisol is your family?” I asked, trying to keep Teresa talking and distracted.

It happened so fast that even my vampire senses barely registered it. One moment Morgan was there, pinned against the railing. The next, Teresa’s arm extended in a swift, violent push. She let go.

And Morgan was falling.

As I sprung forward. My body moved with pure instinct and panic. But I was too late. I was too slow. I reached the balcony edge just in time to see Morgan’s body tumbling through the darkness. Her arms were outstretched as if she was trying to grab the night’s air.

A screamed tore from my throat, raw and primal. I gripped the railing so hard the metal bent beneath my fingers. Twenty stories below, Morgan’s body grew smaller, a bright shape against dark pavement.

“No!” The word didn’t begin to contain the horror that ripped through me.

A movement to my left snapped my attention back. Teresa had jumped onto a balcony two floors down. She looked up at me with a face of cruel triumph.

“You picked the wrong side.” This psycho bitch called up to me. “Tell Zand I send my love.”

Before I could move, she leaped again, a dark shadow flitting from balcony to balcony with inhuman grace before she disappeared into the darkness.

I pounded the railing with my fist, the metal rattled beneath the impact. My mind couldn't process what had just happened. Morgan. Falling. The sound her body would make when it hit the concrete below. The sound I couldn't bear to imagine.

I should have been faster. Shit, I should have anticipated Teresa's next move. I should have protected Morgan like I promised Zand and Chanel I would. Like I promised myself I would.

The rage came first, a red-hot flood that threatened to consume me from the inside out. Then something else, the leaden weight of failure. The thought of letting down the people who mattered to me. Morgan, she mattered more than she knew.

I turned from the balcony. My movements were robotic as I rushed back through the condo toward the hallway. There was no time for elevators. I yanked open the stairwell door so hard it tore from its hinges.

There were twenty floors between me and Morgan's broken body. Twenty floors of nothing but failure and the knowledge that I've let down the one person who saw something in me worth trusting.

The stairwell became a blur of steps and painted walls. I took entire flights in single bounds. My body moved faster than human eyes could track. The rage and grief inside me fueled something primal, unlocking speed I didn't know I possessed. Each landing barely registered beneath my feet. Twenty floors, nineteen, eighteen—counting backward toward the inevitable horror waiting below.

"Fuck!" I cried out so loud that I'm sure it woke the residents on the sixth floor.

I burst through the exit door so hard it slammed against the outer brick wall. The sound was like a gunshot in the quiet night. My eyes found her mangled body immediately. Morgan laid lifeless on the concrete. Her small body was twisted in

angles that human bodies should never form. Blood pooled beneath her, spreading outward like dark angel wings. She was my angel.

No.

No.

No.

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I fell to her side in an instant. My knees hit the concrete with enough force to crack it. Her heart wasn't beating. I couldn't hear the sound I loved beyond no other.

"Morgan." I whispered. My hands hovered over her, afraid to touch her and cause more damage. Her beautiful face was mostly intact, though blood trickled from her nose, her ears, and the corner of her mouth. Her eyes were closed.

Every bone in her body must be broken. Her spine, her legs, her arms had to have all shattered from the impact. No human could survive this fall.

A light flicked on in a window above me. Someone had heard the commotion. Soon there would be people, law enforcement, and questions with no answers. I couldn't let that happen. I couldn't let some morbid asshole whip out a cell phone and record her in this state.

I made my decision instantly. I slid my arms beneath Morgan's broken body and gently lifted her from the concrete. Her blood soaked into my shirt. Her head and crimson streaked hair lolled against my shoulder.

I hurried into the underground garage. I went directly to the Jeep parked nearby, cradling Morgan against my chest like someone that was fragile.

The back door of the Jeep opened under my touch. I laid Morgan across the backseat with care that seemed absurd, given the catastrophic damage already done to her body. Her blood immediately soaked into the leather seat.

I slid behind the wheel, trying to keep my anger and grief at bay. My hands left

bloody prints on everything I touched. The engine roared to life. I drove out of the garage. I was mindless of direction, mindless of everything, except the fact that Morgan was no more.

The town turned into a rural countryside as I drove further away from the water. I drove too fast, daring any state police to stop me. My mind raced faster than the speedometer, calculations and possibilities colliding.

My time with her had run out. I wished we would've defied Zand and went to Minnesota. Maybe I could've convinced her to go back to L.A. with me. The what ifs were dancing around in my brain and suffocating me.

I turned onto a dark country road. There were no houses, no lights, no witnesses. When I could no longer bear it, I pulled over on the dirt and grass that laid before the tree line. I cut the Jeep's headlights and settled into complete darkness.

“Fuckkkk!” The scream tore from my throat.

I got out of the driver's seat and opened the back door. Morgan was where I placed her. Her blood had dried on her face.

I gathered her in my arms. Her body weighed nothing to me. I carried her away from the road, into the trees where the darkness was complete except for a few patches of moonlight filtering in on us.

The forest floor felt soft under my feet. I didn't think to look in the trunk for a shovel. I kneeled, sitting Morgan down as if she might still feel pain.

Her face looked peaceful despite the trauma. The fierce, vibrant, independent woman who wasn't afraid to fuck a vampire was broken beyond repair. I brushed a strand of her sandy blonde hair from her face.

I thought of Zand, of Chanel, of my promise to keep Morgan safe. My mind thought of Teresa's cruel smile as Morgan plummeted to her death. I thought of all the mistakes I'd made, all the betrayals and failures that had defined my vampire existence.

I looked down at Morgan's face, memorizing the way she looked. There was warmth in my chest. It was something I hadn't felt in decades. It was the feeling I had when I played music with the Rock It Boys. I felt a connection I never expected to feel again.

I gathered Morgan closer to me. I cradled her head in the crook of my arm. My face hovered above hers, looking down at the woman I wanted.

"I'm sorry." I whispered, but I knew she couldn't hear me. "I'm so sorry. Please don't hate me."

If only I had made different choices. Morgan could go back to Minnesota with her mother, father and brother. I wasn't the only one that loved her. The somber thought was like a dagger to my heart.

CHAPTER FOUR

ZAND

I checked my phone for the hundredth time today. No calls. No texts. No word. Nothing for three long days. Suddenly, the loft felt too small. The high ceilings and open floor plan were shrinking in around me.

My chronic pacing in the living room led me into the kitchen, where Chanel was standing at the sink. Donté was sitting at the island staring down into his cell phone.

"Anything?" Chanel's worried voice called out to me.

I shook my head, not trusting my voice. My jaw ached from clenching it so hard. Three days of silence. Three days of imagining every possible catastrophe. Why would he do this?

Chanel was in a panic. “Something has got to be wrong. Morgan won’t answer me. I’m afraid to call her family. I don’t want to worry them. Zand, did your brother do something to her? You said he was safe.”

I couldn’t respond because I didn’t have anything to say. What I knew, Chanel knew, and that was nothing at all.

My walled windows showed the beauty of the city. The late afternoon sun glinted off the glass, warming the loft. The view was normally enjoyable, but today it was a nuisance. Somewhere out there, Teresa and Marisol were plotting their next move, but all I could think about was the one-sided silence from my brother.

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I should've sent someone else to take Morgan to my safe house. There was a list of people I trusted more than Harlen and I picked him. Chanel's best friend was the only person she had left from her old life. I couldn't stop questioning why I let my brother back into my life.

Everything I ever did was up for debate. I should've never made Teresa Protenza into a vampire. I should've never married her. I should've never introduced Teresa to my life and my family. And I should've never trusted my brother with someone that was so important to Chanel. The "should haves" piled up like the ash I was going to make of Teresa, Marisol and everyone that challenged and threatened my loved ones.

"Maybe the reception is bad up there in—" Chanel offered. She was trying to come up with a good reason for the radio silence.

"Cheboygan." I said, trying to participate in the one-sided conversation.

"Yeah, you said it was near water." Chanel stated. "That could be the reason, bad reception near water."

"Where the hell is Cheboygan?" Donté asked.

"Northern Michigan is close to Canada." I explained. "Harlen would've found a way to contact us." I stopped pacing just long enough to run a hand through my unruly hair. "Something's wrong."

"We don't know that yet," Chanel clarified, and I was happy she was calmer than me.

I'd sent a dozen text messages. Called twenty times. There was no contact from Morgan or Harlen. I asked Natasha to track their cell phones, and she couldn't get a location. Nothing.

The elevator pinged, and I stopped in my tracks.

"Maybe that's Natasha with some news." Chanel said. I wished I shared her optimism.

I left them both in the kitchen without saying a word. Natasha would call before she arrived. It could be Josh, maybe with an update. I needed to hear something. At this point, it didn't matter if it was good or bad.

I was in the living room waiting for the elevator door to open. My fingers scratched at my chin as my impatience manifested itself in my stance.

The metal doors parted and Harlen was standing there, alone. His clothes looked wrinkled, and his hair was disheveled. There was a haunted look in his eyes that I didn't have time to address.

I rushed toward him when he stepped out of the elevator. I was only inches from his face. "Where the fuck have you been?!" I demanded. "Where's Morgan?"

The elevator doors closed and Harlen side stepped me and moved into the living space.

"Zand—" the traitor spoke, but I cut him off.

"Three days!" I shouted, moving closer until I was back in his face. "Three fucking days with no word! No call! Nothing! A simple text to let us know you were alive?"

Hearing the commotion, Chanel and Donté had come around the partial wall that separated the living room from the kitchen. I glanced over at Donté, who was holding his glass of blood, and Chanel, who was standing beside him.

“Harlen, where is she?” I asked again. I felt the vein in my neck pulsate as my temper rose. My fists clenched and unclenched at my sides. My nails dug crescents into my palms.

Harlen took a step back and met my eyes. “I can explain.”

“What the fuck happened?!” My voice bounced off the walls of the loft. “You only had to keep her safe! Tell me where she is!” Each word came out louder than the last. My control was dangling by a thread.

“Harlen.” Chanel’s voice broke through my anger. “What happened?” Her question was more like a plea.

My mind told me Harlen had done something to Morgan. Did he drain her? Did he get too rough with her and kill her? I didn’t want to think the worse, but he was standing here, and she wasn’t.

“You disappeared for three days, and you show up here alone. Where the fuck is Morgan?” I grabbed the front of Harlen’s shirt and pulled him closer to me. I wanted to tear him apart with my bare hands because I could tell by the look in his eyes that something bad had happened.

“Morgan.” Harlen said, not trying to break free of my grip. “She’s?—”

The elevator door opened again. We all turned to see the new arrival.

Morgan.

Morgan stepped off the elevator, and immediately I knew something was wrong. She moved differently, stiffly, more like a robot, like a child learning to walk for the first time. Her skin was paler than usual and lacking the red undertones. The tinge of color that made her sometimes appear biracial was no longer there.

“Morgan!” Chanel cried out, rushing toward her friend. “Oh, my God! Why didn’t you answer my calls?”

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My grip on Harlen's jacket loosened as I watched Chanel approach Morgan.

Chanel wrapped her arms around Morgan. But Morgan didn't return the embrace. Morgan stood very still.

"Sorry, Coco." She said with a voice that was familiar but different. "We had... a situation."

Chanel backed a few feet away from her, suddenly uncertain. "What's up with you? Are you okay?"

A blanket of silence covered the loft. Morgan slowly removed her sunglasses. I heard Chanel's sharp intake of breath.

Morgan's eyes had changed color. Her gray irises now had an unnatural brightness that would wear off in a few weeks.

"I'm different." Morgan said softly.

I turned back to Harlen, enraged even more than when I first laid eyes on him. "What the fuck did you do?"

Donté moved closer to the women. His expression clocked in at somewhere between shock and recognition. He knew exactly what he was looking at. He'd seen it in the mirror right after I turned him.

Chanel's hand trembled as she reached toward Morgan's face. She stopped short of

touching her. “Morgan. No!” she wailed.

“I’m still me.” Morgan said, trying to smile. “I’m still a baddie, but now I have fangs.”

Morgan’s joke was ignored. My brother had turned Morgan into a vampire without my knowledge or consent. The realization sent shockwaves of fury through my body. Harlen had stolen Morgan’s humanity. He changed the course of her existence forever. He did it all without a single word from us.

The room seemed to spin around me as I stared at the newborn vampire who used to be Chanel’s human best friend. What I spent months protecting Chanel from had happened. My supernatural world had interfered with her life and claimed one of the people she loved.

The quiet rage exploded inside me and was seeping out. My body launched across the room, colliding with Harlen’s chest. The impact sent us both crashing into the wall so hard the plaster cracked. My balled fist connected with his jaw. The sound was like stone striking stone.

“Why?” I roared, punching him in the face. “Why? Why would you fucking turn her?” My blows to his face came in rapid succession.

Harlen didn’t fight back for the first few seconds. He took my fury like he believed he deserved it. Then his survival instinct kicked in. He twisted out of my grip and shoved me back, sending me stumbling into the glass coffee table. It shattered beneath me. Crystalline shards exploded across the hardwood floor.

I jumped up on my feet instantly, barely registering the glass embedded in my palms. My wounds would close as quickly as they opened. Regular fresh human blood from the vein accelerated my vampire healing in seconds. I wasn’t done. I charged at him

again, tackling him over the back of the sofa. We rolled across the floor, knocking over a floor lamp that crashed against the wall before landing on the floor.

“Please stop!” Morgan’s voice cut through the chaos, but I didn’t care. I owed him this fight for so many things he’d done in the past.

I punched Harlen’s face again and again. “You! Had! No! Right!” Each word was punctuated with a blow to his face.

Harlen blocked my next punch and kicked me off him with enough force to send me flying into the bookshelf. Hard-covered books rained down around me.

“I had no choice!” He shouted back, with blood streaming from his split lip.

“Bullshit!”

I launched myself at him again. We crashed into the dining table. The heavy wood splintered under our combined weight and supernatural strength. A chair went flying, striking the wall and breaking into pieces.

When I stood, Donté wrapped his arms around my chest. Harlen relocated a few feet away to stand beside Morgan.

“Father, chill!” Donté’s words crippled me for a second, but I couldn’t help but charge back at Harlen again.

“Enough!” Morgan shouted. Her new voice stopped my forward movement. Her tone carried an edge I’d never heard from her before. Power. Vampire power.

I stared at her in disbelief. Three days ago, she was human. The reality of what Harlen had done and what couldn’t be undone hit me all over again.

Chanel was frozen in place and standing by the window. Her tears streamed silently down her face. She hadn't moved or spoken since the fight began. Her eyes were fixed on this new version of her friend.

Morgan seemed to notice at the same moment I did. "Coco, it's still me. I promise."

"Zand, I had no choice." Harlen said quietly.

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“I sent you to protect her, not to turn her so she could protect herself!”

“Brother, listen, Teresa found us. She was in Michigan.”

I took a few seconds for his words to make a connection to my brain. “How? I want to know exactly what happened.” I demanded, directing all my vitriol at Harlen. My voice was lower and more controlled now. “Every detail. Now.”

Harlen wiped the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand. His split lip had already healed.

“Teresa was in Michigan. She was waiting for us at the condo. Somehow, she knew where we were going.”

“The bitch must have followed us.” Morgan added, and the casual profanity was strange in her unfamiliar voice. “I went up to the condo, and she was already there. Harlen was parking the car.”

“As soon as I got inside, I saw Teresa holding Morgan over the edge of the balcony.” Harlen continued. “Your condo is twenty stories up.”

“She pushed me.” Morgan finished for him. Her hand moved unconsciously to her throat where Teresa must have held her. “I remember falling.” She paused, swallowing hard. “Then I woke up... different.”

Chanel let out another sob. Her fingers pressed against her lips as if holding back more tears.

“She died on impact.” Harlen says flatly. The words hit the room like physical blows. “I got to her as fast as I could, but it was too late. Every bone in her body was broken. Her skull was fractured. There was blood—” He stopped after noticing Chanel’s horrified expression. “She was gone. She was dead, Zand. Teresa killed her.”

“So, you turned her.” I stated. “Without calling me. Without asking anyone what you should do. You made a decision, that decision, without a conversation.”

“I was there. I saw it happen. What was I supposed to do?” Harlen demanded. “Let her stay dead? Call you and say, ‘Hey, brother, Teresa just murdered Morgan, sorry about that’? Sorry I failed to protect her. I had to decide right then and there. You know we only have so much time before we can’t bring them back.”

“Three days of silence, Harlen. Three fucking days while we were going out of our minds with worry.”

“I was busy.” He snapped. “Did you forget what the first few days of a new vampire are like?”

Of course I remembered. The uncontrollable thirst in the first twenty-four hours. The disorientation, the headaches, and the newfound strength that could accidentally kill someone if not carefully managed.

“I had to get her somewhere private and safe.” Harlen continued. “I had to feed her and teach her the basics.”

“You should have brought her back immediately,” I told Harlen. “As soon as she was stable enough to travel.”

“She wasn’t stable until late yesterday.” Harlen argued. “And I couldn’t risk bringing her back into the city until I was sure she could handle it. Teresa got away.” Harlen

added, and my attention snapped back to him. “I wasn’t going to leave Morgan on the pavement to go after her.”

“If she gets the chance, she’ll go after Chanel next.”

“We can’t give her anymore chances.” Harlen chanted.

And just like that, the final piece clicked into place. The worst had happened. Teresa found them. And somehow, it ended with Morgan dead—and then reborn.

“Was it that bad?” Chanel asked Morgan now that her tears had dried.

Morgan hesitated. “Yes, and no. The first day was bad. It was like having the flu, bad cramps, and a migraine. I was asking myself every damn hour ‘Ho, is you cool’? It’s like every day that passes, I feel just a little bit more comfortable in this body.”

Donté stepped forward, looking between all of us before he focused solely on Morgan. “It’s going to get better. Being a vamp takes time to get used to.”

The five of us stood there amid the wreckage of the loft—broken furniture, shattered glass, scattered books. The physical destruction around us mirrored the emotional upheaval within all of us. Morgan was a vampire now. Whatever future she might have had as a human was gone forever. And Chanel had lost the human version of her best friend even while she stood right beside her.

“What happens now?” Morgan asked. Her new vampire eyes moved from me to Harlen and back again.

None of us had an answer ready. The rules of the game had changed drastically. We were all struggling to catch up. Teresa killed Morgan to hurt us, but Harlen turned that death into something else entirely. I just didn’t know yet if it was a victory or

another kind of loss. I'm sure Morgan and Chanel thought it was a loss.

CHAPTER FIVE

MORGAN

I closed the door to the guest room and leaned against it. I was grateful for the alone time. Adjusting to this dramatic change in my life didn't need a 24/7 audience. My entire body felt wrong, too light, too heavy, too strong, and too weak. The light from the bedside lamp burned into my retinas despite being dimmer than I would have preferred as a human.

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Human. The word sat on my tongue like profanity. No matter what Harlen says I gained, right now I feel like I lost so much more.

I grabbed my designer sunglasses off the bed and put them back on. How long would I have to wear sunglasses inside before my eyes were like the rest of the vampires?

I was enjoying the quiet after all the madness that accrued earlier. Zand and Harlen's fight was too WWE for me. There had to be more going on between them because I knew all the violence couldn't be because of me.

Sounds were amplified to the umpteenth degree. I could hear water rushing through pipes inside the damn walls. Harlen told me that either my ears would adjust to sounds or I would just get used to it and it would no longer annoy me.

Walking seemed awkward for me. I could do it, but my limbs just didn't feel the same. Three days of Harlen's crash course in vampire mobility hadn't prepared me for this. Nothing could. I walked over to the mirror above the dresser for the fourth time today just to see if I had a reflection. Of course I did.

The face staring back at me was mine, but not mine. My skin had a subtle translucence. I was already a light bright. Now I could see even more of my veins than before. My blue veins traced delicate patterns just beneath the surface of my skin. I leaned closer to the mirror, watching how the light played differently on my skin now. It didn't reflect. It seemed to pass through the top layer before bouncing back. Not cute at all. I was too bright. I looked whiter than my White father and I never thought that was possible.

My fingers traced my cheekbones. My facial texture hadn't changed much, and that was a good thing. My hair was still blondish and curly in its natural state. I didn't try to flat iron it after I turned. I wasn't even thinking about my appearance until now.

The scariest part of me was my eyes. My gray irises were glowing with this unnatural brightness, like I was wearing white contact lenses. It was freaky and Halloween-ish.

It was Zand's idea for me to come back into the guestroom and stay at his loft. At first, I wanted to leave with Harlen. I didn't feel like I belonged in the room I occupied when I was human.

The way Chanel looked at me broke my heart. And Harlen felt guilty about my death. He blamed himself. But I didn't blame him. I blamed that raggedy ass bitch that tossed me off a fucking balcony. I wanted to kill that goofy hoe on sight. Dead ass.

Despite this tragedy that was now my life, I preferred being a vampire over being dead. I wasn't ready to go up to yonder. I wasn't ready to die. Definitely wasn't ready to leave my parents and my brother with the level of pain. I had a plan and once I mastered pretending to be human, I would go back to visit them. I didn't know if it was prohibited to see your family. I didn't care. One day I was going to go see my kinfolks. I could always play off the fact that I was aging by saying I had work done on my face. Or just use that my mama is Black, and Black don't crack excuse.

My voice was different, too. My voice carried notes and octaves I've never heard before. I could sing a little here and there, but now I had an enhanced melodic tone and vocal range. In middle school, people used to call me Mariah Carey because of the way I looked, but now I could sound like her. I could hit them high notes.

I stepped back from the mirror and sat on the edge of the bed. I ran my hands over the comforter. Each individual thread registered against my fingertips. I could feel the weave pattern. I'd touched this same comforter hundreds of times when staying over

at Zand's place, but I'd never truly felt it until now.

Something sharp and sudden twisted in my stomach. A cramp like contraction that made me double over with a gasp. Thirst. No hunger. It was out with the old menstrual cramps and in with the new hunger cramps. My new fangs descended without my permission. The strange sliding pressure in my gums made me wince.

"Jesus." I hissed, wrapping my arms around my midsection as if I could physically contain the feeling. This was what Harlen called the bloodlust. It would hit me in waves about every four hours. It was the constant reminder that I wasn't Morgan Kamisha Hayes. I was a vampire. The pain receded slightly after a few moments, but I knew it wasn't going away completely.

I forced myself to stand, to move away and distract myself. Pacing helped. I remembered the fall. I remembered the air rushing by me and through me. I remembered the impact, a millisecond of blinding pain, and then nothing. Truly nothing. Then I woke up to Harlen's wrist pressed against my mouth. His salty blood on my tongue forcing its way down my throat. There was urgency in his words as he begged me to drink.

My plans, my future, my life was gone in an instant when Teresa pushed me over that railing. I was going to do so many things, go so many places, have two to three kids. If I make it through this shitshow, I'm going to have to lie to everyone I love.

I never imagined in a million years that me and Coco's love for vampire movies would bring me here. Some of the stuff in movies and TV wasn't true, but there were things that were true. I was going to have to watch my family and friends grow old and die. Except for maybe Chanel, if Zand turned her into a vampire one day. I never envisioned a life where I would crave blood every day for eternity.

The look on Coco's face when she saw my eyes. I'll never forget it. There was terror

mixed with grief. My best friend looked at me like I was a stranger.

Maybe I am.

My brain remembered being Morgan Hayes. It held my memories, my personality, and a variation of my voice. I was going to have to think positive. I needed to believe that now I was just a better, more enhanced version of myself.

Another wave of bloodlust hit me. I squinted my eyes and held my stomach. Was this what addiction felt like? I needed to figure this out. I needed to learn to live in this skin, with these senses, and with this hunger. I needed to still be me, whatever the hell that meant. Because the alternative was death, and I wasn't sure how to kill a vampire.

A soft knock on the door pulled me from my existential spiral. Who the hell was at the door? Didn't we all have enough drama for one day?

"Yes." I called out a little too loud.

"It's me."

Who the hell was me? The door opened just a crack. Donté's face appeared in the opening. Unlike the others, he didn't look at me with pity, concern, or fear. He had been exactly where I am now.

"I thought you might want a tasty beverage." He joked with all of his white teeth on full display. And like a magic trick, he presented a glass of blood from behind his back.

I shrugged and sat down on the bed, leaning my back against the headboard. "I don't think I'm good company right now."

“Nobody is the first few days.” He slipped inside the room and closed the door behind him. The click of the door latch sounded like a gunshot to my oversensitive ears. I flinched and Donté noticed.

“Yeah, that shit is wild, right? The super hearing.”

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He crossed the room but stopped to place the glass of blood on the nightstand beside me. He perched on the edge of the bed in front of me.

“I heard it stops?” I asked, gesturing at my ears. “All the loud noise?”

“Yeah, give it a few weeks.” He shook his head. “It’s like background music in a store or on an elevator. Eventually, your brain just tunes it out. Or adjusts to it.”

“How did you deal with it, the transition?” I finally asked. “When Zand turned you. How did you cope?”

Donté leaned forward. “Gee, on God.” He slammed his fist into his palm. “At first, I was about to crash out.”

“Wait, what happened to you? Why did he make you into ah?—”

“You mean how did I die?”

I guess I meant that. I wasn’t sure. I didn’t know much about any of this stuff. I didn’t know anything about Donté.

“Yeah, how did you die?” I was just now understanding that Donté was brought back from the dead, just like me. I didn’t know that until now.

“I was dead when Zand saw me for the first time. I had bullet holes all up in me, no cap.”

“Damn, you got shot.”

“Fo’ times. I was murked at the age of nineteen. Just like all the other YNs in the hood that become statistics.”

“What happened next?” I asked.

He exhaled slowly. “Shit! Damn, Zand told me to stop cussin’ so much.”

“Zand ain’t here. You can talk however you want.” I assured him.

“Yeah, I know, but I’m trying to better myself.”

“Do that after you tell me your origin story.”

“Heavy on the origin story.” He chuckled, showing his pearly whites. “I stayed over on 63rd and Aberdeen. You know, in Englewood.”

I didn’t know I wasn’t from Chicago. I was just mastering up north, over east, out south and out west.

But I let him continue. “I was hanging out with my gee’s. It was me, K. Squeala. J. Money and Lil Reek, we was standing in front of the crib. Reek goof ass was talking about this bop that he cracked at this party last Friday. It felt like a regular day. No cap, we was slippin’, cuz fo’ you know it. Woo-wap-da-bam, The Opps hit the corner and roll up. And buddy start blastin’ on us. I couldn’t even pull my blickey out my shit. J. Money got a few shots out before we took off. I took fo’ of them bullets.” Donté tapped his chest, abdomen, forearm and thigh, marking the places he’d been shot. “On fo’ and ‘nem, I was outta there. I mean out. Ambulance got me to UIC Medical, but they say I was bleeding out. Doctors was working on my Black ass. I could hear ‘em saying that Grey’s Anatomy shit above my head, but I didn’t see ‘em,

just heard ‘em. I could feel myself slippin’, you know? Like falling asleep, like I was on percs, but deeper. I ‘member thinking I wish I would’ve took my dumbass to my granny house over in Lawndale like my mama told me too. Hard-headed, that was me.”

What a colorful story. I nodded, remembering my plunge over the balcony. That millisecond of knowing it was over was a terrible feeling.

“Zand told me he was at the hospital when I died. He was there cuz his lady was a patient.”

“Yeah, somebody jumped her in the parking lot of her old apartment.” I added my facts.

“Right. Zand told me there was a lot of my fam in the waiting room going through it cuz I was shot da fuck up. He said my fam was toe up over me. He said I couldn’t be that bad if all those people was held up at the hospital worried about me and praying for me to make it.”

He had a good point. I was even convinced that he wasn’t that bad. “Why did Zand pick you to turn?”

“He said something about me called out to him. He said he thought he heard my voice even though I was dead.”

Did he really? “And then he turned you?” I filled in the blanks.

“Nah, not right dem and there. My body went to the morgue. Zand said he came back later and copped me.” A smile flashed across Donté’s face. “Rich-ass vampire sneaking into a morgue to steal some YN’s body? Can you imagine dat shit?”

I couldn't believe I was keeping up with all the AAVE and Chicago hood slang that was coming out his mouth. It had to be thanks to The ShadeRoom. I'm sure it wasn't my suburban middle-class upbringing. "I can't even imagine it."

"My father said he gave me his blood, but I don't remember that part. I guess I fell asleep, and I woke up like this." He raised both of his arms out to his sides and dropped them back on the bed. "A vampire."

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“I’m scared of all of this.” I admitted. “I’m afraid I won’t be me anymore. That the vampire will take over and Morgan will disappear.”

“I get that. First few weeks, I kept looking for my heartbeat. Kept forgetting it wasn’t there anymore.” He tapped his chest. “Empty. Silent. On my soul, it freaked me the fuck out.”

“How did you get over that?” I struggled to find the words.

“Father, Zand told me I was going to get something that felt like a heartbeat over time if I continued to drink blood. He said something about vampirism being a virus that mutated over the years. He said old vampires don’t have a heartbeat but all the newly made ones like us do.”

That was something I didn’t know. Harlen said my heartbeat would come back, but he didn’t say anything about a virus or that some vampires don’t have one.

“I really don’t know anything about being a vampire.”

“It’s a learn as you go type of deal. Give it some time.” Donté’s young ass was schooling me.

“Time seems to be all we have.”

“We still can die. It’s just harder to kill us, so we gotta keep our head on a swivel.”

“I’ll remember that.”

“Dead ass, I’m high-key happy father made me. He gave my Black ass a do over. He showing me a different lifestyle. As a vampire, I can have a life without poverty. I don’t have to worry about the police fucking with me. No drive-by shootings, no more gangbanging, burying dead homies, or killing other YNsthat look like me. Now I got a father. I never had one before, not around me. Didn’t even grow up with one. My real daddy went to jail when I was three. I don’t even remember his ass. I was just another YN being raised by a single mom that was working hard to feed me and house me just so I could do all the wrong things. I know Zand isn’t my real father, but he my father in every way that matters. On God, being a vampire is better than my old fucked up life.”

“Well damn, Donté, that’s an origin story.” Another wave of bloodlust hit me. I shut my eyes tight and clawed at my stomach.

“Gee, drink the blood.” Donté’s eyes moved over to the glass of blood sitting right beside me, the one he brought with him.

I glanced over at the glass on the nightstand. He didn’t have to tell me twice. I picked that bad boy up and tilted it to my lips. I drank it down until there was only a mask of red smeared on the inside of the glass. I gently placed the glass down on the nightstand. I fought the urge to place my finger in the glass. Dig out what little was left. And suck it off my fingers.

“That actually helped.” I said, surprised at how much better I instantly felt.

“Gee, don’t starve yourself. My father has an endless supply. He got all the blood types.”

I never even thought about different blood types. What type did I just drink? It was del-lish.

“I got a question for you.” I asked.

“What’s up?”

“Did you ever...” I hesitated, uncertain how to phrase the question. “Did you ever hurt anyone? After you were turned?”

He understood me right away. “I haven’t hurt anyone as a vampire. But I hurt a lot of people when I was human.” Donté’s eyes changed. They were filled with regret. His life was better now that he was a vampire. I feared the same wouldn’t be for me.

“I’m afraid I will hurt someone. I know I’m stronger and faster. And then the hunger. I don’t want to attack anybody.”

“We can hurt people without meaning to. But you got all these people around you to help you through the early parts of being a vampire. It’s only been three days, and you doing good if you ask me. Don’t overthink it.”

“I don’t feel in control.” I admitted. “I feel like I’m hanging on by my fingernails.”

“Gee, that’s control. And your nails are fire.” He said and bucked his eyes like I was slow. I mean, okay, I get it. I’m new to the vampire family, but could he stop calling me gee?

“Did you ever go back to see your family after you turned?” I asked.

“Nah, when I died in the hospital, that was it. Father told me if I wanted this new life, I couldn’t go back to my old one. Everybody knows that I died. Your family doesn’t know you died. You can act like nothing happened.”

“Yeah, you’re tight. But don’t you miss your mother?”

“Yeah, fo’ sure, but she better off without me. I was a bad influence on my little brother and my cousins. All I did was cause my mama problems. I know she good. She moved to Ohio to stay with her sister. It worked out for her and my brother.”

A comfortable silence settled between us. For the first time since waking up to this new existence, I didn’t feel completely alone. Donté had walked this path before me. He survived it. He seemed to be still himself. I didn’t know him before, so that was an odd thing to think. He actually might be better than he was before because he pretty much described himself as a violent youthful offender with his origin story.

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“The hunger never goes away completely.” He said after a while. “You learn to make it your strength instead of your weakness.” He stood up and stretched. “Morgan don’t even trip. The fact you worried about losing yourself means you won’t.”

Donté moved toward the door, then paused with his hand on the knob. “We’ve got your back. Me, Zand, Harlen and Chanel. Gee, you not alone in this.”

As the door closed behind him. I sat with his colorful words. It was information. Data. Something I could learn from and use. He was gone, and I forgot to ask him if there was a funeral and a burial for him. I also forgot to ask him if it was an open casket because it couldn’t be open. If it was, whose body was in the casket? I knew it didn’t matter, but I was confused and curious about the whole damn thing. I’m still nosy as a vampire. That part of me hadn’t changed.

CHAPTER SIX

ZAND

My rage burned cold as I slipped my Cripso Glock into my shoulder holster. The weapon’s lightweight against my ribs felt comfortable. I existed for a few decades without the need for weapons. Times had changed.

Teresa crossed a line when she murdered Morgan. Harlen turning Morgan didn’t erase the loss of life. Nothing could erase Teresa’s sins now. I didn’t think she would go this far. I will never underestimate a rival again. This was my lesson learned. Morgan was the only family Chanel had left, and Teresa took her life. Payback was so near I could feel it, see it, and taste it.

I adjusted my suit jacket, guaranteeing the gun remained invisible beneath the tailored fabric. Tonight, I was hunting my ex-wife. If I would've known what she did to Morgan, I would've confronted her sooner. Harlen should've reported Morgan's death immediately. This time, I overlooked his behavior. It was clear he had genuine feelings for Morgan.

I left my office and walked down the hall to the Castle's private conference room. I entered and noticed Natasha standing at the head of the table. Marco bent to slide his weapon into his ankle holster. Matt checked the clip on his Glock. He was a good shot. Matt was a hunter before he was made a vampire. Josh stood silently by the door. His expression was unreadable, but his eyes were always alert. Each of them had served me faithfully for years.

Harlen entered the conference room last. The recent events with Morgan had changed him. There was a new focus in his eyes. It was nice to see he cared about someone other than himself.

"You sure this is the play?" Harlen asked, accepting his weapon from Natasha. "Confronting Teresa in a public place?"

I addressed his concerns. "We need to see how many people she has with her that are vampires. We need our people to walk around so we can get some kind of head count. When the shit goes down, I don't want to be outnumbered. Teresa thrives on chaos. We're not giving her what she wants. We're dictating the terms now."

"Harlen, do you remember how to use your weapon?" Natasha asked.

He looked down at his own personal gun. "Yes. Point and shoot."

I advised Natasha to give Harlen a Crip Glock. There was nothing I could see that made me believe he would go against me. He wanted to be here. We wouldn't know

Marisol was a vamp without his intel.

“Listen up everybody!” I called out. “As you know, the weapon is personalized only for you. Get used to carrying it, concealing it, and wearing it on your body. This tech is something we can’t let get out into the world.”

“Why are we bringing them if we can’t use it to take these assholes down?” Harlen asked.

“This isn’t what we’re there for. Using our weapons are last resort. We are not there to get civilians killed and caught in our vampire business. Natasha and I have never tested the serum on humans. One stray bullet might kill them, and that’s not what we’re there for.”

“Club Bailar Caliente has a VIP section that’s relatively isolated.” Natasha said while pulling up the club’s floor plan on the screen on the wall behind the head of the table. “Our goal is to isolate Teresa and Marisol and identify any other vampires in the establishment.”

“Every entrance and exit needs to be covered as soon as we step inside. We can’t have any vampires leaving without a head count and description.” I instructed. “I know everyone is ready to use the Cripes and have this over with, but we can’t show them our hand this early. If they see our secret weapon coming, they can run and hide and then we are right back where we started. I don’t want to go back to looking over our shoulders. I’m going in there to stir shit up! So, we can take them out completely!”

The team absorbed my instructions. These weren’t just my employees. They were my soldiers in a war most humans didn’t even know existed. A war Teresa started when she created her own vampire and targeted Chanel. I just hoped Marisol was the only vampire she created.

“If we all are there at the club, who is with Chanel and Morgan?” Harlen asked.

“Donté and Viktor are with them.” I replied. “Donté and Viktor have been issued weapons. Morgan is a vampire now. As far as we know, Teresa doesn’t know that you turned her. The instructions are clear. Time to get the information.”

The ride to Club Bailar Caliente was hauntingly silent. We took two black SUVs, with window tints beyond legal limits. We cut through Chicago’s night traffic in route to our destination. I sat in the lead vehicle with Natasha beside me and Harlen in the back.

We pulled up a half a block from the club entrance. The line stretched down the sidewalk, humans blissfully unaware they were in queue alongside predators. Bass pulsed from within the walls and leaked out into the street.

Natasha approached the bouncer who was a mountain of a man with neck tattoos and hands like sledgehammers. She smiled and slipped him an envelope from her leather jacket. The bouncer’s eyes widened slightly as she placed it in his palm.

“Three thousand.” She murmured. “Me and my friends don’t like waiting or being searched.”

He hesitated only briefly before pocketing the cash and unhooking the velvet rope. “Go right in.” He grunted, avoiding eye contact with the rest of us.

We entered the club. Harlen took the lead because he’d been there before. The club interior was colorful and very different from my decor at The Castle. The dance floor was full of bodies pressed together under strobe lights moving to Latin music.

I scanned the crowd methodically. Josh and Marco positioned themselves near the main exit. Matt drifted toward the emergency exit. Natasha remained at my flank.

Harlen moved to the other emergency exit by the bar that led to the kitchen.

Then I saw that bitch!

Teresa provocatively danced in the center of the dance floor. Her body gyrated to Mi Gente by J. Balvin and Willy William. She was wearing a black leather dress that clung to her form like a second skin. It was the skin of a snake that needed their head cut off.

Beside her were the faces of humans, oblivious to the predator in their midst. How many of them would she feed on tonight? How many more Chanel Taylor's would die if I didn't end this soon?

As if sensing my predatory gaze, Teresa turned in my direction. Our eyes locked across the crowded floor. Surprise flickered across her face. It was quickly replaced by delight. Her lips curved into a smile that held no warmth. Was she happy to see me?

She beckoned me with a single finger, inviting me to join her on the dance floor. The gesture carried all the arrogance I remembered about her. She thought with absolute certainty that she could control any situation, manipulate any person. Even me. Especially me.

I felt Harlen tense beside me, his hand reflexively moving toward his concealed weapon.

"Be cool." I murmured.

"That bitch killed Morgan!"

I looked my brother in his eyes. “Harlen, we’re going to get her. But not here. Not now.”

He conceded with a head nod. I removed my Crip Glock, discreetly passing it to Natasha with a look that communicated more than words could. She took it with a nearly imperceptible motion.

“Cover me. Don’t intervene unless I give the signal.” I told Natasha and Harlen. “This needs to play out a certain way.”

Harlen’s jaw clenched. “Be careful, brother. If she kills humans so freely, vampires are next.”

“We’re not going to lose any of our people. Don’t even think it.” I sternly replied.

I straighten my suit jacket and stepped forward, moving toward Teresa with long strides. The crowd parted instinctively before me. I’m tall, and humans subconsciously recognize me as a predator. Teresa watched my approach. Her smile widened. Her thin body was still moving to the beat of the music.

I glided into Teresa’s space. My hands found her waist. We’ve danced this dance before, in a different place, at a different time. It was our wedding day when the steps were romantic rather than hostile. I gripped her tighter than necessary, my fingers digging into the fabric of her dress. It wasn’t made of real leather. The fabric was cheap, just like the bar I picked her up in, just a few years ago.

“Zand.” She purred my name from her lips. “This time you came to me. I’m flattered.”

The Latin beat drove our movements. I danced in my own controlled way just to fit in and not look suspicious. I guided her roughly, my steps aggressive and forceful.

There was nothing seductive about the way we move together. This was a fierce battle choreographed to music.

Teresa leaned in, pressing her breasts into my chest. Her hair brushed against my cheek. The high heels lifted her just a few inches below me.

“Stop being so rough with me. Save that for the bedroom.” She whispered up to my ear.

“You think this is rough?” I clawed at her shoulder, causing her to stumble.

“I do. Stop it now, or I’ll start killing random people on this goddamn dance floor.”

“You’re bluffing.” My jaw clenched, but I eased my grip on her shoulder and back. I refused to give her an excuse to spill innocent blood. “Always the same threats, Teresa. You haven’t changed.”

She laughed. It was a delightful sound to anyone who didn’t know the darkness behind it. We turned in perfect synchronization.

“Turning Marisol crossed the line.” I said, keeping my voice low enough that only she could hear. “And killing innocent women named Chanel Taylor is diabolical.”

Teresa’s eyes flashed with amusement. All around us, humans continued to dance, unaware of the predators in their midst.

“You have no idea where the line is.” She moaned while her fingers dug into my shoulders. “I will stop at nothing to make you feel pain, and I won’t stop until you lose everything you love and have worked for here in Chicago.”

The music shifted to a deeper bass line. Teresa moved closer to me, although that

seemed impossible. Her body pressed against mine felt grotesque. My eyes scanned the club over her shoulder. I located each member of my team. They were maintaining their positions and watching with alert vigilance.

“Why kill innocent humans?” I demanded an answer while spinning her abruptly. “They have nothing to do with us. It seems beneath you or any vampire.”

Teresa’s face hardened. “No human is innocent. They are sheep. Prey. Food. Nothing more.”

“You were once a human.” I reminded her.

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“Yes, and I was pathetic and powerless. I begged you to turn me for a reason.”

“I did, and you betrayed me?”

“You said forever.” Her hand slid up to my face. Her fingernails scraped lightly along my jaw. “You’ve become domesticated, Zand. Playing house with your human nurse. It’s disgusting. You told me we were destined. You said we were infinity.” Teresa’s anger got the best of her, and she dug her nails into my flesh and twisted my jaw like she was trying to break me.

I grabbed her wrist, yanking her hand from my jaw. I twisted her wrist and squeezed it hard enough to remind her that I’m far from domesticated. “You’re jealous.”

“Jealous?” She laughed again. “Of what? A temporary plaything? Humans break so easily. As the little mulatto Morgan discovered when I pushed her to her death.”

The mention of Morgan sent a flash of rage through me, but I maintained my mask of calm. Showing emotion would only give Teresa what she wanted.

“Morgan survived.” I said, gloating just a bit.

“Impossible.” She blurted.

“Harlen turned her. You failed. She’s not dead.” I mocked her bravado with some of my own.

A flicker of genuine surprise marred her face before she could conceal it from me.

“I don’t believe you. He’s a dimwit. He’s never, ever turned anyone into a vampire.”

“There’s a first time for everything.” I gloated.

“How did he know how to do it? He can’t even tie his shoe without you showing him bunny ears.”

“Harlen is smarter than you think.”

“How sweet. Your brother is playing hero.” Realizing her mask had slipped, she bounced back into her tough girl persona. “But that doesn’t change anything. I’ll just have to be more thorough next time. The nurse, I’ll chop her body into pieces and then you can’t turn her into a vamp.”

This time, her threat to Chanel didn’t faze me. “How do you know she isn’t already one?” I lied, just to irritate her. I knew I was only days or hours away from ending her miserable life.

We moved across the dance floor with our bodies locked in this hostile embrace. Her body was tense. I’d said too many things that weren’t to her liking. She’d never seen this side of me. I was a fierce protector when I felt like I had something to protect.

“Do you want me to stop, Zand?” Teresa asked suddenly, her voice almost girlish. “Is that what this visit is about? You want me to leave your little nurse alone?”

“Yes.” I said simply. I knew she wouldn’t. I’d been down this road before.

Teresa’s forced smile widened. “Then ask me nicely.”

The music pounded in my ears, matching the fury pulsing through me. “Teresa, please stop killing innocent people.”

“Since you asked so politely. I will.” She paused theatrically. “Not.”

But there was something in her predatory smirk that betrayed her words. I recognized the calculated gleam in her eyes. There was something else going on and she was doing everything she could to bite her tongue.

“Surprise. Surprise.” I said flatly.

She shrugged. “I’m actually full of surprises.”

“I disagree.”

“You’ll believe what you want to believe.”

“I believe you’re desperate.” I told her the truth. “You lost me, and now you’re scrambling to hurt me because you can’t accept that I’ve moved on. It’s just confirmation that you weren’t that special to begin with.”

Her eyes flashed dangerously. “Moved on? To what? Playing protector to humans who will age and die while you remain unchanged? Or will you turn your precious Chanel too? Make her like us?”

“Chanel is already like us. Since you kept threatening to kill her, I had to do something so she could protect herself.” I lied.

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Teresa studied my face, trying to see if I was being honest. She leaned closer, her lips nearly brushing mine. “If she’s still human, I’ll drain her dry, then chop her into teeny weeny pieces. If she’s a vampire, I will hang her from a tree and set her on fire.”

My hands tightened involuntarily on her waist. My self-control slipped for just a moment.

“There he is.” She purred. “There’s the monster you pretend not to be.”

I forced my grip to relax. “You’ve made your intentions clear.” I said evenly. “Now it’s my turn to be clear. If you come near Chanel, Morgan, or anyone I deem my clan, I will end you.”

“Oh, Zand.” Teresa sighed. “I expect more of an original threat from you.” She trailed a finger down my chest. “Maybe deep down, you still love me too much to do it.”

The song being mixed changed to Gasolina by Daddy Yankee and the crowd erupted in cheers. The songs fit with my intentions for Teresa. Especially the part about her loving gasoline. I need to get some accelerant and make sure Teresa burns. The dancers around us moved with reckless abandon. I locked eyes with Teresa. I looked at her just as I used to. Some may call it flirting, but I called it an act.

“That’s where you’re wrong.” I groaned into her ear. “What I feel for you now isn’t love. It isn’t even hate. It’s nothing. You are nothing to me.”

Her smile faltered, just briefly, before she forced it back into place. “We’ll see about

that.” It was the first genuine emotion. “When I’m finished, you’ll feel something for me again, even if it’s just pain.”

The song ended, creating a momentary lull on the dance floor. Teresa stepped back and her eyes never left mine. Her thin lips curved into a smile that promised violence.

“This was lovely.” She mocked. “We should do it more often.”

The crowd on the dance floor shifted. Some dancers left the floor when the song changed. As the parting bodies opened, I saw her. Marisol Lopez emerged from the throng, her eyes locked on Teresa and me. She was dressed in tight black pants, and a red bandana that she made into a halter top. The resemblance to her brother Lonzo was striking. I’d never seen her in person, only in photos and video footage. Teresa’s maniacal smile widened as Marisol approached. The two of them exchanged a look of shared malice.

“Look who’s joined our little reunion.” Teresa said, extending her hand to Marisol. The newly turned vampire took it.

I was surrounded now, sandwiched between two harpies complete with bird brains instead of wings. The music shifted to something slower and more sensual. I was at a tactical disadvantage, but I held my ground.

“You must be Alexander Valentine.” Marisol said, her accent thicker than her brother’s. She positioned herself behind me. Her hands rubbed my shoulders. “Teresa has told me so much about you.”

The three of us moved in tandem. We moved like a parody of dirty dancing. Patrick Swayze would be disgusted. Teresa pressed against my front while Marisol clung to me from behind. Their movements became increasingly more aggressive and provocative.

“I don’t believe we’ve been properly introduced.” I replied.

Marisol’s fingers dug into the muscles of my back. “I think you know exactly who I am,” she hissed right below my ear. “Just like I know what you’re hiding.” She hinted.

Around us, oblivious humans continued dancing. They were caught up in the music and their own desires. I spotted a few curious glances thrown our way. The three of us, one blonde, White woman, a White man and a Hispanic woman, engaged in what appeared to be an intimate dance would draw attention.

“Where is my brother Lonzo?” Marisol demanded. Her hands slid from my back to grip my ass.

I kept my face impassive. Revealing nothing to Teresa, who was watching my every move. Lonzo’s body was bloated somewhere at the bottom of Lake Michigan, but she didn’t need to know that. Not yet. Knowledge was power, and I wasn’t giving her any more than Teresa had already given.

“You came all this way looking for him.” I said instead. “What makes you think I know where he is?”

Teresa cackled, cutting through the music. “Don’t play dumb, Zand. It doesn’t suit you.” She ran her hands down my chest.

From the corner of my eye, I saw movement. Natasha and Harlen had noticed the women’s aggressive behavior. They both moved closer with their hands hovering near their concealed weapons. Josh shifted position, creating a clear line of sight to where we danced. I raised my hand slightly, a subtle gesture that only my team would recognize. Stand down.

“Careful, ladies.” I said with my voice pitched low beneath the music. “There are too many witnesses here.”

Marisol’s laugh was nothing like Teresa’s practiced cackle. Her laugh was raw and unrefined. “You think I care about witnesses? You think I care about anything besides making you pay for what happened to my brother?”

“Your brother made his own choices.” I told her, turning to meet her eyes. “Whatever happened to him was the consequence of his own actions.”

Marisol’s eyes flash dangerously, and I felt her muscles tense as if she might strike me. Teresa noticed too and gives her a warning look. Not here. Not now.

The song changed again, with the beat becoming more insistent. The three of us continued our twisted dance, locked in a power struggle disguised as passion. Sweat-slicked humans pressed closer around us, the dance floor becoming more crowded as the night went on.

“This isn’t over.” I told both women, my voice carried over the music just enough for their vampire hearing to catch.

Teresa’s red lips curved into a smile. “It’s only over when the Black nurse is dead. I promise you that.”

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Something inside me snapped—not my control, but my patience for this game. I laughed directly in Teresa’s face. The sound startled her enough that she pulled back slightly.

“The war has officially started.” I declared as I looked from Teresa to Marisol and back again. “And you’ve already lost. You just don’t know it yet.”

My words landed like physical blows. Teresa’s composure cracked and her fangs nearly appeared in public. Marisol hissed and mumbled something in Spanish under her breath.

“You arrogant bastard.” Teresa spewed. “You think you’ve won? I’ve barely started making you suffer!”

I maintained my composure, not giving her the satisfaction of seeing me rattled. With deliberate calm, I extracted myself from between them. I straightened my jacket with a casual air that I knew would infuriate them both.

“Thank you for the dance.” I said mildly.

I strolled away from the duo and nodded almost imperceptibly at my team. They responded with practiced efficiency. Natasha glided toward the main exit. Harlen fell into step beside me. Matt and Marco created a protective formation without being obvious about it.

“You walk away now, and I’ll kill another Chanel Taylor tonight.” Teresa yelled after me and over the music.

I turned back and met her gaze from across the distance that now separated us. “No, you won’t.” I smirked with absolute certainty. “Because from this moment on, you’ll be too busy looking over your shoulder.”

Teresa’s eyes bulged. This was the first hint of genuine fear crossing her. Beside her, Marisol shifted uncomfortably. I couldn’t read her face, but she had to realize this would be a fight like none she’d ever encountered.

We exited the club smoothly. The night air hit my face as we stepped outside. Josh and Marco left to bring the SUVs around as Natasha gave me back my Crip-o Glock.

“The team confirmed Teresa had at least three more vampires with her. All women.” She reported quietly. “Two were positioned outside in the rear of the club. Two more were inside, watching you on the dance floor.” She said.

I placed the weapon back in my shoulder holster. My mind was already calculating our next moves. “Were you able to track them?”

“Da. We have the location of their nest. An abandoned warehouse near the river, just as we suspected.”

Harlen joined us at the curb. “What’s the play now, brother? They’re expecting us to hit them.”

“Then we’ll do the unexpected. We’ll take them out one at a time. Let’s start with Marisol. Teresa values her as a weapon against us. Without her, Teresa is on her own. All the other vamps she created have no reason to go against us.”

Natasha nodded, already understanding my strategy. “Divide and conquer.”

“Exactly. Teresa wants me to lose everything.” I glanced back at the club entrance,

where the neon lights cast bloody reflections on the pavement. “Let’s show her what it feels like instead, to lose everything.”

We slid into the vehicles. The engines roared as we pulled away from Club Bailar Caliente. For the first time since Teresa appeared in Chicago, I felt something close to victory. She had made herself clear. I wanted her to leave this city. But she didn’t. It’s my turn to make myself clear. Chicago was mine and mine alone.

CHAPTER SEVEN

HARLEN

My watch read 2:47 AM. I’d been parked in this same spot for nearly two hours, waiting. I scanned the nearly empty parking lot of the Parkview Apartments. The name promised a view of something other than the dilapidated buildings across the street and the overflowing dumpsters at the edge of the cracked asphalt.

I didn’t want to be here, but I had to be here. There was this thing called revenge.

My specially made Crip Glock was currently resting against my ribs from inside my jacket. I didn’t know much about how this handgun was created. I only knew what Natasha told me. If this thing could put a vampire down, it really was the secret weapon we needed to run shit in this town.

I adjusted the side mirror to get a better view of the building’s west entrance. The exterior lights flickered, casting uneven shadows across the concrete walkway. A stray cat darted between parked cars. It was the only movement I’ve seen in the last hour. In the distance, a siren wailed and faded. Chicago at night was always windy and always restless.

I glanced down at my cell phone. I had an incoming text.

Morgan

Are you still coming over later?

Me

Yes. As soon as I wrap this up.

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Morgan

Why are you alone?

Me

I don't need backup.

Morgan

Don't die tonight.

Me

Never. I'm trying to fuck you until the sun rises.

Morgan

You better.

Me

I got you. Wear something sexy.

Morgan

Like this???

A picture of Morgan in black lace thong lingerie appeared on my cell phone. She was laid on her bed and one of her nipples was playing peekaboo through the fabric.

Me

Yes.

Morgan

I'll be waiting.

The rumble of an approaching motorcycle broke the sexting spree. I straightened in my seat, watching as a sleek black Kawasaki bike cruised into the parking lot. The rider was a young, tall, Hispanic man with broad shoulders and a confident posture. He pulled into an empty space near the side entrance of the building. Behind him, with her arms wrapped tightly around his waist, was Marisol Lopez.

Me

I see my mark.

Me

I'll be there soon.

Morgan

Be careful.

I shut my cell screen and shoved my phone in my pocket.

Even from this distance, I recognized Marisol. She swung her leg over the bike to dismount. She was laughing at something the guy said. She almost looked like a human.

The guy was Juan, according to Natasha's intel. He removed his helmet, revealing a sharp jawline and the kind of face that probably never struggled to find female company. He was too young to remember Menudo, but he could've easily made the group with those looks.

Juan reached for Marisol, his hand settling possessively on the small of her back. She leaned into him, her body language screaming for sex. They were touching continuously. Her fingers traced his arm. His hands slipped to her ass.

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I reached inside my jacket, feeling the Crip-o Glock. The weapon was lighter than a standard gun. I checked the safety, then the magazine, ensuring everything was precisely as it should be. The bullets contained a serum that Natasha invented. It comprised something that attacked vampire blood cells. I was advised to shoot once or twice, depending on the size of my target.

As Juan and Marisol made their way toward the building entrance, I slowly opened my car door. I moved silently, keeping myself in the shadows and between parked cars.

The couple disappeared through the building's side entrance. I waited before following them inside. A fluorescent lighting buzzed overhead. The elevator was out of service, not surprising given the state of the place. I took the stairs. I hung back, listening to their footsteps and their quiet laughter as it echoed in the stairwell.

"You're going to wake your neighbors," Marisol said. There was a playfulness in her tone.

"Let them hear." Juan replied. "I don't care. I've been trying to get with you all night."

I took the stairs one at a time. At the second-floor landing, I paused. Marisol's laugh was melodic, genuine in a way that caught me off guard. This chick couldn't run a cartel. She was focused on the wrong things.

"You were thinking about me while I was sitting right next to you at the club?" She teased. "What exactly were you thinking, Juan?"

“You don’t want to know that.”

“Yeah, I do. Tell me.” She pleaded.

“I was thinking I can’t wait to see you naked,” Juan gushed.

I heard the unmistakable sound of bodies pressing together against a wall and the sound of kissing.

“What else were you thinking?” Marisol asked.

“That I wanted to get you alone so I could see what that pussy do.”

They continued down the hall, and I followed at a careful distance. The corridor was dimly lit, with several burned-out bulbs creating pockets of darkness perfect for hiding. I slipped from shadow to shadow, keeping my footsteps silent on the worn carpet.

“Oh, papi, that’s what you trying to see.”

“Si, mami.”

“Good, because I plan to fuck you until the sun comes up.”

I had said the same thing to Morgan over text. Great minds, think alike. Maybe?

Juan laughed, a deep, throaty sound. “Promises, promises.”

The door to an apartment opened, and they stumbled inside. Neither of them noticed the door failed to click shut behind them. It only mattered if Marisol noticed, and she didn’t. I heard their continued conversation as they move deeper into the apartment,

something about drinks and music, then the unmistakable sounds of deep kissing and clothing being removed and tossed.

I stood motionless in the hallway. One minute. Two minutes. Three. Giving them enough time to become thoroughly distracted. The Crip-o Glock felt unnaturally warm against my palm as I drew it from its holster. I flicked off the safety with my thumb.

As I moved toward the unlocked door, I felt none of the doubt or hesitation that might have plagued me in the past. Teresa killed Morgan and now Marisol would pay the price. A human life for a vampire life. She took one of our people and we will take one of hers. Simple.

I pushed the apartment door open with my fingertips. The hinges were silent as I stepped inside. The entryway was dark.

My vampire eyes adjusted instantly to the darkness, taking in details no human could discern without lights. The living room was an ode to bachelor minimalism. There was a sagging futon couch with small stains. There was also a coffee table constructed from milk crates and a TV stand supporting a massive flatscreen that was worth more than everything else in the room combined.

The walls were bare except for a single framed Chicago Bulls poster and a Mexican flag thumbtacked above the futon couch. The carpet beneath my feet was worn thin in the pathways from the door to the kitchen and toward what must be the bedroom. That's where the sounds of Marisol and Juan's passion grew more intense.

I moved slowly, placing each step carefully to avoid the creaking floorboards under the carpet that plagued buildings of this vintage. The Crip-o Glock was a comforting weight in my hand. My finger rested alongside the trigger rather than on it.

As I approached the hallway leading to the bedroom, the scent of sex became more

pronounced. There was a heady mixture of sweat, pheromones, and the distinct metallic undertone that accompanied vampire arousal. Marisol's gasps and moans filtered through the open bedroom door, punctuated by Juan's deeper groans and Spanish endearments.

"Así, así!" Marisol urged. Her voice was ragged with pleasure. "Don't stop!"

The bedroom door stood ajar, offering me a perfect line of sight to the bed. The sheets were tangled around them. Marisol straddled him. Her bare back was to the door and her spine arched as she rode him like he was a bull.

Her hair cascaded down her back in dark waves, swaying with each movement of her hips. Juan's hands gripped her waist. His fingers pressed into her flesh with an intensity that would bruise a human woman. But Marisol wasn't human anymore. Teresa saw to that.

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We were at war, and in war, there were casualties. Tonight, Marisol was one of them.

I raised the Cripso Glock, aiming the barrel at the center of Marisol's back. My hand was steady. It always was. I've killed before, though never another vampire. That distinction didn't matter now.

I exhaled slowly, squeezing the trigger with precision. The gun made a sound unlike any normal firearm. The noise was a soft phut that was barely louder than a handclap. There was minimal recoil. The barrel barely moved as I fired the second shot immediately after the first.

Marisol's body jerked violently as the specialized bullets pierced her skin. She didn't scream. There was no time. Her back arched in a grotesque parody of the pleasure she was experiencing moments before. Her arms went rigid, fingers splayed wide, as if reaching for something just beyond her grasp.

The bullet's ingredients worked with terrifying speed. A soft orange glow emanated from beneath her skin, tiny veins of light spreading outward from the entry wounds. She collapsed forward onto Juan's chest. Her body convulsed slightly before going completely limp.

"What the fuck?" Juan shouted.

With a grunt, he pushed Marisol's body off of him, rolling her to the side of the bed. His eyes darted wildly around the room until he found me standing in the doorway, gun still raised. Recognition dawned on his handsome face. He knew me. I was the one sitting quietly in the background when he had his secret meeting with Natasha

days ago.

Marisol's eyes were open, and her mouth frozen in a startled gasp of surprise. The orange glow beneath her skin was fading now, leaving behind a grayish pallor that signaled the serum had completely worked. She was paralyzed. The bullets of the Cripso Glock did the job they were designed to do. Incapacitate.

Juan scrambled backward against the headboard.

I lowered my weapon. "Hey, my guy, you gonna cover your cock?"

His hands fumbled for the bedsheet to cover his nakedness. His erection, so proudly engaged moments ago, withered under the reality of what he was witnessing. Sweat beads blanketed his forehead and his chest was heaving with panic.

"You, you're that guy," He stammered with one hand covering his genitals under the sheet. "I did what she told me to do." He howled, speaking of Natasha.

"Be quiet and listen. You did exactly what you were supposed to do. We need to talk about what happens next."

Juan's eyes moved to Marisol's body, then back to me. There's fear there, but something else too. He was already thinking about how to navigate this situation, how to come out alive. The sheet trembled in his grip, but his gaze settled on me.

"Whatever you want." He said as his voice evened out. "Just tell me what to do."

I stepped fully into the bedroom, keeping the Cripso Glock visible in my palm. "First, we need to wrap her up. And then we're going to have a conversation about your payment for services rendered."

“Okay.”

“Get dressed.” I told Juan, tucking the Crip Glock into my waistband. “Then help me wrap up her body.”

Juan nodded. His movements were jerky as he slipped from the bed. He pulled on a pair of jeans from the floor and struggled with the zipper.

“I didn’t know you were going to... while we were...” Juan gestured vaguely toward the bed, pulling a t-shirt over his head. “You could have waited until after.”

“I could’ve but I didn’t.” I replied, moving to the edge of the bed. I grabbed the corner of the fitted sheet beneath Marisol. “Help me get her wrapped in the sheet.”

Juan hesitated only for a second before joining me on the opposite side of the bed. His eyes focused on Marisol’s face. Her opened eyes were freaking him out.

“Should we close her eyes or something?” He asked.

“Nah, it doesn’t matter.” I began folding the sheet over her body, tucking it tightly around her shoulders. “She’s not coming back.”

Working together, we rolled Marisol’s body until she was completely enveloped in the fitted and the flat white cotton sheets. Juan moved with surprising efficiency once he started. His initial shock gave way to a keen focus that suggested he would be fine after the dust settled. I could see why Natasha enlisted this young man for our plan.

“We need something to secure that she stays wrapped up.” I was talking out loud. The sheet-wrapped form on the bed looked like a cocoon or a mummy. “You got any rope, anything like that?” I asked.

“I have duct tape in the kitchen.” Juan offered, already moving toward the door.

While he was gone, I checked Marisol’s wrapping, making sure the sheet completely covered her. There was no blood. When I was wrapping her up, I only saw the two bruises from the shots. Natasha said the serum would dissolve inside the body in four to six hours. I had time, and I had more bullets.

Juan returned with a roll of silver duct tape. His composure was more settled now that it was past the initial shock. He tore off strips with his teeth, handing them to me as I secured the sheet around Marisol’s ankles, then her knees, her waist, shoulders, and finally her head. The process moved smoothly.

“When are you leaving town?” I asked as we finish securing the last piece of duct tape.

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Juan wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. “Early tomorrow morning. My Amtrak train leaves Union Station at 7AM to Orlando. One-way ticket.” He glanced at me. “Just like I discussed with Natasha.”

“Good.” I reached into my jacket inside pocket and pulled out a thick envelope, tossing it onto the mattress next to the wrapped body. “Twenty thousand. Don’t spend it all in one place.”

Juan picked up the envelope, thumbing through the bills with a slight smile. The amount was clearly more than he expected. “This is generous. Tell Natasha thank you for me.”

“I will.” I straightened my jacket. “You played your part well, amigo. Getting her here, alone, distracted. The door left unlocked. All according to plan.”

“She never suspected anything.” Juan said, a note of pride slipping into his voice. “She thought I was just some guy looking to get laid.”

“And instead, you were bait.” I allowed myself a small smile.

“I think I might take some acting classes.” Juan offered.

Not exactly what I thought the pretty boy was going to say.

“Whatever floats your boat. Just make sure you’re on that train tomorrow. You don’t want to be anywhere near Chicago.”

“I can help you get the body out of here.” Juan offered, tucking the envelope into his backpack on the night table.

“I got it.”

“Okay, I’m just happy I could help Natasha.”

Juan ran a hand through his hair. His gaze settled on the wrapped form of Marisol. “It’s crazy, you know? Vampires. I always thought it was bullshit.”

“The world is full of all kinds of monsters. Hey, I got a question.” I was just curious.

“Yeah.”

“How do you know Natasha? I asked.

“We met at The Castle about a year ago.”

“And?”

“She used to use me to get her hot girls. You know, some girls are only into girls when there’s a guy around.”

“Oh.”

Juan grabbed a sweatshirt from a hook on the back of his door. As he pulled it over his head.

“That thing Natasha mentioned before, about you know me maybe getting to be like you someday. Was that real? Or just part of getting me to help take down Marisol?”

I studied him for a moment. His eagerness was transparent. The lure of immortality, of power, of being something more than human. It was a desire I recognized.

“If you stay out of trouble.” I said carefully, “and if you live that long. Natasha will consider it.”

His eyes lit up. “Four years. I can do that. I’ll only be twenty-eight.” He reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out a set of keys. “Here’s the key to the bike. Natasha loaned it to me so I could get around, but I can’t take it with me.”

Natasha gave this pretty boy a motorcycle. How generous, when she was a bitch to me from the day I met her.

Juan tossed me the keys, and I pocketed them. I was already plotting the next steps. I could come back to get the motorcycle later and return it to Natasha.

I lifted Marisol’s body over my shoulder. “Have your ass on the train. Don’t fuck up.” I warned.

“I’m leaving as soon as I pack.”

“How are you getting to Union Station?”

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“Uber, and I’m going to pretend that I’ve never met you or seen you before. My lips are sealed. I don’t want anything to mess up my chance of being one of you guys one day.”

I walked out of the apartment with a body over my shoulder. I was careful to avoid cameras and moving cars. There were no people out and about, which aided in my endeavors.

I threw Marisol in the car’s trunk. Doing the speed limit, I drove to the spot where I was told to take her body. I thought about Juan Eduardo Vega. His conviction was almost touching. This human was so eager to leave his humanity behind. I wondered if he would feel the same in four years, or if the reality of what we were would have dimmed the fantasy he had in his head.

It didn’t matter. For now, he was useful. He aided us in our cause. And in this game of vampire chess, every pawn had its purpose.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ZAND

My armored beast drove through Chicago’s darkness. I felt cloaked from the chaos in the luxury tank. Chanel wanted me to stop driving around in my old Chevy while there was danger looming. She asked me to drive the reinforced truck, and I complied. I ditched the vintage Chevy to ease her worries, but I didn’t fear Teresa or Marisol. Chanel cared, and I cared enough for her, to do as she requested.

With hands laid on the steering wheel, I drove with little effort. The ride was so quiet and comfortable. I could sink into the leather and fall asleep. Tonight, I didn't have that luxury. My senses were enhanced, and my predatory nature was unlocked. I scanned every crosswalk, each alleyway, and eyed each person I saw on the street because of the current threats I faced.

Teresa was still out there, but tonight's hunt wasn't about her. Tonight belonged to Marisol Lopez. If Harlen had done his job, she would soon answer for her crimes against Chanel and Morgan's late boyfriend. I still hadn't figured out how Marisol was introduced to Teresa. Where could they have connected? It was still a mystery.

Even more pressing was how Teresa found the location of my condo in Cheboygan, Michigan. The good news, I didn't have to worry about Teresa killing anymore innocent women with the name Chanel Taylor. Natasha's associate at the Chicago Police Department had contacted every lady with that name and put them under some form of police protection.

Always on the job, Natasha made sure my Chanel was excluded from the others. With a quick name and social security number change, my Chanel Taylor was now legally going by the name Vanessa Taylor. It was an ode to one of Chanel's favorite movies, Blade. Vanessa was Blade's mother in the movie franchise.

Natasha also made sure the Minnesota detectives weren't aware of these random killings in Chicago. I didn't need detective Crowley and Jamison interfering in my plans. I also didn't need them to force Chanel into witness protection. I get it. They were doing their jobs. But I needed them to go back to Minnesota. If Marisol disappeared, they wouldn't have any reason to be here in Chicago. Without Lonzo or Marisol Lopez, their case would be closed.

The power of my vehicle felt like an extension of my body. This truck was six thousand pounds of reinforced steel and bulletproof glass that surrounded me like a

cocoon of security. I had four vehicles custom-built two years ago when I realized Chicago would be my permanent home. The windows were tinted so dark they were nearly opaque from the outside. This allowed me to see out while preventing anyone from seeing in.

A quick glance in the rearview mirror confirmed I wasn't being followed. Not that I expected to be. I left The Castle at different times and in different vehicles to confuse anyone that dared to tail me. Teresa was dangerous, but she wasn't stupid. Well, she was very stupid to go up against me. After our confrontation at Club Bailar Caliente, she had to know I was going to take action. She probably didn't know I was hunting her allies one by one. I knew my presence rattled her. She would be lying low, regrouping, and planning her next move. But for now, I had the advantage.

A few years ago, I reluctantly funded the science to create the Crip-o-Glock. I doubted Natasha's ability to produce a weapon that rendered a vampire powerless. But now Natasha's invention has changed everything. Even before I was made, I was told for centuries killing another vampire required fire or decapitation with a dismembering of limbs. All these forms of death were messy and risky methods that often left evidence behind. Now, with a single pull of the trigger, I could incapacitate a vampire and end their life in a cleaner and more efficient way. The power of this weapon was intoxicating, though I'd never admit that to anyone, not even Chanel. I wanted to use the Glock one day. I wanted to feel that power. If that made me a monster, I would have to wear the title.

My phone vibrated against the center console. The screen illuminated with Harlen's name. I pressed the button on the steering wheel to activate the hands-free system.

"Brother," I answered.

"It's done." Harlen's voice filled the vehicle's interior, clear through the high-end speakers. "The package is secured and ready for delivery."

A tightness I hadn't realized I was carrying released from between my shoulder blades. "Any complications?" I asked.

"Not one." He replied. "The pretty boy played his part perfectly. She never suspected a thing."

I made a sharp turn onto a less traveled street. "Where is she now?"

"I just dropped her off with Virgil. She's wrapped up tighter than a mummy and completely immobilized. The serum worked exactly as Natasha said it would."

"Is she conscious?" I asked, accelerating through a yellow streetlight.

"Her eyes are open, but she's out." He explained. "I wanted to make sure she was down, so I hit her twice in the back. She never saw me coming."

"Good."

"Here's the proof."

My phone buzzed against the console again. A text message came through. I picked up my phone to see the text message from Harlen with the picture attachment. I swiped to open it.

The photo appeared on my screen. A pic of Marisol Lopez with her body cocooned in white sheets and secured with silver duct tape. Only her face was visible, and her eyes were half-open but vacant. Her dark hair was fanned out around her head. She looked nothing like the fierce, vengeful witch who partnered with Teresa to terrorize me and my people.

I recalled going to the hospital and seeing Chanel's bruised body after Marisol

attacked her. I had no compassion for this woman. There was nothing innocent about Marisol Lopez or what she's done. I'm sure she wished she would've kept her ass in Minnesota.

"Hey, you got the picture?" Harlen asked as his voice cut through my thoughts.

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“I see it.” I replied, zooming in on Marisol’s face. “Good work.”

A brick lifted of my chest. It was a nice, peaceful feeling of satisfaction. One down, one to go. Because the others didn’t matter much.

“Make sure she stays unconscious.” I instructed Harlen. “I don’t want her getting loose before I get there. Double check the restraints and shoot her again if you have to.”

“Already done.” Harlen assured me. “I gave her another dose of the serum after I got her over to Virgil. According to Natasha, she’ll be out for at least six more hours.”

“What about Morgan? Does she know what you’ve been up to?” I asked, thinking of our newest vampire and if we could trust her with secret information so early in her transformation.

There was a slight hesitation, then Harlen’s spoke. “She wanted to come out with me tonight. I told her you put me on a solo recon mission.”

“Yes, you should always blame me. She needs to understand that everything must go through me first.”

“I think she knows you’re at the top of the food chain.”

“How did she take it— you telling her she had to stay back?” I asked to get a read on her state of mind.

“She understood. I told her I’d call when I was done, and she could meet me at The Castle later.”

That was a smart move. Morgan might be a vampire now, but her humanity was still too fresh, her self-control was too new. Having her present for any violent acts could trigger her.

“Let’s hold off on telling Morgan about our plans for revenge. We need to only share with the people who need to know, and we are sure we can trust. I’m not saying we can’t trust her. I’m saying she needs time to adjust to her new normal.”

“I agree. I want to protect her.”

“And that is your job. You are her maker.” I rationalized. “I don’t want any more heartbreak for Chanel. She loves Morgan.”

“I love Morgan too.” Harlen said and surprised me.

“Seriously? You love her?”

“Yes. I do.”

“Congratulations.” I gave my brother what he needed, which was my approval. “Does she feel the same way about you?”

“I don’t know.” His voice trailed off.

“Well, you’ll have to wait and see. Her emotions are mixed up and amplified. Give her time.”

“Yes, that’s what I’m doing.”

“Good. She wants to be with you. You’re her maker, and she doesn’t seem to blame you for her current situation. I think those are all good signs.”

“I think so too. She blames Teresa. She wants her dead.” Harlen exclaimed.

“We all do.”

“Did you get any intel on how Teresa learned about our location in Michigan?”

“No. I’m working on it, but as of now Natasha can’t figure out how she knew. It doesn’t look like Teresa followed you. Natasha believes she was there lying in wait, meaning she knew about the property in advance.”

“Shit! I’m sure we weren’t followed. It was almost like Teresa was there before we were.”

“Natasha agrees.” I added.

“I told Donté to bring Morgan to The Castle. She should be arriving soon.”

“Good, we need to keep her occupied. This has to be hard for her.”

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“I think she’s coming around. She just needs some time to get used to being like us.”

“I’m sure she will. I have Donté looking after her.”

“Are you headed to Marisol?” He asked me.

“I’m going home to see Chanel first. I will get to Marisol before the serum wears off.”

“I just pulled up to The Castle. If I need to go shoot Marisol again, let me know. She’s there alone with Virgil and he’s not strapped.”

“I’ll call if I need you. But I’ll be there before she wakes up. Brother, you did a good job tonight.” I commended him.

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Okay, I will text you if there is an emergency. Go and have fun with Morgan. Enjoy the win.”

“I will.” Harlen’s joy rang through his voice.

I ended the call and pressed harder on the accelerator. I sped up to merge onto Lake Shore Drive. Winning felt good. For the first time in weeks, I felt like I was gaining ground against Teresa’s campaign of terror.

Marisol Lopez was about to discover the consequences of attacking my family. And

through her, Teresa would receive a message she couldn't ignore. Chicago was my territory, and I protected what was mine. It didn't matter that I was her maker, or that she was once my wife. Go against me and nothing good comes of it.

I waved at Josh when I pulled into my guarded and secure garage. I took the elevator up to the loft. When I let myself inside, I walked into the kitchen. The digital clock on the microwave read 3:17 AM. I was home earlier than expected.

The picture of Marisol bound and waiting for me to kill had lifted a weight from my shoulders. It also made me hungry, but not for blood or vengeance.

I shed my suit jacket and carefully removed my Crip-o-Glock from its holster. I made my way through the darkened loft and upstairs toward the bedroom where Chanel slept.

CHAPTER NINE

ZAND

The bedroom door was slightly ajar. I pushed it open with my fingertips. Moonlight streamed through the floor-to-ceiling windows, making her look like a princess. I moved inaudibly on the floorboards. It was a habit formed over decades of existing in the shadows.

Chanel lied in bed on her side with her back to the door. The white cotton sheets were tangled around her waist, exposing the smooth curve of her spine and the thin straps of her silk pink camisole. Her hair was spread across the pillow in loose waves. I could see the gentle rise and fall of her breathing. For a moment, I just watched her, struck once again by how beautiful and alluring she appeared without any effort. I thought of how close I'd come to losing her to the Lopez family. I could, and would not ever, let that happen again.

I approached the bed, placing my Glock on the nightstand. I removed my watch and set it there too. My shirt followed, then my belt. The buckle made a soft clink as I placed it beside the watch. The bed dipped slightly beneath my weight as I slid under the covers. My body found hers like we were magnets. My arm slipped around her waist, pulling her against my bare chest. Pressing my lips to the nape of her neck, I inhaled her sweet scent. With another tender nibble on her neck, I inhaled the coconut and lime scent of her hair. My body desired her just as much as I craved blood. Feeling this way for a human was both exhilarating and terrifying, even for a vampire like me.

Chanel stirred in her sleep. She murmured something unintelligible before her body registered mine was nearby. “Zand.” Her voice was thick with sleep, confused, but not alarmed by my overbearing presence.

“It’s me. Your Mr. Vampire.” I whispered against her silky, warm skin. My hand slid beneath her camisole to trace the curve of her stomach. “I didn’t mean to wake you.” I said it sincerely because I meant it. I was going to have her in her sleep if I had to. Her participation in the activities was appreciated but not required for me to get off.

Chanel turned in my arms. Her sleepy brown eyes found mine in the darkness. “You’re home early. It’s still dark out.”

Instead of answering, I captured her pouty lips with mine. The kiss was urgent, the culmination of a thirst that I had to quench as soon as I could. Her lush lips parted and melted into mine, inviting me deeper into her mouth. I tasted mint toothpaste and something uniquely Chanel, a flavor I’ve come to crave more than blood.

Her soft hand cupped my cheek, and her touch ignited me. I trailed kisses down her throat. My eager fingers found the hem of her camisole and yanked it upward. She raised her arms, allowing me to slip the silk garment over her head.

In the moonlight, her skin glowed with a radiance that no vampire could ever possess. Chanel would likely attribute it to shea butter moisturizer. I believed the glow came from her inner beauty that couldn't be contained under her skin.

My hands explored the familiar territory of her body. Each curve I had memorized but never grew tired of exploring over and over again. I had counted the moles and scars and etched them into the annals of my brain. Every imperfection was the epitome of perfection in my eyes.

“Zand.” She moaned my name like it was the beginnings of a love song. “I need you.”

I needed her, too.

She sighed as my thumb brushed across her solid nipple. I lowered my head to replace my thumb with my mouth. Chanel's back arched to press her breast firmly against my lips. I swallowed her breast, being extra careful to only lightly scrape my teeth across the firmness of her D cups. She had just enough tit to fill my mouth completely.

Chanel's fingers tangled in my hair, urging me on as I lavished attention on one breast first, then the other. The scent of her arousal filled my nostrils and swirled in the air of the bedroom. It was the most intoxicating scent. It made my fangs ache with desire. I resisted the urge to plunge my teeth into her skin. Instead, I focused instead on the pleasure I could give her without drawing blood.

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Her soft hands weren't idle. They roamed across my shoulders and down the hardened muscles of my back. Her nails left trails of titillating sensations in their wake. She was mine, all mine, and I relished that thought every time I laid with her. She was my temptress. She was my lover, and I hoped she would one day be my queen. But for now, I had this, and this was everything.

Chanel tugged at my underwear. My girl was impatient. I aided her by kicking my boxer briefs off at my ankles. With my help, her silk sleep shorts slid down her legs, removing the last barrier between us. We were bonded together in a tangle of limbs and desperate, needy touches. Her fingers traced down my abs and wrapped around my long, thick hardness. She stroked my cock with knowing precision. I groaned against her collarbone.

Slipping my hand between her creamy thighs, I discovered she was soaking wet. She was always ready for me. With my fingertips, I circled the sensitive bundle of nerves at her clit, feeling her hips buck in response to my touch.

"Please, Zand." My girl gasped, guiding me toward her wet and always tight entrance. "I need you inside me. Please." She begged.

Teasing her was an option. Making her cry and writhe in pain was another, but not today. I complied. My intention was to please her. I wanted to give her what she craved. Pushing my swollen cock into her taut hole, I moved with a measured and deliberate thrust. We both moaned as I sunk inside her tight pussy. Her legs wrapped around my waist. Her ankles crossed at the small of my back, pulling me deeper into her choppy waters. For a moment, I savored the sensation of being completely enveloped by her plush, pillowy warmth.

The calm was too calm. I started moving my hips. I rocked to a rhythm that gradually but quickly built in intensity. As if this was a competition, Chanel matched me thrust for thrust. Her hands gripped my shoulders, her eyes locked onto mine. In this moment, the connection between us transcended the physical. It was something uniquely deeper, maybe spiritual. It was primal. It was a claiming of our hearts and souls as much as our bodies.

“God, I love you.” She breathed through our mutual pleasure. Now I could truly understand this feeling, this intense love. Lately, I’d been physically present but mentally elsewhere for far too long. I was consumed by the hunt for Teresa and Marisol. My cock wasn’t giving Chanel all my attention. I wasn’t giving her what she needed to feel safe and satisfied as humanly possible. I was slacking on my job of lover, friend, and protector. It was time for me to make up for my blatant neglect.

I wanted to say I’m here, baby. Your dear mister vampire is back. Can you dig it? But I said. “I love the fuck out of you. Forever.” Can you dig it was slang from the 70s? Did she even understand what that meant? Had she even heard it before? I let my mind take a little detour away from the pleasure so I wouldn’t mentally fall too deep into her pussy and come too quick.

Chanel’s hands moved to my face. Her index finger traced my lower lip. Then, with a deliberate motion that sent shockwaves through me, Chanel turned her wrist to my lips. She offered me her pulse point, her juicy, insatiable vein. “Drink,” she whispered. “I know you want to.” She encouraged.

The invitation was tempting, more than tempting. I could see the raised vein beneath her skin. I could hear the rush of blood moving under her flesh. My gums ached and my fangs throbbed with need. But I shook my head and pressed a gentle kiss to her wrist instead.

“Not tonight, my love.” I murmured. “Tonight, I just want to fuck you.”

Disappointment flickered across her face, but I had plans for her that didn't involve draining her to sleep. She needed all her strength to keep this train moving at full speed. Her blood was just an appetizer. Her meaty, sopping wet pussy was always the meal. I was going straight to the main course without using utensils.

Without warning, I swiftly flipped her off her back. I used my hands to force her up on her knees and on all fours. Did she think she was going to lie on her back this entire fuck festival? This was my Woodstock 1969. I was going to force my wood as deep inside her as I could, without the heavy rain, mud, and drug use.

I smacked her ass cheek with too much force. Chanel went barreling toward the headboard. She didn't crash into the frame because I was a fucking vampire. I grabbed her by her neck and pulled her back on my cock before she could suffer a concussion. Changing the angles of my thrusts, I could accurately hit all the areas inside her womb that I desired. The view from behind her luscious ass was phenomenal. From the back, I could go faster at my vampire speed, without her seeing it and freaking out. I was extra careful when pounding her pussy hard. I knew I was hitting the spot inside her taut walls that made her eyes roll back. The feeling was so good that all thoughts of drinking her blood were long forgotten.

My eyes glinted with satisfaction as I watched her body buck against my slick cock. Chanel's creamy delights coated my cock like icing on a cake. I pounded inside her and pulled out just to see her milk all thick and buttery over my shaft. I was slamming too hard into her. Chanel tried to escape and crawl away from the pleasure I was serving her. I knew just how to touch her, how to drive her wild with unrestricted need and desire. With each thrust, I felt my own control slipping away and leading me to give in to my vampire instincts that demanded gratification.

"Oh, Zand!" Chanel screamed my name as I found her sacred spot and sent her spiraling into ecstasy.

“You like that?” I growled against her shoulder. I nipped at the soft skin with my teeth before soothing it with my tongue as I hunched over her back. I really wanted a bite into her flesh. “You’re mine. Forever.”

Chanel’s body arched. She was begging for more as I pulled my rigid beast out of her liquid heat, only to slam back inside her tight walls again.

Whack! She felt the sting of my rough hand on her ass cheek mixed with the intense pain of being filled so deeply. Whack! Whack! Whack! I took her breath away with every forceful blow, each one harder than the last. Bad girls with good pussy deserved to be spanked.

I could feel her knees about to give out. My baby was tired. I chuckled and reminded myself that she was human, and I was a fucking vampire. I tossed her over, so she was under me again. She needed the rest. I gave her a quick two second break before I got back to business.

My cock throbbed against her entrance. He wanted to jump back inside. He was eager for release as I positioned myself at her velvety cave and plunged deep inside her once again. Her legs spread wide, then wrapped around me instinctively as I pounded into her with a ferocity that took her breath away. The bed shook beneath us as our bodies moved together in perfect harmony.

“You are mine.” I groaned, pinching one of her nipples hard enough to make her cry out in both pain and arousal.

Chanel whimpered softly at the sting, but she couldn’t deny the thrill coursing through her body. Her fingers roamed across my chest and down to my abs before trailing lower towards my cock, which was still buried inside of her. She gripped my ass tightly, matching my rhythm as best she could while looking up into my eyes.

“Fuck yourself on my cock.” I growled down at her and lifted her off the bed by moving up slightly. She had her legs still wrapped tightly around me. I stopped thrusting and remained halfway inside her. I balanced on one arm and grabbed her ass cheek and pushed her up so she could slide up on my cock. It was her time to put in some work.

“Move!” I twisted her ass cheek, and Chanel pushed her body up and down on my cock. I stayed there frozen in a plank as she used all her upper body strength to fuck me mid-air. I remained stiff as a board because any movement on my part could make me explode. The sounds of flesh smacking against flesh filled the room. The wet skin slapping together only fueled my lust for this woman. Her weakened body was on the verge of collapse when I took over. I lowered her down on the mattress with the weight of my body and slowly rolled my cock deep inside her raining walls. After my third slow grinding movement, her legs dislodged from my back and fell to the mattress.

It was my turn to do all the work. I rocked inside her with increasing urgency. Chanel’s internal muscles tightened around me. Her breathing became erratic. We both were on the verge of reaching our peak.

Chanel’s body shuddered under the weight of mine. Her orgasm came with the cry of my name.

“Zanddddd!!!” Her entire body tensed beneath me. The feel of her insides clenching around me sent me over the edge. My explosive release hit with an intensity that whited out my vision, blinding me. Pleasure radiated from my core and spiraled to the tips of my fingers and toes.

My body stiffened as I released more of my venom inside the woman that I loved. Chanel was the woman who should be deadly afraid of me if she knew all the lascivious thoughts in my head.

Chanel's second orgasm left her body while she moaned my name again. She bit my shoulder as she came. I pumped the last of my cum inside her and I felt something odd. It felt like a scorching surge in my balls. That had never happened before.

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For several heartbeats, hers, not mine, we remained frozen in that idyllic moment of connection. I carefully rolled off her body and laid beside her. I gathered her still-trembling body against mine. Her head found the hollow of my shoulder and her leg draped over mine, with our bodies still intimately connected.

I knew I couldn't give her the world, but I was hellbent on giving her everything else. Money, material possessions, safety, and love. And if one day she wanted everlasting life, immortality, to be a vamp, it would be hers.

CHAPTER TEN

ZAND

Wrapped in the embrace of our lovemaking, I lost track of time. As Chanel's breathing slowed and her eyelids grew heavy, I let her drift off to sleep. Earlier when I arrived home, I didn't intend to fuck her for so long and so vigorously. I was wide awake, but being close to her naked body was my happy place. After letting her sleep for an hour, I gently roused her from her overnight nap.

"Time to wake up." I whispered into her ear, nuzzling her softly.

She let out a contented sigh. "Why?"

"We need to shower."

"Why?"

“I have my reasons.” I did.

“My body is tired.” She moaned. “So tired.”

“I can carry you.”

I moved her head from my chest and positioned myself to lift her off the bed. The swift movement jostled her completely awake. Her eyes were open, and she locked into my eyes as I lifted her naked body from the bed. She wasn't happy with me.

“Oh, damn. Shit!” She held on tight, worried that I would drop her, but that was impossible. I chuckled. I believed that sometimes she completely forgot that I was a vampire with supernatural strength.

“Profanities.” I smirked.

“Down, down.” She commanded. “I can walk.”

“You don't want me to carry you?” I asked.

“No.” I placed her down on her feet. “I have cum leaking out of me.”

Really? I didn't notice.

I took Chanel's hand and led her to the bathroom. Our naked bodies reflected the moonlight as we walked hand in hand. She followed willingly with her fingers intertwined with mine. There was a small tugging at the corners of my lips. The marble floor was cool beneath our feet. I reach into the glass-enclosed shower and turned the knobs, adjusting the temperature until steam billowed into the air. The warmest water cascaded from the rainfall showerhead.

I guided Chanel as she stepped into the shower first. She let out a small gasp at the intensity of the water.

I stepped in and joined her under the pulsating spray. The droplets started to wash away the remnants of our lovemaking. We lingered there, letting our bodies slide against each other, the water adding another layer of intimacy to our connection.

I watched, transfixed, as droplets of water clung to her eyelashes and her lips. Even after all this time, the sight of her wet body made me rock hard. I watched as she tilted her head back and let the water saturate her hair. Her straight hair slowly drew and shrunk into tight coils.

I could never wet her hair, but when she wet her own hair, it was my queue to touch it. I reached for her shampoo, pouring a quarter-sized amount into my palm before working it into her hair. My fingers massaged her scalp with firm, circular motions. Chanel leaned into my touch and her eyes closed in bliss. There was something profoundly intimate about this ritual.

“Your fingers feel so good.” She said with her voice echoing slightly against the tiled walls.

“You deserve to be spoiled.” My fingers worked through her hair, and the suds ran down her back. “Turn around.”

She complied, and I rinsed the shampoo from her hair by removing the showerhead. I placed the shower nozzle back in the holster and reached for the conditioner. I carefully coated her hair from the roots to the tips with the rosemary and minty smelling conditioner. After raking my fingers through her hair, I removed my hands to let the conditioner sit.

Steam swirled around us, engulfing us in a private world of heat and moisture. The

bathroom filled with the scent of her lemon oatmeal soap as Chanel rubbed it on her loofah. I watched her gently scrub her body. I bent to suck soap subs off her nipples and took water into my mouth and spit the soap out. I tried to mentally motivate my cock to a flaccid state and failed.

After washing herself, she reached for my soap next. She lathered it between her palms before pressing them against my chest. Her hands moved in slow circles, spreading soap across my skin, her touch both cleansing and arousing.

My stiff cock was going to break off if she touched it. I was so hard I was going to have to rub one out before I left the shower.

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“So,” she said, as her eyes met mine. Her hands continued their exploration over my body. “Why are you so energetic and happy?”

My girl could read me. I considered my answer carefully. The truth was that we captured the vampire who tried to beat you to death. But that wasn’t something Chanel needed to hear right now.

“Some business matters were resolved.” I replied, which isn’t exactly a lie. “And I missed you.”

“You’re being evasive.” She observed, but her tone was light. “Is it vampire business?”

“Everything in my life is vampire business.” I reminded her, while turning to rinse the soap from my body. “Except you. You’re my human business.”

I angled my head down to taste her lips. I sucked her into my mouth. This wasn’t the best move, considering my crowing cock. I pulled away from her lips to regain some composure.

Chanel’s hands glided down my chest and paused when she got to my abdomen. I couldn’t hide my solid erection. It was pointing eight inches in her direction. With her soapy hands, she let her fingers trace the bulging veins of my engorged pole. I got lost in the sensation.

I closed my eyes and let her stroke me up and down my shaft. Her touch lulled me into a trance. She splashed the warm water over my cock and rinsed it clean of the

soap.

I wanted to open my eyes, but I didn't. I was glad they were closed when I felt her lips wrap around the bulbous head of my cock. The sensation took me by surprise, and I squeezed my eyelids tighter to be present in the moment.

Her tongue danced around my member as she began to tease and lick me. My breath hitched in my throat as pleasure washed over me. I clutched at the shower wall for support. If I believed in heaven, this was what I envisioned.

Chanel took me deeper into her mouth, tightening her grip on my throbbing pole. The suction intensified, and warmth surrounded me as she worked her magic. With each bob of her head, I could feel the tension at the base of my spine coil tighter and tighter until I knew I couldn't hold back any longer. The warmth of her mouth, coupled with the softness of her tongue, created a delicious sensation that spread through my body.

Her hand gripped my erection firmly. She stroked me up and down as her lips continue to work like a suction on mycock. My body trembled with every movement until I couldn't hold on any longer. I grabbed the back of her head and let the hair conditioner seep into my fingernails. I thrust my body forward and pumped my cum into her mouth, filling her throat until she gagged.

The sounds of her choking forced my eyes to open. I removed my leaking cock from her mouth and scooped her up from the shower floor. I held her under her arms while she regained her balance.

I wiped the residual cum from her lips and chin. I looked into her eyes and quickly placed my face under the shower water. I was too overwhelmed with emotion to look her in her eyes. I needed a quick splash of water on my face in order to return back to myself.

We finished washing in comfortable silence, taking turns under the spray to rinse off. I took a step back so Chanel could rinse her tresses clean. She rinsed her mouth and face. We both rinsed the suds from our skin. We basked in each other's company during this private moment. The tranquility of the water and the closeness of our bodies created a sanctuary where we could lose ourselves in each other. I pulled her against me. With both of us slick with water, I pressed my lips to her forehead.

When we were clean, I shut off the water and stepped out first, grabbing three plush towels from the warming rack. I wrapped one around Chanel, using it to gently dry her skin before securing it around her. The second towel I handed to her for her hair. The third towel I wrapped around my waist, leaving my chest bare.

As we moved back into the bedroom, an idea formed. "I want to surprise you with something." I said, watching her face light up with curiosity.

"Now?"

"Yes."

"Is the surprise here?"

"No, we have to drive to it." I told her.

"It's almost four in the morning."

"Yes, I know." I moved to the closet, selecting clothes with more care than usual. I chose a black and gray track suit Chanel purchased for me. I wasn't known to wear sweats, but Chanel bought it, so that was reason enough to wear it.

Noticing my clothing choice, she said. "Are you really wearing that?"

“Yes, I am. Get dressed in something comfortable.”

Her brow furrowed in confusion, but there was excitement in her eyes. “What kind of surprise is this?”

I crossed the room and took her face in my hands. I pressed a kiss on her lips. “The best kind.”

Chanel had no idea about the gift I had in mind. But the idea had been forming since I received Harlen’s call, a perfect way to mark this turning point in our battle against Teresa. Something to cement our future together, now that I’m certain we’ll have one.

“Alright, mister secretive man. This better be good.” She walked deep into the walk-in closet and the motion lights lit the room up. She disappeared inside the closet.

I fished a black t-shirt, socks, and fitted boxers out of the dresser drawer. I got dressed in my undergarments first. Then I put my sweatpants and black sneakers on. I went back over to the nightstand to grab my watch. I also strapped my holster under my shoulder and tucked my Glock in place. With time to kill, I placed my cell phone off the nightstand.

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I walked into the closet to check on Chanel. She had on her bra and panties. Her hands were moving through familiar motions while applying lotion to her skin. She didn't look up at me as she placed a touch of perfume at her pulse points.

I left her to it and walked back into the bedroom. I sat on the edge of the bed and checked my incoming text messages. Natasha and my son were the only ones who messaged me.

I read Natasha's messages first. She informed me she debriefed Harlen when he returned to The Castle. There was also another message from her informing me that she had given our newest member a crash course in Being a Vampire 101.

Donté's messages were usually accompanied by a photo or video, even when it wasn't necessary. I attributed this to his youth. He was more of a show me person than a tell me person and that was quite alright with me. With Donté, this would be the closest I would ever get to fatherhood.

Because I thought of every possibility with Chanel, I wondered if she wanted to have a child. This was a conversation that would arrive one day. I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her, but I loved her too much to deprive her of the opportunity to be a mother. When I glanced into our future, I could see myself raising a child with her, but I wouldn't be able to give her that child.

The image of another man planting his seed in my love made me ill. In today's world, she could always get artificially inseminated. Not too long ago, I would've had to let her have sex with another man to give her a baby. I knew I wouldn't have been able to sit back and let another man fuck her. I knew myself well enough to know that it

would've sent me over the edge. I couldn't understand why I was thinking about it now when making a baby had so many options in the present day.

One of my biggest regrets was not having biological children when I was still human. If ever I was reduced to ash, I didn't have a biological legacy to leave behind. After a dozen or so decades, the memory of me would fade and a century later it would be as if I never existed. It was a sobering thought. It was something I could revisit at a later date. Now wasn't the time to ponder such things.

Minutes later, Chanel emerged from the closet dressed in a chocolate brown tracksuit that clung to her curves like a second skin. Her hair was slicked back into a low ponytail that was wrapped in a neat bun. I was impressed with how fast she put her look together. She was stunning in plain clothes, cute in casual and fabulous in formal wear. My human was gorgeous, no matter what.

Chanel stepped into a pair of rhinestone brown sneakers that matched her clothes perfectly. Looking at her, I could see her face was bare of all cosmetic products. That was, except for the lip gloss that was scented. My love was a natural beauty, and I loved to see her with the natural texture of her hair and the clean bare earthiness of her rich brown skin.

I didn't bother responding to the text messages. Natasha and Donté would have to wait. I had other plans. I made a decision and hoped it was a good one. Tonight was the perfect night, but it would be morning soon. It was more of an overnight of victory, a reclaiming of power. It was a night of knowing that one threat was neutralized, and that other bitch was on borrowed time. What better moment to give Chanel what I should have offered her months ago?

"I'm ready?" Chanel said as she tossed her monogram Louis Vuitton purse over her shoulder. A gift that I forced her to take.

I pocketed my cell phone and extended my hand to her. “Me too.” I confirmed, leading her toward the bedroom door. I leaned in and got another whiff of her scent without her noticing me being weird.

Chanel had no idea what awaited us. Tonight, my two worlds would collide in ways I never anticipated. And by the morning light, everything would be different.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ZAND

My armored SUV drove through the darkness of pre-dawn Chicago. Josh guided us through empty streets. Chanel sat in the backseat beside me, staring out the window. Her reflection occasionally caught the glow of passing streetlights. I wondered what she was thinking. Did she have any idea where we were going or what awaited us? She didn't. This excursion was something she couldn't even imagine. She would either love it or be repulsed.

“We're heading west.” Chanel observed, breaking the silence. “Away from the lake.”

I nodded, watching the industrial landscape gradually replace the sleek downtown buildings. “It's not far now.”

Josh met my eyes in the rearview mirror. I gave him a barely perceptible nod. He knew tonight was different. Tonight, I was on the verge of crossing a line I've been hesitant to cross. I was bringing Chanel directly into the darkness of my world.

The SUV slowed as we turned onto a narrow access road flanked by chain-link fences topped with razor wire. Old streetlamps shined faded yellow pools across the cracked concrete sidewalks. The buildings in this area were old, utilitarian structures of brick, glass, and metal. Unmarked facades and blacked-out windows obscured

their purposes.

“AV Enterprises.” Chanel read from a small, discreet sign as we pulled up to one such building. “Is this one of your companies?”

“It’s a business I own.” I replied, unbuckling my seatbelt. “I have my irons in many fires.” I had made a little joke, but she didn’t get it yet.

I was a vampire that owned a crematorium. The place didn’t look particularly ominous from the outside. It was just another nondescript building in a manufacturing zone where very few questions were asked as long as you paid your property taxes and insurance. Behind its walls, however, there were a few secrets humans would never know.

Josh parked near a side entrance in a place that wasn’t visible from the main road. He turned off the engine. “Do you want me to wait here, sir?” He asked

“Yes. Josh, thank you. We won’t be long” I opened my door and helped Chanel from the vehicle. There was a faint smell of smoke and chemicals that permeated this part of the city.

I guided Chanel toward the rear entrance. I kept close to her by placing my hand at the small of her back. A security camera tracked our approach. The back door buzzed open before we reached it. I felt the subtle shift in Chanel’s posture. There was a slight tensing of her muscles, and a quickening of her breath as we stepped inside the doorway of AV Enterprises.

The interior was intentionally mundane. The reception area featured bland, office-standard furniture. There was a desk with a computer, a few chairs, generic and landscape prints on the walls. There was a precision to everything in the room. The freshly waxed floors, the faint smell of industrial bleach and the absolute absence of

dust or debris made everything look legit.

A door opened at the far end of the room, and Virgil emerged. He was a tall, lean man with close-cropped gray hair and skin the color of well-oiled mahogany. Despite appearing to be in his sixties, he moved like a much younger man. His movements betrayed his true nature to those who knew what to look for.

“Mr. Valentine.” He greeted me respectfully, then he turned to Chanel. “And you must be Ms. Taylor. It’s a pleasure to have you visit our little establishment.”

Chanel offered her hand, which Virgil took with care. I recognized the cautious pressure of a vampire touching fragile human flesh. “Nice to meet you,” Chanel said. She studied Virgil with the sharp gaze that rarely missed anything.

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“Virgil has been with me for many years.” I explained as I watched the subtle interaction between them. It was that thing that Black people did when they met each other for the first time. “He oversees this facility and ensures our privacy.”

“Among other things.” Virgil added with a smile that was genuine as his loyalty to me. He turned back to me. “Everything is prepared for you.”

“Thank you.” I scanned the room, noting the cameras positioned discreetly in each corner. “We won’t need any documentation tonight.”

Virgil nodded with the understanding that my instruction was to disable the surveillance cameras.

“Of course.” He moved to a panel on the wall. He punched in a code that caused the small red lights on the cameras to blink off.

Chanel watched our exchange carefully without saying a word. I knew she was absorbing every detail. Her stillness was deceptive. I could almost hear her mind working, processing, analyzing everything that she was witnessing.

“Your package arrived a few hours ago.” Virgil said, his voice pitched low despite the privacy. “I kept a close eye. The serum appears to be working exactly as Ivanova described.”

“Good.” I felt Chanel’s questioning gaze but didn’t see the need to feel her in at this time.

Virgil checked his watch. “If there’s nothing else you need from me?”

“No, I think I can handle everything for now.”

“Good, my show starts in ten minutes.”

“The one with the doctors?” I asked, familiar with his routine.

“Yes sir. Tonight’s the season finale.” His enthusiasm seemed incongruous with the setting and circumstances, but I’ve learned that even immortals needed their distractions.

“Don’t let us keep you.” I said, moving toward the heavy steel door at the back of the room. It was reinforced with a keypad lock and what appeared to be a standard fire safety sign, but I knew what lied beyond was anything but standard.

“The door will lock automatically behind you.” Virgil reminded me. “Holla, if you need anything.” With that, he disappeared back through the door he came from. He left us alone in the reception area.

I turned to Chanel. I studied her face for any sign of hesitation or fear. I found only curiosity and determination.

“What is this place, really?” She asked.

I punched a code into the keypad, and the heavy door released with an inflated hiss. “It’s where I deal with problems that can’t be resolved any other way.” Yes, I was speaking in riddles, something I did from time to time.

“And what does that mean?”

“It’s better to show you.”

“Is that right?” She blew air from her mouth.

The door swung open, revealing a dimly lit staircase descending into darkness. Cold air rushed up to meet us, carrying the faint dusty scent of the basement below.

“And is that why we’re here tonight?” Chanel asked. “To deal with a problem?”

I took her hand, feeling the clamminess of her fingers against my palm. “Yes.”

Chanel’s eyes were curious. There was no shock, no horror, or an ounce of fear. I’d chosen well. Or did she choose me? The woman beside me was a potential vampire queen in the making. Vampire, no, she was human. Why did I think that?

“Follow me.” I said, taking the first step down into the darkness with Chanel one step behind me.

The staircase descended in a tight spiral. The temperature dropped, and it was for good reason. Chanel’s hand remained steady in mine, her grip neither tightening from fear nor slackening with doubt. I watched her profile in the dim light, searching for any hesitation, but found only curiosity.

“The cold helps preserve them.” I explained as we reached the bottom. “Vampires and humans alike.”

The basement stretched out before us. It was clinically lit with recessed fluorescent fixtures that cast no shadows. There were stainless steel tables, cabinets, and instruments arranged with surgical precision. Along one wall stood a row of refrigeration units, their contents hidden behind heavy doors. The opposite wall housed something that resembled an industrial oven, though its purpose was far more

specific.

“It smells like a hospital down here.” Chanel observed.

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“Formaldehyde, bleach, and something else.” I led her further into the room. “There is something special here today.”

“Is this a morgue?”

“It’s a crematorium.”

“Why are we in a crematorium?”

“It’s one of the businesses I own.” I explained.

“Why would you want to own this?”

“In my current state. I’ve grown fascinated by death.”

“Your current state?”

“You know fangs, undead.”

“Oh, you’re a vampire.” She said it like she’d forgot. I was flattered by this.

We moved toward the wall at the furthest end of the room, where a stone bed sat elevated on a metal platform. Secured to its surface with multiple reinforced straps, laid Marisol Lopez.

“This is your gift.” I said while I looked down at Chanel to gage her reaction.

“Is she— dead?” She asked.

“Not yet.”

Marisol’s eyes followed our approach. It was the only part of her that could move. The rest of her body remained perfectly still, held immobile by both the restraints and the serum coursing through her system. Her skin had taken on a grayish pallor, and beneath it, faint orange traces of the serum pulsed under her flesh.

“Her eyes are open. Can she see us?” Chanel asked.

“I believe so. This technology is new.”

“Can she hear us?” She had more questions for me.

“She can see us. But she can’t move or speak. The effect of the serum is wearing off. I was told she will gain mobility in her face first and then slowly she will move her fingers and toes, then she will eventually regain mobility in all her limbs and get her strength back.”

Chanel stepped closer to Marisol’s lifeless body and studied her condition. There was no triumph in her expression, no gloating over her enemy. Her cool assessment reminded me why I was so drawn to her. Marisol’s eyes widened slightly, recognition and hatred flaring within them as she registered Chanel’s presence.

“I wanted to share this with you. I wanted you to see what I would do to protect you from those who would try to harm you.”

I moved to the wall, pressing a button that caused the platform to shift slightly, angling Marisol toward the industrial oven. “This is a cremation chamber, but it’s been modified for our purposes. It burns hotter than a standard human

crematorium—hot enough to reduce a vampire to ashes.”

“Fire is one of the only ways to kill your kind permanently.” Chanel said, not framing it as a question.

“Yes.”

“But what about a wooden stake to the heart?”

“Our hearts are artificial. They beat but it’s in some artificial way. Honestly, we don’t know why it stops when we die and then it just starts again. The best way I can explain it is magic. A wooden stake wouldn’t really work because we heal. It might hurt or slow us down, but once the stake is removed, we will gradually get right back to normal.”

“Do you just burn vampires in here?”

“No, it’s a real business. Funeral homes outsource to us. They send us the bodies and we send them the ashes for memorial services.”

I traced my finger along the edge of the metal platform. “This is a cleaner way to discreetly dispose of my kind. More efficient. No evidence.”

Chanel watched me. She simply listened, absorbing the information. “

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“I’ve been in Chicago for five years now.” I said, beginning the conversation I’d rehearsed in my mind. “Building businesses, gathering allies, creating a network that spans from the city to the suburbs.”

“Why?” she inquired, and I was elated. She was interested in my dealings.

“Selfish reasons, I guess. I wanted to run things. Start some sort of hierarchy of vampires with rules and regulations.”

“Okay. What does that mean?” Chanel asked.

“I’ve allowed others to believe I’m simply a successful entrepreneur who happens to be a vampire. A club owner, content to exist within the established order.” I moved toward Chanel, taking both her hands in mine. “But that’s not all I want to be.”

Her eyes searched mine, patient and curious. “Tell me what you want.”

“I want to be the head vampire of Chicago.” I said, watching her reaction carefully. “The king. Not just of a club or a business empire, but of every vampire in this city.”

“Why?”

“At first lied to myself and said things like it was for the protection of humans. Really, I just want the power. I want to build something greater than my maker. I thought it would take decades, but with this recent war waged against me, I wanted to speed the timeline up. We have weapons and numbers. And with Natasha, creating even more ways to make us unstoppable. I think the time is now. I can start here in

Chicago and push my efforts out across the Midwest.”

“I don’t understand.”

“We don’t have any structure here. There is no vampire government. No checks and balances. I want to make that world exist again.”

“Again?”

“There was some structure before the 1900s, but then everything disappeared if we believe the old vampire history books. There was this ethnic cleansing of vampires that only left a few of us, and I heard most of the remaining vampires were too afraid to make more of us. They feared the more of us that existed, the easier it would be to kill us all over again. We remained in the shadows, and now I want to change that.”

“This is a lot to take in. I mean. I don’t even know what to say.”

“I want you to know everything. I want you to know my intentions because I want you to willingly be a part of my future.”

“Your future?”

“Yes, as King.” I released her hands and walked a slow circle around Marisol. “To take that position requires eliminating certain threats. Making examples. Establishing dominance in ways that leave no question about who holds all the power.”

“Like Teresa.” Chanel said.

“Like Teresa.” I confirmed. “And like Marisol. They challenged my authority, threatened you, Morgan, and what’s mine.” I paused beside Marisol’s head, looking down into her wide, hate-filled eyes. “In the vampire world, such challenges can only

be answered in one way.”

“With death,” Chanel stated flatly.

“Yes, with the final death.” I corrected. “To rule, I will have to kill and be more ruthless than I’ve been. There are other vampires in Chicago who believe their age gives them superiority. They’ll need to be convinced otherwise.”

I had given Chanel an intimate confession of calculated future violence. I had revealed to her my true nature and my intentions that very possibly could involve danger and war with my people. I watched Chanel absorb my words, weighing them against what she already knew of me.

“This isn’t a side of you that you’ve shown me before.” She muttered.

“No,” I admitted. “I’ve tried to shield you from this aspect of my existence. Perhaps to protect you, perhaps because I feared your reaction.”

I moved back to her side, reaching up to touch her face. The contrast isn’t lost on me—the tenderness I feel for this woman and the cold calculation with which I approached my enemies.

“You’ve killed before Lonzo.” She said, and it wasn’t a question. She already knew the answer.

“Yes. To survive. To protect. To advance.” I stroked her cheek gently. “It’s part of what I am, what I’ve been for a long time. My maker had me do things for him. Things that helped him build his empire in LA. I want the same thing for myself here in Chicago.”

She didn’t flinch at my touch or my words. Instead, she leaned slightly into my hand,

accepting both.

“And now you’re showing me this because...?”

“Because I want you to know all of me.” I said, the truth flowing more freely in this basement of death than it had anywhere else. “The club owner, the lover, the protector, the businessman, but also the killer and the would-be king.”

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Her gaze held mine. “And what role do you see for me in this kingdom you’re building?”

Marisol’s eyes darted frantically between us, the only part of her that could react to our conversation. I ignored her, focusing entirely on Chanel.

“That depends on you.” I said with my voice dropping lower. “On what you want. On how much of this world you’re willing to embrace.”

“I’ve already embraced more than most humans ever would.” She reminded me. “I saw you rip someone’s throat out. I let you drink my blood and now my best friend is one of you guys.”

“Yes, you have.” My fingers traced the line of her jaw. “You’ve stood beside me through threats and violence. You’ve accepted vampires into your life. But ruling requires more than acceptance. It requires participation.”

I took her hand and guided her toward the control panel next to the cremation chamber. A single red button laid beneath a protective cover.

“This is the final step in Marisol’s story.” I explained. “One push, and the platform will move her into the fire chamber. The door will seal, and the fire will consume her. By dawn, there will be nothing left but ash.”

Chanel stared at the red button, then at Marisol, whose eyes had widened in renewed terror.

“You want me to kill Marisol? The bitch that beat the shit out of me. The bitch that probably told Lonzo I moved to Chicago so he could come here to kill me? The dusty ass cow that helped Lonzo kill Craig? And the raggedy ass hoe that helped the bitch that helped kill Morgan.”

“Well, yeah, that Marisol.”

“I want her dead.” She snarled.

“But you have to be the one that kills her.”

“Not a problem.” Chanel said as she peered down into Marisol’s terrified eyes.

“Spoken like a true Queen. Let’s make it official. Push the button and send this—what did you call her— raggedy ass hoe to hell?”

I took a step back, giving her space to consider what I’ve said. The basement fell silent except for the low hum of the ventilation system. In this moment, with death waiting at the push of a button, I laid bare the darkest truth of my ambition. And with it, the question of whether Chanel could truly stand beside me not just as a lover, but as the queen of the kingdom I planned to build.

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHANEL

Zand took my hand in his. The feeling of true love filled my body despite our location in the basement. The crematorium was creepy, but I couldn’t see how it could be labeled as anything else.

I looked into Zand’s honey-colored eyes. They reflected the harsh fluorescent lights

and appeared to twinkle. His expression shifted into something more vulnerable than I'd ever seen in him. I loved this man too much. But at that moment, I didn't want to stop it. I didn't want to heed the warnings. I wanted to be with him, no matter what.

Glaring at Marisol, helpless on the slab, brought me peace. My hate for her was an understatement. I hated what I had to endure. Her brother tricked me. I didn't want remnants of the Lopez family here in my new life.

Killing Marisol wouldn't be this difficult thing, because she wasn't even human anymore. I seriously doubted she was human to begin with. After staring that evil bitch down, I finally looked back at Zand's flawless face. The man I loved was a killer, a monster by human standards. Yet he had also protected me, loved me, respected me in ways no human man ever had.

"I brought you here tonight for two reasons." Zand said. His voice echoed eerily against the concrete walls, and I heard a little bit of Sesame Street, Count Dracula, in his tone. "To show you this side of my world, and to ask you a question I've been considering for longer than you might imagine."

Marisol's eyes enlarged further as she watched us. I wanted to draw her last moments out. I wanted to torture her the way she tortured me. All the sleep I lost, thinking she would come back and kill me after she left me, beat the hell up in the parking lot of my apartment. I really believed she would've killed me if Miss Hampton in apartment 1B didn't show up and scare her off.

Zand released my hand to reach into his pocket. He removed a small, pretty red velvet box. I held my breath as he held the jewelry box between us, not yet opening it.

"I want you as my queen." He told me.

His words hung heavy in the air. They were now accompanied by this gift. I couldn't see what was in the box. My mind swirled with the possibilities. It could be, but I didn't want to assume.

“Chanel, I want you. Not just as my wife or partner, but my true equal in this world I'm creating. Someone who knows about the good and the bad in me, who understands why it's necessary. Someone who stands beside me through vampire blood and fire.”

I knew Zand sounded like some maniacal monster from a B vampire movie horror film. Since I'd never been in this situation, I didn't know how to convey my feelings without sounding like Sookie Stackhouse from True Blood. or Bella Swan from Twilight.

My eyes remained fixed on the tiny red box while Zand slowly opened it. The reveal was epic. I was awestruck. There was a brilliant, sparkling ring inside the box.

“It's a black diamond set in platinum, surrounded by smaller white diamonds.” He explained. “It's unlike any traditional engagement ring, which seems fitting for what I'm proposing.”

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The word engagement made my heart ease on down the road. Zand was dead serious about me. Why did I think dead serious? Poor choice of words from my jumbled brain. This wasn't a traditional proposal. It was so much more. We were getting engaged in the basement of a crematorium.

"I've lived alone, Chanel. I've had a few companions, even a dreadful wife once." He acknowledged, glancing briefly at Marisol as if to emphasize the fate that awaited Teresa. "But I've never had someone I loved and trusted in every way possible. Not until you."

My fingers trembled slightly as they hovered over the ring, not quite touching it. "This is what the surprise was about? A proposal and an execution?" I joked as my nervousness entered the chat.

"Yes." He admitted without apology. "Macabre maybe, but two sides of the same commitment. I'm a vampire, and I want you to understand that and love me, anyway."

"I love you and I saw the real you with my own eyes and I'm still here willingly."

"This is true." He admitted. "I want to share everything with you. I want you forever. In sickness and health. Till death do us part, like the humans say."

"I want the same thing." The nervousness left my body and was replaced with pure joy.

"So, is this a yes? You will be my queen, wife, soul mate and life partner."

“Ah, hell yeah!” I jumped into his arms, and he lifted me off my feet and spun me around a few times. His lips pressed into mine and passion oozed from him and into me.

When he placed me down on my feet, I shook off my dizziness. Like a sleight of hand magic trick, the red velvet box was back in front of me. Zand removed the ring from its box. He gently slid the platinum band on my ring finger. I held it up before me and admired the beauty of it. The black diamond caught the harsh light of the basement and transformed it into something exquisitely beautiful. It looked like it cost a pretty penny, a noteworthy nickel, a delightful dime, and a cutesy quarter. I is getting married now! Broken English be damned! Our eyes met over this symbol of our everlasting union, and I was in awe of the perfection of this moment.

My smile almost cracked the skin on my face. Then I remembered that black don't crack, and I could smile as hard as I wanted too. I peered at Zand to notice his face was a mirror of mine. My Mr. Vampire hooked me all the way up. This ring was a dream. I was in the clouds and my mister vampire put me there.

“Hey, you gotta do one more thing before we leave this place.” He reminded me of my task.

“Oh yeah, her.” That bitch! “And after I kill her, what happens to her remains? Her ashes?”

The question seemed to surprise him. I could see it in the slight raise of his brow. “Virgil will toss her in the garbage, per my instruction.” He replied with a shrug. “Or I don't know the lake, river, somewhere. It doesn't matter once they're reduced to dust.”

Something in me shifted. My smile was gone, and vengeance altered my features. “I want her ashes.” I stated with a voice I didn't recognize as my own.

“Marisol’s ashes?” He clarified.

“Yes.” My voice was firm and commanding. “I want to keep them. For myself.”

Zand tilted his head. He was studying me and there was a look of confusion, or maybe surprise, in his hazelnut eyes. “May I ask why?”

“That bitch.” I glared down at Marisol. “Attacked me. Put me in the hospital. Came into my life to fuck it up.” My words emerged precisely formed, each one carrying the weight of my recent trauma. “I want something to remind me that this raggedy ass bitch can never hurt anyone again.”

“A trophy.” A slow smile spread across Zand’s face.

I knew my request was unexpected, but I was on ten. This bitch was trash. She already was a part of Lonzo’s criminal organization. I saw her brother kill, but I was sure she had done the same. She was my enemy, and I wanted to keep her close even in death. I had to keep my head on a swivel because of her family.

Now I wanted to make sure I never forget to keep my eyes opened and brain fully activated. If Zand was calling for me to be his queen, I needed to act like one. I couldn’t be afraid of the people that did me dirty. I could hold my head high and wear them around my neck in a chain. I wasn’t going to tell Zand I wanted to wear a bit of her ashes in a necklace. He might think I was crazy. I could save that part for another time.

“Then her ashes will be yours.” He conceded, with a look of pride on his face. Zand closed the ring box and returned it to his pocket. “I’ll tell Virgil to collect them and have them messengered over to the loft right away.”

“Thank you.” I smiled inside.

“First, love, you need to create those ashes.” Zand stepped back from the control panel, gesturing toward the red button. “The honors belong to you?”

Without hesitation, I moved forward. My fingers flipped up the protective cover, hovering over the red button for just a moment. I looked directly at Marisol, whose eyes now were registering pure dread.

I gave her my vilest eye. “Go to hell, you stupid bitch!” I said because I felt like I had already called her fifteen thousand raggedy hoes.

I admired my engagement ring as I sat there on the button, and I pressed it firmly. The mechanism engaged with a low hydraulic hiss. The stone bed seemed to activate. I rushed the few steps to get a closer look. This was exciting and terrifying at the same time. I really wanted to see this bitch burn. The stone door opened and the flatbed that held her body slid forward. It carried Marisol’s bound form into the opening of the cremation chamber. The fire was intense. It was alarmingly hot, five alarm fire hot. It was hotter than the fourth of July. Baby, it was ba-dee-ya, say do you remember, ba-dee-ya, dancing in September hot.

Marisol’s fingers twitched. Her toes did the same.

“The serum is wearing off.” Zand coolly explained as he stood beside me. “You hit the button just in time.”

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There was no sound from Marisol, but her horrified eyes communicated everything as her body glided into the blazing flames. My blood pressure probably rose to the ceiling, but I didn't even care. I was in my villain era.

The heavy door of the chamber sealed automatically. A small, glazed window allowed us to observe what happened next, and I was there for it. I didn't look away, and neither did my future vampire king fiancé. We stood shoulder to shoulder as the chamber ignited even more. The flames grew in height and shone brighter in color.

The flames attached to Marisol's frame completely. Through the reinforced glass, we watched as fire consumed her naked body. The fire burned a bluish white in color.

"This chamber is far hotter than a standard crematorium. It's designed specifically to destroy vampire tissue completely." Zand elaborated on what he told me earlier.

"How long does it take?" My voice was steady despite the inferno I was witnessing.

"Twenty minutes for complete incineration." He replied. "Another ten to fifteen for cooling. Virgil will collect the ashes afterward."

We stood in silence, watching the fire do its work. Zand's hand found mine. Our fingers twined together as Marisol's body blackened and disintegrated. There's something intimate about watching death together in this way. It was a bond formed in the deliberate extinction of another.

When the flames finally died down. I felt a surge of absolute. My face had shifted again, revealing a half tranquil satisfaction. My glass was half full, and I needed it to

be filled to the brim.

“Now that’s one less bitch I have to worry about.” I said, cause she ain’t no diva. My voice carried none of the horror or regret one might have expected as a human witnessing such destruction.

Zand raised an eyebrow, genuinely impressed by my composure. “You’re taking this remarkably well.”

Maybe he didn’t know it, but I was that girl. I was the Blackbird that took my broken wing and learned to fly.

“Did you expect me to cry for the bitch who tried to kill me? For the sister of the man who murdered Morgan’s boyfriend and terrorized us?” I shook my head. “No, Zand. I’ve learned that some people don’t deserve my tears.”

My fingers tightened around his as he looked back at the cooling chamber. “Teresa has to die next.” I calmly stated with the utmost certainty. “For what she did to Morgan and what she did to you. I want to be there to see it happen.”

Zand studied my face as if he was seeing me for the first time. Maybe it was the same look I gave him when he turned into a vampire before my eyes and ripped Lonzo to pieces. I knew right at that moment I was no longer a pediatric nurse. I was a burgeoning vampire queen.

“For you, my love, Teresa will be next.” He agreed, unable to keep the satisfaction from his voice and the crooked smile off his lips. He bent to kiss me roughly and possessively. The kiss felt like someone sent sparks of passion to my pussy.

“I never imagined my engagement would happen in a crematorium.” I jokingly said. Wondering if I would ever be able to share this story with someone other than

Morgan. Probably not.

“Would you prefer somewhere more conventional? I can arrange an additional proposal anywhere it pleases you. A white sand beach, the Eiffel Tower, the Statue of Liberty, the Grand Canyon, a White Sox game?” He offered, and I realized he wasn’t joking. Zand could make it happen and would if I requested a grand gesture.

I shook my head no, lifting my hand to admire how my ring caught the light. “No. This is perfect. This is us.” I gazed up at him.

“This is us.” He repeated, pulling me against his firm body. “From now on, we rule together.”

Our lips met in another kiss that tasted like power. Teresa’s days were numbered. Chicago’s vampire world was about to discover what happens when the right queen took her place beside the King. My brain chemistry was different now. I was different. I wasn’t the scared little nurse that was afraid to testify against a monster. I wasn’t the single Black female that had to run away to another state to get away from her past. Now, I was strong, and I was fearless, and I owed it all to Zand. He loved and ignited something in me that made me want to fight.

Things were different now and although I had an army of vampires that would fight to protect me, I wanted to learn to protect myself. Like Malcolm Little said, by any means necessary.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CHANEL

The VIP room at The Castle felt like a sanctuary tonight. The plush velvet curtains were drawn closed. We wanted to conceal ourselves from the partygoers below us at

the club. Me and Morgan were here to celebrate my new engagement. I was just happy Zand let me come out of the house when I was still in danger. I was so happy with my engagement, and there was no way I would let Teresa steal my joy by having me hiding at the loft.

Inside the VIP room, the dim lighting created shadows that danced across Morgan's newly paler skin. My bestie was out here looking like a fair maiden. She wasn't too happy with the slight change in her skin tone. She had purchased three bottles of spray tan that she hadn't tried out yet. Morgan was so funny. She was going to always make sure people knew she was Black or biracial. She was going to go out of her way to make sure the world didn't think she was a whole ass Caucasian person and all I could do was laugh. Being a vampire didn't erase her Blackness, and honestly, she was a vampire now. I didn't think her race, color, or creed even mattered anymore. Zand told me vampires didn't have racism, colorism or discrimination. I wanted to believe him. But seeing that he was White, would he even know if Black vampires were being discriminated against?

I twisted my engagement ring around my finger. My black diamond was something I couldn't stop looking at. I watched my best friend lift a crystal glass filled with crimson liquid to her lips. Her movements were more graceful than they had ever been, yet somehow uncertain, as if she was still learning the language of her own body.

My plate of roasted chicken and vegetables sat half-eaten before me. The rich chicken aroma mingling with the metallic scent coming from Morgan's glass. I was picking at my food for the past twenty minutes. I was more interested in observing the subtle changes in my friend than in satisfying my hunger.

Morgan noticed my stare and quickly lowered her glass. A grimace flashed across her face. "I'm sorry." She apologized while wiping her lips, even though there was nothing there to wipe. "I should've waited until you were done eating."

“You don’t have to apologize.” I told her, spearing a piece of baby carrot with my fork. “Girl, Zand drinks blood in front of me all the time.” The words came easily now, as if discussing blood consumption was the most natural thing in the world. Perhaps for me, it had become just that.

Morgan placed her glass down on the polished mahogany table. Her movement was too fast, too forceful. The crystal made a sharp ping against the wood, and she winced at the sound.

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“Still getting used to it?” I asked softly. I decided against telling her she was already heavy handed before she was a vampire. I remembered how she used to comb my hair when she was flat ironing it. I had to remind her I have 4C hair, and she was used to combing her 3A textured hair. She would ease up, but she was so good at doing my hair I sometimes just let her rake that wide-tooth comb through my hair without complaining.

“Everything is so freakin’ loud.” She whispered. Her hands hovered over the glass as if afraid to touch it again. “And I can’t seem to gauge how much pressure to use. Yesterday, I almost grabbed a doorknob out of a door.”

I nodded, remembering how Zand explained this adjustment period to me. “Zand says it gets easier.”

“That’s what Harlen and Donté keep saying too.” Morgan sighed, her fingers finally wrapping around the glass again, this time with exaggerated care. “But how long is eventually? A week? A month? A year?”

“I don’t know, but for now, sometimes you’re going to be as graceful as Naomi Campbell walking the runway for Versace. Other times you’re going to be Marlon and Sean Wayans walking the runway in White Chicks.”

I had no proper answer for her. The timeline of vampire adjustment wasn’t something I had to personally navigate.

“Girl, please don’t tell me I look like Brittany and Tiffany Wilson.”

“I mean, you did dye your hair blonde.” I teased.

Morgan let out a giggle. “And did.” I loved seeing her laugh again.

The heavy textured curtains parted suddenly, and Layla glided into the room. The Castle’s PR manager moved with the effortless grace that seemed common to all vampires. I wondered how long she had been a vamp. Her tall frame was accentuated by a form-fitting black dress that made her look like she’s stepped off a runway. Her blonde hair cascaded over one shoulder. She looked exactly the same way she looked the first time me and Morgan came to The Castle, and she plucked us out of the line to escort us inside.

“Is everything to your satisfaction?” Layla asked. Her voice carried a faint accent I had never been able to place. Her eyes drifted from me to Morgan, then to my plate. “Can I have Marco pour you more wine? Or perhaps something stronger?”

“No, I’m fine,” I replied. “Everything’s perfect, thank you.” Layla seemed too high up on the totem pole to be checking in on us. Zand had a kitchen with regular waitstaff. I was sure Layla was busy, and this was way below her pay grade.

Layla nodded, but her gaze lingered on Morgan, the new vampire. There was something in Layla’s expression, not quite hostility, not quite curiosity. Morgan got attention from women and men, but nothing about Layla screamed lesbian or bisexual.

Morgan noticed Layla’s lingering gaze and met her stare. A small crease formed between Morgan’s brows. It was a ‘what the fuck you looking at glare’ that only someone that was close to Morgan recognized.

“And you, Ms. Hayes?” Layla asked. “Is your beverage satisfactory?”

The pause before “satisfactory” stretched a beat too long, infusing the word with something that could be judgment. I really didn’t know.

“It’s fine.” Morgan’s voice was clipped. “Thank you.” Morgan growled.

Still, Layla didn’t skedaddle. She didn’t catch the hint. She stood there, assessing Morgan with the kind of measured gaze one might give to a puzzle they were trying to solve. “If you need anything, anything at all, please don’t hesitate to ask me. Mr. Valentine has given instructions that you’re to be afforded every comfort.”

“We will let you know.” I interjected, sensing Morgan’s growing discomfort with Layla’s presence. “Thank you, Layla.”

With one final glance at Morgan, Layla turned and slinked her tall ass back through the curtains. Her exit was as smooth as her entrance. But the extra time at our table was weirdo behavior.

“What the fuck was that about?” Morgan muttered once we were completely alone again.

“What do you mean?”

“The way she looked at me,” Morgan said, leaning forward. “Like I was some kind of science project. People act weird around me now that I’m a vampire.” She picked up her glass and took another sip. “They either avoid me completely or stare like I’m going to snap and drain them dry any minute. And check it, they all vampires too.”

I considered this, thinking about the dynamics at play. “Maybe it’s not just that you’re a vampire.” I suggested. “Maybe it’s who turned you. Harlen is sort of new around here. I know he’s Zand’s brother, but you and me were here before he was.”

Morgan's eyes widen slightly. "You think that's it? That I'm guilty by association?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "Vampire politics are complicated."

"Tell me about it. Even so, it makes no sense. Like you said, I was coming here with you. I'm not some new person."

I watched as she sat down her glass again. Her hand trembled slightly. The tremor was barely perceptible, but it spoke volumes about the strain she was under. Morgan had always been the confident one, the one who barreled through life with unwavering strength. Seeing her struggle with basic movements broke my heart.

"How are you really doing?" I asked, pushing my plate aside. "And don't tell me fine. I want the truth."

Morgan's shoulders sagged a little, her carefully maintained facade cracking just enough to let me glimpse what was beneath. "I feel..." she began, then stopped, searching for the right words. "I feel like I'm wearing someone else's skin. Like everything's familiar but wrong at the same time." She flexed her fingers, watching them move as if they belonged to a stranger. "I can hear people talking on the dance floor if I focus on it. Coco, I can smell what shampoo you used this morning. It's overwhelming."

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“I can’t even imagine.” I murmured, wishing I could do more than offer empty platitudes.

“And the hunger...” she whispered. Something dark flashed in her eyes. “Bay-bee, it’s always there, just under the surface. Girl, remember when I tried to go on that Keto diet to lose 10 pounds and I passed the hell out?”

“How could I forget?”

“Girl, it’s like ten times worse, but I can’t even faint and not feel it.” It was nice to see that Morgan was still funny, and dramatic and, dare I say, still Morgan. “Harlen’s been teaching me to control it and your cute little stepson has been checking up on me. I think I want to set him up with Donna.”

“I know you lying.” I laughed out loud.

“I’m just playing about Donna, but that’s your son. You about to marry his daddy.”

“You think you funny.”

“Ah. No. It’s facts. Donté Jackson Valentine is your stepson. Congratulations! Yes, ma’am, you got a baby boy.” Morgan nodded with a straight face. She reached for her glass again, this time lifting it without any visible tremor. Progress, even if it was small.

“Technically, you’re right, but Donté is grown.”

“Nineteen has never been grown, especially for someone with a penis. Because he was turned at nineteen, does that mean his prefrontal cortex isn’t fully developed?”

“You know. I don’t know.”

“Being a vampire just brings so many questions without answers.”

“Zand says Natasha is the smartest vampire he knows. She knows a lot about vampire history and just how y’all function and operate. If you have questions, you should go talk to her.”

“Girl, I’m afraid of her. She looks at me like she wants to eat my coochie.”

That was true. “Oh, I guess you going to have to shave your tabby cat and be a lesbian if you want an advanced vampire masterclass.”

“First, that’s a no. Second, you know, I’m falling for Harlen. I could never ever hurt him. He loves me.”

“Be careful with him. I know Zand is tough on him, but he has a good reason.”

“I know he slept with Teresa. He told me he was sorry about it, and he would never betray Zand again. Harlen told me he was lost without his brother, and he never wants to lose him again. He said he would die for him.”

I was shocked and wondered if Harlen really meant it. “He said that?”

“He sure did. I don’t know all their history, but those two need a therapy session with Iyanla Vanzant or Dr. Cheyenne Bryant because they have some serious issues.”

“You’re right. They got into a whole fight at the loft. I mean, we were all upset that

we hadn't heard from y'all, but Zand exploded."

"Right and Harlen just took the punches and didn't even try to really fight him back. I was already a vampire. It's not like Harlen could turn back time." Morgan added.

I agreed with her, but I didn't want to say anything else. Zand always had a reason, and I assumed he probably had many reasons to blow up at Harlen that we all didn't know. They both had the same maker, and they had been around for decades.

"I'm sure they will figure it out." I added. "Let's just promise we won't let anything ever come between us."

"Coco, now you know we ride or die. Bad girls for life."

"Am I Will Smith or Martin Lawrence?"

"Now you know I'm Martin." She joked.

"Okay, good, because I'm Mike Lowrey."

"I'm never going to dispute that. Besides, I was going to marry you if Zand hadn't beat me to it."

"You are a fool. But it makes sense, so we could just pay for the family insurance." I jokingly said.

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“I don’t need health insurance now. I’m a vampire.” She mocked her pre-existing condition.

“What did you tell your job?” I asked. I had to quit my job.

“I’m still working. I’m remote. They don’t have to know I’m a vampire. I still have to make a living. I don’t have to show up to financially advise my clients. I’ll fly back to Minnesota when I just have to show up to the office in person.”

“Do you want to still work?”

“I do. I’m trying to go on like normal. It helps me take my mind off things. I don’t need that much sleep anymore, so I can do a lot of things now. One good thing about being a vampire, in the woods, I don’t have to choose between the man or the bear. I can kill both of them.” She said with a tone that was matter of fact and big facts all rolled into one. “But right now, the only person I want to kill is Teresa Protenza.”

I never knew Teresa’s last name and here it was Morgan, was locked in with the details.

“We’ll get her.” I promised, surprised by the conviction in my own voice. After what happened with Marisol early this morning, the words felt less like empty reassurance and more like a statement of fact. “Everyone is looking for Teresa. When she sticks her head out, we will chop it off.”

Morgan smiled. “Okay, Griselda Blanco. You out here talking like a real queen pin and your son is already a Chicago gangbanger.”

I couldn't help it. I busted out laughing. "You know what? I think they put some Coca-Cola in your drink because you got all the jokes tonight."

"Oh, my God. Can vampires get high? Nah, but in all seriousness. That drugstore bottled bleach blonde psycho vampire bitch got to go." Morgan raised her glass in a toast. "To the left."

"To the death." I raised my water glass, clinking it gently against hers.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CHANEL

The silence that followed our toast felt familiar and comfortable. Something fundamental had shifted between Morgan and me since her transformation. Our friendship was deeper now. It was built on experiences that transcended normal human bonds. The weight of my secret pressed against my chest, demanding release.

"I did something this morning." I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "Something I never thought I was capable of."

Morgan sat her bloody glass down to give me her full attention. Her gaze was more intense than it used to be. It was a side effect of her transformation that I was still adjusting to.

"What happened?" She asked.

I leaned forward, dropping my voice even lower, as though we weren't alone in the VIP section. "Zand took me to this crematorium that he owns. Marisol was there. She was strapped down, paralyzed by some kind of serum."

Morgan's eyes grew large, but she didn't interrupt me.

"Have you noticed that some of the security guards have weapons? It's a gun with some kind of serum that immobilizes vampires."

"Yeah, that Glock that they started wearing?" Morgan knew exactly what I was talking about.

I continued. "Yeah, I thought it was just a regular gun."

"I did too, but why would they carry a gun when they don't need them for humans? I didn't even think about it at first."

"Me either." My words were coming faster now. "Harlen shot Marisol with that special gun that paralyzes vampires. Then he took her back to this crematorium."

"Oh, okay. That's where he was when he told me he was doing a job for his brother."

"He told you that?"

"Yeah, he said he would meet me here when he was done. I came here and just waited for him to come back. I was asleep when he finally got back to The Castle. If Harlen took Marisol there. Did he kill her?"

My fingers gripped the stem of my wineglass tightly. The memory of the basement filled my mind, the clinical lighting, the sterile smell, and Marisol's terrified eyes.

"Harlen didn't kill her. He just left her there. When I showed up with Zand, he gave me a choice." I said, meeting Morgan's gaze steadily. "I pushed the button that sent her into the fire. I watched her burn. I didn't look away."

I waited for her reaction. Morgan nodded slowly, and a smile of satisfaction settled on her face. “Good.” She simply said. “She deserved it for what she did to you. For what her brother did to Craig.”

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“I thought I’d feel, I don’t know, guilty? But all I felt was relief.” I twisted my engagement ring. “Is that wrong?”

“No way.” Morgan answered with no uncertainty. “That’s survival. That’s justice. Not court justice, or street justice, but vampire justice.” She paused, then added. “That’s what she deserved. She could’ve kept her human ass in Bloomington. She came here and got the business. After everything she did, she didn’t deserve to be a badass vampire living forever and never aging.”

“She’s dead now and when Teresa realizes she’s missing, we have to be ready for her.”

Morgan leaned back in her chair. “My maker grabbed her, and you took her out. That’s the kind of payback I’m trying to serve to that bitch that threw me off a balcony.”

I wanted to tell her how sorry I was, but I didn’t want to sound like a broken record. “Is he here, Harlen?” I asked, because I hadn’t seen him all night.

“Yeah, he’s either with Zand or Natasha. Harlen’s been teaching me about how things work around here. Who’s running this and that?” She gestured vaguely with one hand. “Harlen’s been sleeping here at The Castle and I’m thinking of staying here with him.”

“Why?”

“He doesn’t feel safe at the apartments alone. Not with Teresa and her people still out

there. I don't want him to be alone and he wants me around so he can keep an eye on me."

I consider this information. "You're going to stay with him?" I asked, trying to keep my tone neutral. But I didn't want to lose my friend.

Morgan affirmed. "For now. He's teaching me control and how to be what I am now."

"I understand. I'm going to miss you." I whined.

"I'm still going to see you. You gotta fiancé now. Y'all need some time alone."

"Alone with the vampire security guards!" I belted. There was always a vamp somewhere near me. I guess I should be grateful for all the protection.

"Josh and Matt are damn near family."

She was right. "Yeah, I'm just complaining for no reason."

"I've been doing the same." She said, gesturing to her transformed body. "I'm done mourning what I've lost. I didn't choose to be a vampire, but I'm choosing to embrace it."

Her words were exactly how I was feeling at the crematorium. I wanted to embrace this stronger version of myself. I was done with the scared me. Like Morgan, it was time for us to just accept the life we had now, and the women that we had become.

"I think that's brave." I told her honestly. "Embracing change instead of fighting it."

Morgan's lips curved into a grin. "It's not bravery. It's practicality. I can't go back to

what I was, so I might as well make the most of what I am.” She leaned forward.
“Besides, there are perks.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t get cramps, or a period anymore.”

“Girl, you stupid.”

“My stupid vampire ass can wear white anytime I want to, and not worry about having an accident. And all the money I’m going to save not buying tampons, diva cups and pads with wings. I don’t envy you.”

“You never ever wear white.” I reminded her.

“That’s true. But the new me is going to start wearing white.”

“I’m going to have to see it to believe it.”

“I want Teresa to pay for what she did.” She changed the subject back to our nemesis.
“I want her to suffer.”

The vehemence in her words should have frightened me. After this morning, after pushing that red button, I understood it all too well. I tasted the hunger for retribution and the need to see justice served, no matter what.

“It’s going to happen.” I said quietly.

“I know Zand runs everything around here. I’m going to ask him to let me have a chance to take her out.” She confided in me.

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The ferocity in her words would've been foreign to the Morgan I knew before. She was the carefree party girl with the ready laugh and easy smile. This new Morgan spoke of vengeance with a conviction. Her eyes, those unnaturally bright gray eyes, flashed with a purpose that bordered on predatory.

"Morgan, I don't want anything to happen to you. You're a new vampire and Teresa has been one for some time. You changed and you have to get used to the new you."

Morgan tilted her head and looked at me with that new intensity. "You've changed too, you know. The old Chanel would never have pushed that button."

Her observation struck home. "Maybe we're both becoming what we need to be to survive in this world." I said.

"Maybe." She agreed.

"I'm happy you're still alive, and I want you to stay that way." I said, the words inadequate against the enormity of what's happened, "and I'm sorry that being my best friend has cost you so much."

"It's not your fault. This is basically just how life was supposed to turn out."

"How can you say that?" I asked, searching her bright eyes for any sign of resentment. "You died, Morgan. You had your entire future ahead of you, and now?—"

"And now I have a different future." She finished for me. "One with superhuman

strength and a blood diet.” She attempted a smile. “I’m here. I’m different. I’m dealing with it.”

Her pragmatism surprised me, though perhaps it shouldn’t. Morgan had always been adaptable. She rolled with the punches in ways I never could. The fact that she applied that same resilience to her literal death and resurrection was both impressive and heartbreaking.

“By the way,” I said, shifting topics. “Donna has been calling me. She’s worried about you.”

Morgan winced. “I know. She’s left me about twenty voicemails. She’s so damn extra. I’ll call her back soon. I told her I was on an extended vacation. Some bullshit about needing time alone after Craig.”

“And she believed that?”

“Donna? Hell no.” Morgan laughed. “But she pretended to. That’s why her worrisome ass keeps calling you trying to see what I’m doing.”

“What about your family?” I asked carefully, knowing how close Morgan was to her parents and younger brother. “Have you talked to them?”

“I talked to them yesterday. Made up some story about my job, giving me more work, and I needed to stay here in Chicago to meet new clients.” Her finger traced the rim of her glass, a habit she carried over from her human life. “My mom was disappointed I didn’t come home to visit before my fake workload got heavy, but she understood.”

“When will you go see them?” I questioned.

“Not until Teresa is dead. It’s too dangerous for them and for me. I could be followed.” She looked down at her hands. “I’m still learning control. And what if Teresa follows me there to hurt them? I can’t go back now. Maybe a month or two and only after she’s dead.”

“I understand.”

“Besides,” she continued. “I’ll have to lie to them, make something up, and I need to be better at lying.”

“I don’t want us to change.” I blurted out. “I mean, I know everything has changed, but I don’t want us to change. You and me.”

“Coco, girl. We won’t.”

“How can you be so sure? You’re a vampire. I’m engaged to a vampire. Our lives are insane.”

“Because we’ve been through too much to let vampire bullshit come between us.” The curse word was refreshingly normal. It was a piece of the old Morgan shining through.

“Promise me something.” I said, turning my hand to clasp hers properly. “Promise we won’t let vampire business affect our friendship. No secrets, no hidden agendas.”

“I promise.” She said, quickly and reassuringly, “I will always have your back, Coco.”

“And I got yours.” I replied, feeling something settle within me. “Which means we tell each other everything we learn about these vampires. All the stuff, the politics, the secrets, all of it.”

“Deal. No more being kept in the dark. If I hear something from Harlen or the others, you’ll be the first to know. For real, you’re the only person I fully trust.”

“And if Zand tells me anything important, I’ll share it with you, too.” I promised.

The seriousness of our pact felt almost ceremonial, a covenant between friends who were moving into our new hot girl era.

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“You know, this means you have to tell me every gory detail about how Zand proposed to you.”

“It was literally when I was executing Marisol.”

“Child, it sounds so twisted when you say it like that.”

Morgan was right, of course. There was no going back to normal, no pretending that our lives hadn't veered into territory that defied comprehension. All we could do was move forward together, one human and one vampire. This was our new reality show, and we probably couldn't sell it to Bravo, but I bet the Zeus network would sign us up right away. Our friendship was the only thing we had left from our old world. And somehow, that made even the darkest parts of this new life seem survivable.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ZAND

I leaned back in my leather chair, watching the security monitors that lined one section of a wall in my office. Normally, the monitors were hidden from view. Tonight, I wanted to see everything happening downstairs at the club. Each screen offered a different view. There was the dance floor packed with gyrating bodies, the lower-level VIP sections with their velvet ropes and bottle service, and the front and side entrances where my people stood guard. There were video cameras in the upstairs VIP room also, but I wanted to give Chanel and Morgan their privacy. I was the king of this small empire, and tonight, in due time, I would plot the expansion of my reign.

Harlen slouched in the chair across from my desk. He had one leg draped over the armrest in a posture that was more human than vampire. The events with Morgan changed him. Losing the human version of her, turning her, and helping her navigate her new existence had altered him. My brother had always been chaos personified. Now there was purpose in his actions and movements.

“What’s up with you?” I felt the need to check in, to see where his head was.

“I should’ve killed Teresa when I was back in L.A.” He grumbled. “Before she became a problem.”

“Hindsight.” I replied. Tracing the rim of my untouched whiskey glass filled with AB negative blood. I was working on my second glass of the crimson liquid. “She wasn’t always what she is now. I thought she would’ve been done with her antics after killing the pilates instructor.”

Harlen snorted. “She was always a snake. You just didn’t see it.”

He was right, but I didn’t acknowledge it. Instead, I turned my attention back to the monitors.

“When Teresa finds out about Marisol, she will be more careful. More desperate.”

“Good.” Harlen spewed. “Desperate people make mistakes.”

The heavy door opened, and Natasha entered. I’d called her down from the security room a few minutes before. She was my number one soldier reporting for duty.

“Any updates?” I asked as she approached my desk.

Natasha reached into the pocket of her tight black leather jacket and produced a black

smartphone, Marisol's. "I've bypassed her security pin." She offered information. "But the contents are unusual."

She placed the phone on my desk, and I resisted the urge to pick it up immediately. "Define unusual."

"No names in the contacts." Natasha explained, tapping the screen to wake it. The display illuminated with a cold blue light. "Just single-digit numbers instead of names as the contacts."

"Odd."

"The number One is attached to a number with a Chicago area code and it's the same for contact, Two, Three and Four."

Harlen leaned forward, abandoning his nonchalance. "Four contacts? That's it?"

"It appeared to be a burner phone. There's nothing personal on it. No pictures. No music. No social media apps or games." Natasha said. "This phone is for a specific purpose only."

I picked up the cellular device, scrolling through the sparse contact list. "A burner phone with no information," I mused. "One of the numbers is for Teresa, obviously. But who are the other three contacts?"

"Allies." Harlen suggested. "Other vampires she's brought in. Remember the guy and girl I saw her with at Club Bailar Caliente? That could be two of the numbers."

"Or humans working for her." I countered. "She's not above using humans. She was one not too long ago."

The tall windows in front of my desk rattled as the bass reverberated through the glass from the club below. The sound was faint and distant. It was irrelevant to the war council taking place in my office. My fingers scrolled through the phone's message history. There were a few cryptic texts that didn't give anything away. Nothing revealing names, locations or specific plans.

"What about her call history?" I asked, handing the cell phone back to Natasha.

"It's been cleared regularly. But I recovered fragments from the cache." She scrolled to a series of timestamps. "Most calls were to contact One. Shorter calls to Two and Three. No communication with Four since last week."

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“One has to be Teresa.” Harlen said like he knew it for a fact. He didn’t. “She’d be the primary contact for sure. She had to be the one to make Marisol into a vamp.”

It made sense, but there was no evidence to etch it in stone. “Four contacts, four potential targets. How do we know which one to pursue first with no clarity on who they are?”

Natasha’s lips curved into the barest hint of a smile. “We don’t pursue. We wait.”

“For what?” Harlen asked. He was impatient for good reason.

“For them to call her.” I answered, understanding Natasha’s strategy instantly. “They don’t know she’s dead.”

“Precisely.” Natasha confirmed. “Marisol has been missing for less than twenty-four hours. Soon, someone will try to contact her.”

The implications ripple through the room. “We have Marisol’s phone. We have potential direct access to Teresa. We have the bait if we played this right.”

“When she calls, we could arrange a meeting.” Harlen said with excitement, replacing his earlier restlessness. “And set a trap.”

I studied the security monitors again, watching the oblivious humans below. They were dancing and drinking. They were unaware of the predators among them. “It’s risky. Teresa isn’t stupid. She’ll suspect something’s wrong if Marisol suddenly arranges a meeting via text.”

“Maybe not, if we’re careful.” Natasha argued. “Minimal communication. A text message with a location only, like an emergency signal.”

The impromptu plan formed in my mind. “Okay, if we draw her out with Marisol’s phone, then we control the location. It needs to be somewhere we can surround her. Somewhere with no easy way to escape.” I pondered.

Harlen’s posture was transformed completely now. His sluggish lounging facade was abandoned. He leaned forward and placed his elbows on my desk.

“The old brewery.” He suggested. “The one on the west side that you own. Concrete walls, limited exits, no civilians.”

His tactical thinking impressed me. This was a new Harlen. He was focused, strategic, and dangerous.

“We’d need to position our people in advance. Make sure Teresa can’t bring an army.” I added.

“I can have a team ready within the hour.” Natasha said. “Six of our best, armed with the Cripso Glocks.”

This was the endgame I had been working toward since Teresa first threatened Chanel. Since she orchestrated the death of innocents bearing my lover’s name. Victory felt tantalizingly close.

“We have to figure out an opportune time to text Teresa. Let’s proceed carefully.” I cautioned. “We need to?—”

On my desk, Marisol’s cell phone suddenly lit up. The screen displayed a single digit: 1.

Our heads turned toward it. The unexpected interruption halted the beginnings of our strategic planning. Perfect stillness fell on the room as we all stared at the glowing screen. With the identity of the caller being only the number One, we could only hope it was Teresa.

I exchanged a quick glance with Natasha. Her eyes were fixed on the phone. When I looked over at Harlen, he was mimicking Natasha. This unexpected development could destroy our newly concocted plan. But I had to do something. My finger hovered over the answer button, and I felt a spark of reluctance. I had to remind myself that sometimes the best plans are the ones that form in the chaos of the moment. This could be one.

“Answer it.” Harlen hissed.

I pressed the green accept button on the screen. I quickly activated the speaker function with the tap of a finger. “Marisol Lopez’s phone.” I answered in a robotic tone. My voice was deliberately casual.

The silence on the other end lasted three seconds. I counted them while I watched the call timer tick upward on the screen. When Teresa finally spoke, her voice carried that familiar tone I had grown to loathe.

“Put Marisol on the phone.” She demanded without an introduction. “Now.”

I leaned back in my chair, making the leather crackle. “I’m afraid that won’t be possible.”

There was another pause, a shorter one this time. “Zand?” The recognition in her voice shifted and added an edge that wasn’t there before. “What are you doing with Marisol’s phone?”

Harlen's lips curled into a silent snarl. Natasha circled around my desk, positioning herself closer to the phone as if proximity might help her hear Teresa's location.

"It came into my possession recently." I replied, maintaining the conversational tone that I knew would infuriate her. "Along with its previous owner."

"What have you done with Marisol?" The first sign of uncertainty crept into Teresa's voice.

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“Done with or done too, Marisol?”

“If you’ve hurt her—” Teresa ranted, but I cut her off.

“Hurt her? No, Teresa. That implies an ongoing state.” I paused, allowing the implication to settle into her dark heart. “Marisol is beyond hurt.”

The sound that came through the cell phone speaker wasn’t quite a gasp. The sound was sharper and more feral. It was the sound of a predator realizing they’ve lost something of value.

“You’re lying.” Teresa said when she was the one who told falsehoods and untruths. “You’re trying to provoke me.”

“Huh, am I?” I lifted the phone closer to my mouth. I wanted to ensure she heard every word. “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. In Alexander Valentine getting his revenge, you must always trust.”

My rhyming taunt landed with precision. Teresa’s breath hitched, and when she spoke again, shock had replaced her confidence. “You, you burned her?”

“In the words of Jimmy Ellis from The Trammps, Burn, baby burn, disco inferno. Oh, how I loved the seventies.” I mocked her with a huge smile I wished she could see through the phone.

Harlen’s face split into a vicious grin. Natasha remained impassive, but I caught the approval in her eyes.

“You bastard!” Teresa hissed. “You’re an absolute monster. Killing humans is one thing, but you killed a vampire, your own kind.”

“It’s whatever.” I cheered. This was ironic, coming from a woman who used to be human not so long ago. “You had no problem systematically murdering innocent humans with the same name as my fiancée.”

My choice of words hung suspended between us, the word ‘fiancée’ ringing in the silence that followed. I hadn’t planned to reveal that information, but the opportunity to twist the knife was far too tempting to resist.

“Fiancée?” Teresa’s voice cracked. There was genuine surprise breaking through her rage. “You’re marrying the nurse?”

“I proposed last night, right over Marisol’s charbroiled body.” I confirmed. I watched Harlen’s eyebrows rise in surprise. This was news to him as well. I hadn’t gotten around to mentioning it to him. “She said yes, of course. We celebrated over Marisol’s remains.”

The open line filled with a sound that was half scream, half sob and a whole lot of fury. “I want to see you now!” Teresa commanded. Her words came faster and with less control. “Face to face. You and me. Bring your precious nurse. Let’s settle this once and for all.”

My jaw tightened at the mention of Chanel. It was an implicit threat, but I kept my voice level. “You’re hardly in a position to make demands.” I warned.

“I have more allies than you think.” She spit back. “You killed Marisol? I’ll replace her with ten more. You think you’re winning? You’ve barely seen what I’m capable of.”

Her threat slid off me. “I’ve seen enough. The desperate flailing of a vampire whore who’s already lost.”

“I want to meet!” she insisted. “Just us. No armies, no ambushes. You, me, and your human pet.”

I exchanged glances with Natasha, who gave me an almost imperceptible nod. Harlen mouthed something I couldn’t quite catch, but his eagerness was clear. He wanted this confrontation as much as I did.

“I’ll think about it.” I told Teresa. I was deliberately casual, as if her demand was of minimal interest. “I’ll call you back when I’ve decided.”

“You’ll think about it?!” Her voice rose. “No, Zand. You don’t get to dictate terms anymore. You bring that bitch to me, or I swear to God I’ll?—”

I ended the call. My finger pressed the button with finality. I cut off Teresa’s tirade mid-sentence.

“Well.” Harlen groaned. “That went better than expected.”

Natasha’s expression remained neutral. “The bitch is deranged. This makes her more dangerous.”

“And more predictable,” I countered, setting the phone down on my desk. “She’s emotional, making threats she can’t back up. Believe me, we have the advantage.”

“She’ll call back.” Harlen predicted, eyeing the phone. “Probably within minutes.”

“Let her.” I said, rising from my chair. I walked over to the one-way glass and looked out over the dance floor below me. “Let her rage. Let her threaten. Let her believe she

still has power in Chicago.”

The lights of The Castle strobed and sparkled below. Teresa doesn't realize it yet, but she's already lost. Her death was determined the moment she threatened Chanel, and everything since then has been merely a prologue to her death. The final chapter was about to begin.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MORGAN

The blood in my glass tasted different tonight. I swirled it around, watching the crimson liquid cling to the crystal in ways I couldn't see before. Everything was heightened now. The bass from the dance floor no longer just vibrated through the floor, it pulsed through my body like a second heartbeat. I moved downstairs to the other curtained VIP section when Chanel went to her man's office. This section was closer to the dance floor and the main bar.

Zand had dismissed Harlen. He was sitting with me, curtains open, people watching. I was chilling and minding my newfound vampire business when I caught Layla's eye, darting over to our table when she thought I wasn't watching. My eyesight was even better as a vampire, and I could clearly see through the Prada sunglasses I wore.

"You're doing it again." Harlen said on the couch beside me. His voice was pitched low enough that human ears couldn't catch it over the music. "That thousand-yard vampire stare."

I blinked and pulled my attention back to him. "Sorry. It's just, you know." Words failed me as I gestured vaguely at the club beyond our private booth.

"Overwhelming?" He offered and lounged back against the plushness of the couch. "Pretty baby, it gets easier. Your brain learns to filter."

"When?" I sighed, taking another sip of the warm blood.

Harlen shrugged. His ocean eyes scanned the dance floor. "Depends. A few weeks, a

couple months.”

I rolled my eyes. All of the answers were so vague. It felt like vampires just made up the rules as they went along. The club was packed tonight. So many bodies grinding against each other on the dance floor, sweat, perfume and alcohol creating a cocktail of scents that I can somehow differentiate. The lights strobed across the dancers. Each flash revealed moments frozen in perfect clarity. There was a woman throwing her head back in laughter. I saw a man’s hand sliding under the hem of his partner’s shirt. I spied a bouncer escorting a drunken patron toward the exit.

And through it all, I kept noticing Layla.

She stood near the bar; her tall frame and platinum blonde hair made her easy to spot even in the crowded space. On the surface, she was doing her job. She was greeting VIP guests. Some WNBA player and a popular social media influencer were in the club. Layla was directing the staff at The Castle. But there was something off about her movements. Her eyes kept finding their way back to our section. Her prying eyes were lingering just a little bit too long. Sitting this close to Harlen was the sign I liked men, and I was with this man. Why was she checking me out? Looking at someone this hard meant one, you want to bone, or two, you want to catch these hands.

“What are you staring at?” Harlen asked, following my gaze.

“Layla,” I murmured, not taking my eyes off her Charlize Theron looking ass. “She’s been watching us.” I meant me, but I didn’t want to sound crazy.

“She’s the PR manager or some boujee title my brother dubbed. Watching people is literally her job.”

“Not like this.” I leaned forward, setting my bloody glass down. “Look at her now.”

As if on cue, one of the bartenders mentioned something to Layla, and I saw her perfect posture change subtly. `There was a stiffening of her spine, a slight tilt of her head. My new vampire hearing picked up fragments of their conversation through the music. Strangely, I could kind of read lips too.

“...Ms. Taylor, oh she just left...” the bartender said.

Layla’s hand immediately goes into the pocket of her dress. She pulled out her phone. Her fingers moved rapidly across the screen, typing something before slipping the cell phone away again. The movement was casual. It’s the urgency of her text that caught my attention.

“Did you see that?” I whispered to Harlen. “The way she reacted when Chanel was mentioned?”

“What? What’s that about Chanel?”

Don’t tell me I can hear better than Harlen? “Dude told her Chanel was gone and then Layla pulls out her phone.” I didn’t even know Chanel had left the club.

“Coincidence.” Harlen said.

My cell phone buzzed on the table in front of me. I lifted it to read the text I had from Chanel. I read it and it said:

CHANEL: I’m gone. I’m going home to get some sleep. I can’t stay up all night like YOU people. Lol

I texted back: TTYL

I placed my cell phone back down on the table. From across the room, I watched

Layla reading her phone screen. She placed her cell phone back in her pocket and for a few minutes she stood still with what I registered as a concerned look on her face. Her phone buzzed in her pocket. I was so focused; I heard it over the sound of the music. Layla reached for her phone again. This time, I removed my sunglasses and zeroed in on her face. My enhanced vision picked up her micro-expressions. Her mouth was tightened. Her eyes were laser focused. She looked panicked and not like her normal, flawless, perfect self.

“Babe, I think she’s reporting something.” I said, with no real evidence to back up my claims. “She keeps texting someone.”

Harlen straightened slightly. His posture lost some of its casualness. “Who?”

“Layla, pay attention.” I snapped.

“What are you talking about?” Harlen asked. He didn’t seem irritated with me. He just seemed confused.

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“I think she’s reporting something to somebody. She has been watching me and Chanel too hard all night long.”

“What are you saying?”

“Someone knew about Cheboygan.”

Finally, Harlen was listening and processing what I was saying. “That’s a serious accusation, Morgan.”

“I know what I’m seeing. There’s something wrong with her. I can feel it.”

“Feel it? Your instincts are still new.” He cautioned, but he was watching Layla now with more interest. “It could be you’re picking up on something else entirely.”

I shook my head no. Frustration was building in my chest. “No, I’m sure of it. Look, there she goes again.”

Layla had moved away from the bar and to a quieter corner. Her back was to the wall as she checked her phone more openly now. Her thumb scrolled quickly, then paused. The faintest smile touched her lips before vanishing. She glanced up and scanned the room. For a brief moment, our eyes locked. Something passed between us before she smoothly looked away. She tucked her phone into her pocket and resumed her professional demeanor.

“We need to tell Zand.” I said, not sure what I would tell him.

“Tell him what?” Harlen chuckled.

My voice dropped. “What the fuck I just saw.”

Harlen sighed. He ran a hand through his hair. “Morgan, listen. You’re new to this. Everything feels suspicious when your senses are dialed up to the clouds. Layla’s been with Zand for years.”

“So what?” I leaned closer to him, my eyes never leaving Layla. “Teresa was with Zand for years too and look how that turned out.”

The comparison hit home. I didn’t mean to hurt his feelings, but I saw the subtle shift of Harlen’s expression. It was too late. The damage was done. I did notice the slight narrowing of his eyes as he considered my words.

“Harlen, she knows a lot of things.” I pressed. “About Zand, about my homegirl. About all of us. And she’s feeding that information to someone.” I placed my hand on Harlen’s knee. “Coco could be in danger.”

The mention of Chanel’s safety finally broke through his skepticism. He sat straight up. “If you want to bother Zand with your Spidey senses, then we will.”

“Yes, I do.” I urged.

“Alright.” He conceded. “We’ll talk to Zand.”

Relief washed through me. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Harlen warned, rising from his seat. “If you’re wrong about this, Zand will not be happy with me.”

“You’ll get over it.” I smarted. “And if I’m right?” I countered, standing up and willing him to do the same.

Harlen stood, and he glanced over at Layla. She was engaged in conversation with a group of wealthy patrons. “If you’re right,” he said quietly, “then we’ll see.”

Harlen took my hand and led me from the VIP section. I followed him through the club, weaving between bodies that seemed to move in slow motion. My senses continue to bombard me with information. There were the individual heartbeats of the humans we passed, and the complex layers of scents.

As we approached the private elevator, I glanced back one last time. Layla was standing by the bar, her posture perfect, her expression professionally neutral. But her eyes. They followed our movement with an intensity that confirmed my suspicions. When she saw me watching her, she spun around, but not before I caught something in her gaze.

Fear. Genuine fear.

And in that moment, I knew without a doubt that I was right. I wasn’t sure if I should call it women’s intuition or vampire intuition, but I peeped game. And that bitch was cooked.

After we got off the elevator, we walked down the hall of red walls. Who the hell picked red paint? Harlen knocked on Zand’s office door with a distinctive tap. Zand opened the door, and I wondered how he knew we were coming. He ushered us inside and we both sat in front of his desk.

Zand’s office felt like a different world compared to the pulsing club below. The thick walls muffled the bass from the dance floor. The modern décor mixed with antique furniture exuded the future fused with history. Zand looked over his desk at

us.

“Hello Morgan.” He spoke slowly.

“Hey Zand.” I spoke before Harlen can speak. I had a newfound vampire confidence propelling me. “There’s a traitor in The Castle.” I announced, with the words tumbling out before I could edit them.

“A traitor?”

“Uh-huh, and I think it’s Layla.”

The declaration landed in the room like a pipe bomb. Zand’s expression shifted from bland to curiosity. He stapled his fingers together as he gracefully leaned back in his leather chair.

“That’s quite an accusation.” He finally said with a measured tone. “Especially from someone who’s been a vampire for less than a week.”

The dismissal stung me more than I was ready for. “I know what I saw. She’s been watching me and Coco in the VIP section all night. She’s been acting weird since Chanel left. Someone mentioned Chanel’s name and Layla started texting somebody.”

Harlen moved to stand beside me. “Morgan’s convinced something’s off. I figured you’d want to know, given, recent events.”

Zand’s glare moved between us. “Layla has been with me for four years. She helped build The Castle from nothing into what it is today. I trust her implicitly.”

“Implicitly?” I wasn’t trying to mock him, but throwing that word around, was a bit much. “You used to trust Teresa. You married her.” I countered, crossing my arms in front of me. “And look how that turned out.”

A flash of annoyance crossed Zand’s face, and it was gone in an instant. “Teresa is a

different matter entirely.”

“Is she?” I took a step closer to his desk. “Because from where I’m standing, it looks like history repeating itself. Someone close to you, someone you trust, betraying you.”

“Morgan.” Harlen warned, placing a hand on my arm that I immediately brushed off.

My voice grew stronger. “Something’s wrong with Layla. The way she watches me, the secretive texting—it all adds up to something.”

Zand stood from his chair. He circled around his desk and stood directly in front of me. I had to step back to give him space. Zand looked down at me.

“Do you have proof of these accusations? Concrete evidence that Layla is communicating with our enemies?”

I hesitated. “No, not concrete proof. But I have instincts?”

“Instincts are unreliable, especially for new vampires.” Zand interrupted. He turned away to face the security monitors. “Your senses are heightened, but your ability to interpret what they’re telling you is still developing.”

My hands clenched into fists at my sides. “So, you’re just dismissing me? Just like that?”

“I’m being cautious.” He corrected, his tone cooling further. “Layla has proven her loyalty countless times.”

Harlen shuffled uncomfortably beside me. “Maybe we should keep an eye on her? Just to be sure?” I appreciated him pleading my case.

But Zand was already shaking his head. “I don’t have time for witch hunts based on paranoia.”

Something inside me snapped. “This isn’t paranoia. This is women’s intuition. It’s like knowing your man is cheating before you have the proof.” Zand glared at me. “And maybe if you had some degree of intuition, you would’ve been a better judge of character when you turned Teresa and married her. You were supposed to fuck her, not wife her.”

The room went deadly still. Harlen inhaled beside me. I immediately regretted my words, but I couldn’t take them back. To my surprise, Zand didn’t lash out. Instead, a small, appreciative smile curved in his lips.

“You have fire.” He acknowledged. “That’s good. You’ll need it.” He took a step back, considering me with new interest. “But passion alone isn’t enough to make these accusations true.”

“Then let me ask you something.” I said, seizing the opening.

“Ask.” He ordered.

“Did Layla know about your condo in Cheboygan? The place where Teresa took me out?”

A subtle change came over Zand’s face. There was a tightening around the eyes. “Why do you ask?”

“Because if she knew about it, and Teresa found me and Harlen there, the connection seems pretty obvious to me.” I held his gaze, refusing to back down. “Did she know?”

Zand turned away. He paced toward the windows that overlook the dance floor below. For several long moments, he said nothing, and I wondered if I've pushed too far.

“Layla didn't just know about the property.” He finally said. His voice was so low I might not have heard it without vampire hearing. “She purchased it for me. Set up the LLC that holds the deed. Handled all the paperwork.”

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Harlen stepped forward, suddenly alert and hopefully ready to back me up again. “Wait, are you serious? She had complete knowledge of the property’s location?”

“Yes.” Zand turned back to face us. “She was one of only three people who knew about it outside of this room.”

“And did she know you were taking me there?” I pressed, feeling the momentum shifting.

“Not at first. She thought I was taking Chanel there. I changed my mind and placed you and Harlen there instead. That location was always an option very early on.” The words fell from his lips. “Layla arranged for the caretaker to stock the kitchen before your arrival. I knew you would need human food.”

I could almost see Zand’s mind working, reassessing conversations, meetings, casual interactions that might have revealed more than intended.

“It could still be coincidence.” Harlen half-heartedly offered, and I wanted to crack him over the head.

“One coincidence is happenstance. Two is concerning.” Zand’s hand moved to his phone. “Three would be an enemy action.”

He pressed a button on his desk phone. “Natasha. Come.”

“King.” She answered him with one word. When did people start calling him King?

“I need you in my office. And bring Layla with you. Tell her it’s about an upcoming event. Use the private elevator.” He disconnected without waiting for a response.

The satisfaction of being taken seriously mingled with my growing anxiety about what might happen next. I’ve started something now, something that couldn’t be stopped.

“What if I’m wrong?” I whispered to my maker.

“Then we’ll know soon enough.” He responded quietly. “But if you’re right...”

Zand interrupted our side conversation. “If Morgan is right, then Layla has been feeding information to Teresa. Information that led to Morgan’s death. Information that puts my fiancée in danger.” He looked directly at me. “If you’re right, Layla will be dealt with.”

Zand’s words should have horrified me. A week ago, they would have. But now, with vampire instincts coursing through my body, I felt a dark satisfaction. Justice was coming, one way or another. If Layla had a hand in my death, I gave zero fucks about her life.

“I understand.” I said. I wanted him to know that I was a team player.

Zand moved back behind his desk. “Good. Because in my world, betrayal has only one sentence.” He opened a drawer, removing his Crip-o-Glock and placing it on the desk’s surface. “And it’s always the same.”

We settled in to wait for Natasha to arrive with Layla. My accusation had set things in motion. I was going to look like a crazy person or a valuable asset to my new family. It was vindication or embarrassment. Deep down in my new vampire core, I knew which outcome we were about to face. I didn’t know why, but I’d never been

more certain of anything in my life—or my death.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MORGAN

The knock on the office door cut through the silence like a blade. There were three precise taps. Zand called for them to enter, his voice deceptively casual as he slipped the Cripso Glock into his desk drawer and out of immediate sight.

I retreated to a corner of Zand's office. I positioned myself where I could observe everything without being the focus of attention. Harlen took a seat on a couch that was away from Zand's desk, but closer to him than me.

Natasha ushered Layla into the room. What struck me about the blonde PR manager was how she appeared. Her posture was impeccable. Facial expression was professionally pleasant. Her sleek, designer black dress was immaculate. You'd never guess she was the reason I died on a Michigan sidewalk not long ago. But I guessed it.

"You wanted to see me about an upcoming event?" Layla asked, her accent fading slightly as she addressed Zand.

Her eyes briefly perused Harlen and then me. From my corner, I eyeballed her. I saw concern crossing her European features. Then her professional mask slid back into place.

"Please, sit down." Zand motioned to the chair across from his desk, the one I had vacated seconds ago.

Zand's voice carried a practiced and patient charm he used with his employees. He

used it with me. Did that mean I was an employee now? I knew he was in charge of us vampires, but was he my boss?

Natasha didn't leave the office. She positioned herself near the door. Her stance was casual, like she wasn't blocking the exit when she was, in fact, blocking the exit.

Layla settled back into the chair. She crossed her long legs. "Mr. Valentine, is something wrong? The club seems to be running smoothly tonight."

"Actually, I wanted to discuss some security concerns." Zand began. He leaned forward with his elbows on the desk. "Information has been leaking from The Castle. Very sensitive information."

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I watched Layla carefully. I had seen one too many episodes of Law & Order: SVU and I really thought I was Olivia Benson. My vampire senses were picking up on the subtle changes in her body. She had the quickening heartbeat. I heard a grinding of her teeth. Even her fingers inside her fists were moving in her lap.

“That’s concerning.” She responded. “Do you have any idea who might be responsible?”

Zand smiled a smile like Nino Brown. “I believe I do.” He leaned back, studying her with a predatory focus. “Your phone, Layla. I’d like to see it.”

The request hung in the air. It was an innocent request on the surface, but it was loaded with accusations. Layla’s heartbeat, which I could now hear as clearly as if I had my ear against her chest, was accelerated and erratic.

“My phone?” She forced a laugh that exposed some of her teeth. “Why would you need to see my phone?”

“Indulge me.” Zand extended his hand across the desk.

Layla hesitated for a second before slowly reaching into her dress pocket. She withdrew her cell phone. She held it for a moment. Her hand shook as she lifted it above the desk. “I don’t understand what this is about.”

“Then let me be more direct.” Zand’s voice hardened. “You’ve been seen texting immediately after receiving information about Chanel’s whereabouts. You’ve been observed watching the VIP section with unusual interest. And you’re one of only

three people who knew about the Cheboygan property where Teresa Protenza attacked Morgan.”

The blood drained from Layla’s face, making her look even paler than a typical vampire. “That’s, that’s absurd. I’ve been loyal to you for all the years I’ve been in your service.”

“Unlock the phone.” Zand commanded. His hand was still extended toward her.

Layla clutched the device tighter. “This is my personal phone. It has private conversations.”

“Which you wouldn’t mind your King seeing if you have nothing to hide,” Harlen interjected from where he sat on the couch.

Layla’s deep blue eyes darted to each of us. She was calculating her options. “I refuse.” She let out a cutesy giggle. “This is invasive and insulting. I have real work to do.” She started to rise from her chair. “If you don’t trust me after all these years, perhaps I should tender my resignation.” Layla stood tall and squared her shoulders.

Natasha moved with blinding speed. Her hand clamped down on Layla’s shoulder and forced her back into the chair with such force that the chair’s legs screeched on the floor. “That wasn’t a request.” Natasha’s Russian accent popped out on full blast.

Genuine fear flashed across Layla’s face now. “You can’t do this. I have rights?—”

“Quiet.” Zand cut her off. He gave a single nod to Natasha. “Get the passcode.”

What happened next unfolded with a methodical precision that chilled me to my core. From somewhere, Natasha produced a thin blade no longer than my index finger. The sharpness of the blade gleamed in the light. Natasha grabbed the cell phone from

Layla's other hand and tossed it across the desk to Zand, and he caught it. If I would've blinked, I would've missed it. In one fluid motion, Natasha grabbed Layla's left arm and plunged the blade across her forearm in a deep, precise cut. It was like she was cutting a steak instead of a person. But she wasn't a person Layla was a vampire.

Layla's screams were muffled by Natasha's other hand pressed firmly over her mouth. Blood gushed from the cut like a water fountain. The bright candy apple red against Layla's pale skin was shocking even to my eyes. The scent of the blood hit me like a karate kick. The blood was bright, rich, and coppery intoxicating. Not as fragrant as human blood, but still enticing. My fangs extended involuntarily. Could we drink vampire blood? I didn't know. I struggled against the primal hunger that surged through me. I couldn't stop watching and I noticed her arm wasn't healing. The blood wasn't stopping, clotting, or looking any less delightful.

"The passcode." Natasha said calmly, as if asking about the weather. "Six digits, I believe."

Layla shook her head violently. Natasha sighed, almost disappointed, and made another cut, parallel to the first. Blood ran even more freely now, dripping onto the expensive rug below.

I should've been horrified. A week ago, I would have been. But something in me, the new, rapacious part, watched with cold fascination instead. This was the justice I'd been craving since I woke up changed.

"Eight-four-sev—" Layla gasped when Natasha grabbed her hair and positioned the blade for a third cut. "Please, stop."

Zand turned the phone screen around and placed it in front of Layla's face. The screen opened without the aid of a passcode. What the hell? If they knew her face

could open the phone, why did they carve her arm up and damn near have her bled out on the floor?

Zand scrolled through the phone. His expression didn't give anything away. With each swipe of his finger, I stood frozen in place. Natasha had a firm grip on Layla's head and Harlen sat with his arms rested on his knees. The room fell silent except for Layla's ragged breathing. We all were waiting for confirmation.

"You've been texting with Teresa." Zand finally said. "There is detailed information about Chanel's schedule dating back. Details about my movements. About my security team." He turned the phone so we can all see the screen. It was filled with incriminating messages. She didn't have the sense god gave a chicken. Cause why didn't she delete the messages all the way off the phone?

"Zand." Layla whimpered out his name.

"Zand." He repeated.

"My King." Layla begged.

There it was again. When did we start calling him King? Were the other vampires already calling him that and I didn't know about it?

"You told her about my Cheboygan condo. You gave her the address, the security codes." Zand admonished.

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Layla slumped in the chair. She looked like she was dying. What kind of blade did Natasha use on her?

“Why?!” Zand yelled across the desk.

“Teresa. Sh, sh, she has my boyfriend.” She wailed. “My human boyfriend. She said she’d kill him slowly if I didn’t help her.”

“And you didn’t come to me?” Zand asked. His voice was dangerously soft. “You chose to betray me rather than ask for help?”

“You don’t understand.” Layla pleaded. “She sent me his finger. His actual finger in a box. She said she would cut off his, his, his.” She didn’t finish, but we knew what she was talking about. “What was I supposed to do?”

Despite myself, I felt a crumb of sympathy for her dumbass. Not enough to forgive, but enough to understand the impossible choice she faced. Love made us vulnerable. It made us do terrible things to protect the ones we cared about.

“You should have trusted me.” Zand said, rising from his chair. “Instead of conspiring with my enemy.”

He opened the drawer and removed his Crip-o-Glock. Zand’s movements were so casual it took a moment for Layla to register what was happening. When she does, her eyes widened with terror.

“Please, Alexander, please.” She begged while struggling against Natasha’s iron grip.

“You don’t have to do this. I can make this right. I can feed her false information. I can help you trap her.”

Zand strolled around his desk until he stood directly in front of her. “You already helped trap someone.” He said with his monotone voice flat. “You helped Teresa kill Morgan. You helped her threaten my fiancée.”

The gun rose in his hand. He aimed it at Layla’s chest.

“My King, I had no choice.” She mumbled the words of her closing argument.

“There’s always a choice.” Zand replied like a real mafioso. “You made yours, and now, I’m making mine.”

The gunshot was almost silent. This was the special serum gun. I had never seen it used before. The bullet hit Layla in the center of her chest. Her body instantly went rigid. Her eyes were still open wide with surprise. Natasha released Layla’s hair, and her body slumped forward. She was paralyzed, but conscious. The blood from her cuts was still pooling beneath her chair.

“I’m going to put in a call to Virgil at the crematorium.” Zand said, turning to Harlen. “Take her there and make sure she burns.”

Harlen nodded twice. He moved forward to grab Layla’s rigid body.

“Wait.” Natasha said, and we all looked at her. “I will give you a body bag, so you won’t make a blood trail down the hall and in the elevator.”

Ah, so, Natasha just has body bags lying around available. Harlen stopped advancing toward Layla. Swiftly, Natasha darted out of Zand’s office.

“Morgan Hayes, look at you.” Zand’s words made me smile. “And here I thought you were going to just sit around and cry about being a vampire.”

“My girl would never do that. She’s too strong.” Harlen dispensed some praise on me.

“She is something.”

“I’ve accepted that I’m a vampire.” I told Zand.

“Good. I will give you all the credit. It was you, the new vampire version of you, that solved this problem for me. And for that, I thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Why did I want to say ‘my king’ just to be funny? “Are you really going to burn Layla?”

“I am going to tell my brother to do it.” He clarified.

“I want to go with him.” I heard myself say it as I stepped forward from my corner.

Zand assessed me. “Are you sure? Witnessing an execution is one thing. Participating is another.”

My gaze homed in on Layla’s face. She was still frozen in an expression of shock. She betrayed us all because she was trying to save someone she loved. I understood her choice, but I couldn’t forgive it. Her actions led to my death. Her betrayal threatened Chanel. In the brutal mathematics of vampire justice, her fate was sealed the moment she looked at me sideways and crazy.

“I’m sure.” I said with a voice more eager than even I expected. “Even though I have accepted the new me. She’s the reason I’m like this now. I want to see it through to

the end.”

Zand pressed his lips together and nodded his approval. “Then go with Harlen. Learn what it looks like when someone betrays us.”

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He didn't have to add that last part, but I got it. He was the leader and all that jazz.

Natasha returned with a black bag big enough to fit a human body, or a vampire body. I stood a few feet away when Harlen lifted and placed Layla's body into the bag that Natasha had placed on the floor. Harlen stuffed her loose limbs inside and Natasha zipped the bag up.

Harlen picked the bag up from the floor and hoisted Layla's weight over his shoulder.

"Let's go." Harlen ordered.

"Use the service elevator. It will take you directly to the alley. Viktor pulled your car around."

I followed Halen toward the door. I felt Zand's and Natasha's eyes on my back of my head. This was a test, I realized. A test of my commitment to this new life. A test to the harsh realities of vampire existence. My willingness to participate in Layla's execution marked my true entry into their world.

I was in a daze and didn't even notice how I got down the hall. The elevator doors closed behind us, sealing Harlen, me, and Layla's paralyzed form in the small space. I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the polished metal with my pale skin and bright gray eyes. I barely recognized myself.

But perhaps that was appropriate. After all, the woman I was had died on a Michigan sidewalk. The creature that stared back at me now was something else completely. I was harder, colder, and gradually becoming comfortable being a vampire.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ZAND

Morning came faster than I planned. I stood in my office staring down at the ancient Persian rug where Layla's blood stained the fibers hours before. I traced my finger along the polished edge of my desk.

The aftermath of Layla's execution left a lingering energy in the space. It wasn't a feeling of guilt, but something adjacent to it. There was a sense of finality and the consequences of it. I had my people looking for Layla's one finger missing boyfriend. If he's found, I didn't know if I should kill him because he knew too much. Or keep him around to commemorate the late Layla Balke. His death just seemed easier. If I'm lucky, he was already dead, and I didn't have to decide either way.

I picked up my phone and scrolled to Teresa's contact, saved simply as "1" from Marisol's phone. It was time to get this over with. I was on a hot streak of death and destruction, and I didn't want to lose momentum.

The phone rang three times before she answered. Her voice carried a false sweetness I once found charming so many years ago. "Alexander," she hummed, using my full name like a weapon. "Calling to accept my generous offer?"

"In a manner of speaking." I replied, purposely impersonal in my tone. "But first, I thought you should know. Layla won't be sending you any more updates about my movements."

The silence that followed was brief but revealing. Did Teresa really believe deep down that she was more clever than me? Did she not account for her plans falling apart?

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She finally said.

“Don’t insult my intelligence.” I leaned back in my chair. “Layla confessed everything before her execution. The information she fed you about Chanel. About Cheboygan. About my security protocols.”

“Execution?” Teresa’s voice raised an octave, straining from shock that didn’t quite ring true. “You killed Layla? After four years of loyal service?”

“Loyal?” I laughed softly. “That’s an interesting way to describe someone who was reporting to my enemy.”

“Enemy, how torrid.”

“How accurate.” I responded.

“She was trying to protect someone she loved.” Teresa snapped, abandoning the pretense. Her words were designed to cut, to reopen old wounds from our shared past. Instead, they washed over me like tepid water.

“Yes. Something you wouldn’t understand. Absolutely no one loves you. Layla chose poorly. As did you, when you targeted Chanel.”

Teresa sighed, a theatrical sound. “This is becoming tedious, Zandy. Are we going to eliminate each other’s allies one by one? Soon there will be no one left standing but us.”

“That’s rather the point, isn’t it?”

“Perhaps it’s time to end this.” She suggested. Her voice softened into something that might be mistaken for sincerity. “A truce. Just you and me, face to face. No

violence.”

I said nothing, letting the silence stretch between us. We both know what “no violence” means in Teresa’s lexicon. It was a promise made to be broken at the first chance she got.

“Bring the nurse.” She added. “I can apologize to the both of you and leave this god forsaken town.”

“Bring the nurse.” I repeated. “You’re in no position to make demands.” I reminded her, though we both knew I’d agree.

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This dance had been building to a crescendo since she first threatened Chanel, since she orchestrated Morgan's death, and since she aligned herself with Marisol Lopez.

Teresa laughed when there was nothing to laugh about. "You took Marisol from me. I've taken something from you too. I want closure."

"Fuck you. Fuck closure."

"You asshole. You will be sorry. You got to see what I've done."

A chill spread across my skin. "What else have you done?"

"Nothing yet." She said, too quickly. "But I have plans that will make burning Marisol look like a child's tantrum."

"Fine. Where?" I asked, cutting through her threats. "Where do you want to meet?"

There was a pause. I could almost see her smile spreading, victorious and cruel. "Let's meet by the Lakefront."

"Where?"

"Belmont Harbor."

My jaw tightened unwillingly. Of course, she would choose that spot. It was a desolate stretch of Lake Michigan's shoreline where I disposed of Lonzo Lopez's body months ago. The symbolism wasn't subtle. She was telling me she knew what

I'd done. I'm sure her spy, Layla told her. How did Layla know? It was clear there were gossipers in my ranks.

"On Recreation but not the Marina. After two." Her voice was different now, businesslike. The negotiations were over. "Just you, the nurse. And as a show of good faith, no more than three of your people. I'll bring the same. I don't want you to think this is an ambush."

"An Ambush." I refrained from laughing. "I'll be there." I confirmed, knowing even as I spoke that we were both lying.

"Oh, and Zand?" Her voice turned saccharine again. "Don't be late."

The line went dead. I set the phone down. Teresa's choice of location wasn't random. She was telling me she knew about Lonzo. But how much did she know? Did she know I ended his miserable existence the night he came for Chanel at her apartment? Layla did me a true disservice. If I could kill her all over again, I would.

The door to my office opened, and I looked up to see Natasha entering. Her face was professionally blank, as always. I loved that about her. Behind her were Harlen and Morgan, both wearing a new change of clothes. Their eyes were bright with the particular satisfaction that came from executing a traitor.

"It's done." Harlen reported unnecessarily. He had proven to me that he could get the job done.

"Good." I rose from my chair, my decision already made. "We're meeting Teresa tonight at 2 AM."

Natasha's posture shifted subtly. "Where?"

“The Lopez disposal site. Due to our traitor Layla, Teresa knows where I dumped his body.”

“Shit! She told her everything.” Natasha raged.

“Teresa believes I’m bringing only three vampires with me. Fuck her. I want everyone there—you, Donté, Josh, Marco, thebest of our security team. And I want everyone armed with Cripso Glocks.”

Morgan stepped forward. She was leaning into her new role in intel. “You’re walking into a trap.” She volunteered.

“Of course I am,” I agreed. “And so is she.”

Harlen grinned. “This ends tonight, then.”

“It does.” I confirmed. “One way or another. I’m over this bullshit.”

“We should position people early.” Natasha suggested, already strategizing. “I can have snipers in place by midnight.”

“Make it happen.” I told her. “I want every advantage.”

As they began discussing tactical positions and weapon distribution. I sensed a presence at the door. I turned to find Chanel standing in the threshold. She looked well rested and refreshed. I should’ve been home a long time ago. I hadn’t realized it was late morning.

“You’re going after Teresa.” She said, not asking. She heard enough of our conversation to piece it together.

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“Yes.” I admitted, knowing better than to lie to her. Not anymore. Not after everything we’ve been through.

“I’m coming with you.” Her voice was calm. My eyes glanced at the black diamond on her finger. It was the physical manifestation of our commitment to each other.

Harlen and Morgan exchanged glances. They expected me to refuse. Natasha’s face remained impassive, but I caught the slight lift of her eyebrow. Approval, perhaps, or surprise at Chanel’s boldness.

“I know it’s what Teresa wants. She wants me there.”

“She does.”

Chanel stepped fully into the room, closing the door behind her. “That’s why I have to go. I’m tired of being the target, the prize, the victim. This is my fight, too.”

I watched her face. I was searching for fear or martyrdom. I found only determination. She was right, of course. This battle began because of Teresa’s obsession with destroying what I loved. Chanel had earned her place at the table.

“Then we prepare together.” I decided, extending my hand to her. “All of us.”

As Chanel’s warm fingers intertwined with mine, daylight was here now. After sundown, the plan to meet with my nemesis would be only a few hours away. Soon Teresa would no longer threaten what’s mine. Soon my queen would stand beside me without fear. Soon there would be vampire blood spilled in the Chicago streets.

I went back to the loft with Chanel to get a few hours of sleep. I needed time to refresh. I needed to be in the best shape and headspace for the showdown at Belmont Harbor. I allowed Natasha to do all the strategic planning. She would take care of the logistics of our upcoming confrontation. A few of my people were armed with Crip Glocks, and Natasha had added a few more guns to my security staff. They were already trained because Natasha was always one step ahead.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ZAND

We went back to the loft so Chanel and I could get a few hours of sleep. I needed time to refresh. I needed to be in the best shape and headspace for the showdown at Belmont Harbor.

We stepped off the elevator and entered the living room. Chanel walked toward the kitchen. She glanced over her shoulder

“Do you need a drink? I’m getting water.”

“No, I’m good.” I followed her into the kitchen. She placed her purse on the kitchen island.

“You know, you don’t have to put on a brave face. If you want to stay here tonight you can. You don’t have to come with us tonight.”

“No. I want to go with you.” Chanel opened the cabinet reached in and grabbed a tall empty glass. “I want to see her. I want her to see me.”

“I’m not going to let her get to you.” I walked away and leaned against the island.

“With you is the safest place for me.” She said and it was true. No one would protect her the way I would.

I couldn’t argue with that. “I hope she shows up.”

“She will.” Chanel walked to the refrigerator and placed the glass at the door. She pushed the lever for the water to pour into her glass.

“How do you know?”

“She’s a vampire, but she’s like any other woman. She views me as competition. She won’t miss a chance to see me up close. She wants to confront me. She’ll be there.” Chanel raised the glass to her lips and took a sip of the water.

“If I haven’t said it before I’m sorry.”

“Sorry. What for?”

“I’m sorry I brought her into your life. My ex, I’m sorry she’s here doing all these things to you, to us. I’m sorry she killed all those women. I’m sorry she murdered Morgan. I’m just sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking. I never thought she would take it this far. You don’t deserve any of this.”

“You don’t have to apologize for her. You just promise to kill her.”

“I will kill her.” I assured Chanel. Killing Teresa was my top priority.

“You used to love her, right? You married her.”

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“I did.” And I hated myself for it.

“And she’s the reason you left California?”

I opted, to be as honest as possible. “Yes, I tried to stay there and coexist, but my presence put people in danger.”

“What’s that mean?” Chanel took another drink of water from her glass.

“Teresa killed a woman I went on two dates with. An innocent woman I barely knew. A woman died only because she casually knew me. I had to leave. I knew I would never forgive her, so I left L.A. I disappeared. I moved somewhere I knew she wouldn’t look for me. It took her five years to find me here in Chicago.”

“Five years is a long time to disappear.” Chanel placed her glass down on the kitchen island.

“It is. I refuse to believe she’s been pining away for me after all this time. I don’t understand her motivation for coming here, staying here and then murdering all those innocent women. Why did she turn Marisol? After all the things she’s done, it feels like I never knew her.”

“That was the same feeling I had with Lonzo. I thought I knew him, and I didn’t. He was a monster.”

Chanel reached for her purse and accidentally knocked her water glass off the edge of the island. The glass collided with the floor, sending broken pieces of glass in all

directions.

I instinctively bent to clean it up. Chanel knelt too. I grabbed a large shard of glass. I didn't even feel it pierce my finger. I only noticed it when I felt Chanel's eyes on me.

"Oh, my god. You're bleeding."

My eyes peered down to my finger, and she was right. I was bleeding. I stood when Chanel did. She reached out and grabbed my hand, inspecting the cut on my index finger. Before I could tell her, it will heal in under a minute, she put my finger in her mouth to stop the bleeding.

It took less than two seconds before she realized what she was doing. I could see the panic spread across her face.

She took a step back, and I caught her by the wrist. Be careful. Broken glass." I warned.

"Oh." There was still alarm altering her features.

"Hey, what's wrong?"

"I tasted your blood. I mean, drank it. I don't know. What's that mean? What's that mean?" She frantically asked.

I took her other wrist in my hand. "Chanel, it doesn't mean anything. That's not how it works."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. You're shaking. Babe, you're not going to be a vampire. You could

drink a gallon of my blood, and it wouldn't make the difference."

I took a step over the broken glass that was on the floor. I released her wrists and took Chanel's hand. I led her out of the kitchen and into the living room. I pulled her to sit beside me.

"I'm sorry. I don't know why I freaked out."

"It's okay. My cut is healed. You're still human. All is right with the world."

Chanel chuckled, but I could see she was still unnerved.

"I have to work on my reflexes." I told her. "I didn't know you were going to put my finger in your mouth." I tried to make light of the situation.

"I didn't know I was going to do that. I can't believe I put your bloody finger in my mouth."

"What did it taste like?" I asked.

"I don't know. It was so quick." Chanel's panic changed into curiosity. "Does blood turn you on? Or is it just food for survival?"

"Your blood turns me on." I licked my lips, reminiscing on its rich flavor. "A stranger's blood would just be nourishment. The blood bags are just nourishment."

"My blood turns you on," she said, not as a question but as a diagnosis, an unwrapping of a secret I'd never meant to show her.

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I couldn't deny her. She studied my face, hunting for any tell that might let her dismiss her next words as fantasy. When she found none, her voice dropped low. "I want to taste it again."

I blinked. "Taste it?"

"Your blood."

She slid closer to me on the couch.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Her distress was gone and replaced with interest. I grabbed her under her arms and scooped her up into my lap. I pushed her back so her head could rest on a pillow. Her pretty brown eyes were focused on me, trusting me and begging me to guide her.

I unbuttoned her blouse slowly, revealing her lacy bra underneath. She moaned as I teased her through the fabric, causing her nipples to harden. I then reached for her zipper and lowered her skirt down her legs. I discarded it on the floor, exposing her black lace panties that left nothing to my imagination. My pants were growing tighter by the second.

Chanel's hand slid up the length of my arm, slow and deliberate, as if she was testing the reality of me.

“Are you sure?” I asked. It wasn’t like me to ask for consent so many times, but this was Chanel. I only wanted to make her comfortable.

She shook her head yes, and I felt the bulge in my pants become increasingly more unbearable.

As she watched me, I let my fangs slowly descend from my gums. Lifting my hand to my mouth, I let the sharp point stab at the tip of my finger. When the blood began to pool on my skin, I slipped my finger into Chanel’s mouth.

I watched her take my finger into her mouth and suck it like she sucked my cock. I was aroused. I could feel the glow of my eyes and the hunger in my throat.

Our lips crashed together in a kiss, tongues tangling and wrestling for dominance as we explored every inch of each other’s mouths. Her hands raked through my hair while I ferociously gripped her thigh, desperate to bring her even closer.

I tasted my own blood on her tongue. It made me crave the taste of her blood. Chanel took control, kissing me fiercely as she unbuckled my belt and unzipped my pants. Her warm hand wrapped around my erection through my boxers, stroking me through the fabric. I groaned in pleasure, unable to contain myself any longer. She teased me with her tongue, running it along my jawline as I leaned over her.

I couldn’t take it anymore. I lifted her off my lap and slip from underneath her. I stood to remove my shirt, shoes and pants. I stood above her body as she laid across the couch. With my solid cock pointed at her, I watched her shimmy out of her panties and her open blouse. The tangy aroma of her shaved pussy traveled to my nose and called to me.

I slowly climbed down on top of her, spreading her legs apart with one hand. With the other, I slid my fingers into her pussy, finding that she was already soaking wet

for me. I teased her opening before slipping a finger inside her, causing her to moan loudly. I added another finger, thrusting them in and out in time with her moans.

Chanel rocked her hips against my hand, urging me on faster and faster. I obliged, picking up the pace as I stared into her eyes, communicating my desire for more. With one swift motion, I removed my fingers. I felt her hand reach between us and seize my cock. She guided me inside of her wet honey pot.

We both moaned in unison as our bodies connected. I began to move slowly at first, but soon picked up speed as Chanel wrapped her legs around my waist, urging me deeper inside of her core. I slowly dove into the deepest parts of her ocean. I moved my hips in controlled waves. I wanted to savor the current and get lost in her kitty pool.

Reaching up, I pulled her bra down, and her breasts spilled out from their lacy confines. My rough hands pinched at her nipples, sending shockwaves of pleasure coursing through her body as I leaned down to take one erect nipple into my mouth, sucking hard while teasing the other with my thumb.

“Fuck,” she managed to cry out between gasps for air. “Zand... please.” She arched into me helplessly as I continued to torment both nipples with my teeth and fingers until she was begging for release.

With a devilish grin, I asked. “Please, what?”

“Bite me.” She begged as I looked into her insistent eyes.

Her wish was my command. I exposed my fangs and watched her body shiver with anticipation of what was to come. Her creamy, firm mounds called to me. The breast meat looked so tender, and I couldn’t resist sinking my fangs into the fatty part above her left nipple. I cupped her supple pillow in my palm. I impelled my fangs down into

the skin that was flushed with desire underneath me. The rush of delicious blood billowed on the surface of her skin, and I licked it up like a fiend. I squeezed her breast to release more of her bloody meth out for me to consume and get high off.

Her blood was my heaven, and, like an angel, I flew through the clouds when I consumed it. I took some of her blood into my mouth and held it there. I moved up her body to catch her eyes staring into mine. I held to blood in my mouth as I rocked my cock inside her in perfect rhythm.

Chanel grabbed my hair and tried to forcefully pull me down into a kiss. She was completely unaware that I held her crimson delights in my mouth. This time, she would either scream in fear or moan in pleasure when I released her own blood into her mouth. I let her pull me to her lips. As our lips touched, I released a little of the blood on her lips.

At first, she didn't know it was blood because she had no reaction, but then I let all the liquid go into her mouth and spill down her cheeks and chin. I didn't give her the opportunity to panic. I plunged my tongue into her mouth and kissed her deeply. I let her choke on the mixture of my tongue and the blood. I grabbed her neck and applied enough pressure to remind her that I was a creature of the night. After tonight, she would never forget that I was a vampire.

Chanel's hands left my hair and roamed to my shoulders. She was digging her nails into my skin. My controlled thrusts were growing more fervent. I grabbed her hips and roughly slammed into her walls. Each thrust was sending waves of pleasure throughout my entire being! I primal need to fuck her, love her and consume her. Our connection was so raw and intense that nothing had ever compared to it in all the decades of my existence.

As I pounded harder, she gripped me tightly. Our bodies slapped together in rhythm, creating a symphony of lust and longing.

My hand gripped the back of her hair and pushed her possessively into my mouth.

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I pulled back from the kiss to look at her and make sure she was okay. I couldn't assess the damage through all the blood smeared on her face.

"You like that?" I growled lowly, still thrusting into her but at a more sensual pace.

"Yes..." she whimpered. "I love it."

"I love you."

"Ohhh!!!" she moaned, and her body convulsed. I had hit a sweet spot without even trying to, and her body arched off the couch.

"Do you want to come?" I asked, and she squeezed her muscles around my cock and almost knocked me off the beat.

"Yes." she moaned, and turned her head away from me.

"Look at me."

She turned back to gaze into my eyes.

"Tell me you will never leave me."

"I will never, oh, never, leave you." She hummed.

I was well aware that I was using my cock to coerce her into saying things, but I was making her take an oath whether she understood the severity of it or not. She could

never leave me. The ring was a symbol of human matrimony, but the blood was a symbol of our vampire marriage. She had consumed my blood, and we were already married under vampire law.

“Tell me this is forever.” I flashed my eyes at her and thrust so deeply the couch moved across the floor.

“It’s forever.” She moaned. “Zand please.”

“Please what?”

“Stop torturing me.”

“You want to come?”

“Yes.” She begged.

“Make me. Make you come.” I don’t know why I was being so defiant. I loved this woman and would do anything for her. She just made me feel so many emotions that it reminded me of being human. I tried to fight against it, but she was winning. I wasn’t human. I was a vampire, and I had to remind myself by fucking with her sometimes. It was childish, but the only way I could remind myself that I was a vampire and destined to be king.

Chanel glared at me with her blood-stained face, and something in her eyes changed. My reflexes were off again because she slapped me clear across my cheek. I wasn’t expecting it. It didn’t hurt, but it did startle me. I stopped moving inside her warm sugar walls.

“Make me come!” She wailed as I stiffened and stared down at her.

With a balled fist, she punched me in my jaw. What the fuck! I didn't move as she socked me again on the other side of my face. She hit me again and my cock took notice. The violence ignited me. I didn't know who this version of Chanel was, but I loved her, too.

I seized both her wrists and pinned them above her head as she struggled to get out of my grip. I pulled my cock out just enough to illicit a tear from her eyes. She wanted to come, and I was going to make her explode. I was going to make her squirt her orgasm all over me.

I slammed down into her pussy, moving my hips at a vampiric speed. I could do even better what a vibrator, a dildo, and a rose could do. There was never any need for sex toys with me, and I was going to make sure my queen knew that explicitly.

I looked down at her, and her eyes were closed, and her mouth was open.

"Look at me!" I howled.

Her eyes popped open, and the intensity of our gaze caused tears to leak from the corners of her eyes. I would cry to, if it were possible.

The pounding never let up as I gave my true love what she desired. She needed the release, and I did too. The more I beat my body against her, the tighter she became. Her throbbing pussy was sending shockwaves through every part of my body. I felt an earth-shattering orgasm building from deep within me.

Her body convulsed uncontrollably underneath me as wave after wave crashed over us both. Just when I thought we couldn't get any closer, I felt her essence coat my cock and drown me before I slammed back inside her one last time.

We came together explosively. Our bodies were fused together with her sweat.

Panting heavily, we stayed locked together long after our bodies had stopped trembling. I was too exhausted to remove my cock from its home sweet home. I eased myself down on her body and shifted my weight to the back of the couch without removing my cock. I held her close and closed my eyes. The couch was ruined with blood and cum. I felt her fingertips comb through my hair, and I let her human heartbeat lull me to sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY

ZAND

The shore of Lake Michigan laid shrouded in fog. A ghostly veil that swallowed the beam of our headlights. The violent sounds of the crashing waves lapped against the rocky harbor. I stepped from the SUV. My hand automatically found the small of Chanel's back as she emerged from the truck beside me. Her warm body was a stark contrast to the chill that ravaged this isolated stretch of the shoreline.

This place held memories, violent ones. I was a pillar of nonviolence until Alonzo entered my life. His body was buried beneath the dark waters that stretched into invisibility and beyond. Somewhere out there, I had disposed of Lonzo Lopez. I thought the lake kept my secret, but Layla's loose lips made that a mistruth.

"Spread out." I instructed in a voice barely above a murmur. I knew my vampires could hear me clearly. "Marco, take the north side of the cliffs. Donte, south. Natasha, find high ground."

They moved with supernatural silence and disappeared into the fog like ghosts. Only Josh remained visible, positioning himself between our vehicles and the water. His large frame was a reassuring presence.

Harlen and Morgan took their positions closer to the shore. Three additional members of my security team were all vampires I befriended when I arrived in Chicago. These vampires established a perimeter that appeared hidden in plain sight.

“Stay close to me.” I muttered to Chanel and drew her against my side. She was dressed in black with her hair pulled back. We were all wearing dark colors.

“I’m not going anywhere.” She assured me.

My team and me, Chanel, plus three, moved toward the water’s edge. I thought having Morgan as one of my three people might rattle Teresa. She knew Harlen and Josh were my muscle. Teresa would probably see Morgan and Chanel and think I was at a disadvantage.

The fog swirled around our ankles, creating the illusion that we were walking through the clouds. Ahead, the lake stretched into utter darkness. The lake’s surface was visible only where our flashlights caught the fierce movement of waves.

I scanned the striking Chicago skyline, an oasis of tall buildings. Then, in the direction of Canada, I scanned the horizon. Beautiful. My vampire vision penetrated the fog. I watched for vehicles that entered the harbor and there were none. Nothing yet. Teresa wouldn’t arrive until the last possible moment. She had to make a grand entrance. It was a power play. It was a reminder that she thought she could force us to retreat simply by delaying.

“This is where you brought him?” Chanel asked while looking into the dark water.

I didn’t pretend to misunderstand. “Yes. Weighted down and taken out here where he wouldn’t be found.” The admission came easily. I’ve stopped hiding the darker aspects of my nature from her. “His body should have been unrecoverable.”

“Should have been?”

“Sometimes bodies raise to the surface in the springtime.”

My fingers tightened slightly on her waist. I had lied to her before. The truth was simpler. It might be more brutal, but Chanel was tougher than I knew. I would never apologize for keeping my future bride safe. I eliminated the threat he posed permanently. Lonzo asked for violence, and I was just better at my brand of violence.

The minutes ticked by slowly, but time waited for no one. The sky remained dark, and the stars and the moon gave us a bit of light. I could feel drama approaching like a pressure against my skin.

“There.” Harlen’s voice came from my right. He pointed toward the lake.

At first, I saw nothing. Then a shadow separated the darkness. A small motorboat cut through the fog. Its engine was muted to near silence. It approached slowly, deliberately, making no attempt at stealth now that we spotted it.

What the fuck? She showed up on water instead of land. If she isn’t careful, her little boat could crash into the rocks under the surface. I hoped to see her careen out of the vessel and into the cold lake.

“I count five figures.” Morgan reported, her new vampire vision serving her well. “Teresa at the front and three others I don’t recognize.”

Now Harlen was homed in and looking. “That’s the lady that drove the getaway car for Marisol. The other two are from Club Caliente Bailar.”

“Who?” I asked Harlen.

“The Mexican woman. I think the cousin. The other one was the tall male. Maybe an uncle?”

Morgan said. “I can’t believe the bitch only brought three people with her.”

“Don’t underestimate her.” I warned.

“Never. She’s the bitch that killed me.”

Chanel shifted beside me. She pressed closer into my side as the boat continued its approach. She squeezed my hand and then let my hand go.

“Hey.” I said, worried about her actions.

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“You need both hands to shoot this bitch.” She said, and she didn’t back away. My queen stood her ground beside me.

The boat emerged completely from the fog. It was close enough now that even human eyes could make out its occupants. Teresa stood at the bow, her platinum blonde hair whipping around her face in the breeze. She wore black. Behind her stood three vampires I didn’t recognize until I did. One of the women was familiar. She had helped Marisol attack Chanel back at the apartments. The one with the jet-black hair was new to me. The fifth figure that froze my blood, the man.

Lonzo Lopez stepped from behind Teresa and appeared at the center of the boat. His familiar face now had the unmistakable pallor of vampirism. His dark eyes, once merely cruel, now held the vacant glare of the undead. He stared directly at me, his lips curled in a smirk that revealed the points of fangs.

Beside me, Chanel gasped, audibly. Her body went rigid with shock. Her fingers dug into my arm with enough force to bruise a human.

“Zand.” She choked out my name. “That’s, that’s?—”

“Impossible.” I muttered, though the evidence was headed toward me. Lonzo Lopez, the man I personally killed and disposed of in this very lake. He lived. He existed, reanimated in vampire form. How?

The boat scraped against the rocky shore and came to a halt. Teresa leaped out onto a rock, followed by Lonzo, who made a show of it. He jumped in the air and landed smoothly next to Teresa. The other three vampires joined them on the shore.

“Surprise! Surprise!” Teresa greeted us. Her voice carried easily across the short distance that separated us. Her smile was triumphant. “You should see your face, Alexander. It’s almost as shocked as it was when you found me in bed with your father.”

I didn’t respond to her taunt. My eyes remained fixed on Lonzo, cataloging the evidence of his transformation. This bitch turned him and never gave anything away. I should’ve never tossed him in the lake. I should’ve burned him at the crematorium. It was a vital mistake, a miscalculation that I couldn’t change.

“How?” I finally asked, but I knew exactly how.

Teresa’s laugh rang out over the rocks and echoed over the water. “I saw you put Mr. Lopez in the truck of that old ugly Chevy. I followed you and fished him out when you left. Did you have to kill this man for that bitch?” She continued. “I had more than enough time to resurrect the dead. “Humans are surprisingly resilient when they have the right motivation.” She stroked Lonzo’s cheek like he was a pet pitbull. “And he had excellent motivation—revenge.”

The implications cascaded through my mind. She had been planning this betrayal longer than I realized. She was deranged and obsessed. I miscalculated her cunningness. I had to stay sharp in the moment and beat myself up later.

Lonzo came forward, his eyes fixed were not on me but on Chanel. “Hey, baby girl.” He said with a voice carrying the new timbre of vampirism. “Did you miss me?”

Chanel’s heartbeat spiked. “Fuck! You!”

“Whoa, Zand you kiss her potty mouth.” Teresa’s smile widened at the exchange. She took a step closer, and her twofemale vampire guards and one male fanned out behind her and Lonzo. They created a defensive formation that mirrored our own. The air

between us felt charged, like the moment before lightning struck. “Zand, did you lose your voice?”

“Never. We’ve talked too much.”

“Surprised to see your handiwork undone?” Teresa toyed with me and spread her arms as if presenting Lonzo as a gift. “You should be more thorough when disposing of bodies. Some things refuse to stay buried just like out past.”

I felt Chanel pressed against my side. I wanted to hold her and tell her she was safe, but I had to focus all my attention on my enemies.

“Zand, you had so much to say over the phone. Where’s that blonde bitch that’s always at your side?”

“I don’t need her.” I saw Harlen and Morgan to my right. They were ready to pounce. Then there was Natasha’s barely visible silhouette on higher ground to my left. The trap was set. The players were assembled.

“But you bring the baby vamp with you instead?” Teresa glanced over at Morgan. “Sorry babes, I really thought Harlen was too stupid to make a vampire. I wanted you dead.” Teresa waited for a response. “Hello, Mariah Carey. Are you mute?”

Morgan’s eyes stayed fixed on Teresa, but her mouth didn’t have any words. We rehearsed our plan. Morgan’s silence irritated Teresa. She wanted a reaction, and I was proud that our new vampire didn’t give her one.

“Well, okay.” Teresa signed. “I’m a little disappointed with your team of Avengers. You have a human nurse, a biracial newbie, your creepy brother and your WWE chauffeur. Husband, you know you brought a nail file to a knife fight?”

Tension hung in the air. My every muscle was primed for violence. Lonzo's eyes only left Chanel's face when he was undressing her with his eyes. I couldn't wait to kill him once and for all. The mention of truce was always fiction. It was a thin veneer of civility stretched over mutual hatred.

I was done with all the talking. "Teresa, do you ever shut up?"

"Let's make a deal. Give me the nurse."

"Never."

Teresa licked her lips and let her eyes trail down my body. "Do you have a noise maker on your hip? Guns don't work on vampires. None of my people are humans."

I wanted to say something, but I was confused. Was this a trick? Layla. Layla. Layla. Did she tell...

Wait. Layla saw my security officers with guns, but I never told her what the gun was used for. Crip-o Glocks resembled regular 9mm Glocks. The guns were classified weapons. Only a few of my people knew their true function. Layla wasn't a part of my security team. She wasn't privy to anything regarding this weapon or any of the previous prototypes. The possibility existed that Layla never shared this intel because she didn't know anything about this invention.

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“We have to keep up appearances. Security guards carry guns.”

Teresa shook her head. “Appearances, ha. You always want to fit in with the humans.”

“And you have no regard for them.”

“I murdered a few Chanel Taylors and one friend of the group.” Teresa scowled at Morgan. “And you won’t let me forget it. Here’s the thing. Lonzo is pissed that you killed his sister. He wants two of your people and I have to agree. It’s only fair.”

“Fuck you.” I pointed to Teresa. “And fuck you.” I pointed to Lonzo. He didn’t like what I said, and he took a step toward me. He stopped when Teresa raised her arm and nudged him in the chest.

“Give us Chanel and Morgan and there will be no violence.” Teresa requested.

“Never. Fuck off. You can’t have them.”

My signal was subtle. I took Chanel’s hand in mine and that was the cue. Only my people knew it was a sign to get active. Harlen lunged forward with a snarl that sounded more animal than human. From beneath his jacket, he was a fast draw with his Cripso Glock. Teresa’s vampires moved in for the battle. Suddenly, the quiet shoreline erupted into chaos.

“Get down!” I shoved Chanel behind me. My body became her shield as the first gunshots blow through the air. I didn’t know where the bullet came from. I did see

one of Teresa's female guards fall immediately.

The paralytic serum hit her skin, and she went down with a loud thump. One down and four to go. Another one of her people returned fire with a conventional weapon. It was useless against vampires, but deadly to Chanel. And that was exactly where they were aiming. Their bullets ricocheted off my armored truck.

I ducked down, pulling Chanel with me behind the rear of the SUV.

"Stay here." I commanded.

I had my Crip-o Glock in my hands. I didn't want to leave Chanel, but it was time I joined the fight.

Chanel nodded, and I left her in a crouching position. I wrapped my hand around my weapon with practiced ease. I scrambled my way to the front of the truck. Morgan had joined Harlen, her newfound vampire strength apparent as she tackled one of Teresa's remaining guards. They rolled across the rocky beach. A blur of limbs and fanged snarls were exchanged before Morgan pinned her rival with surprising efficiency. Her time with Harlen had clearly included combat training. The guard's head snapped back with the impact of her fist. Morgan reached for her weapon when the movement to my left demanded my immediate attention.

Lonzo had broken away from the main conflict. He sprinted with vampire speed toward the road that ran parallel to the shoreline. Natasha spotted him too, signaling to Donte with a sharp gesture before both of them gave chase. They ran fast after Lonzo, and they soon disappeared across the landscape. Two of my people were predators in deadly pursuit.

I scanned the area for Teresa. I spotted her backing toward the water. The coward, she was trying to flee. Her black outfit was ripped where Josh tussled with her. Her

expression had lost its smugness. It was replaced by something closer to panic and desperation as she realized Lonzo had run off and abandoned her and her guards were falling. Her plan was unraveling.

“Josh!” I called, and my driver materialized at my side. “Protect Chanel. I’m going after Teresa.”

Harlen and Morgan could handle the one female vamp they were fighting with. I needed to go after Teresa. There was no way I would let her get away, and she was retreating to the boat. I couldn’t let that happen.

Before I could move, an almost silent gunshot rang out from the direction Lonzo fled. I turned to see Natasha and Donte in pursuit. They were running down Lake Shore Drive with their Cripso Glocks raised, but missing their mark as Lonzo wove in and out of the early morning traffic on the expressway.

Even from this distance, I can see Donte and Natasha struggling to keep up with him while they had to dodge moving cars. I couldn’t watch much longer. I had to go after Teresa. Lonzo disappeared among the vehicles, his escape all but assured.

A scream pulled my attention back to the battle that was only a few yards away. One of Teresa’s vampires was frozen on the ground, hit with the serum for the Cripso Glock. The other nameless male vamp was engaged with Marco and two of my security team members. The guy was outmatched, but fighting with the desperation of someone who knew defeat meant death.

Teresa herself was cornered now. She was backed against the water’s edge, with Harlen and Morgan approaching from both sides while I approached up the center. Teresa’s eyes darted frantically. She was searching for escape routes and finding none. Jumping back on the boat was no longer an option. Harlen and Morgan had the vessel blocked.

Teresa reached inside her leather jacket, perhaps for a weapon, but Morgan moved with blinding speed. She slammed into Teresa with enough force to send them both sprawling onto the wet rocks at the shoreline.

“You remember me?” Morgan snarled, pinning Teresa beneath her. Her pale vampire face contorted with rage. Her glowing gray eyes flashed bright like the moon. “You threw me off a balcony. You fucking bitch!”

Teresa struggled, but Morgan’s vampire strength was fueled by vengeance. Morgan punched Teresa repeatedly in her face with the platinum brass knuckles that Natasha designed. Every punch cut into Teresa’s skin and oozed blood. This new weapon didn’t allow for instant healing. Teresa’s face was gushing blood that seeped into her blonde hair, changing the color to cherry red.

“It, it wasn’t personal.” Teresa choked and spat the words out while blood trickled from the corner of her mouth.

“But this is personal.” Morgan growled. Harlen approached and aimed his Crip gun at Teresa’s heart. He shot her twice, although only one serum filled bullet was needed to immobilize her. Morgan crawled off of Teresa’s body.

I made my way over to the tree where Marco had now subdued the last of Teresa’s vampires. They were already lifting her body and placing it in the back of the truck. We had taken everyone down except for Lonzo. I hoped he was down too, and I would get word soon from Natasha.

I looked back at Chanel, who was safely standing with Josh. I walked back over to my brother and Morgan. They were still standing over the lifeless body of my ex. Teresa’s eyes found mine as I glared down at her.

“Zand.” Teresa’s muffled voice startled us. Her body wasn’t moving, but somehow,

she could speak. We all looked at each other, confused by the sound of her voice.
“Please.” We watched her say a second word.

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“Do you want us to load her into the truck?” Harlen asked.

I thought about it. “No.” I glared down at Teresa. “No, let her burn.”

The threat was now given as an order. Harlen looked over at me to make sure I meant it. I did. I nodded to Harlen, who took a step forward.

Teresa’s eyes widened, real panic flooding her features. “Zand, please—” she mumbled.

Harlen reached into his pocket and produced a silver lighter, the flame dancing in the pre-dawn breeze. From his other pocket came a small flask that he uncaps with his teeth before pouring its contents over Teresa’s immobilized form. The smell of accelerant filled the air.

“This is for Morgan.” Harlen said and looked over at Morgan. He handed the lighter over to his girl.

“Burn in hell, bitch.” Morgan cursed. She simply flicked the flame on and dropped the lighter on Teresa’s body.

The flames ignited instantly. The fire engulfed Teresa in a blue-white fire that reflected off the dark water of the lake. Her eyes remained open. She was aware as the fire consumed her. The paralytic serum prevented her from thrashing or screaming. The awareness in her gaze told us she felt everything as the flames slowly reduced her body to ash.

Morgan stepped back, watching with grim satisfaction.

Josh approached me. “Boss, we have the other three vamps secured in the trucks.”

“Good. Tell Marco to take them to the Crema. The police and fire department should be here soon.”

I watched Josh walk over to Marco and my remaining men to convey my message. My security staff piled into one of the trucks and peeled off the path that led to the main street.

Josh was back at my side. “Boss, Natasha reports that Lonzo escaped.” He informed me quietly. “He made it to the expressway and disappeared in traffic. They’re still searching, but...”

I nodded, understanding the implication. The city offered countless hiding places for a vampire, especially one with Teresa’s guidance still fresh in his mind. Lonzo is gone, at least for now.

I needed to head back to Chanel, who stood next to the SUV. As I approached, her eyes were transfixed on Teresa’s burning remains.

“Is it over?” She asked as I reached her side.

“Part of it.” I answered honestly, securing my gun in my holster. “Teresa is finished. But Lonzo escaped.”

Chanel stiffened. “He’s a vampire now.”

“Yes.” There’s no point in softening the truth. “A new one, poorly trained, but dangerous nonetheless.”

We stood together, watching as Teresa's remains collapsed into embers and ash.

"We should go." I murmured.

Chanel nodded, but made no move to leave. Her eyes were still fixed on the smoldering remains of Teresa. She was gone, reduced to ash that will soon scatter across the lake's surface. But Lonzo lived or existed as a vamp. Now he carried all of his malice and vengeful nature with enhanced with vampire abilities.

"It's not over." I admitted.

I realized that my son was missing. "Josh, did Natasha mention Donté? Is he with her?"

"She didn't mention him. I'll send her a message."

"Yes, do that."

Where was Donté? Did Lonzo take him? Did Lonzo kill him? A slight panic set in. I was sure he was okay, or I hoped that he was. I wanted to call him, but I couldn't. If Lonzo had him, that meant I couldn't call and alert Lonzo that Donté had a cell phone on him. All I could do was wait as the fire burned down to nothing.

Behind us, Teresa's ashes mingled with the stones and sand, her existence reduced to dust. Ahead of us was an uncertain future, with Lonzo's escape casting a shadow over our victory.

But for now, I allowed myself to feel the weight of one enemy vanquished, one more threat neutralized. Teresa would never again threaten what's mine. And when Lonzo made his next move, as he inevitably would, we would be ready.

The game had changed, but the stakes remained the same. Chanel's safety, my kingdom, and our future together, had to be secured. And for those I loved, there was no price too high, no enemy I wouldn't destroy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ZAND

Teresa's smoldering remains made small smoke clouds a few feet away. We needed to leave Belmont Harbor before law enforcement showed. Natasha appeared through the darkness. She was walking up to us from a grassy path of the harbor. She was alone, and I was alarmed. Where was Donté?

"Sorry King. Lonzo got away."

"What happened?" I needed details.

She explained. "We chased him down Lake Shore Drive, going south. But the barrage of traffic made capture too difficult. We lost sight of him near the Shedd Aquarium. I made the decision for us to split up to cover more ground."

"Where is my son?"

"I'm not sure, King. I went east toward the Adler Planetarium and Donté went west, in the direction of the Field Museum. After I made it to Northerly Island, I texted Donté, and he didn't respond. I didn't spot Lonzo, and I came back here to you."

I was quiet, thinking. "Can you track his phone?" I asked.

My phone vibrated against my thigh. I reached for my cell. The text message preview made my vampire heart tighten with something I hadn't felt in decades. There was

urgency combined with hope. Donté, my son, had found Lonzo.

I swiped to open the text, and my eyes scanned the message from my son.

SON

Found Lonzo. Soldier Field North Garage. Level 3. Looks injured. Will keep eyes on him.

The second message arrived immediately after.

SON

Hurry.

OTW

I texted back.

“King.” Natasha called to me. “It’s a group text.”

Donté was smart enough to include Natasha in the text to me. The timer had started to tick. I turned toward my remaining team. They all stood silently watching Teresa’s ashes scatter across the lakeshore. My gaze found Morgan and Harlen first. The duo was still vibrating with the rush of vengeance.

“Harlen, Morgan, collect what remains of Teresa. Every ash, every ember. I want nothing left. Hurry.” My voice was eager and intentional. “Put her remains in the containment vessel. I’ll decide what to do with them later.”

Morgan’s eyebrows lifted slightly, but she didn’t question my order. Harlen soon

returned from my Jeep with the specialized vacuum equipment we brought for just this purpose. The captured vampires were already on the highway with Marco and my men.

“Josh.” I continued. “I have a line on Lonzo’s whereabouts.”

Josh, ever stoic, inclined his head in acknowledgment. “And Ms. Taylor?” He asked.

Chanel stood slightly apart from the group. Her arms wrapped around herself against the chill in the air.

“You take her home first. You can meet us la—” I began.

“No.” Chanel interrupted. The single syllable boomed with authority. She took a step forward and her eyes met mine. “I’m coming with you.”

Josh shifted uncomfortably, looking between us. My jaw tightened. Sunrise was only a few hours away. I didn’t know how long it would take us to find, chase, and eliminate Lonzo. He had a personal vendetta against Chanel. Every instinct screamed to send her home, to protect her from what would happen next. But I had learned enough about my fiancée to recognize the futility of arguing against her determination.

“Chanel.” I said, keeping my voice low as I stepped closer to her. “This isn’t over yet. Lonzo is dangerous, more so now that he is a vampire.”

“I know exactly what he is.” She replied. “I was there when he tried to kill me the first time, remember?” She sassed me. “I want to see this through to the end. I want to watch him burn, just like his sister.”

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Her words didn't disturb me. Her need to embrace the violence and her thirst for retribution was sexy. I felt a surge of pride. She was becoming more than my fiancée. She was becoming my queen.

"Fine." I conceded, reaching for her hand. "You follow every instruction without question or hesitation. Understood?"

Her fingers intertwined with mine. "Understood."

I turned back to my team, issuing rapid-fire orders. "Natasha and Josh, you're with me. Harlen and Morgan follow us in the Jeep. Donté has spotted Lonzo at Soldier Field."

My phone buzzed again. Another text from Donté.

SON

Got my eye on him. Blood on his clothes.

I gestured toward my SUV, and Natasha immediately moved to the passenger seat while I guided Chanel to the backseat. Josh jumped into his role as driver. As both vehicles rumbled to life, I added Josh and Harlen to the text chain with Donté, ensuring everyone receives the same real-time updates.

"Go." I instructed. "Soldier Field North Garage. Hurry."

The SUV lurched into motion. The run-flat tires sprayed gravel as we accelerated

away from the harbor. In the rearview mirror, I watched Harlen and Morgan follow us as we merged onto Lake Shore Drive.

Chanel sat beside me in the back seat. Her posture was rigid with tension. She was twisting her engagement ring on her finger. I reached over to touch her hand briefly.

“Don’t worry. We’ll get him this time.” I assured her.

“I’m not worried. I just want that muthafucka dead.” She turned from looking out the passenger side window to look at me.

Another text from Donté illuminated my phone: He’s pacing near the northeast elevators.

Natasha immediately pulled up a schematic of the garage on her cell phone and showed it to me in the backseat. “Three entry points to that level.” She murmured. “We need to cover them all.”

“Josh can guard the Eastern entrance right outside the garage on Special Olympics Drive.” I decided. “You and I will approach from the North on E McFetridge Drive. Harlen and Morgan can go inside the main entrance where Josh is parked and move in from there. With Donté’s location, we will just move in toward him until we spot him or Lonzo.”

“And me?” Chanel asked.

“You stay with me.” I told her. I wanted her to stay with Josh, but I also didn’t want to argue with her. Chanel wasn’t like us, a vampire. We could move so much faster and cover so much more ground. Natasha and I were going to have to adjust having a human with us.

“Text the plans to Harlen.” I ordered Natasha to do. “And tell them to wear face masks. There are cameras everywhere.”

The city flashed by outside our windows. Early morning Chicago was mostly asleep. Chicagoans were unaware of the vampire hunt unfolding in their midst. The winding road that was Lake Shore Drive made it hard to speed. The highest speed was 45mph and Josh could only drive ten or fifteen over the limit to get us there in five to eight minutes without the vehicle ending up overturned or worse, somewhere in the lake.

The massive structure of Soldier Field loomed ahead. Its stone façade was pale in the darkness of night. My phone buzzed continuously with brief updates from Donté, each one confirming that our prey remained within the concrete maze of the North Garage.

Our latest intel stated that Lonzo had moved from the elevators to level 1A, which was actually below ground. I thought that maybe Lonzo had gotten ahold of Donté’s cell phone. I quickly dismissed this theory, noticing the jargon sounded exactly like my son. These messages were written in his voice.

When we arrived, I instructed Josh to drop us off at the Field Museum. Josh and Harlen drove to the main entrance of the garage and parked two hundred yards from the entrance. Josh would be close enough to observe, but far enough to not be immediately detected.

All my security knew to shield our license plate numbers when we were doing anything humans considered illegal. Breaking into a city parking structure was on that list. Having a button in all my vehicles that automatically concealed our state issued license plates was a plus. Natasha even had a device that could scramble and sometimes wipe out the CCTV live surveillance cameras. We came prepared. We lived to shield our true selves from the world.

Already masked in ski masks, Natasha, Chanel, and I walked up the sidewalk that connected the Field Museum to the Soldier Field.

“I’ll scout ahead.” Natasha said with her hand already resting on her Crip-o Glock. It was a good idea. She knew Chanel would slow us down.

I nodded. “Go. We’ll follow.”

Natasha disappeared with vampire speed. She turned left into the vestibule that housed the stairwell and elevators of the garage. With my enhanced hearing, I could tell Natasha took the stairs. A good choice for a sneak approach.

Chanel and I were going to take the elevator now that Lonzo was currently on level 1. We were standing at the elevator on the ground level, which was level 4, when the doors opened. The North garage was an enormous underground structure. Our advantage was there shouldn’t be any cars inside the garage. The North garage didn’t have overnight parking.

While inside the elevator, we stood side by side. I could see Chanel’s alert brown eyes through her mask. She didn’t have noticeable fear in them, and that was a good thing.

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“I’ve never been to a Chicago Bears game.” She whispered, attempting to lighten the mood.

“I’ll be sure to take you to one.” I muttered back, helping with the mood alteration.

When the doors opened for us to exit on level 4, I said. “Stay close to me.”

We stepped out into a garage that swallowed us with its cheap lighting and emptiness. Level 1 of the garage was a maze of concrete pillars and plastic wall signs. We were standing in level 1B. We needed to head over to 1A. I guided Chanel to the right. The arrowed sign told me I was headed in the right direction. I moved stealthily, with Chanel following closely behind me.

Unexpectedly, a shadowy figure detached itself from behind a concrete column thirty feet ahead of us. Fuck! Lonzo stood motionless. His newly transformed vampire body was unnaturally still. He watched us with eyes that blazed with recognition and pure hatred. He had bloodstains on the front of his opened shirt, exposing his colorful skull tattoos. Was it his blood or someone else’s?

My Cripso Glock was in my hand before a conscious thought registered. The gun draw was so swift, Chanel flinched beside me. I aimed directly at Lonzo’s chest, where the paralytic serum would surely hit and spread most efficiently through his transformed circulatory system. I didn’t take the shot. Missing would mean he could escape again. I needed to be closer to him.

“Well, well, well.” Lonzo’s voice carried a resonance all vampires possessed. “The great Alexander Valentine. Coming to finish what you started, huh? Too bad it didn’t

take the first time.”

He remained perfectly still, making no move to attack or flee. I recognized his stance. It was just the same as the one he took when we were back in Chanel’s apartment.

“This doesn’t have to be difficult, Lonzo.” I warned.

“Put the gun down, you fuckin’ coward.” He taunted.

“You’re outmatched and outnumbered.”

A sinister sneer spread across his face, revealing his fangs. “I don’t see anyone but you, and that human snitch.”

“I don’t know what Teresa told you, but I roll with an army.”

“Heyese, I’m not alone either. Teresa taught me a few things before you killed her. Things about your weaknesses.” His gaze shifted to Chanel and his expression turned vicious. “Like how you’d risk everything *foreste perra negra*(this Black bitch) who ruined my life.”

Beside me, Chanel stiffened but didn’t flinch at his crude remark. You didn’t have to be fluent in Spanish to figure out what he was saying. I edged slightly in front of her. My posture shifted to better shield her body with mine. Where the fuck were my people?

“Watch your mouth.” I warned, with my finger tightening on the trigger. “Or I’ll end this conversation right now.”

Lonzo laughed, and the sound echoed unnaturally off the concrete walls. “With that fancy gun? Why don’t you fight me like a man?” He spread his arms wide, inviting

confrontation. “Or are you afraid I might be stronger than you? I know I’m faster than you. I outran that Russian bitch and that skinny Black boy. Who said Mexicans weren’t fast?”

“Lucky once doesn’t mean lucky always.” I replied dismissively. “You barely understand what you’ve become.”

His face contorted with rage. “What I’ve become? I’m superhuman. I’m a fuckin’ supervillain because of her!” He jabbed a finger toward Chanel. “Did I say thank you? I would’ve let it all go. I would’ve lived forever as a vampire, but you killed Marisol. My sister’s dead because of you. Teresa told me all about it.”

“Teresa lied if she told you I killed your sister.” I sneered.

“Chanel, baby girl, you’re with this fuckin’ punk. He won’t even claim his bodies.” Lonzo addressed Chanel instead of me. He didn’t faze my future queen.

Chanel exhaled. “Lonzo, I killed your sister.” Her voice boldly came from behind me. “It was me. I did it.”

“She’s right.” I goaded him. “I merely provided the opportunity.” I said, trying to get him to make a move.

Lonzo’s eyes enlarged and darted from me to Chanel. He was in disbelief. I could see it.

“That’s right.” Chanel said, stepping slightly to the side to face him directly. “I watched her burn. I even asked for her ashes as a souvenir.” Her voice didn’t waver or break. It carried the weight of absolute conviction. Then she pulled her ski mask up revealing her entire face to him.

This was my soulmate.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

ZAND

After hearing Chanel's confession, something in Lonzo snapped. In an instant, his face transformed from human to monstrous. His fangs fully extended, and a snarl ripped from his throat that was more animal than man.

"Bitch, I'm going to tear your throat out." He promised, with his eyes never leaving Chanel. "I'm going to make him," Lonzo pointed at me. "Watch while I drain every drop of blood from your body."

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“You won’t touch her.” I growled. “You won’t get within ten feet of her.”

“So much mouth and so little bravery.”

“I’m waiting for you, motherfucker!”

“Ha, then shoot me.” Lonzo sneered, taking a step forward. “Use your little science gun, you pussy. We’re both vampires now, Valentine. Let’s settle this like vampires.”

I weighed my options. The Crip Glock would immobilize him, yes, but something in me balked at the easy victory. This was personal for me, for Chanel, for the memory of Morgan’s human life, and for Craig. Contemplating a physical battle was stupid. Either way, if I missed my shot with the Crip, he could rush me, and we would end up in fisticuffs.

Perhaps Lonzo sensed my hesitation, because a smirk spread across his face.

“That’s what I thought.” He cheered, “A fake ass vampire, hiding behind his toys.”

My decision formed in an instant. I turned slightly, pressing the Crip Glock into Chanel’s hands. “Take this.” I told her, my eyes never leaving Lonzo.

All the Crip Glocks were custom to fit their owner, so I knew Chanel couldn’t use it. But my vampire manhood was being challenged, and I had to take the risk. I had to show myself I deserved to be king.

Chanel took the weapon.

I took a step forward, shrugging off my jacket and letting it fall to the concrete floor. Lonzo mirrored my movement, a grotesque parody of gentlemanly preparation for a duel. I then removed my ski mask.

“Woo hoo! Look at that face! Chanel, you like this pretty White boy? I thought the Blacks and Mexicans was supposed to stick together.”

I ignored his random race taunting rant. Vampires were one unified race. I was here to kick his ass and kill him. Nothing more and absolutely nothing less. Snide remarks were useless. Nothing he said mattered in this moment. I had to finish what I started and kill this motherfucker. Once and for all.

I bent into a fighting stance. “Let’s see what Teresa taught you.” I said, rolling my shoulders. “Besides how to die.”

A scream echoed through the structure. There was another battle going on somewhere in the garage. He was lying. He had people here fighting my people.

“Ya’ hear my army, pretty boy? We on level 1, 2 and 3— fuckin’ shit up. With my new gift, I let Teresa think she was incharge. Women are so fuckin’ stupid. Then I secretly made an army of vampires that she didn’t know nothing about. Your ex-bitch was a bartender, and I was a cartel leader. Did she really think I was going to let her tell me what to do? See there. We all got secrets.”

“Shut the fuck up and let’s fight!” Harsh but effective. I was over the chitchat.

With a roar that resonated through the concrete structure, Lonzo took off running at me. He launched himself in the air and I did the same. Our bodies collided into each other with the speed of the fastest human on the planet. The force knocked us both clear across the lot and crashing down on the cement floor. We both jumped to our feet and ran at the fastest vampire speed. This time there would be no midair lunge. I

sidestepped his assault with precision. Born from years of training in martial arts, thanks to Natasha.

I grabbed him by his waist before he could stumble past me and I swung him around. The swing sent him flying into the wall behind him. I was on him quickly and kicked him in his gut. When he landed on his knees, I drove my elbow into the back of his head with enough force to crack the skull of a human. Lonzo stumbled down to the concrete and rolled away before I could stump on his face.

The sound of something crashing reverberated above our heads. I didn't have time to think about it. Lonzo eyed me closely as we both rocked on our heels in a circle like pro boxers. Our fists were raised, and we both were looking for the opportune time to strike a deadly blow. Our blows wouldn't actually be deadly because we were vampires, but I hoped mine would be enough to disarm him, alarm him or better, knock him off his feet.

I let off two forceful jabs that he took to the face. He shook them off and hit me with two blows to the body. I heard my ribscrack, but they instantly healed. That didn't diminish the initial pain, but I couldn't feel it for more than a second or two.

Lonzo threw a punch that didn't land, and I swung his extended arm behind his body. He whirled around and snarled. We began a deadly dance between enemies. His haphazard attack was ferocious but unrefined. He had powerful swings that would crush a human's bones, but they were easy for me to anticipate and counter. He trained at a local gym, but I was trained by masters. There was a difference in our techniques. I landed a precise blow to his face, his kidneys, and his knees. I tested his resilience while gauging his recovery speed.

"Is that all you got?" He belted with blood streaming from his nose, only to stop flowing as his vampire healing began to work. "I expected more!"

I didn't waste breath responding. Instead, I moved toward him again. This time with my full speed and strength. To Chanel, we must look like the monsters we are. Every movement and the sounds of our impact bounced off the walls and through the garage. The concrete cracks as our bodies slammed into pillars. Lonzo fought me with the desperate strength and a wealth of determination. I countered with the calculated accuracy that came from experience and my vampire age.

A flash of movement at the periphery of my vision signaled the arrival of reinforcements. Natasha appeared at the far end of the garage. Her Cripo was raised. She was unable to fire off a clean shot with us moving so quickly and sparring so closely. Harlen emerged from the stairwell with Morgan. Harlen, similarly armed with his Glock but frustrated by his inability to get a clean shot. Donté circled to the opposite side, positioning himself to cut off any potential escape route.

"Hold your fire!" I commanded between blows, knowing the risk of hitting me with the paralytic if they shoot. "He's mine."

I swore him a clean hand to hand fight, and I wanted to show this bastard what a real boss looked like. His little drug enterprise would pale in comparison to the empire I was on the verge of creating.

Lonzo used the momentary distraction to land a crushing blow to my sternum, sending me sliding across the concrete floor. He tried to follow his luck immediately. He rushed toward me with fangs bared, but I rolled to my feet before he could press his advantage. Blood trickled from a cut on my forehead, momentarily blurring my vision, but I wiped it away with a quick motion.

"You think you're winning?" Lonzo snarled, circling me like an authentic predator. "Teresa told me all your weaknesses. How you overthink. How your love for humans makes you vulnerable."

“Teresa is fuckin’ ash,” I reminded him coldly. “And you’re about to join her.”

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My bravado enraged him. Lonzo dove at me again. This time I was ready and over this fight. I caught his arm mid-swing, using his momentum against him as I pivoted to slam him into a concrete pillar with enough force to crack it from floor to ceiling. Concrete dust rained down as Lonzo struggled in my grip, his newfound strength impressive but insufficient against my decades of experience as a vampire.

“Your problem, Lonzo.” I said while twisting his arm until bones fractured. “Is that you never learned when to stop.”

Lonzo jerked free of my grip with a desperate surge of strength, sending us both crashing into the elevators. Metal crumpled beneath our combined weight. I didn’t even realize we had moved so many parking spaces down the garage.

He fought with the raw power. Each of his blows left dents in the concrete walls when I dodged his fists, each impact shaking dust from the ceiling when I countered. But there was a distinct pattern to his attacks, a predictability born of human muscle memory that hadn’t fully adapted to vampire capabilities. And in that pattern, I found his weakness.

I allowed him to drive me backward, feigning difficulty as we smashed through a concrete pillar. The structure groaned ominously above us, but I paid it no mind. Lonzo’s confidence grew with each step I yielded. His fangs fully extended in a triumphant roar. He didn’t realize I was leading him exactly where I wanted him, away from Chanel and into a corner where his escape routes were limited.

“Not so tough now, are you?” He prematurely chanted, landing a blow to my jaw that would decapitate a human. I turned with the impact, minimizing the damage while

making it appear more effective than it was. “Teresa was right. You’re old and weak.” He howled.

I caught Natasha’s eye across the garage and gave her a familiar look. She understood immediately, shifting her position to cut off the last potential exit route. From the corner of my vision, I saw my son moving Chanel further back. He positioned her safely behind a concrete barrier while maintaining her line of sight. Good. She deserved to witness this.

“Old, perhaps.” I replied, allowing a trickle of blood to run from the corner of my mouth. “But weak, never.”

I let Lonzo land another blow to my sternum. As he committed to the punch, overextending himself, I made my move. Decades of combat experience compressed into a single motion. I pivoted around his extended arm, gripping his shoulder with one hand, and drove my other hand directly into his chest.

The sound was unlike anything human ears could discern. There was the simultaneous ripping of skin, muscle, and bone as my fingers pierce through his ribcage with surgical precision. Lonzo’s eyes bulged. Pure shock replaced triumph as he realized too late what was happening to him. The garage grew silent, seeming to pause in respect for the grotesque tableau I created.

“This,” I said, my voice quiet but carrying in the sudden stillness, “is the difference between us.”

My fingers closed around his heart. A strange organ in newer vampires. It was still beating but not pumping blood. This magical organ served instead as a reservoir for the power that animates our undead forms. We had yet to understand where it came from or how it worked.

Lonzo's mouth opened, but no sound materialized. His body went rigid, every muscle locked in place by my direct contact with his vampire heart.

"Teresa never taught you about this, did she?" I continued conversationally, as if we were discussing the weather rather than me standing with my hand buried wrist-deep in his chest cavity.

With a single, brutal movement, I wrenched his heart from his chest. The organ pulsed in my hand, unnaturally bright against my blood-stained skin. Lonzo collapsed to his knees, his body still animated but paralyzed, unable to move while his artificial heart existed outside his body. His knees gave out, and he fell flat on his back. His eyes, however, remained conscious, horror and understanding dawning simultaneously as he stared up at his own beating heart.

I held it up for all to see. This was my trophy from vampire-on-vampire combat. This was the ultimate display of dominance. Blood dripped between my fingers, spattering on the concrete beneath us.

"You threatened what's mine." I told him. "You aligned yourself with my enemies. You must die."

With deliberate slowness, I closed my fist around his heart. The mass struggled against my grip like a bird trying to escape a cage. Then, with one final squeeze, I crushed it. The organ ruptured between my fingers, its contents running down my arm in rivulets of dark, congealed blood. Lonzo's body shuddered, a silent scream frozen on his face as the connection between his consciousness and his physical form began to degrade.

He isn't dead, not yet. Vampire anatomy ensured he remained aware, even as his body failed him. His eyes followed me as I took a step back. He ogled with helpless rage mixed with a dash of fear as Natasha approached with a small metal container.

“The accelerant.” She announced, removing the cap. The pungent smell of chemicals filled the air as she methodically doused Lonzo’s lifeless form. My best soldier ensured every inch of him was covered with the flammable liquid. The substance mingled with the blood on his chest, creating a macabre painting across his frozen body.

I turned to Chanel, who had appeared from behind her protective barrier. Her face was composed. Her eyes fixed on Lonzo with an expression that contained no pity, no hesitation, only a cold hard stare that made my chest fill with pride.

“Zand.” She called to me. “I want to do it.”

Natasha paused, looking at me for direction.

“Let her.” I said to Natasha.

Natasha took two steps back and wiped her hands on a black bandana before reaching into her jacket pocket for a silver lighter.

“Ms. Taylor.” Natasha said formally, extending the lighter toward Chanel. “The honor is yours.”

Chanel walked over and took the lighter in her hands. She approached Lonzo’s body. When she stood over him, she paused, looking down into his terrified eyes. She broke her gaze at Lonzo to look over at Morgan and then back at her stalker.

“This is for Craig.” She simply stated. “For Morgan. For those three people I heard you kill back in Minnesota and for everywoman named Chanel Taylor who died because of your fucked up family.”

Her thumb flicked the lighter. The flame sprung to life with a soft click. She held it

for a moment. The orange glow illuminated her face from below. Then, with a gesture as casual as lighting a cigarette, she dropped the lighter onto Lonzo's fluid-soaked torso.

I moved with a quickness, grabbing Chanel around the waist and pulling her back as the flames erupted. The fire consumed Lonzo instantly. Blue-white flames climbed higher as they found fresh fuel in his clothes, his hair, his flesh. His eyes remained open and aware, as the fire melted the features of his face and turned him into more of a monster than he had been in human and vampire form.

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We stood in a loose semicircle, me, Chanel, Natasha, Harlen, Donté and Morgan. We watched as the flames transformed our enemy into ash. No one spoke. No words were necessary.

Chanel leaned against me. My arm snaked around her waist, securing her against my side where she belonged. In the flames, I saw not just the end of Lonzo, but the final severing of Teresa's influence on our lives. With both the Lopez siblings and my ex-wife reduced to ash, the threats that had hung over us dissipated like the smoke now filling the garage.

"If we're going to keep killing vampires, I think we need to start using matches." Natasha joked with a straight face. "Seriously, we must leave. I need to make sure the camera footage, didn't record us."

"Right. Natasha, you're in charge."

I took Chanel's hand and ushered her away. In the distance, I could hear Natasha giving out assignments for cleanup, which included retrieving the lighter that Chanel touched and the ashes. I knew Natasha could handle it. I needed to get Chanel into bed, and I wanted to lie beside her. Everything else could wait until the afternoon.

In the new world I aimed to create, endings were rarely permanent. But for now, in this moment, we carved out a space for me to be the vampire king that served justice with fire and blood.

EPILOGUE

CHANEL

FOUR MONTHS LATER

I jolted awake to dead silence. My body sensed something was wrong before my mind could identify it. The bedroom was a canvas of shadows. Chicago's glowing landscape filtered through the reinforced windows of Zand's loft. My hand reached across the sheets, finding his side of the bed empty and cold. Then I heard it. The hushed baritone of his voice came from across the room. He was engaged in a whispered conversation not meant for my ears.

I adjusted my eyes to Zand. He was pacing near the floor-to-ceiling windows. His shoulders formed a rigid line beneath his black t-shirt. Tension was radiating from him in waves I could feel from across the room. One of his hands gripped his phone with unnatural strain while the other hand ran through his hair repeatedly. This gesture was so uncharacteristic of his usual composure that alarm bells immediately rang in my mind.

"That's impossible." He whispered, but his vampire whisper carried in the quiet bedroom. "You need to verify before—" He stopped abruptly, listening to whoever had disturbed our night with news that transformed my usually cool ass fiancé into an agitated stranger.

I pushed myself up against the headboard and let the sheets pool around my waist. "Zand?" My voice came out rough and sleepy.

He didn't turn to acknowledge me. His focus remained entirely on his conversation. His body angled away as if physically shielding me from whatever information flowed through that phone.

"Check again." He commanded. "I need absolute certainty."

I cleared my throat. “Zand, what’s wrong?”

Still nothing. He continued pacing, five steps one way, pivot, and five steps back, like a caged animal.

My pulse quickened as I watched him. I cataloged the signs of his distress, the microscopic tremor in his usually steady hand, the tightening around his eyes visible even in his profile and the way his jaw clenched silently between sentences. I’d never seen him like this, not even when we faced Teresa and Lonzo.

“No.” He hissed into the phone, stopping his pacing to press his forehead against the cool glass of the window. “That changes everything.” A pause. “Are you absolutely certain?” Another pause, longer this time, during which his entire body goes motionless like only vampires or talented actors could achieve. “Come here right now. All of you. I don’t care what time it is.”

I threw the covers off. I was fully awake now and moving toward him. Concern superseded the instinct to give him space. “Zand!”

He turned as I approached. His eyes met mine for the first time since I woke. Something flashed across his face. Surprise, then concern, then something else I couldn’t label. Then his features smoothed into careful neutrality. He ended the call with a swift movement, dropping the phone into his pocket.

“Nothing’s wrong.” He barked. The words were so at odds with everything about his demeanor. His eyes slid away from mine, another warning sign from someone who usually held my gaze with an intensity that made my pussy vibrate.

“You’re lying.” I replied, reaching for his arm, but he had already moved past me. He headed for the bedroom door with long, purposeful strides.

“Go back to sleep.” He said over his shoulder. “It’s too early.”

Before I could formulate a sassy response, he was through the door, pulling it firmly shut behind him. What the fuck just happened?

I stood frozen in the middle of the room, barefoot on the cool hardwood. After everything we’d been through, Teresa’s death, Lonzo’s execution, my acceptance of his world and all its violent necessities, now he shuts me out? Now, when we should be celebrating our victory and our future together. What about the honesty and the sharing? Apparently, some promises were easier to make than keep.

I paced the same path Zand had traced minutes earlier. My mind was racing through possibilities. Was there another threat? Perhaps Teresa or Lonzo had some remaining allies? But none of these explanations justified shutting me out. Especially after I proved myself by helping execute our enemies, and after I agreed to be his queen.

Beyond the closed door, I heard the low murmur of voices from downstairs. Zand was on another call, or perhaps someone had already arrived. The urgency in his final command suggested this gathering wouldn’t wait until morning. Whatever crisis had developed, it was happening now, with or without my participation.

I hovered near the door, my hand rested on the cool metal of the handle. Indecision paralyzed me. Following him meant confrontation. It meant I was going to demand inclusion in whatever crisis had erupted.

My engagement ring suddenly felt heavy on my finger. What kind of queen allowed herself to be locked away in a tower while the king held council below? What kind of marriage could survive when he was deliberately excluding me?

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I dropped my hand from the door handle and took a step back. It was time for me to chill. I wouldn't chase him. I sure as hell wouldn't beg him. If Zand wanted to resurrect walls between us, he'd have to do it while looking me in the eye. I could give him five minutes to reconsider, to remember who we are to each other now and what we've promised to be. And then I'm going downstairs to claim my place at his side, whether he likes it or not.

It was time for me to get ready for the day. I couldn't get back to sleep. The bathroom felt like a space of comfort as I stripped and stepped into the shower. I turned the water temperature as high as I could stand. Steam billowed around me, warming me up. The expensive body wash was a small luxury that I savored. I rinsed quickly and stepped out onto the marble floor.

I braced myself in front of the mirror. My reflection stared back. Water droplets trailed down my neck like silent accusations. Whatever was happening downstairs, I'm being deliberately excluded, and that knowledge burned hotter than anger. Five minutes had passed, then ten, and still no sign of Zand returning to explain his rude behavior. Fine. If the king won't come to the queen, the queen will go to the king.

I dressed in dark jeans, a simple black tank top, hair twisted into a quick knot at the nape of my neck. No makeup, no jewelry except for the black diamond engagement ring that suddenly felt like both armor and a challenge. We weren't married yet, and this was already getting difficult.

The marble floor and the bedroom mirror offered no encouragement, no solace. I turned away from my reflection, wrenching open the door with more force than necessary.

My bare feet made no sound on the sleek staircase as I descended. One of my hands slid along the polished banister. The loft was designed with vampire acoustics in mind. Still, I heard snippets of urgent conversation drifting upward, coming from more than two voices. Someone other than Zand was here now. Who? It didn't matter if they heard me coming. I'm here.

I rounded the final curve of the staircase and stopped dead in my tracks. My fingers tightened on the banister. The living room had been transformed into a war meeting. Zand stood at the center of a loose circle formed by Donté, Harlen, Morgan, Josh, and Natasha. All six pairs of eyes turned toward me simultaneously. What the hell was going on? And why was Morgan standing with these people? That was my friend, despite her being a vampire.

Zand looked like a darker version of the man who left our bedroom. His face was a mask of tension. His honey-colored eyes were without an emotion I could decipher. Beside him, Donté's usually relaxed features had hardened into something foreign. Harlen fidgeted with nervous energy. While Morgan was frozen in place, Josh maintained his stoic facade, but his eyes tracked my movement with unusual intensity. And Natasha watched me with the unflinching focus of a scientist observing a particularly interesting specimen.

What the fuck was going on?The silence stretched and filled the open space of the loft. I was the only human in a space full of vampires.

Fuck it!I stepped forward, breaking the silence. "What is this?" My irate voice was all they would get this early in the morning. "Why are all of you here this early in the morning?" It wasn't even light outside yet. "Looking at me like I grew a second head?"

None of those blood drinkers responded. Zand's hands clenched and unclenched at his sides.

“Chanel.” He finally said my name. “Do you hear what I hear?”

The question made no sense. I frowned, scanning their pale faces for some hint of explanation. “What the fuck are you talking about?” It was too early in the morning to cuss, but oh well.

Zand tilted his head in a robotic way. “Listen. Just... listen. Do you hear it?”

“Hear what?” Frustration course through my voice as I took another step into the room. “All I see is a bunch of vampires being cryptic and weird in the morning.”

“Yes.” Morgan said. Her gray eyes were wide and focused. “It’s there. I can hear it too.”

Oh, okay. My bestie was about to be ten or twelve bitches if she didn’t tell me what the fuck was up. One by one, the others nodded.

“Yes.” They all said in near unison like church folks saying amen to a pastor.

Confusion twisted my brain and turned into panic. “Will someone please tell me what the hell is going on?”

The silence broke without warning. Natasha lunged forward with speed, crossing the space between us before I can even back up. She stopped inches from my face. Her posture tensed, but her movements were controlled. She leaned in close, too close, and then she did the unthinkable.

This crazy bitch sniffed me. Not subtly, not metaphorically, but actually drew in a deep breath through her button nose. She moved from my neck to my hair and Zand let her do it. I couldn’t believe it. Then she disturbingly directed her attention to my abdomen. Her nostrils flared as she inhaled me like those vampires in movies.

I recoiled, stepping back so quickly I nearly tripped over the arm of a chair. My hand rose instinctively to push her away. “What in the actual fuck, Natasha?”

Anger flooded my veins. This violation of my personal space. Six feet covid space bitch! This bizarre behavior coupled with this secretive gathering. Was I going to have to fight for my life?

“Don’t touch me.” I warned. I was so mad, but something said I should be afraid.

Natasha straightened her posture. She was apparently satisfied with whatever information her olfactory investigation had provided. Her expression shifted from scientific detachment to something almost like awe as she turned away to face the others.

Behind her, Zand had become a statue. His eyes never left my face. He was watching me with an intensity that felt intimate and distant all at the same time.

My instinct said ‘run bitch run’ but the other three, or two point five Black people in the room, weren’t running. Before I could back further away, Natasha reached out with startling speed. Her cool palm pressed directly against my stomach through the thin fabric of my tank top. The unexpectedness of the contact made me jerk backward.

“Don’t touch me.” I said through my anger and fear. I stepped back out of her reach. My back hit the wall, giving me nowhere else to go. “Zand!” I called out for his help.

Zand didn’t move. His eyes never left me, but he still did nothing to help me. The power of his gaze felt like a weight pressing against my skin.

“Remarkable,” Natasha crooned, stepping back. “I’ve heard of old ancient myths about human breeders, but I’ve never seen one in modern day. I thought they were just

stories the elders told.”

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“What are you talking about?” I demanded, looking from face to face, finding only variations of the same dumbfounded expression. “Will someone please tell me what’s happening?”

Natasha turned back to me. “You really don’t hear it?” She asked. “It’s quite strong.”

“Hear what? Stop talking in riddles!”

Natasha straightened. “We all hear a second heartbeat.” She delivered matter-of-factly. “A strong heartbeat of a human fetus coming from you.”

The words landed like airplanes at O’Hare airport. This landing was damn near a crash landing. Second heartbeat? Baby? From me? The pieces refused to assemble into anything resembling logic. Cause what?

“That’s...” I began, but my tongue felt dry. “That’s not possible.”

“When was your last menstrual cycle?” Natasha asked.

I opened my mouth to answer, but realized I didn’t know. “None of your fucking business.”

With everything that happened, Teresa’s death, Morgan’s transformation, Lonzo’s return and execution, I’d lost track of something as ordinary as my period. Weeks? Months? The calendar in my mind was a jumble of drama.

“Chanel, answer the question!” Zand howled so loudly somebody’s deaf grandma

heard him back in Minnesota.

I wanted to say ‘who the fuck you hollering at’, but I didn’t. I was tired of using so many bad words.

“I don’t, I can’t remember.” I admitted. “But this is impossible. Vampires can’t reproduce. Zand, you told me that.” I just didn’t remember when.

“Vampires can’t reproduce with other vampires.” Natasha corrected me, her eyes never leaving my face. “But there are legends of some vampire males impregnating human females. The stories call them half-bloods. Most vampires consider them myths because in present times, these magical children don’t exist.”

The room spun. I couldn’t move off the wall. I needed to stay on my feet.

“Impossible.” The word was a lifeline I clung to even as evidence mounted against it. “Zand, we’ve been together for a long time. If this was possible, it would’ve happened before now.”

“Not necessarily.” Natasha countered. “The legends speak of very specific circumstances. The human female must be a certain blood type. She had to have consumed vampire blood. The coupling must occur during a specific lunar phase. There are variables.”

I remembered tasting Zand’s blood just to see what it tasted like. Only after he assured me, I wouldn’t turn into a vampire. It was just the one time.

“It clearly is not impossible.” Natasha continued. “You are pregnant with a vampire baby. Our King’s vampire baby. The heartbeat is strong, faster than a human infant’s would be at this stage.”

The spinning room spun up to the highest level. The faces of the vampires blurred

together in a carousel of concerned eyes. My knees felt heavy and unable to support my weight. A cold sweat broke out across my forehead and upper lip.

“I can’t be.” The protest died on my lips as a wave of dizziness washed over me.

My vision dimmed. Sounds became muffled. The last thing I registered was Zand’s alarmed and still handsome face. He was suddenly very close to me. He was close enough to kiss. Close enough for me to swim in the pools of his sepia eyes. I was aware of my body falling. My legs were gone. They were no longer below me, keeping me erect. Then darkness swallowed everything, and I sunk into the blessed emptiness of unconsciousness. I fled from a reality I couldn’t process. My last coherent thought before the blackout told me that nothing would ever be the same again.

THE END