



Dear Mr. Vampire (The Valentine Vampires #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Chanel Taylor had to start a new life.

She didn't have much of a choice because her old life was far too dangerous.

All alone, in a brand new city she meets a mysterious stranger that fascinates and intrigues her.

After the terrible disaster that was her ex-boyfriend, there's no way Chanel should be crushing on a new man.

But sometimes when you sprint out of the arms of one murderous man, you might just fall into the arms of one even more deadly.

Total Pages (Source): 22

PROLOGUE

What a day, what a way to live your life in total isolation. Sometimes I'd stare out the sliding glass door of my second-floor balcony apartment. I spent too much time people watching. I was an incognito peeping Tom, or the female version, a peeping Tonya. I would observe people living their busy lives, wishing that I had a vibrant life of my own. I was exaggerating. I had a life, but I wasn't living it to the fullest. I couldn't live it now, no matter how badly I wanted that fundamental freedom. There were too many ghosts in my closet and bats in my belfry.

I had been in my new apartment building for just a short time when I noticed him. I didn't know all the tenants by name, but I had seen all of them in the three months after I moved in. This roguish guy didn't fit. There was something different about him, something private and sinister. I knew evil people. I wouldn't quite call him that, but he was ominous in his way. He wasn't friendly or nosy. He wasn't helpful or loud, but there was something— dangerous. He avoided eye contact at all costs. He could easily fit into the weirdo category if he weren't so ridiculously and raggedly handsome.

We would briefly bump into each other at the community mailboxes, at the parking lot dumpster, or in the laundry room. He didn't speak to me. He didn't gawk. He didn't acknowledge me, although I was fairly attractive. I was at least a solid seven to White men in the looks department and maybe an eight to Black, Latino and Asian men. Something about this elusive man was off.

I was in the small parking lot at the rear of the complex when I noticed his amber-colored eyes. I got a glimpse of his alluring gaze and froze in my tracks. I sensed

danger. His eyes didn't fit his face. They were warm but sinister all at the same time.

He had an old classic car, but he always walked the streets. From my balcony window, I could see him coming and going in the darkness of the night. I didn't use to be this judgmental. I was never this nosy, but I had time. Life, it had a way of grabbing your innocence and choking the hell out of all you believed in.

There were six regular apartments in the complex and one lone basement apartment. The basement was where he lived— alone. There were women, lots of women. They entered at night and emerged in one piece in the early morning. I waited for the day that one of these women would disappear, never to be seen again. That day never came. They always left the basement on their own; with a waiting Uber or Lyft to whisk them back to their regular lives.

In my short time in the complex, I had brief introductions with all the tenants, but not him. I didn't know his name. It wasn't on the communal mailboxes. His mailbox just had the letter "Z" That's weird. That's suspicious. His age and his political affiliation were all a mystery. It seemed no one really knew him. His name never came up in the hallway, elevator, mailbox, or parking lot conversations. Maybe I was the only one that thought he was strange.

The lack of excitement in my life made it easy for me to focus on this random stranger. The freaks came out at night, but he wasn't freaky if you didn't count his harem of women. He was quite handsome in his guarded, nonchalant manner.

I had all sorts of strange men on my radar since my last breakup. I fell asleep at the wheel and had a relationship with a dangerous stalker. He was more than a stalker. Even now, I found it hard to admit just how bad my ex really was. It's sad to say, but some men would go out of their way to deceive you. They lure you in by pretending to be a gentleman. My ex replaced honesty with deception. He was the reason I lost all hope in the male species. Where were the good, chivalrous, and trustworthy men?

I know they're out there somewhere, but where? This was just another question that I didn't have the answer to.

CHAPTER ONE

CHANEL

I woke to the rhythmic tapping of rain against my windowpane. It was cold for October in the Midwest. My reluctant move to Chicago wasn't going as bad as I thought it would. From the outside looking in, Chicago seemed dangerous. Now that I had taken up residence here, it wasn't bad at all in my neighborhood. It wasn't any worse than where I came from.

Regardless, I didn't want to be here. I was going to make the best out of this bad situation that was forced upon me. No need to bitch and moan about it. I was at a point where I could say it is, what it is.

I had just finished making my apartment livable. No more boxes or random clothes tossed about. Everything finally had its place. It felt like a comfortable, cozy home. It wasn't too bright and bold. But it wasn't too dark and dull. I reached a happy medium. This apartment was my new sanctuary.

Months alone in a new city all by myself was driving me stir crazy. After a few months of getting adjusted, I was ready to have some company at my place. My best friend Morgan was coming in from out of town just to visit me. She was bringing the one thing I didn't have in my refrigerator, wine. I hadn't wrapped my lips around a bottle of anything alcoholic in a long time. I wasn't on a cleanse, but it sure seemed that way. I wanted to start my new life in a new city completely dry. I didn't have a drinking problem, but I was embarking on a new life. With that came a new state of mind.

Morgan was my long-time loyal friend. She was my ride or die. She was driving six hours to see me. Although she didn't like to drive, I thought it would be safer for her that way. Who was I kidding? It would be safer for the both of us. I had a restraining order against my ex-boyfriend from the court. I wasn't sure the order held any merit out of the state of its issue. I could hope.

I left town because I was terrified he would come after me. I wasn't sure what he would do. Would he try to follow my friends to find my current location? Who knew? I didn't want to take that chance. I wished I never laid eyes on Alonzo Lopez. It was much too late for wishes. Bad things happened, and I never thought I would be in this situation. But I was in it up to my eyeballs.

Earlier in the day, I was in a good mood at the office because I knew I would see my friend later. Morgan arrived soon after I got home from work. I buzzed her up to my spacious two bedroom second-floor apartment. She wheeled her cute little rolling luggage into my front door. She had her shoulder bag and a cloth grocery bag slung over her shoulder. Seeing her made me emotional. I missed her. When we hugged, I felt a huge weight lift off my chest. I missed all my friends. Starting over was hard. Seeing my bestie made everything feel just a little bit better.

My friend looked pretty damn good. She was exactly the same as last time I saw her, but her summer tan had worn off. She was pale again. Her sandy-colored hair was pulled back in a low, curly ponytail.

Morgan's eyes scanned me up and down. "Coco, you cut your hair."

I missed being called Coco. "Yes, I did." I took the shopping bag with the wine from her shoulder and rushed it into my open kitchen.

"Why? I loved your thick, long hair." She followed me until she stopped to lean on the kitchen island.

“New life, new hairstyle, new me.” I removed the wine from the bag and placed the four bottles on the countertop.

“I kind of like it. I’m just used to seeing you with long ass hair.”

“It’s not the first time I cut my hair.”

“I know, but you should let me curl it.”

“You can, tomorrow. Aren’t you tired from all that driving?”

“A little, but I haven’t seen you in three months.”

I grabbed two wineglasses from the cabinet and the corkscrew from the top junk drawer. “I had to go. I didn’t have much of a choice.” I removed the cork of the Pinot Grigio.

“I know. It’s just so crazy not having you around. I have to hang out with dingy ass, Donna.”

“Donna loves you.” I poured the wine into both of our glasses without spilling a drop.

“Donna gets on my nerves. She fetishizes me and it’s weird.”

“She does, but you know she has color issues. Ignore her.” I slid Morgan’s glass across the island.

“I try, but she is too much.”

I took a long gulp from my glass. “Have you heard anything about Lonzo?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Thank God.” I let out an enormous sigh of relief.

“No, well, I know he’s out on bail. I would be very careful if I were you.”

“I am as careful as I can be.” I took another drink to calm my nerves.

“How’s the new job going?”

“It’s okay. It’s kids, so it can’t really be bad.”

“If you say so. Kids get on my nerves.”

“Everything gets on your nerves. ”

Morgan giggled. “You right. I need a Caribbean vacation. We should go to Mexico.”

“I can’t leave my job for a vacation. I just started.”

“Ah, yeah, that’s right.”

“I met a guy.” I opted to change the subject.

“Already? You just got here. Who? How? Where?”

“At work?”

“Really? I can never meet anybody.”

I couldn’t help but roll my eyes. “You already have a boyfriend.”

“For how long? I really think he’s going to leave me for a White woman.”

A White woman? Morgan was biracial. She was so light that she was White passing when she wore her hair straight. So I had no idea what she was talking about. “Why do you think that?” I decided to indulge in her far-fetched fantasy.

“I don’t know. I just do.” She took a sip of her wine. I could tell she had things on her mind. “Tell me about this guy you met at work.”

“He comes into the office a lot. We started talking and I think he’s feeling me.”

“Wait. Hold up. He comes into the pediatrician’s office? So you saying he got a kid or kids?”

“No, I don’t know. I never asked him that.”

“Is he a FedEx driver or something? Because I know you know better than that.”

“He’s a pharmaceutical sales rep.”

“Is he White?” Her face morphed into a huge frown.

“No, of course not.”

“He’s Black.”

“Oh, for real? That’s a good job for a brotha.” She slapped her hand down on the countertop. “What’s wrong with him?”

I shrugged, thinking about the question. “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with him. I don’t know him well. He just stops in to peddle his drugs. We talk. He seems

like good people. That's it."

"Is he tall?"

"Now you know, you the only one that date short dudes."

"The short ones have all the money."

"That's not true. Plus, you have more money than every man you ever dated. I swear you don't make no sense."

"Okay yeah, first off I gets my coins, but they never know how much money I make."

"Now that's true. You are the queen of secrets."

"I will take that as a compliment. You need to stop opening up and telling these men all your business." She was right.

"Anyway, he's tall. He's fine, and I think he's normal."

"Ba-bee, your judgment is not good."

"No, no, no, don't do that. I picked one thug. It is not a pattern."

"I guess, child." She smacked her lips.

"Don't even try me like that."

"I'm not, but Lonzo Lopez is not one bad apple. He's the whole damn apple tree."

"That may be true, but I didn't know about his past. He hid it well. He acted like a

gentleman in the beginning.”

“He did. I will give you that. But I really don’t want you to jump into anything serious until this mess with Lonzo is over. He needs to be locked away in some prison downstate, upstate or in another state.”

“I agree.” She was right again.

“Get him gone before you even think about dating someone new.”

Morgan was trying to run my life. What else was new?

“His case is going to take forever to go to trial.” Probably an entire year, and since he was out on bail, I had to stay away. I wasn’t the only witness to his crimes, but I didn’t want to testify against him. The state was making me. I really hoped they changed their minds and didn’t call me to testify. They didn’t need me to put him away.

“Hey, Coco, straight up. I just would feel better if he was gone for good.”

“You? I will feel better if they locked him up and threw away the key.”

“I would be okay if he ate a bullet.”

Geez, that was harsh. I felt bad because I actually agreed with her. I just didn’t have the balls to say it out loud. Lonzo, six feet under, would solve all my problems. I shook my head yes.

“You should stay away from anyone with a penis.”

She had a good point. I shouldn’t even think about men. The last one was an epic fail.

Lonzo was a crafty chameleon. He was so nice the day we met. I just didn't even see whom he really was inside.

There was a brief silence between us as we finished off our first glass and we took turns pouring ourselves another.

It was late when we finished eating the Chinese food I had delivered. I missed hanging out with Morgan. I missed so many things from my old life. If you'd asked me to predict the future, I would've never guessed I would be in this situation. I fled my seemingly perfect life because of a man. I had never dated a Mexican, and if I live through this nightmare, I will never date another one. I'm over it and for now over dating at all.

We both drank wine until we were both between tipsy and drunk as a skunk. Morgan could drink me under the table, around the table, and on top of the table. After two glasses of wine, I was a giddy, giggly mess. I was a featherweight and my bright skin friend was a heavyweight.

After trying desperately to learn TikTok dances we were too old to master, we sprawled out on the couch to watch the classic vampire movie Blade. Morgan loved Wesley Snipes, and I just didn't get it. She thought he was fine, and I tried to never have any thoughts about the man. I had many things in common with Morgan, but our taste in men wasn't one of them .

I should've stopped drinking. By the end of the movie, I was three sheets to the wind. Morgan was getting there. She had the stomach of an Irish sailor.

"Hey, didn't you tell me there were a lot of old people in this building?" There she was with her random questions.

"Pretty much." I shook my head up and down.

“Are there any cute guys?”

“Cute guys?” I tried to think about her question. But it wasn’t looking good for me. I was at the intoxicated stage where I was going to repeat the words that were said to me. I was probably going to slur them as well. I knew myself.

“Yes, any cute ones in your building?” She repeated.

“Not any cute ones, but there is that one weird guy that lives in the basement. I guess it’s a basement apartment. It’s below ground.”

“Basements are below ground.” She smarted.

“Right, but it’s on the other side of the building. His apartment has a black door, and he’s down there with the storage spaces and the laundry room.” It seemed that I knew a little too much about my strange neighbor.

“What’s weird about him?” Morgan asked.

“He only comes out at night.” Something I found quite peculiar.

“Maybe he works the night shift.”

“I don’t think so. There’s no set time. He just only leaves his apartment at night.”

“Ohhhh, hell, he’s nocturnal. He must be a vampire.”

That was a leap, but I went with it. “One morning I left to go to the gym at five in the morning. It was still dark out and I saw him in the entryway. He didn’t see me. He had red paint all over him.”

“Red paint.” Morgan’s gray eyes bulged. “Child, that was blood. He’s a vampire. You live in the same building as Edward Cullen.” Morgan was somewhat excited about her wild declaration. My bestie was a vampire fan, just like me .

“He’s a little bit cooler than Edward Cullen. He’s more like Angel from Buffy.”

“Oh well. Maybe you should shoot your shot.”

“He’s White.” It tackily came out of my mouth because I always forgot Morgan was biracial. “I’m not shooting shit.”

“Girl, stop.” Morgan chuckled.

“You see what happened the last time I dated outside my race. I’m sticking with the brothers. At least I’ll know what I’m getting.”

“You trippin’. My dad is White, and he’s awesome.” That was true. “I didn’t say marry the vampire.”

“Well, what are you saying?”

“I’m saying let’s have a little fun.”

Her idea of fun was too mischievous for me. She was White passing, which came with White privilege. The things she could get away with, I couldn’t even think about. Sometimes she would forget that we weren’t the same. It wasn’t her fault. But I wasn’t too drunk to do anything that would get my Black ass in trouble. I knew better.

Morgan hopped off the couch. She strolled over to my little workstation by the window that faced the courtyard and the street. I watched her rummage through the

hodgepodge of things on my desk. She grabbed an ink pen out of my gold rhinestone cup. Opening the printer's drawer, she grabbed a single piece of the white copy paper. She trotted back over to me. What was she up to?

I missed Morgan and her antics. I was going to be depressed when she left me to go back to Minnesota. I wish I had a friend here in Chicago to distract me from the loneliness.

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CHAPTER TWO

ZAND

I took a cold shower and let the water cleanse me of my sins. In my recent past, I was a hell of a sinner. I hadn't been a bad boy for quite sometime. Then again, everyone had a different definition of bad.

Tonight, I was ready to get into something sinful and delicious. I towed off and dressed in all black. Some days I would spice it up with a splash of color, but that wasn't in the cards for tonight. I had fallen into a routine, and I had grown accustomed to the monotony. I'd done almost everything that life had to offer. I was on the quest for the mundane and regular. Living a slow and quiet existence wasn't as boring as I believed it would be.

I had a little basement apartment with only a few furnishings. I lived this way for over a year, and somehow I didn't long for more. Being content was underrated. I might even work behind the bar at The Castle. Maybe?

In the past, I never lived this way. I was finding it rather enjoyable. I was never tired, but running around in circles was getting old. Sleeping around never got old, but it seemed women were growing more vapid by the minute .

I checked my cell phone for the time: 11:48. I grabbed my black vintage leather jacket off the arm of the chair. It belonged to my old friend Elvis, and it was the only thing I had of his after his death.

Something was off. Something was different. Although all the lights were off, my eyes went from the front door and then to the floor. A folded white piece of paper was on the floor on the inside of my apartment.

I stopped, not because of fear, but because of the unknown. I looked around the room just to make sure there was nothing else amiss. I had been asleep, and I needed to know for sure that no one had entered my apartment without my consent. I hadn't had a woman over in days.

A quick scan of the room gave me the answer. I didn't smell anyone, and all my things were exactly as I had left them. I didn't have many things, so the assessment was a quick one to make.

Four steps toward the door, and I bent to retrieve the bright white note. I flipped it over to see it closer. I sniffed it to get just a hint of a grimy floor scent. I opened the paper and read:

Dear Mr. Vampire,

I know who you are. You only go out at night. You're the one with red stains on your clothes. You should be more careful. Stop drinking human blood and start drinking animal blood. Haven't you seen Twilight? People are trying to live. Life is precious. Do as I say, and your secret will be safe with me.

Signed, a Daywalker

My mouth formed into a slight smirk before a chuckle escaped my lips. This night was full of surprises. Someone was watching me, a glorious turn of events when I was usually the predator. The writer had to be a woman. No man would ever reference the Twilight movie in a note. I wondered why the immaculate handwriting asked if I'd seen Twilight instead of reading it. Do I look like the kind of man that

doesn't read books? I was impressed by the penmanship and the knowledge of vampire terminology. I've been known to enjoy a vampire movie from time to time.

I thought of a way to respond and pushed the thought away for a later time. I had somewhere to be. I would save this endeavor for another time. I shoved the note into my pocket. I exited my apartment and let the door automatically lock behind me. Privacy gave me solace. But being watched gave me a hard-on. Both were good. Aroused by a note instead of a naked woman only inches away from me. This was a first.

I walked up the stairs to the ground level and walked through the vestibule until I was out in the crisp night air. The chill was soothing on my clean skin. I looked up at the windows of the apartments on the left and then at the apartments on the right. Two out of the six residents had their lights on at this late hour. Second floor left was the new lady that wore scrubs, a nurse, possibly.

The other house light belonged to the middle-aged man that smelled of marijuana. He was an unregistered sex offender. He was living off the grid. He slept with a girl three years younger than him, back when he was eighteen. It didn't matter that teen lied about her age. Her parents filed charges, and he was branded forever. He did some time, and he's never gotten over it. Maybe he's never gotten over the girl.

Back to the note, this Daywalker was probably not even a resident of this apartment building. It could be any of the random women I had one-night stands with over the past year. One thing I knew for sure was I would soon find out. I had time. There was no rush. Time was on my side .

I walked out of the open gate into the courtyard and turned left. It would take me about ten minutes to walk to The Castle.

I took this walk often, but this time it felt different. It was like I sensed something

new was on the horizon. I needed something new. I was quite content in my little working class bubble, but I had to admit I could use a little mystery. Let me rethink that. I needed a little mystery without the drama, of course. Leaving L.A. was a necessity. I wasn't actually hiding, but I was trying to start anew. Bad relationships were not something I wanted to be bothered with. Been there, done that. I wasn't used to being tied down to anyone. I left California for liberation, and I swore I would never be exclusive to any one person.

I loved the life I built this year—a life full of parties and plentiful sex with a bevy of beauties. Sure, I got bored sometimes, but that was par for the course.

I heard the hard pounding of EDM beats an entire block away from The Castle. I never entered through the front entrance. I always cut through the private parking lot that led to the alley. I liked to slip in without a fuss.

Nick and Josh were always standing in the doorway, guarding the club's back entrance. Occasionally, people would try to sneak in through the back alleyway. The back door was only for famous visitors and special guests. There was a guest list for some and a waiting list for others. The private parking lot was only for the guests with expensive cars willing to pay one hundred dollars to have access to The Castle's hidden treasures.

Nick and Josh parted as soon as they saw me walk down the middle of the darkened alley. There was a single light and a video camera right above their heads. Some people called them bouncers, but I called them security specialists. It just gave their job titles a little more flair. Both men were six feet and six inches tall. I was slightly dwarfed, even with my six-foot two-inch frame. They greeted me with their customary head nod. I returned the gesture and stepped over the threshold and into the pulsating thud of loud, fast-paced music .

This was the night my favorite DJ was at the helm. Carpe Cool D was a young,

talented, transgender woman who wanted to still be referred to by his masculine pronouns— a truly bold decision but his to make. His skills were revolutionary, and I was a true music connoisseur. I knew good music. The deejay stage was across the bridge and over the moat. The Castle had a detailed drawbridge. It was quite a sight. The décor was that of a Scottish castle from the eighteen hundreds. The unique drink menu and the pool of water was a major attraction.

The Castle was quite mellow tonight. This, despite two rival actresses showing up and throwing shade and eye rolls at each other. They had both dated the same NBA player just a few months ago. Layla forced the salacious information on me. She was the club's events and public relations manager. She was good at her job and made sure The Castle was a premier hotspot in Chicago.

Layla wasn't my type, and I'd never slept with her. Mixing business with pleasure was never a good idea. But the note I received earlier made me horny, and I wanted to fuck someone. I had my pick of a club full of hot cover models and starlets, but I chose to keep my cock in my pants from time to time. This, sadly, was that time. I was moving at a different pace and I wanted to delay my sexual gratification.

After hours of being cooped up in my office and drinking too much. It was time for me to go back to my apartment. My night could've been full of mischief, but I didn't indulge. I had other things on my mind.

My short walk was more than pleasant. It started raining. I loved the rain. There was a magical essence about the rain. The air was a bit fresher and newer when it was pouring down. I didn't mind being wet. When I walked into my apartment, I dried off. I removed my jacket and checked the pockets .

The note, the silly, funny and flirtatious note, hadn't gotten wet. But it definitely needed to have another read-through. I smiled and gathered a black pen and a piece of paper to craft myself a proper reply.

Finding paper proved challenging. So I ripped a piece of paper from one of my old books. I flipped through a few before I could find a blank sheet. I wasn't one to usually deface books, but this was a special occasion.

I was no poet, but I never had a hard time expressing myself.

Dear person polite enough to call me Mr. but rude enough to judge me without knowing me. (That's you.)

I don't know what you think you know, but you shouldn't go around accusing people of being vampires. It's terribly impolite. Stalking is rude as well. Clearly, you have been watching me from afar. I refuse to admit to being undead. I'm not sure why people are always so hung up on labels. I don't know who you are. But you have piqued my curiosity. I think of myself as very observant. Nonetheless, I am clueless. You write like a human female. So that's all I can gather from your accusatory note. We should meet so you can air your grievances in person.

P.S. I stopped drinking human blood decades ago. Do your research, madam.

Signed,

Mr. Vampire

I felt quite proud of myself as I folded the note one time and slide my fingers to crease it. I taped it to my door that very night. I was up for a game of cat and mouse. I was up to masturbating in the shower. I wanted the woman who crafted this cryptic note. I didn't care what she looked like. All women were beautiful, and I was determined to fuck this clever siren at least one time.

CHAPTER THREE

CHANEL

Morgan and I got dressed up for a wild night on the town. I hadn't gone out much since I moved to Chicago. On my way to work, I passed this club that was only a few minutes away from my apartment. There was always a long line outside, so I thought it would be a good spot to take Morgan.

I couldn't remember the last time I went out for a drink. Actually, I could remember the last time. Lonzo took me out for drinks often. It was so hard for me to believe he was a monster. Worse, it was even harder for me to believe I fell for him. I thought he was a legit businessman. He was far from it. He was a stone-cold killer and the head of some Mexican drug crime family. It didn't matter now. Hopefully, he would be convicted of one or all the crimes he's committed and he would be gone forever.

Morgan was wearing black, her favorite color. She had her small boobs tucked into a bustier. I could never wear something like that because I would spill out. I needed support for my D's.

I had on a cute, tight electric blue tube dress that hugged my curves. It was chilly as always, but at least it wasn't raining again. My hair was spiral-curled all over. Morgan really did her thing with my hair. She was much better at fixing my hair than me. I really didn't know why? She had fine mixed chick's hair, and I never knew how she knew the perfect products for my 4b hair. But she did.

We stepped out of my apartment in our high heels and took the stairs down to the

ground level. It was her idea to not wear coats, although it was freezing outside. There was a chill as soon as I hit the apartment hallway. Morgan's car was parked in my apartment lot and she had seat warmers. I would be okay as long as we exited through the back of the apartment complex. There was no way I was going to walk around the entire complex to get to the parking lot.

Morgan was a shit starter. I should've known she wasn't going to let me walk to her car in peace and harmony. There was a minor argument slash debate on whether we should go down to the basement and take a peek at Mr. Vampire's door.

There was absolutely no way to know if my strange neighbor received my drunken crazy note from last night. I wasn't even sure the sentences were coherent or grammatically correct. It was just a silly game of dare.

After I wrote the note, Morgan was my proofreader. We took the back staircase and crept down to the basement. I was so nervous. My feet wouldn't carry me to Mr. Vampire's door. Morgan got fed up with my antics and snatched the note out of my hand. She pranced her ass right up to his door because I couldn't actually do it. Yesterday Morgan was the one that slid the note under his door. She ran back to where I was waiting like a coward. We both dashed up two flights of stairs until we were in the comfort of my apartment. Last night was fun just like always but today was a new day.

I wished I knew his name. His mailbox was the only one that didn't have a name on it. I didn't have anything to call him, but Mr. Vampire. Maybe I should have put the note in his nameless mailbox. I didn't think of it at the time. What's done is done.

I didn't want to go back to his lair now that I was completely sober. Morgan talked me into going back to the basement. I wanted to just get in her car and go to the club.

Mr. Vampire's door didn't have a peephole, so I didn't have to worry about him

watching us. I had to worry about him opening the door at the very moment we arrived at it and cold bustin' us acting childish and stupid.

We didn't take the elevator because the opening of the doors would be a little loud even though the elevator wasn't directly near his apartment. We took the stairs and our high heels were silent because of the carpet.

This whole thing was juvenile, but it was the most fun I had since being here in Chicago. I was an only child, with no parents, and I didn't have any family I was close to. I missed Morgan and how crazy we were when we were together. I had no idea when I would see her again, and I was okay with acting a bit out of my character.

As soon as we hit the last step to the basement, we paused. With Morgan on my heels, I crept around the corner toward his apartment. Like a neon sign glowing in a darkened hall, I saw the note attached to his door. I stopped in my tracks and grabbed Morgan's wrist so she could do the same.

"You see that?" I whispered in her ear after smacking my forehead into the side of her face.

"Yeah, oh, oh. It's a note. You think it's for you?" She frantically asked.

"I don't know." My heart picked up the pace. Was I really freaking out over a damn piece of paper? "You think?"

"Has to be."

"Maybe, I don't know."

"Go over there and get it." She goaded.

“It could be a trap.”

“Ah, I don’t think so.”

“You grab it.” I ordered, knowing that wouldn’t work with her.

“You grab it. He’s your secret vampire. ”

I laughed on the inside because he wasn’t anybody’s vampire. He was just some freakishly handsome White man that lived alone in my apartment complex. I’m sure he had a good reason why he was living in the basement. Maybe there weren’t any other apartments available when he moved in. Maybe he didn’t have his name on the community mailboxes because he had a P.O. Box at the local post office.

I mustered up all the courage I had in my throbbing heart. “Okay, I’m going to grab it. Come with me.”

“Gurl.” Morgan smacked her lips, and I knew that meant hell no. “I went yesterday. It’s your turn.”

She was right. It was my turn. I held my little clutch purse close to my side as I tiptoed the few steps it took to be at my neighbor’s front door. I was stealth as I could be in six-inch designer heels. I snatched the note off the door and was glad it came off easily. I sprinted back to Morgan, and we jetted up the stairs to the ground level.

I held the paper close to my chest as we both ran out the back door to the parking lot. Morgan was quick to unlock the car doors, and we both jumped into her plush, cold leather seats.

As soon as she locked the door, we both erupted in a barrage of giggles. I missed our stupid antics. It felt so good to be myself. I didn’t have to code switch. Being with

Morgan almost made me forget about the danger I was in and why I fled Minnesota.

“Read it! Read it!” She chanted.

“Drive the car away from the building.” I groaned.

I waited until we were out of my parking lot before I peeled the lone piece of tape off the note. I unfolded it and used the flashlight on my cell phone to read the note.

“What does it say?”

Excitement filled my heart when I shined the cell flashlight on the words written in black ink.

“Coco!” Morgan blurted my name as she turned the corner. She knew where she was going because she never went anywhere without an exact address she could map out beforehand .

“I’m going to read it.” I grinned as I skimmed the note. “Oh shit, it’s just a pizza menu.”

Morgan removed her eyes from the road to buck them out at me. “Coco, don’t play with me.”

“Okay, okay.” I fixed my face and started to read the note out loud.

Dear person polite enough to call me Mr. but rude enough to judge me without knowing me. (That’s you.)

“He put that’s me, in parentheses.” I said.

“Oh, he extra.” Morgan smacked her lips.

I don’t know what you think you know, but you shouldn’t go around accusing people of being vampires. It’s terribly impolite.

“Oh, he think he funny.” Morgan added.

Stalking is rude also. Clearly, you have been watching me from afar.

“Damn, he called you a stalker.” Morgan joked.

I refuse to admit to being undead. I’m not sure why people are always so hung up on labels. I don’t know who you are. But you have piqued my curiosity.

I think of myself as very observant. Nonetheless, I am clueless. You write like a human female. So that’s all I can gather from your accusatory note. We should meet so you can air your grievances in person.

“Oh, he wants to meet you.” Morgan gushed.

P.S. I stopped drinking human blood decades ago. Do your research, madam.

Signed,

Mr. Vampir e

“Okay, that was something.” I sighed with relief when I finished reading the note.

Morgan’s eyes stayed focused on the road. “It was cute and flirty.”

“Should I be scared?” I genuinely asked. I didn’t know where to go from here.

“Scared of what? You started this, and he was just trying to be funny. He could’ve ignored you all together. To me, it seems like he has a sense of humor.”

“Yeah, but now it’s going to be weird when I see him. We live in the same building.”

“He doesn’t even know it’s you.”

“You’re right, and I never run into him. When I see him, he never even notices me.”

“Maybe you should introduce yourself.”

“No way.”

“Yeah, just be cool. Take it slow. Write him another note. See if he gets weird. Hey, can I park on the street over here?”

I pointed to the right. “No, turn here. You can park on this street. We just have to walk a few blocks and freeze our asses off.”

“The margaritas will warm us up.”

Morgan made a right at the corner. She found a parking space and showed me her impeccable parallel parking skills. I wanted to take pictures for the Gram because my girl and I were looking so damn hot to death. That was definitely not an option, because I wasn’t sure if Lonzo had access to Morgan’s social media accounts. I don’t know why I let the thought of that man enter my head when I was supposed to be having fun with my friend.

The walk to the entrance of The Castle wasn’t too bad. My heels were broken in, since I had them for a few years.

Of course, there was a long line. We stood out in the cold for six minutes. That was before a tall blonde woman that could easily be a supermodel looked at both of us and said, “Come with me.”

Morgan grabbed my hand, and we followed the beautiful woman down the sidewalk and to the front entrance. She turned to us and her blonde hair whipped around like she was in a shampoo commercial.

“You both over twenty-one?” The blonde asked with an accent I couldn’t quite decipher.

“Yes.” Morgan blurted.

“Good.” The bombshell looked us up and down. “Follow me.”

We trailed behind the woman as she made long-legged strides right through the metal detectors, past the cashier, and to the first bar.

The hostess whipped around to smile widely at us. “The first drink is free ladies. Enjoy The Castle.” She waved her hand around to the tattooed bartender and he came right over with his perfect purple hair.

“What are you beauties drinking tonight?”

“Two Patron Silver margaritas.”

“Coming right up?” The bartender smiled and winked at us. Or maybe he winked at Morgan. It was hard to tell. He sauntered away to mix our drinks.

“Did you have to do the most?” I asked.

“Yes, I did. Charlize said the first drink was free. I like free shit.”

“Right, she did look like Charlize with long hair.”

“This music is different. But I like it. It’s all Coachella slash Lollapalooza.”

“It is.” I agreed.

We stood at the bar for only a few minutes before our drinks were handed over. Morgan was ready with a tip, but the bartender picked up the money and handed back to her. That’s never happened before, but it was a cool thing. I took a sip, and the tequila was strong .

We took our drinks and walked across the crowded room. The club was rustic on the inside. The décor was stone, like real stone, I think. There was an actual castle inside The Castle. At the top of the tower housed the deejay booth, only accessible by a bridge. Whoever designed this place had a really vivid imagination. I could see why there was a line outside. The hospitality was stellar, and the crowd was a good mix of all ethnicities despite the medieval times style.

I glanced up at the top of the tower and there he was, my mysterious neighbor. He was standing there next to the deejay and a woman. He was talking to the lady as the deejay bobbed his head to the music. I couldn’t believe he was here. He didn’t seem like the type that would be in a nightclub. I didn’t know what type he was, but I just didn’t imagine loud music and crowds were something he was into.

“Hey.” I leaned into Morgan’s ear. “That guy up there.”

“Where?”

I inconspicuously pointed my drink in his direction. “At the top of the tower.”

“Where?”

I raised my voice an octave. “At the top of the tower.”

Morgan’s body and face moved in the right direction. “Which one?”

“The guy in all black.”

“He’s fine.”

“That’s my neighbor.”

“What neighbor?”

“Mr. Vampire.”

“Oh shit, he don’t look weird at all.”

Well, he wasn’t weird in this environment. He was dressed hip and cool. His hair was even combed. Nothing like I’d seen him when I got a rare glance at him. He was usually dressed like a homeless serial killer.

It didn’t matter. I was determined to have a good time. I was also keen on staying out of his line of sight. I doubted he would recognize me as his neighbor. He never looked my way. As far as I could tell, I was a ghost to him, even though my melanin was popping.

I was here to drink, dance with strangers, and have a good time. I was going to do just that. I knew I wouldn’t be able to stop thinking about the note he taped to his door. He intrigued me, and I wasn’t going to act like he didn’t.

We only had a little over two hours in the club before we had to call it a night. Hurting feet, aching legs and a few drinks too many meant time to head out. The ride home was quiet. We didn't bother to turn the radio on. We still had the music from the club banging in our ears. I drank more than I should. I wanted to let my hair down in this new town where no one knew my past or me.

I should've been fast asleep as soon as I got inside my apartment. But the note was in my head and in my drunken heart. Morgan didn't even remove her dress when she climbed under the duvet.

Seeing my neighbor at The Castle lit a fire under me. I had to respond to his note. Writing it sober would've probably been the best option, but I wasn't sober, so hopefully the words I put down would make some sense.

I found a pen in my top drawer and I went into my printer to grab a fresh piece of white copy paper. After rewriting the letter three times, I settled with this Shakespearean masterpiece.

Dear Mr. Vampire,

I'm not sure why you need to talk to me. I thought I made myself perfectly clear. I'm human and you're not, so please state your grievances and place them under the big brown flowerpot near the bushes at the rear of the building where you live. I'm only going to collect your note during the sunny light of day. So don't even think about trying to figure out my identity. I have the light of the sun on my side and I bought some crucifixes too.

Signed, a Bossy Daywalker

It was liquid courage that compelled me. I took the stairs down to the basement. I kept with tradition and was going to slide my note under the door. Instead of moving

slowly, I wanted to hurry and get this part over with. I knew my nocturnal neighbor was still at the club, and that gave me more comfort and bravery.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHANEL

Blue was the color of the day. Depressed was the feeling of my current life. My best friend was gone, and it had been two days since I shoved my playful note under his door. I checked the flowerpot three times and there was nothing there. I guess our little game of cat and mouse was over. I looked forward to his communication and was disappointed when he stopped writing to me.

I went right back to my regular routine: work, home, clean the apartment, and cook. Today was laundry day. I let my dirty clothes pile up. I needed to wash my scrubs for work tomorrow morning. I wore my last clean shirt today. I took the elevator down to the basement. I got a glimpse at his dark door and there was nothing there. The flirty little party was over, and it hurt more than I thought it would. Whatever, I told myself. His loss.

I wheeled my rolling plastic hamper around the corner and into the laundry room. The lights were on. I wasn't in the mood to be bothered by anybody, but he was there. Mr. Vampire was sitting on top of a washing machine, with his bare feet dangling in the air. Yuck, where are his shoes? The floor was hella dirty. I knew he was a weirdo and here was the proof, the pudding and the total grossness .

His chiseled face was buried deep into a hardcover book. He was wearing tattered dark blue jeans and an old black t-shirt. He didn't bother to look up at me, although I was in the same room with him and my hamper was making squeaky noises.

I realized this could be because he didn't hear me with the earbuds in his ear. Or he could just be a jerk. I was trying to give Mr. Dirty Feet the benefit of the doubt.

I tried to regulate my heartbeat. I had to admit he made me nervous. I laughed inside when I thought about his vampire status. I hope he can't read minds. My eyes scanned all five washing machines, and it was clear. There were no available machines for me. Uh, what kind of fuckery is this?

Finally, he looked up at me with his abnormal but alluring amber-colored eyes. He slowly removed the earbuds from his ears. "Oh sorry, all the machines are taken."

He had an actual voice. He talked. Oh shit, he was talking to me. His voice wasn't what I expected. It was deep, clear, and pulsating.

I cleared my throat. "It's okay. I can come back later."

"I only have about ten minutes left on my machine. You should stay, so no one else gets my machine."

"Ten minutes?"

"Give or take a few minutes."

I was frozen in place. I didn't know what to do with the information he provided.

His voice was like liquid fire. I'd never heard it before today, and he was actually talking to me.

His eyes blinked slowly. "Or you could just leave your clothes with me and I can put your load in the machine for you."

What? He sensed my apprehension, or he could see it on my face.

I tried to brighten my face with a lift in my eyebrows. “Ah, no, that’s okay. Ten minutes isn’t long at all.”

He pushed his earbuds back into his ears, and then sunk his head back into his book .

I guess the conversation was over. I felt dismissed, disregarded and just dissed. That was all he had for me. He was rude. I said it, rude. He had the nerve to call me rude in his little note to me.

He doesn’t know I’m his special pen pal. I wondered if he would act definitely if he knew. Obviously, he’s not a vampire. I probably shouldn’t have joked with him like that.

Looking at him now, he didn’t seem so weird. He didn’t seem dangerous. He seemed regular. There hadn’t been any murders or deaths in my apartment building since I’ve been here. I’m sure he was harmless, but my judgment sucked ass. He reads, and a man that reads actual books is hard to find.

Mr. Vampire was even more attractive up close. He was well toned and muscular. He wasn’t as thin as I initially thought. Maybe I had him pegged wrong. He offered to put my dirty clothes in the wash. That was nice, right?

I didn’t know what to do with myself. I wanted to flee from the laundry room, but that would be odd. Or was it odd for me to just stand here like a stalker? He did call me one. I smiled to myself, replaying the words of his note over in my head. I had the note memorized. I was pathetic for putting his words to memory, but I didn’t have anything else better to do. I was alone here in the city of Chicago, without any family or friends. I was letting my imagination run away with me. I had a lot of imagination.

He was reading Stephen King's Doctor Sleep. I was impressed. Sadly, that was always my problem with men. I gave all their normal deeds more weight than they deserved. Reading books shouldn't be looked on as anything special.

I reached down and took my laundry basket across the room. I pulled my cell phone out of my back pocket. I had to pretend to do something while I waited to get a washing machine. I opened my cell and turned the volume down. I checked my one hundred and eighty-seven emails. I started scrolling, Sephora Insider, DSW, Fenty Beauty, Best Buy, Bergdorf Goodman, Capital One?—

“Hey.” His voice jumped across the room.

I twirled around to see if he was talking to me. Of course he was talking to me. I was the only one in the laundry room.

“Yeah.” I said, as his amber eyes pierced me.

“Are you Taylor?”

“No, yes, ah, I, my last name is Taylor.” Shit! I sound stupid.

“Huh, right.” He closed his book and placed it on the washing machine beside him.

“I'm Co, I'm Chanel. My name is Chanel.”

“Chanel, huh, second floor?”

I shook my head. “I've only been here for a few months.”

“How do you like it so far?”

“It’s okay. What floor are you on?” I knew the answer, but he didn’t have to know that.

His lips twisted. “Here, down here. My place is here in the basement.”

“Oh, that black door by the elevator.”

“Yes.”

“Oh, okay. I thought that was a storage room or something.” Oh, I was lying too damn good.

“It’s an entire apartment.”

“Oh.” I couldn’t think of anything else to say. “Your name? What’s your name?”

“Zand.”

“Zand, I’ve never met a Zand.” I was trying to stay casual and cool and not look like a goddamn fool.

“It’s Alexander. But why waste that many syllables on me? I’m not worth it.” He grinned with just the corner of his lips.

“Zand.” A woman’s voice came from the doorway. I whipped my head around to see a tall, leggy brunette standing at the entrance of the laundry room. Her face was bare of product, but she was still naturally attractive. Her hair was long with a hint of a curl. A short, skintight red dress clung to her model body like a second skin. She was holding her high heel sandals in her hand.

“Bai-ley.” He said her name slowly and precisely, like he was trying to recall it. He

gracefully hopped off the washing machine.

She smiled at him but didn't enter the laundry room. "You're really doing laundry. I thought you ran out on me."

"Never." He flashed a grin, and I saw the sexy, deep dimple in his cheek.

"Who's your friend?" Her eyes scanned me casually.

"My upstairs neighbor, Chanel."

"Hey Chanel." She gave me a quick wave.

"Hey." I returned her wave and turned my back to give them some privacy. In my peripheral, I could see him move towards the open door where she stood.

Something about this screamed booty call. I'd never seen this woman Bailey before. I'd seen more than a few young women emerge from the building in the wee hours of the night. I knew they had to be coming from his basement apartment, even though I had no proof. Before I got my sleeping pills, my insomnia would keep me up. That's when I noticed a flock of random, scantily clad women that would do a walk of shame from the apartment building.

There was silence while he was gone for a few minutes. Mr. Vampire strolled back into the room like nothing happened. I hadn't accepted the name Zand. He didn't look much like a Zand, a Zander or and Alexander to me. He looked like his name would be Ryan, or Matt, or possibly Ethan. I was still stuck on calling him Mr. Vampire, for now.

Why hadn't he written me another note? Was it Bailey that had distracted him from our harmless fun and games?

Zand walked over to his washing machine. “My clothes stopped.”

He started removing a few items at a time and tossing them into the empty dryer a few feet away. All his clothes were dark black, faded black, dark gray and just black-black. I watched him carefully, and I convinced myself that he had a small penis and I wasn't missing a thing.

I waited patiently while he removed all his things.

“Your turn, Chanel.” This was an odd thing to say, but not so much coming from him.

“You sure?” I playfully asked, not sure where the sass was coming from. I wheeled my basket over to the open machine.

“I'm more than sure.” He stopped and turned to glare at me.

I smiled inside and started tossing my clothes into the washer. “I can knock on your door and let you know your clothes are dry. If you need to go hang out with Bailey.”

He chuckled. “Bailey has left the building.”

“That's too bad.” I joked. I didn't own this man.

“Is it?” He asked.

I shrugged. “She seems nice.”

“One-night stands are nice. So I guess you're right.”

I heard him start his dryer. I pursed my lips; sure that he couldn't see me. “I wouldn't

know anything about one-night stands.”

“There’s no fun in that.”

I closed the lid to the washer. I looked down to reach for quarters in my front pocket when I felt his presence only inches away from me. He was putting quarters into my machine. When he finished, he turned to me.

“A gift. Welcome to the neighborhood, neighbor.” He cracked a sly smile.

I couldn’t speak. He was so close to me, and those honey-colored eyes of his were hypnotic.

“Th, thank you.” I had to watch my nervous stammer.

Zand grabbed his book off the nearby washing machine. “I guess I’ll see you around.”

I watched him stroll out of the room like he didn’t have a care in the world. He wasn’t weird at all. After talking to him, he seemed cool, too cool. Zand was the kind of guy that was full of mystery and full of himself. Basically, the kind of guy my dumb ass should stay far away from. The cool guy road was a road I wanted to stay far away from. My next guy friend will be a socially awkward nerd.

I waited a few minutes and then left my clothes to wash. Instead of going up to my apartment, I went to the back entrance of the apartment building by the parking lot. I covertly glanced around. When the coast was clear, I tilted the flowerpot and there it was, another note from Mr. Vampire. My face warmed with delight, and my body did the same. When did he put this here? I contained my smile the best I could. This was something to look forward to.

CHAPTER FIVE

CHANEL

Two at a time, I quickly took the stairs to my apartment and concealed the note inside my shirt. I was so nervous with the piece of paper you would think I had military secrets concealed in my bra. The coast was clear when I stepped into my place. I locked my apartment door. I felt comfortable enough to remove the note but not confident enough to read it just yet.

I wanted to call Morgan and tell her about my random meeting with Zand. I wanted to read the note to her so we both could experience it at the same time. I needed to take a nap because I was overwhelmed with just how childish I was being about a man I really didn't know. From what I could tell, we clearly had nothing in common. All I knew was we both read books. We both liked clean clothes, but that wasn't enough for even a half-ass friendship.

There was no rush. I could always tell Morgan about Zand later. Zand— now I knew his name. I had just a little more information about him. I was one step closer to something. I just didn't know what.

I still needed to dry my clothes and go to the grocery store. My friend Morgan was a little bitty thing, but she ate like a horse, a cow and three elephants. I had to replenish all the stuff she helped herself to. I needed to grab some basic staples like eggs, milk, and bread. I loved feeding her. It was the least I could do. She drove all the way here to cheer me up. She was a true friend.

As much as I wanted to save the note for later, I just couldn't do it. I was too thrilled by the little things in life. Patience was a virtue that I lacked at the moment. I had to open the note and read it. So here goes...

Dear persistent Daywalker,

If you went through the trouble of retrieving this letter, it is clear you have a genuine, huge crush on me. As stated before, you are a stalker, my stalker. I am flattered. I love all the attention you've poured on me. It's bloody fang-tastic! Is this a wise correspondence if I am believed to be a blood drinker? If you play with fire, you will get burnt. If you play with vampires, you will get bitten or...

P.S. What's your blood type, asking for a friend?

Signed,

Mr. Vampire

I hated how these notes made me feel inside my tiresome body. They were the highlight of my life. I looked forward to this unusual distant connection, more than I wanted to admit. Zand put a smile on my face and he made me feel normal and safe. It didn't make much sense. I didn't even know why these feelings manifested toward this particular man. One thing was for sure, he took my mind off of Lonzo. That was a blessing.

It was better to think about my one-night-stand having neighbor than the man that was out on bail and probably going to murder me. Knowing I would have to testify against Lonzo in court gave me anxiety. I didn't want to be a witness to his crimes. I wanted to end the relationship, but he wouldn't let me go. Regardless, the Bloomington Police Department had other plans for me. So did the Minnesota State's attorney on the case.

For the time being, I vowed to block that all out. It was best to savor the note from Zand and craft a witty rebuttal. My response would be different this time, bolder, smarter, and feistier.

Dear Mr. Vampire,

Question, (crush on you) are all vampires so presumptuous? Do you think I write about you in my Vampire Diaries? I have been known to play with fire because I am flame resistant, fire retardant and non-flammable. Calling me a stalker is not much of an insult. I am purely interested in the safety of humankind. Tell me you are harmless and I will feel much better about your nocturnal comings and goings. If I play with vampires I will get bit??? I didn't realize we were playing, but I do enjoy games.

Respectfully, my blood type is none of your concern.

Signed, Hot Daywalker

The flirting that was happening between Zand and me didn't seem to be going anywhere. Where could it go? I was hiding behind a pen and paper. There was no way in hell I had the courage to reveal my true identity to him. This was just a harmless flirtation. He didn't know my identity, and there was no guarantee he wouldn't be pissed off if he discovered my deceitfulness.

I had the opportunity to tell him I was the author of the notes when I formally met him in the laundry room. If I revealed my identity, he would probably think I was immature. I couldn't blame him. The entire thing was silly.

There were other men in the world. There was one currently in my orbit. I had a genuine connection with this guy named Shawn. He would stop by the office and chat me up at least three times a week. After exchanging numbers, loads of texts and a few phone conversations, I took the leap and agreed to meet him for drinks at The Castle.

I picked the place. Then wished I didn't. I couldn't figure out if I wanted to see Zand. I didn't even know what made me think he would be there after only seeing him once. He didn't seem like the type who frequented nightclubs. But then again, where else was he meeting females?

I met Shawn at The Castle. I didn't want him to know exactly where I lived. He seemed harmless, but I couldn't trust my own instincts when it came to men. Shawn looked and seemed like the perfect guy, but if he was so perfect, why was he single? Could be many reasons, but I was on a mission to take it slow.

Shawn dressed nicely, and he hadn't missed the mark tonight. He was wearing a nice pair of black slacks and a tan cable-knit sweater. He could easily give Morris Chestnut a run for his money.

After two drinks, I cut myself off. Shawn would not see the three-drink Chanel tonight. Mainly because three-drink Chanel could easily turn into four-drink Chanel given the circumstances. Being lonely and horny was never a good reason to sleep with a man, and I needed to keep my head clear. I also needed to keep my legs locked at the knees.

The conversations I had with Shawn were always pleasant. This night was no different. We hit up the dance floor for a few fast-paced songs and he had all the moves. As much as I wished I could just have casual sex with a man, it just wasn't my thing. I wasn't in any position to proceed forward. I didn't want to hurt people, and I definitely didn't want to be hurt. Moving too fast was not in my present or future plans.

Since Shawn and I were in the getting to know you stage, I didn't have any real feelings for him. He was a nice guy. Sure, he was fine and sexy. He seemed sweet, but I wasn't by any means falling for him. It usually took me awhile to catch feelings. Mr. Perfect was no different. I had my guard up. I was going to vet every man to the

fullest, moving forward.

Shawn briefly left me to go to the restroom. He had three drinks, and I knew that was coming soon. I found a small place in the corner a few feet from the bar to check my makeup. I hoped I wouldn't get hit on. I made sure to put my resting bitch face on until Shawn came back.

I was only standing idle for two minutes tops when I felt the tap on my shoulder. Who the hell put their grimy paws on me? I was ready to turn around with a fake smile that could instantly turn into pure vitriol in a millisecond.

Zand!

"Hey, I know you." His killer smile slapped me hard across my face.

"Yeah, you-um, live in my apartment building." I stumbled over my words. I was nervous around this sexy man, and I wasn't sure why. He was just a man.

"Yes, Chanel, we're neighbors, that sometimes wash clothes at the same time."

"Yes, that's true."

"Did you forget about me already?"

"No, no. I just didn't expect to see you here." The lie detector determined that was a lie. "Do you?—"

"Are—, no, you go first." He politely offered.

"Do you come here, often?" I knew it was a dumb question when I asked it, but it flew out my mouth any damn way.

“I do.”

“Oh.” My eyes searched the room for some kind of anchor. I couldn’t keep looking into his honey-colored eyes. I was going to start singing— baby, it’s the eyes for me, it’s the eyes for me. I need to stop spending so much time on TikTok.

“Are you here alone or on a date?”

“A date.” I blurted.

“That’s too bad. Come back tomorrow so I can show you around.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes, come back tomorrow.”

“I don’t know. I work. I have to go to work.”

“You work in the daylight hours. You can play in the nighttime hours.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

His eyes scanned me up and down and then up again. He licked his lips in a sexy way that was alluring and unnerving.

“Chanel, here comes your date.” I looked back to see all six feet, two inches of Shawn walking toward us. “Hey.” Zand drew my attention back to him. He leaned in close and angled away from my lips and over to my ear. “He’s okay, but you can do better.”

I felt his breath on my earlobe and it sent sparks of carnal lust to my unused lady

parts. My heartbeat skipped, but I still had my voice.

I batted my eyelashes and glared at him. “You think so?” Who was this flirty version of me?

“Tomorrow night, go to the front of the line and show them your I.D.”

I blinked once and then he was gone. He had slithered through the crowd like a human snake and disappeared like a ghost. I got my flustered face together, hoping Shawn wouldn't see that I had been mesmerized by this other man.

Far too soon, Shawn was standing right in front of me. I looked up at him, hoping my eyes didn't convey any signs of guilt. Looking at him, I could tell that Shawn and Zand were the same height.

“Who was that?” Shawn asked .

“I don't know.” Why did I lie? I could've easily said Zand was my neighbor. He is actually my neighbor. That much was true. “Just some random guy.”

“I shouldn't have left you alone.”

I forced a smile onto my face. “No sir, you shouldn't.” I don't know why I wanted to flee the scene like I committed a crime. I didn't do anything wrong. Shawn hadn't done anything wrong. It was Mr. Vampire that messed me up with his hypnotic eyes and luscious ass lips. I had a long list of famous White men I thought were fine. I'd never had this level of attraction for one in real life. I couldn't understand why, but Zand was different. He was sexy without trying to be, and I felt a strong magnetism toward him. I had to snap out of it. I was being ridiculous. Zand wasn't checking for me.

I looked down as Shawn took my hand in his. He led me to the bar and ordered drinks. Mine had to be alcohol free. I could do one more hour at the club. Then I would tell him I was tired. I was. That wasn't a lie.

CHAPTER SIX

CHANEL

In true gentlemanly fashion, Shawn walked me to my car. He gave me a brief and tender kiss on the lips that I accepted gracefully. Although sweet, his kiss didn't give me butterflies or even a slight tingle below the waist. I wished I felt something more for him. Shawn would be the easier choice, probably even the better choice.

Someone else had stolen his thunder and I couldn't shake the giddy feeling I had when I thought about Zand. A kiss from him would be something to remember. I just knew it would be good for me. I wondered if the attraction I felt for Zand was mutual. I really didn't know.

It took just a few minutes for me to drive home. My tank was close to empty, but it was too late to stop and get gas. I didn't want to get kidnapped and murdered. My neighborhood seemed safe enough, but this was still Chicago and the reputation of this city was nothing to play with.

In minutes, I'd made it home safely. I hadn't drunk enough booze to be stumbling around, but I still hurried from my car and dashed across the parking lot to the back door of my apartment complex .

I didn't know why I checked it, but I did. I tilted the flowerpot with no valid expectations. I knew Zand was at The Castle. He was probably chatting up some supermodel looking chick. Or worse, deciding which Instagram starlet he would bring home with him. I was sure he wasn't thinking about writing another silly note

for a perfect stranger.

Stop! Drop! Open up shop! This time I was wrong. To my surprise, there was another note. Elation flooded my body from head to toe. I couldn't wait until I was safe and sound in the confines of my apartment. I wanted to wait, but I had no chill. I needed to read the note right where I stood. Or a few steps from the doorway and into the hallway where it was warmer.

Dear Human Stalker, Hot Daywalker, and Firestarter,

Are you still stalking me? I think we both know the answer to that one. If I told you I was 200 years old, would you believe me? Have you ever considered the possibility that I am an actual vampire? I could have special powers. I may possess psychic abilities. I am incredibly strong. Maybe even immortal. I could pay another Daywalker to watch you remove this letter from under the flowerpot. Then I would know who you are and I could do bad things to you. That is, if I am a True Blood.

With an invitation, you should Let The Right One In.

Don't be afraid. I'm closer than you think. Look around. I could be watching you.

Signed,

Mr. Vampire

The crisp October chill slapped my bare, shaved legs. The letter floated from my fingers and landed on the ground near the flowerpot. My hands trembled. Was someone watching me remove the letter? Was Zand watching me now? There was no way. It couldn't be my special vampire. I left him at the club. It's not like he could fly over here. He doesn't even drive. I thought I was being careful. It was clear. He was just messing with me. My mind was running wild and, more likely, I was tired and

imagining things.

My eyes jetted around the parking lot. There were only parked cars. I quickly grabbed the note off the ground and sprinted into the apartment building. I dashed up the stairs. I searched my small purse for my apartment key, only to realize I had the key in my hand all along.

When I was locked up, safe and sound in my apartment, I knew how silly I was being. These were playful, innocent notes about fictional vampires. Zand was no threat to me. Besides, what would he do if he learned the truth? Nothing really, I suppose. The most he could do was stop talking to me. It would hurt for a few days and then I would get over him, just like every other man from my past.

I was tripping, big time. He couldn't know my true identity. He would confront me. He didn't seem like the kind of guy that would hold back. His cute little notes were giving me some insight into his personality. He was clever, smart and funny. I wanted to know more about him.

I was too exhausted to take a shower. I peeled off my dress, and I climbed into bed naked. I didn't normally sleep in the nude, but going into a drawer and removing pajamas seemed like too much work. I only had the energy to plug my cell phone into the charger, throw on my silk bonnet, and tuck my body into the comfort of my duvet.

My workday went smoothly. Working with kids was always more rewarding than working with adults. Sick adults acted more like babies than actual babies. I spent my entire lunch break in my car. It was cold, so I had to turn on the car to get some heat circulating. I called Morgan to tell her everything that happened with Shawn and Zand. The Shawn part she found boring. I hated that I found that part boring as well.

She had a trillion and one questions about Zand. I couldn't answer any of them. I

really didn't know much about him at all. I only knew I had a strong attraction to him. I only knew what he shared with me in his vampy notes. That wasn't much. I needed more. I had to be careful. Not knowing a man's backstory got me into trouble once before. I couldn't travel down that road again.

As soon as I got home from work, I peeled off my scrubs and hopped in the bathtub. I needed a nice hot bubble bath to relax me. I needed to figure out my next move. I had made up my mind. I was going to prance my fast ass into The Castle and get the tour Zand had offered. I had no idea what his tour would entail, but I was hell-bent on finding out. I was up for the adventure just as long as it wasn't too adventurous.

Going to any club two nights in a row was a bit much for someone my age. I needed my rest, my peace, and my beauty sleep. I took a one-hour nap so I could recharge and hit the streets with a little energy. As I went to plug my cell phone into the charger, I saw Shawn had sent a text. I hesitantly responded and only shared that I was taking a nap. I didn't want to lead him on. I closed my eyes and thought about what I was doing. Those thoughts were fleeting. I was asleep in minutes.

I was startled by the blaring sound of my cell phone alarm clock. It didn't stop me from my goal. My mind was made up. I was going to hit them streets. I made dinner and showered. I wanted to be full and refreshed when I arrived at The Castle. I took my time getting ready when I normally rushed. I didn't want to get overheated, and I wanted to take my time putting on my makeup. I was going for a sexy look with a natural face. I wanted to look like I tried, but wasn't trying too hard. If Zand wasn't interested, I didn't want to feel stupid with a face full of glammed up makeup.

One hour of preparation and priming and I was ready to hit the Chicago streets. I slipped my feet into my Dolce and Gabbana red Nappa leather pumps with the trademark letter DG heel. The pump was a one thousand dollar gift from my ex gangster boyfriend. The shoes were pretty but held no value to me. I never wanted to be a gangster's girlfriend. I didn't know I was even in the role until the very end of

the relationship.

I grabbed my leather clutch and my little piece of paper and made my way out of my apartment. I locked my door and carefully walked down the stairs. Instead of going out on the ground level, I walked down one more flight to the basement. I looked around and was happy to see that I was by myself.

Before I dressed for the night, I was able to pen another little note.

Dear Mr. Vampire,

Your brazen use of the word stalker is quite comical. You're watching me far more than I'm watching you. Are you saying you have a Vampire's Assistant? Did you hire them from the Vampire Academy? A real vampire wouldn't have to pay anyone to spook me. If you want to lurk in the Dark Shadows, that's okay or you can come up and show yourself. By the way, what's your name? Lestat? Nosferatu? Bill Compton?

Signed, a Daywalker

It only made sense for me to write Zand another message. I knew he wasn't at home. He was at The Castle. I awkwardly bent to push the note under his door. I felt a rush of adrenaline run through my body. This was fun. I needed fun.

In my heels, I jogged to the back door. Just as I stepped into the parking lot, my cell phone buzzed. I pulled it from my small handbag. It was Shawn calling again. I just couldn't do it. I didn't answer. I held the cell phone as I walked to my car. When I didn't answer; he left me a text. I waited to text him back. I had somewhere to be. I had a sexy man to see.

I pulled out of my assigned parking space. Driving the speed limit, I sang along with Dua Lipa as she belted out Levitate. In just a few minutes, I made my way to The

Castle.

I didn't have to wait in line and I didn't have to pay. The same tall blonde was there to escort me into the building without any fuss. A few young women rolled their eyes at me, and the special treatment I was receiving as a brown girl. I had to admit I was dressed cute tonight. My hair was bouncing like I had a silk press and my edges were laid. My face was beat to the gods, for the gods, and by the gods. I was feeling myself.

I followed the tall golden-haired woman into the heart of the club. I didn't know her name, and I wished I did. With a smooth and graceful pivot, she turned to me. Her blue eyes peered right into me.

"Go to the main bar. Mr. Valentine will be with you soon." The Amazonian blonde spoke without any real infliction in her voice. She extended her hand in the direction of the bar. I took my cue.

"Thank you." I muttered.

She watched me walk away. I tried to look as calm and confident as I could. I knew I looked good, but I wanted to act the way I looked in a room full of equally beautiful people.

I had another piece of the Zand puzzle. My Mr. Vampire was really Mr. Valentine. Mister amber eyes was Alexander Valentine. I was going to Google it as soon as I had a chance. I knew I shouldn't, but I had been a fool before. Never again.

I stood in this little spot between the bar and the wall. I nervously smoothed my tan leather-look dress down. This dress hugged my body and accented my deep brown skin. I looked around the place and nothing had been changed since yesterday. The thought of being a club regular made me feel old.

I was left alone with my thoughts for too long. I wondered if Zand was a club regular. How did he make a living? He never went to a job in the daytime. Before I could bolt toward the door, Zand sauntered his way through a crowd that parted like he was someone of importance. Was he someone of importance? I realized his tour of the club might be a real one and not just a ploy to get me to hang out with him. I didn't have time to mull it over. He was here, in my face, smirking, looking sexy and like a dark-haired vampire Lestat. Rest in peace to Anne Rice. She sure knew how to write some sexy ass vampires.

"You showed." His dark brow hitched.

"You didn't think that I would?" I couldn't conceal my smile.

"It was a fifty-fifty chance."

"I didn't have anything else to do." I nonchalantly added. I was joking. I hope he got the joke.

"There were plenty of other things to do." He called me out. "You chose me."

I twisted my lips at him and his brazenly arrogant statement. Cocky much?

"I chose the tour."

"Yes, the tour." Zand lifted his elbow out from his side.

I paused before I realized he wanted me to hook my arm in his. I did as he expected and willed my armpits not to sweat.

We walked across the room. But I felt like I was gliding.

“You look lovely.” He held me closer to his side.

“Thank you.” My heart started beating so fast it felt like Serena Williams hit me in the chest with a tennis ball.

Zand led us past a burly security guard that was standing in a darkened hallway. There were rooms on each side of the hall, but we walked to the end of the hall where elevator doors were closed. Zand typed a code into the elevator keypad. In seconds, the elevator doors quietly parted.

Okay, this is happening. What is actually happening?

CHAPTER SEVEN

ZAND

There was something about Chanel, something special, fresh, alluring. She was unique. I couldn't stop thinking about her. I couldn't sleep thinking about her. She was in my dreams. She was in my waking thoughts. I hoped she would accept my invitation for a tour.

When she magically appeared at The Castle, I had to fight to keep my composure. I fought to hold back a smile. This was the feeling I had when I liked a girl in high school. I hadn't felt this way in a very long time and I felt this way about Chanel.

Stunning was the first word that came to my muddled mind. Chanel was even more beautiful than she was yesterday. She showed up in a sexy, sandrift-colored fitted dress. I wanted to rip from her body. Did she wear it for me? Was she trying to tempt me? Did she know how good she looked in this dress?

Something about this particular woman rocked my confidence. That feat was rather difficult for any woman. I was always on an elevated level of arrogant. I would never claim that all women were the same, but I never felt such warmth radiating from any other woman.

Her alluring brown eyes seemed to gaze deeper into me than I wanted to acknowledge. It could all be in my head, but there was a tingle in the air, a chemistry that I was sure that I wasn't making up in my wild, kinky imagination whenever she was near.

I ushered her down the hall toward the elevator. I tapped the button for the third floor. As soon as the elevator doors closed, I entangled our arms and held her hand. I squeezed her palm. This felt familiar, but I was sure I'd never met her in the past.

"You okay?" I breathed between exhaling.

"Yes." She didn't look at me. She was anxious. I could almost hear her rapid heartbeat in the quiet of the elevator. "What's on the third floor?"

"The members' only private lounge, a few dressing rooms and several offices."

"Oh."

We both remained silent until the elevator doors opened. I guided her out of the small metal box. Instead of pulling her behind me, I walked a pace suitable for the very sexy high heels she wore.

"Zand."

"Yes."

"Do you work here?"

"Uh, I wouldn't call it working." I raised an eyebrow while she wasn't looking. I stopped in the doorway of one of the dressing rooms. "This is the room for the main talent, mainly recording artists and their entourage."

"It looks nice."

"It's been remodeled."

I never gave tours, but I wanted to impress her. But I also didn't want to look like a braggadocious prick. I wasn't sure if I was succeeding. It was important for me to be cool, although I wanted to fuck the shit out of this woman. I could only imagine how divine her hot molten orgasm would feel coating my cock.

Chanel stepped into the room, pulling me in behind her. She was leading me and I loved it. It also gave me a split second to salivate over her nice, perfect ass. She examined the walls laced with framed photographs of famous and not so famous celebrities. I'd seen these photographs a thousand times. I instead examined her glowing, exposed skin.

"Have all these people performed here?" She asked.

"Yes, everyone on the wall has performed on the stage."

"That's very cool."

"Honestly, some of the younger artists I don't know their music. I'm getting too old. It's hard to keep up with the newer talent."

"You're not getting old." Her lips twisted in disbelief.

"Huh, well, age is relative." I countered.

"How old are you?"

She wanted information, and that was a good sign for me. She was interested in me. "You really want to know?"

"Yes, I'm thirty-two. Now it's your turn." She batted her long eyelashes at me. They were her real lashes. I hadn't seen real lashes in a while. Fake ones appear to be the

rage for a few years now.

“I’m twenty-eight.” Going on one hundred and four. “Do you have something against older men?”

“You mean younger men.” She corrected.

“Yeah, younger men like me.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Four years isn’t a big age difference.”

She shrugged. “Yeah, it’s not at all.”

“There’s an invitation only Halloween costume party coming up in two weeks if you’re interested.”

“Are you going to be there?” She inquired.

“Yes. It’s no pressure, but you’re invited. We can go together or you can meet me here.”

“I don’t know.”

“Please.” Did I just say please?

“No, it’s just a costume. You said a costume party. I don’t have a costume. I haven’t dressed up for Halloween in years.”

“How many years?”

“Like five years. ”

“You have time to find something.”

“Are you wearing a costume?”

“Yes, I will be in costume.” Little did she know I was always in costume.

“What are you going to be?”

“My costume never changes. I will be a vampire.” Chanel laughed. “Is that funny?” I needed to hear her answer.

“No, no, it’s just vampires have been done so many times.”

“That is true. But it’s easy. I already wear black every day.”

“Yeah, you do.” She agreed.

“There’s literally no work on my part.”

“But change is good.”

“Okay, if not a vampire. What do you suggest?”

She shrugged her bare, delicate shoulders. “I don’t know, Iron Man, Captain America, something like that.”

“Superheros?”

“What’s wrong with superheros?”

“Kid’s costumes? You know, at twenty-eight, I am considered an adult male.”

“You would make a great Iron Man or Tony Stark.”

“I will consider it.” And I would, just for Chanel. “There’s more to see.”

I took her hand again, and I led Chanel down the blood red hall.

“How do you like the red walls?” I asked.

“Very colorful.”

“I helped paint them. I haven’t done that in years. The interior decorator and events coordinator wanted to add a splash of color. The walls used to be gray. There was bright red paint everywhere for a week until a real painter showed up and fixed the mess we’d made.”

“I like the red walls. It’s jazzy. The third floor is completely different from downstairs.”

“It’s modern décor here and the main floor is more, I don’t know. ”

“Game of Thrones.”

“Yes, if Game of Thrones and Medieval Times had a baby.”

“Exactly.” She giggled.

Once down the hall, I led Chanel to the closest room with the steel door. The door was open, but it was the only door of its kind in the building. I stepped inside with Chanel, closing the door behind me. Natasha and Nick were sitting together and

watching the CCTV monitors.

“This is the security room.” Our presence in the room alerted Natasha. Her shoulder length platinum blonde hair bounced as she turned her swivel chair to look at us. She stood and made her way across the room to engage us.

“Zand, you’ve bought a guest.” Natasha’s thick Russian accent bounced around the walls.

“Yes, this is Chanel. Chanel, this is Natasha. She’s head of security.”

“Nice to meet you.” Chanel gave Natasha a cautious wave.

“It’s nice to meet you as well. What are your pronouns?”

“I don’t ah.” Chanel muttered. “I.”

“She, her.” I offered. I wanted to help her out.

“Are you straight or bi?” Natasha abruptly inquired. There was no way I was going to share Chanel with any man or woman. Natasha needed to back off.

“Straight.” Chanel offered a single word. She was completely taken aback by the question, respectfully, of course.

Natasha poked her lips out and rolled her eyes. “Too bad for me. You are very beautiful, very sexy.” Natasha raised an eyebrow as she chewed her bottom lip.

“Th, th, thank you.” Chanel stumbled over her pleasantries. Was this the first time she was hit on by a woman? I found that hard to believe.

Before a wave of discomfort took over, I decided it was time to leave the room. I had to get away from the Russian temptress. She had a way with women and bedded more babes than me. I wasn't jealous, but I think her Chechen accent really turned women and certainly men on.

"Zand, there was a call for you from someone named Gillian. I didn't recognize that voice or the number."

"Gillian." I didn't mean to repeat the name, but I was a bit taken aback.

"Da." She confirmed in German.

Gillian, a name I hadn't heard in a long time, and I wished it had been longer. My face twisted as I tried to keep all my emotions in check.

"Zand." Natasha called to me.

"Yes." I snapped back into the moment.

"Is this someone I should know?"

"No, not at all. But he isn't someone I would call a friend."

"So what do I do if he calls back?"

"Send the call to me immediately."

"Da." Natasha's eyes left me to rest on Chanel. "We can discuss this at a later date?"

"Yes, we can." I appreciated her ending this conversation. Just the mention of Gillian rattled me and sent a barrage of questions directly to my brain.

I seized Chanel's wrist and pulled her into the hallway. After a few more stops, I lured her into my private office.

"This is the manager's office." I closed the door when we were both inside the spacious room. "It has a lot of amenities." I waved my hand to the right. "Its own private bathroom with a bathtub and shower, a small kitchen with appliances."

"Nice. Where's the manager?"

"There are a few managers. Someone manages the bar, the events. Natasha manages security, the grounds, the maintenance."

"Who manages the entire place?" She was thinking about it. I could tell by the inquisitive look in her dark eyes. "Is it okay that we're in his office?"

"It's cool. I know the owner. "

"You do?"

"Yes, we go way back. He's a recluse that lives alone, in a basement apartment, just a few blocks away. Some people think he's quite bizarre."

I took a seat in the huge black leather chair behind the glazed marble desk.

"Zand." Her eyes squinted as they focused on me. "You own The Castle?" Disbelief marred her voice but didn't stop her from asking.

"I do." I let my words sink in. Her face didn't change, and that I took as a good sign. "Please take a seat." Chanel stepped into the plush chair on the opposite side of the marble desk. Her descent into the chair was elegant. Seeing her move was a sight to behold. She was graceful like a dancer. I couldn't be the only one under her spell.

“No, seriously?” She questioned. There was something cute about her disbelief.

“Yes, seriously.”

“No, bullshit?”

“No, bullshit.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Her eyes beckoned me to be truthful.

“It’s better to show than tell. I didn’t want to look like an asshole. Saying certain things too quickly can make you look like an asshole.”

“How is that?”

“I can’t really say, hey neighbor, I own a nightclub. I can get you in for free. Sounds like a total lie.”

“No, it wouldn’t. It doesn’t. Not coming from you. I get— I tell the truth vibes from you.”

“I believe that is a compliment.”

Chanel smiled. “It is. Your place, the club, is nice, really nice.”

“Thank you. The employees keep it that way. I have a great team of people that are good at their jobs. ”

“Why do you live in the basement apartment and not here?”

“The law, Chicago law. This area, this block and this building are commercial

property and not residential. Basically, it's against the law to take up residency. I live close by. I can walk over and be here anytime I need to be."

"Do you think it's wise to walk the streets at night alone?"

"I do okay. I know how to scream and run."

She giggled. "Yeah, that's good. Not very effective on the streets of Chicago."

"Were you applying to be my bodyguard?"

"No, no, I only know how to scream and run, too."

This time, I had to smile. Her words, her phrases, her sentences were charming.

Our conversation flowed without any awkward silences. We enjoyed a few hours together. We had a few drinks, and we even danced together on the crowded dance floor. I could dance, but I didn't dance. I wanted to please her. Whatever she wanted, I was obliged to give her. Seeing her happy produced a tingle inside my body. It was more than the twitch in my cock. I couldn't ignore it.

We left together in her car. She didn't want me to walk home alone, and I thought her protective nature was adorable. She was a decent human being. I envied her.

She parked, and we both walked toward the back door of the apartment. She was going to have to go upstairs to her apartment. I was going to have to go downstairs to my apartment. I didn't want this to end. But I didn't want to come on too strong. I had to think fast. When we stepped into the apartment building, I had to say something.

"Chanel, do you want to come over for a drink?"

She paused. “Yeah, sure.”

I couldn't contain my smile. So I turned to hide my face. I turned to the stairwell and started walking down. Chanel was right behind me. I moved slowly because I knew she was in high heels.

I put my key in the door and opened it wide enough for Chanel to walk through first. I entered behind her and switched on the light. I watched her as she looked around the open living area. I kept a clean and neat living space. It was a habit I inherited from my father.

“So, this is your place on the inside?”

“You look like you disapprove.”

“No, no. I don't know what I expected. Your door is black.”

“Did you expect a grubby, ancient dungeon?” I joked.

She giggled. “No, it's just you're in the basement, the only apartment in the basement. I didn't think the basement apartment would be so nice and big.”

“It looks big because I don't have much furniture.”

“You're a single man. You don't need much. But your place is really nice.”

“Thank you.”

“Maybe I can see your place one day.”

Chanel turned to look at me. Her shoulders rose in a slight shrug. “Maybe.” She

wrapped her arms around herself and rubbed her shoulders.

“I can turn the heat up.” I rushed over to the thermostat and adjusted the temperature. I turned back to Chanel. “I tend to have it too cold most of the time.”

“It’s not you. I’m always cold.”

I rushed over to her and rubbed her arms up and down with my hands. “Your arms are cold.”

Her skin was smooth, sugary, and sweet. I pulled her in close to me. She smelled like cotton candy. My senses went into a dreamlike state as I pulled her in closer to me. I remembered the taste of cotton candy and I recalled being fond of it, just as I was fond of her.

Her scent was meant to seduce me. It was working. The things I wanted to do, but I couldn’t. I had to be gentle. I didn’t want to scare her away. On occasion, I was known to be a bit scary in the bedroom. I had to refrain from showing her that side of me. She wasn’t ready, and I wanted to savor her insides a few times before we parted. She was sure to dismiss me eventually and I couldn’t blame her. I was not the long-term relationship type.

My nose brushed against her hair, and I got a whiff of coconut. My hands snaked around her back, and I felt my cock jerk. There were so many lovely scents bouncing off one woman. How did other men resist her? I had to use so much restraint.

“Zand.” Her voice knocked me out of my trance.

“Yes.” I pulled back to look at her radiant face.

“Where’s your bathroom?”

“Oh, yes, it’s right around the corner. First door on the left.” I removed one hand from her body to point toward the bathroom. I removed the other hand to let her step away from me. I watched her walked down the hall to the bathroom.

If I had the mind to mate, she would be perfect for me. But I would never choose a bride. I had been there and done that and vowed to never let another woman have that much control over me. I would never commit, submit, or permit a woman to have all of me.

Women were good for sex, sometimes conversation and nothing more than that. I stood by this mantra.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHANEL

Looking in the mirror, I needed to figure this out. Was I going to do this? I really wanted to, and I felt like I needed to. I couldn't stay in his very clean bathroom forever. I had to make a decision, and that decision had to be final. First, I should text Morgan to let someone know where I was. It was a precaution. I didn't think Zand was going to do anything to me, but letting someone know my whereabouts had become a habit.

I gave her a quick text stating my location and whom I was with. I let her know I would call or text her tomorrow. I decided it might be a good idea to pee after the two margaritas I had at The Castle. I had more urine than I thought. I wet some toilet paper and made sure I wiped really well. I usually kept my pubic hair low and now I was almost bare thanks to the close shave I gave myself yesterday.

I removed my pantyliner from my thong panties. I wrapped the liner up in toilet paper and tossed it in the wastebasket. After flushing and washing my hands in hot water, I was brave enough to go face Zand, Mr. Valentine, also known to me as Mr. Vampire. There was no turning back now. There was no reason to pretend or play hard to get. I wanted this man to blow my back out.

The thought occurred to me that maybe he didn't even want to have sex with me. It seemed stupid because he gave every indication that he wanted to get some of this pussy. But my insecurities started to surface. Maybe I was being presumptuous. No, I wasn't. The way he held me, he let me know he wanted to do this.

I was a bad bitch, and he had one-night stands all the time. The invite into his apartment was automatically an invitation for sex. It had to be. He owned a nightclub. He was extremely private. This was his M.O. He brought women back to his house for his hanky and his panky.

Sex with him wouldn't harm me one bit. I didn't even know him well enough to like him or dislike him. If the sex was terrible, I could just act like it had never happened. I'm sure he would do the same. Those other women seemed to like it the way they strutted out of the apartment complex in the early morning.

I walked back into the living room. Zand was standing there, looking good enough to ride in reverse cowgirl. He removed his leather jacket, and his arm muscles were on full display. I thought about it, going down. But there was no way I was being a head doctor tonight. I was going to keep my mouth off his dick, no matter how badly I wanted to suck it. Cause I didn't know this man and I'm going to keep my inner hooker to a minimum.

He held a glass of wine in his hand and promptly raised it to his lips. After swallowing the wine down, he smiled at me. "Hey. You good?"

I shook my head. "Yeah, I'm good." Good and nervous.

"Do you want wine? I didn't pour you one. I wasn't sure if you were still drinking tonight."

"Yeah, I could go for one more."

"Red, white? "

"White." I picked white because I didn't want to get a headache. If I was going to be brave enough to have sex, I didn't want to get a headache while it was happening.

Zand walked over to the kitchen island. There was an empty glass on the tabletop. He reached behind him and grabbed a fresh bottle of white wine from the other bottles that were perfectly lined under the cabinets. I watched his biceps flex as he twisted the corkscrew to remove the cork and poured the wine into my glass.

He strolled over and handed the empty glass to me. Zand had swag. I was just noticing it, and his smooth movements charmed me. I wondered how his sex game would be. I was excited that I would soon find out. I wagered in my head rather he would be good in the sack. There was absolutely no way to tell, but the women who came before me seemed to be satisfied. They all seemed pleased while doing their walk of shame. It's my turn, but there's no shame in my game.

That Bailey chick was all smiles when she entered the laundry room the next morning after sex with Zand. I wanted that smile, and tonight was the night. I never slept with a man I barely knew, but I was in a new city and trying to make a new life for myself. I wanted to do something daring and adventurous. I needed to do something out of character, and riding Mr. Vampire's dick could be just that thing.

"So, you're new in town?" His deep voice took me out of my thoughts.

"Yeah, I've been here in Chicago for a few months."

I watched him as he opened his refrigerator and grabbed an open bottle of red wine. He poured himself a glass. Now I wished I would've asked for red. He opened a new bottle of white wine just for me. It was too late. I took another sip from my wine glass.

"How do you like the windy city so far?"

"It's windy." I joked. Why was I joking ?

“Yes, and cold, but I like it.” He admitted through a slight grin.

“Do you really walk to and from The Castle?”

“I do.” He tilted the wine to his mouth. I watched as he licked the crimson liquid from his lips. Watching his lips made my heart beat faster.

“Do you have a car?” I asked, just to take my mind off his perfect lips.

“I do. It’s parked out back, in the lot.”

I thought about all the cars in the parking lot behind the apartment complex. “The old black car.”

“Yes, the black vintage sixty-seven hardtop Chevy Impala. That’s my baby.”

“Do you ever drive it?”

“Sometimes. I don’t have anywhere to go. The Castle is within walking distance.”

“Yeah, but that’s a nice, classic car.”

“If you find somewhere to go, I can drive you.”

“You know the city better than me.” I hadn’t even been in Chicago long enough to try a half dozen restaurants.

“That I do.” His crooked smile liquefied my little coochie juice.

“How long have you been in your apartment?” This time I was going to ask questions.

“A few years.”

“Were you born here, you know, in Chicago?”

“No, no, I’m from L.A.”

“Why did you move somewhere with winters?”

“I wanted a fresh start somewhere far away from Los Angeles. Why did you move to Chicago from?—?”

“Minnesota. I needed a fresh start, too.”

“So we have that in common.”

I watched as Zand drank all the red wine from his glass. He placed the glass in the sink and walked around the island and offered me his hand. I took it. He removed the wineglass from my hand with his free hand. He sat the glass behind me on the kitchen island.

He was gazing into my eyes, and I couldn’t look away. He leaned his face close to mine, but he didn’t kiss me. He rubbed his nose against mine and pulled back to look at me. Zand leaned forward and rubbed his cheek against mine. He pulled back again to gaze into my soul. His honey-colored eyes had little fragments of orange, or maybe it was red. Whatever the color, it was beautiful. He was really dreamy up close and personal.

What was he up to?

His next move was to brush his lips against mine. The graze turned into a kiss as he gently parted my lips with his tongue. My free hand grabbed hold of his bicep. I

needed something to hold on to. My legs felt weak as he probed into my mouth with his powerful tongue. I had no control over what was happening to me. I was somewhere in La-La Land, or that odd Fae world that Sookie Stackhouse would wander off to. His kisses were so magical I couldn't even imagine what his dick would feel like. Heaven maybe?

Zand pressed his body into mine. I felt the strength of his arms holding me up and moving me backwards. I didn't know where I was going, but I did know I felt safe.

His lips traced my chin and landed on my neck. His kisses turned into deep, penetrating sucks. He pulled my skin deep into his mouth. His teeth raked my flesh and sent shock waves to my over-saturated pussy. Oh, my God!

My lungs sucked up all the air I could muster without panting too heavily. I could feel my lower lips swell. They wanted out of my wet panties. I peeked my eyes open just enough to notice I was in his bedroom. I didn't even remember the steps it took to get here.

I quivered when I felt his cool fingers land on the small of my back. He leaned into me, forcing me to sit. I landed on his bed while he stayed attached to my neck as he lowered himself down to the floor.

While on his knees, his hands traced down my legs until he removed my high heels, one at a time. The skill he possessed was undeniable. I needed to get out of this dress. He must have been reading my mind because he slowly pulled my straps down my shoulders. He smoothly wrenched my arms out. He lowered my dress to my waist, enabling my breast to spill out for his viewing pleasure. He detached from me to glance down at my mounds. He smirked with desire and pressed his wet lips into mine. His movements were precise and ritualistic. He knew how to seduce a woman and I was finally that woman. Yay me!

I didn't care that I was just an infinite number, or a notch in his well-worn belt. I was willing to join the list of booty calls just to see what all the hoopla was about.

His kisses took me away from my boring life, and I didn't want them to end. His tongue was masterful. If he kept this up, I was going to cream before he touched my hotshot.

His cool fingers traced my collarbone and sent shock waves down my arms. He moved his lips from mine to trace them down my neck.

My nipples pebbled as he blew his breath over them without touching them with his mouth. Although it was torture, I wanted more. I arched my back and leaned toward his mouth. I wanted him to suck me deep into his esophagus.

Zand had other plans. He wanted to tease and torment me endlessly. He wanted to make me ache for him, and this bastard was winning at every turn.

I was cold minutes ago, and now I was boiling with desire. I was hot and bothered. I burned with a fever that raced throughout my entire body. I was soaking wet in between my legs without the aid of his member. I wanted him just to put the tip in. I wanted him to give me the release I knew I deserved. How could I want this stranger so badly?

I couldn't take it anymore. I reached up and roughly raked my hands through his hair. A brazen move, yes, but it was time to see something. I tried to pull his face and body down on top of me. He resisted and shot his eyes at me. He scolded me with his butterscotch orbs. He was too handsome and flawless, and I longed to have that perfection deep inside my soaking wet hole.

My body shivered when he buried his face into the side of my neck. I missed intimacy and wanted this man to recharge my mind and body. I needed him to show

me all the things I had missed and could look forward to in the future.

Zand took both of my hands and pulled me to stand. His hands scaled my thighs and pulled my thong panties off. I hadn't noticed when he had unbuttoned and unzipped his pants, but it had already happened. And I was here for it.

He removed my crumpled dress. I stood naked and exposed as he removed his shirt with a swift pull over his head. He dropped his pants to the floor and stepped out of them. He wasn't wearing underwear. Why? I refused to look down at his package. No, no, no, I was acting like Baba Voss in See. I'm not looking because I didn't want to change my mind for any reason. A small penis could ruin the entire mood, but somehow I didn't think he would be a short dick man.

Zand shifted his hand around my frame and pressed his cool body into mine. He lowered me on to the bed, never letting our bodies detach. Oh, baby! He climbed over me and motioned for me to scoot back into the center of the bed. I did just that. I wished the lights were low, but they weren't, and all I could see was his copper-colored eyes gazing into my soul. He could seduce a nun with those eyes, and I was pretty sure he knew it.

He inclined downward to kiss me. The kiss was quick and deep and left me longing for more. Zand opened my legs with his knees and that's when I felt him. His manhood grazed the inside of my thigh. This was happening.

Oh! I felt the head of him brush hard against my shaved pussy lips.

I wanted to feel him. I wanted to feel the authentic him, but I knew better. This man was a tease. His mouth seized my neck. He licked my skin and sucked hard until his teeth scraped at my flesh. He lowered his body and pushed his pelvis against my lubricated kitty.

“Do you have protection?” I mumbled the question.

He stopped grinding his hard body against mine to cup my face in his hands.

“Protection?” He asked.

“A condom.” I clarified.

His lips curled into the slight smile. “Yes, of course.”

The way he said it gave me pause. What if he said no? My head was in a sex cloud. I was in a weird melancholy haze that made me confused and much too trusting of this here man person. All I knew was I wanted him to fuck me like I stole something. Okay, that isn’t a thing, but I could admit I wasn’t thinking clearly.

“Don’t move.” He whispered in my ear.

I didn’t plan on moving from my very comfortable center spot in his king-size bed. My phantom vampire had hypnotized my limbs. It was so relaxing he was going to probably have to kick me out of this bed before it’s all said and done.

I slowly blinked a few times. I was trying to control my breathing. I couldn’t believe how badly I wanted this, this man, his sex, this dick.

I couldn’t see where he got the condom. Evidently, he was a magician. I saw the wrapper when he placed it on the bed beside my head.

Zand lifted my legs so my feet were flat on the mattress. Soon, after my eyes closed, I felt it. Oh, lord!

His tongue licked at my pussy lips. It was a long, luxurious lick that hit me in my

spinal cord. Then there was another that landed deeper inside my folds. The third lick was different. His face was buried in between my legs. His tongue had taken up residence inside my sopping wet hole. This was the real deal. He was slamming his tongue against my clit as I squirmed against his face. I was embarrassingly wet and overcome .

His tongue was working me over. This was a treat for a one-night stand. But I didn't actually know one-night stand protocol. The treatment I was receiving felt special. That could be his intention. Did he treat all his conquests with so much tenderness? I'll never know. I loved every minute of it. His lips and tongue were working as one orgasmic unit. I could get used to this. I was weak with emotion and an orgasm screaming to leak from my body.

But there was none. His magical mouth was gone from my clit. In a flash, my butt was lifted off the mattress. My legs were draped over both his shoulders and I felt it. A whoosh of air released from my lungs.

"Ohhh!" He slammed his dick inside me without a proper warning. He didn't inch his way inside. He smashed into my tightness and I choked on my own saliva when he dove deep into my pussy until he couldn't go any further.

My instincts try to push him off, but he had pressed all his weight into my body, making it impossible to move. I looked through my eyelashes and my knees were on the sides of my cheeks. He rested deep inside me and the pressure forced out a groan from him that vibrated throughout my body.

My hands clawed at the bedsheet. Zand pulled out of me just to ease his way back inside. His movements were slow and steady. His hips angled with precision to elicit the most sincere moans from my lips.

"Ahhh!" He glided in and out of my pussy, only pausing to rub my drenched walls

and stir me into a frenzy. His moves were sensuous and calculated. Every subtle thrust was strategically placed to build on the previous one. I was climbing to my peak when he withdrew his dick and dropped my legs onto the bed. I was afraid to open my eyes and look up at him.

As if I weighed nothing, he rolled my body over until I was on my stomach. I drew my arms above my head and waited for his command.

“On your knees. ”

I did as I was told and positioned myself into doggystyle. I shut my eyes tight when he inched his width inside me. He was thick and long and I could feel just how much by the tickle in my throat. He was pounding me deliberately, never moving too fast and never moving too slow. He was hammering just enough to coax breathy moans from my wet lips. It felt too good. I longed to savor this moment, but I knew he had the power to make me gush at his command.

Zand controlled my body as he controlled the bodies of the women that came before me. He didn't want me to come, and he made sure to bring me right to the brink before pulling his heavy pole out of my choppy waters.

He opened my ass wide and gave a circular thrust into my under-used kitty. He took a huge chunk of my ass in his hand and twisted my skin until it burned. He took both his hands and smashed my ass cheeks together until I covered his dick with my skin.

“Oh, oh!” I yelled out as he hit the spot that was going to knock me out of this universe. This dick felt like the real deal and not that rubbery condom shit. This was different. This sex was making my eyes wet with tears. It felt raw, reckless and wild. My pussy was drooling and so was my mouth.

I couldn't take this deep penetration any longer. My knees buckled and I screamed.

“Ohhhhh! God!” Then my orgasm punched me in the chest and seeped out of my battered pussy.

I felt wetter than before. I felt warm liquid inside of me, but I was sure it was my cream and not Zand’s. He was wearing a condom. The aftershocks rocked my core, and Zand wrapped his arm around my body and held me close to him.

I was too tired to think, so I closed my eyes and opened them when I felt a warm wet cloth wipe the leakage from my ass and pussy. In seconds, I felt a sheet cover my naked body. Zand’s slid behind me. He pressed his body into my backside and his arm draped around me, holding me in a body-hugging embrace.

Being tired after sex was normal. Being awakened with a penis already inside you a little over an hour later was special. I thought the show was over. I was still exhausted from the first time around. I was too weak to throw my pussy back at him. He didn’t need my assistance. He was back inside me again. This time, he was kneading my breast and pinching my nipples as he shoved his member into my pussy while we lay on our sides.

This lazy orgasm made my pussy contract all over his dick. He held me so close in his arms he could break my bones. When he came, he released his firm grip, but not his total hold. He kissed the back of my neck and I was out.

That was until he was inside me again...

CHAPTER NINE

CHANEL

There was no sunlight to wake me the next morning. There was no light coming in through his basement apartment windows. The small rectangular windows were tinted with a dark film that seemed as thick as card stock paper. I felt a wave of unfamiliar emotions the next morning. I honestly didn't even know if it was the next morning. It just felt like I'd slept a complete eight hours. Zand had sleeping pill gas in his dick.

He didn't have a wall clock or an alarm clock anywhere in his bedroom. I needed to find my clothes, purse and cell phone. Getting out of his apartment was a priority. If I stayed too long, I would feel guilty even though I didn't have a thing to feel guilty about. We were two consenting adults. This wasn't something I did all the time. Hell, it wasn't something I did at all.

I couldn't believe I slept with my neighbor. There was no way I could go back to The Castle, ever. That nightclub was off-limits. It wasn't that big of a deal. My club days were coming to an end. I wasn't just like all of his other one-nightstands. I lived in the same building as the man. I probably should've thought this through before I let him get all up in my juicy fruit.

I didn't feel dirty or slutty, but I felt stupid with a dash of needy. I needed that dick, and I had it all up inside me. Oh lord, I hated being weak. Now I was going to have to listen to a four-hour gospel playlist to cleanse myself of my reckless behavior. I needed some melodies from heaven to rain down on me.

Soon as I tell Morgan, she's going to chastise me for being so loosey goosey. I was supposed to be lying low in this new city. Not riding my mysterious neighbor's gi-norn-mess dick like I was in a rodeo. Because yes, that was also something that happened in the middle of the night.

Zand had a revolving door of women, and I just made myself one of his many conquests. It happened and I couldn't take it back. Truth be told, I didn't want to. That was some of the best sex I'd ever had. It was sensual and sweet. He hit all the spots without beating me to a pulp. He caressed every inch of me without leaving bruises. Now I knew what being caught up in the rapture really meant.

I didn't shower when I got home because I wanted to smell him on my body. I wanted to savor his intoxicating flavor. I wanted to feel something other than loneliness, despair, and fear. Zand did that for me. He gave me a night of repose.

The dick was superb, but we exchanged fluids. I wanted to freak out about it later rather than sooner. I could panic tomorrow. I was going to have to get my ass out of the house and buy a morning-after pill. To make matters worse, I was going to have to get tested for STDs. Was the phenomenal sex even worth all the drama? Time would tell. I was going to have to check back with myself once I knew I was free of diseases and embryos.

All the drama because the condom broke. That's never happened to me before. Why in the world was he forcing his large penis into a normal size condom? One size does not fit all. He knew what tools he was working with. He said he was clean. But just because he said he's clean, don't make it true. I'm not going to take his word for it.

The next few days were stressful for me. Waiting for my blood work to come back from the lab was nerve wrecking. I had to get a gynecologist recommendation from a coworker because I didn't have one in this town. I didn't actually need one when I first arrived in Chicago. I wasn't planning on sleeping with anyone. And then Zand

happened. I wished I was prepared, but I wasn't. I wished I had got to know him better before I spread my legs, but I didn't. I was drawn in by Zand's cool and sexy nature.

After five days of worrying, I could breathe a sigh of relief. I was sure the Plan B pill worked just because I'd never heard of it failing. My pap smear and my labs came back STD free. I celebrated the win with a pint of Talenti Sorbetto in Roman Raspberry flavor. I didn't care about the calories. I needed something to make me feel sated since sex was off the table. I swore off all men for the time being. Good old unprotected sex was just so stressful.

I hated thinking about Zand, the man of many names— Mr. Vampire, Alexander, Zander and Mr. Valentine. Thinking about if he was thinking about me was driving me bat-shit crazy. I'm sure he wasn't giving me a single fleeting thought. His apartment was a revolving door of various women. I had to come to terms with the fact that I was just one of many.

I slept with that man and I didn't even have his cell phone number. I didn't even know what I was doing sleeping with someone who lived in my apartment building. This definitely wasn't part of the plans I had when I moved to this city. I was already messing up. I was supposed to be focused on my career. I wanted to pay off my credit cards, raise my credit score and save up money to buy a house. I wanted to live my life in Chicago without getting into anything physical with a man. My judgment was not the greatest in the man's department.

I stayed in my apartment, not sure what to do to avoid seeing Zand. I went to work, but I made sure I didn't run into Mr. Wham Bam Thank You Ma'am. I was hiding out, and it seemed to be working.

After a long day at the job, I needed a friend and although Morgan was four hundred and ten miles away; she was a constant source of support for me. I called her up, and

she answered on the second ring.

“What you doing?” I asked.

“I’m doing Brandy.”

In unison we sang, “Sitting up in my room. Back here thinking about you.” We giggled. We were a hot mess when we got together.

“You still hiding from that man?”

“Every-damn-day.” I sang.

“You’re real immature.”

“I’m embarrassed.”

“Was he laughing when he was blowing your back out?”

“No.” I frowned into the cell phone.

“Well, you don’t have a damn thing to be embarrassed about. Did he leave you any more notes?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged, although she couldn’t see me sprawled out in my bed.

“Girl, stop being silly. Go check the damn flowerpot.”

“I’m afraid to look.”

“Why? I thought he was gone to that club every night.”

“I think so. I don’t know. I’m trying to stay out his way.”

“Go. Check and see if his car is out there.”

“His car never moves.” I knew I told her he likes to walk around the crime-ridden streets.

“Get up and go see.” She ordered.

“Okay, I’m going.” I hopped out the bed and walked to the back of my apartment. I peeked out the window that overlooked the back parking lot. I couldn’t believe it. Zand’s car was gone. I was looking at an empty spot.

“Hey.” Morgan called to me through the cell. “Is his car there? ”

Just to be sure, I gazed over the parking lot one more time. “No, his car isn’t out here.”

“Well, take your ass down to that ugly ass flowerpot and see if he is still leaving notes for your hit-it and quit-it ass.”

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, I got to put my house-shoes on.”

I tossed my duvet off my body and scooted off the bed. I slipped my feet into my Nike slides. I did a little shuffle toward my bedroom door. When I got to my front door, I unlocked it and fixed the lock so I could get back in.

“Hurry up.” Morgan muttered. “I’m invested in this soap opera.”

“Calm down, I got to go down a flight of stairs.” I whispered into the cell, “What if he didn’t write another note?”

“Girl, get your scary ass down them steps.”

I quickly jogged down the stairs. I peeked my head out the back door. I leaned down to tilt the flowerpot, being extra careful not to drop my cell phone.

I couldn't believe it. There was something there, another note. He clearly has no clue that his pen pal and Chanel from apartment 2B are one and the same.

I wanted to hoot, holler and do a little praise dance, but not in a public space. I dashed up the steps to my apartment.

“Hello! Hello!” I heard Morgan's voice bellow out of my cell phone.

When I was back in the comfort of my apartment, I lifted the cell to my ear.

“I have another note.”

“Damn, this is better than Bravo TV. Come on, friend, read it.”

“Okay, Okay.” I jogged through the apartment to my bedroom. Kicking my slides off, I jumped back into my bed. “You ready?”

“Jason Bourne, ready.”

With a hefty inhale; I opened the note. With a hearty exhale; I instantly started reading out loud .

Dear Human, (I don't know your name)

If I could die, I would die to see you. I don't know why you are so hesitant to have a face-to-fang conversation with me. I promise, on my immortal life, that I will be on

my best behavior. How long do you want to play these reindeer games? I don't have any vampire movie or television references for this note. I just have a bloody, burning desire to meet you. You are safe with me. I don't bite the people I like.

Signed,

Mr. Vampire

"Woo child, what you about to do?" Morgan was as geeked as I was.

"Not a damn thang."

"Coco Chanel, he's getting tired of these little notes. He wants a face-to-fang, get up in that thang."

"He's already been up in my thang. He just don't know it."

"True. But you gotta tell him something."

"I'm not going to write him back. It's silly. This part is over. There's really nothing more to say."

"If you don't write him back, he's probably going to think it was you writing the notes and not some other chick."

"You think so?"

"Haven't you been hiding from him?"

"Yes, but?—"

“Then the notes stop.” Morgan mimicked Cardi B’s voice. “That’s weird. That’s suspicious.”

“I don’t know. I have to think about it.”

“Gone on and write that man another little letter. You know he didn’t give you an STD. He seems nice, and he owns a whole nightclub, like a popular nightclub.”

“I don’t care about his money. ”

“He don’t seem to care about it either. That’s why he got his rich ass living in that shitty basement dungeon.”

“I have to work early tomorrow.”

“And?”

“And I need to go to sleep.”

“So you’re trying to get me off the phone? Okay, it’s cool. Sweet dreams, vampire queen.”

“Goodnight.”

I ended the call, grabbed the charging cord and the prong to push into my cell phone. Once I saw it was charging, I placed the phone on my bedside nightstand. I reached for the string to the lamp and pulled it.

Darkness.

CHAPTER TEN

CHANEL

Ducking and dodging Zand had become part of my daily routine. I managed to avoid him for a full week and I was proud of my stealthy abilities. I didn't bother to wash clothes this week for fear I would bump into him. With the laundry room in the basement, I just couldn't take the chance. I had enough clothes to last another week.

I put off writing another love note. After a few days, it just seemed odd to revisit the back and forth. It was clear to me this would never go well. Zand seemed to like his secret admirer. If he found out his human was me, I'm sure he would feel betrayed. I would, if I were him. He would think that I was a liar and this whole thing was a game. It was better to just leave things alone.

Zand was never out in the daytime, so I took the opportunity to go venture out into the cold. After coming home from work and changing out of my scrubs, I was ready for coffee and a few other items from the local grocery store. I grabbed my coat and purse and crept down the back staircase. Taking the elevator wasn't an option. I could never know who would be standing there when the doors popped open. I didn't want to press my luck .

I was confident that I was going to make it out of the building without seeing Mr. Vampire. I even did a little hop when I made it to the first floor. I managed to put my coat on while going down the steps. Before I could move through the back door, I felt a chill on the back of my neck. My brief body shiver was met with a roughish grip.

There was a pale hand cuffed around my forearm that twirled me in a half circle. It wasn't a real handcuff, but it sure felt that way. His grip was constricting. It was possessive and urgent.

He, Zand, he was all up in my face. His intrusive hand was wrapped around my arm. I didn't have the strength to pull away, even though I knew this would not be good.

"Hey." His voice was deeper than I remembered.

"Hey." I said, startled but not afraid. I was ready for whatever, even though I didn't know what was coming my way.

"What's the deal?"

"Huh?"

"Have you been avoiding me?" His grip loosened a bit.

"No, no, why would I?"

He raised one brow in defiance. "Be honest."

"No." I lied again.

"Chanel." His soothing voice was like a lie detector. One of his eyebrows rose in a menacing and sexy manner. His amber eyes started disarming me. I was caught in his gaze. Girl! Snap out of it!

They say confession is good for the soul. So, here goes. "Yeah, fine. I was avoiding you."

“Why?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. Why did I do that?

“You know.” He tightened his grip on my forearm and pulled me closer to him. “Be honest.” He threatened. I smelled peppermint in his breath. Gum, mints, toothpaste, I couldn’t figure it out. Why did I care? Why did I want to stick my tongue in his mouth to taste it ?

I sighed. “I don’t know how to do— that.”

“Do what?”

“You know, just have random sex.”

“I think you did it rather well.” His eyes undressed me for a brief second.

“I mean, I don’t know how to sneak out of a man’s apartment after drunken sex.”

“Huh, you weren’t drunk.”

“I had a lot to drink.”

“No, I told the bartender at The Castle to water your drinks down.”

What in the entire fuck? “Why would you do that?”

“I didn’t want you to be intoxicated if you blessed me with your body. Consent is important to me.”

My mind started spinning in circles. “So this was all some elaborate plan to get me

into bed?”

“The plan didn’t have to involve a bed. We could’ve had sex anywhere.”

I tried to quash my anger. “Your plan worked.”

“Not completely. You started avoiding me.” His hooded eyes glared from under his lids. “Why? Why did you ghost me?”

“I didn’t ghost you, I told you. I don’t do that.”

“Do what? Please explain.”

“Sleep with strange men I barely know.”

Zand blinked a few times. “Do you really think I’m strange?”

I shrugged; realizing how insulting the word strange had come across. “No, I don’t think you’re strange. But it’s like you’re a stranger. We never dated or anything. We never went out.”

“Sex and dating are two different things and not synonymous.”

“Yes, of course not, especially for people like you.” I circled back to his previous words. “Wait, a, goddamn, minute. You had someone tamper with my drinks?”

“Tamper isn’t the word I would use.”

“It’s the one I would use.” I looked at his hand wrapped around my forearm. Even my evil glare didn’t coax him into letting me go.

“You can’t be mad. I was looking out for your welfare by insuring you weren’t intoxicated. You’re being foolish. I wanted you to be lucid. Do you remember having sex with me?”

“Yes, but?—”

“That was the entire point. Would you rather have drunken sex that you couldn’t remember to only feel violated the next morning?”

“No, of course not.”

“I made sure you were sober and clear-headed enough to make the decision without being coerced.”

“You could’ve just told me not to drink too much.”

“When do women ever listen to what men have to say? Women will literally do the opposite.”

Damn, he had a point, but I was being extra and I knew it. “Not all women are the same.”

“It seems you’re trying to be difficult.”

“I’m not.”

“Sex with us was good. It was fucking fantastic. You can’t deny it. Stop over-analyzing that night. I don’t have any diseases and I cannot get you pregnant.”

“What does that mean? You can’t get me pregnant.”

“I’m fixed, vasectomy. If you wouldn’t have run away, I could’ve proved it to you. There was no reason to disappear for an entire week. It’s rude.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know what I was supposed to do. I never had a one-night stand before.”

“What makes you think it was a one-night stand?” He leaned into my face, waiting for my response.

I took a huge gulp of nothing. “I, I, isn’t that what you always do with your women?”

“What do you think of me? I don’t have any women. I only have you. ”

He has me ? Run that back Mr. Vampire. Did he say he got me? “Zand, please, you know what I’m talking about.”

He flashed a smile at me that made my stomach do cartwheels. “Chanel, the only women that matter to me are the ones that have names. Well, names that I can remember.” He took his hand and pointed at the side of his forehead. “You are the only name I have up here.”

I said, “Okay.” Even though I didn’t know what I was agreeing to.

“Chanel, have you decided to stop avoiding me?”

“No. Yes. I don’t know.”

“I think you should stop avoiding me.”

“Why?”

“So I can fuck you.” His brow furrowed. “Come back to my apartment, remove all your clothing, and crawl into my bed. Get on all fours, open your legs wide, push your face into the mattress, and wait patiently for me to push my tongue inside your pussy.”

I blinked too many times to count. His buttery voice painted a visual that twisted my core in knots. I was familiar with his pussy eating skills. He could teach a master's class.

“You think that’s what I should do?”

“Yes.”

“And why should I?”

“Because the last time we just had sex. I don’t want to scare you away by fucking the shit out of you. Now I think you can handle a long, hard fuck. I want to fuck you this time.”

I held my mouth together because I knew my lips wanted to part. I couldn’t speak with a padlock on my lips, so I stood there, looking like a paralyzed statue. My frozen pose didn’t last for long. Zand released my arm and grabbed my hand and gave it a firm tug. He pulled me across the hallway. I took two steps to his every one hulking step. He led me down the stairs to the basement. Soon we were at his black door and quickly inside his apartment .

This was happening. Correction, this was happening again. I was being led to Zand’s bedroom. I placed my purse on the chair by the dresser. This was a detour from my trip to the grocery store. I wanted this so badly and my body knew it. My nipples were so hard they burned against the cotton fiber of my bra.

Zand made me feel desired. If I was a stupid woman, I could even confuse his tenderness with love. I was far from stupid, but an invitation to be fucked by the hot, mysterious guy in my apartment complex was a pleasure.

I stood near his bed while he pulled my coat off my shoulders and down my arms. He tossed it on the chair. I tried to contain my smile, but I couldn't. His eyes were gazing at mine and heating me from the inside out.

Zand leaned into my face and kissed my lips with a gentleness that made me feel safe. His tongue pierced and parted my mouth and entered me willingly. I missed his kisses.

"I'm clean. Give me permission to fuck you the way I want to."

"Without a condom?"

"Yes."

"Zand."

"This dogs got all his shots. Don't you trust me?"

"Ah, I don't have an answer for that."

"Feel this." Zand took my hand and placed it on the enormous bulge in his pants. "I'm going to break the condom. They're too tight. I can't fit inside them. I can only fit inside you." He bent to kiss me on the cheek and smiled at me as he pulled away.

This guy was really trying to make a case for unprotected sex. His words aroused me when I knew I should be annoyed. Why was he like this?

Zand planted teasing kisses all over my face while he carefully undressed me. I closed my eyes with every tender kiss. Before I could answer his request, we were both completely naked, standing and facing each other .

He snaked his arm around my waist and pulled me in close to his body. I rested my cheek on his bare chest. His massive bulge poked into my stomach. He bent his face to my ear.

“Permission.” His husky voice caused my nipples to tighten.

The heat of his skin against mine was irresistible. I wanted to melt into this man and be one. I wanted to feel him inside me and, against my better judgment, I wanted to feel his skin, his raw skin.

Zand took a step back and took both of my wrists in both of his hands. He had a firm grip and pulled me as he walked backwards. He stopped when he bumped the wall. He quickly released my wrists and grabbed my neck with one hand. He pushed my face into the wall and my cheek was stuck to the satin paint. My hands laid flat on the wall when I felt him release my neck.

I closed my eyes, and I felt my ass cheeks spread. His tongue dipped inside my asshole and I instantly clench my cheeks together. He slapped me hard with an open hand on my ass and I screamed out into the air.

His fingertips dug into my skin as he opened my ass and pressed his entire face into my ass crack. Zand pushed a finger inside my pussy as he ate my ass out and dipped his wet tongue in my forbidden hole.

I could barely stand and his face was rocking me up until I was on my tiptoes. Both of my holes were wet and all I could think about was tasting his big ass dick in my mouth. My unstable legs wobbled as I tried to keep my balance.

He gave me some relief when he pulled his finger out of my pussy and removed his face from my ass. My head snapped backward when he grabbed my ponytail and dragged me over to the bed. He pushed my face into the mattress. His dick was touching my ass, and he released my hair. I rested my hands on the side of my face. I couldn't see what he was doing behind me, but I thought moving my feet off the floor was a bad idea .

“I’m going to fuck the shit out of you. I’m going to do whatever I want to you.”

“Ughhh!” I cried out as I felt his dick enter my closed pussy. I had to expand to let him inside and his dick slammed inside me before I was ready to take it all. My toes gripped the floor as he held my waist and rammed his dick inside me like a machine instead of a man. I couldn't stay up on my feet. My pussy was about to explode from all the pounding. I was being fucked hard and recklessly. When my weak legs gave up, he lifted my body and tossed me across the bed like I weighed nothing.

I couldn't take him pounding me from behind. It was too much. I was going to cream if he entered me in that position. He was hitting too many of my hot spots from behind. I quickly turned to lie on my back.

Zand placed my feet flat on the bed and crawled in between my legs. He placed his arms on both sides of my face and bent to kiss me. He trailed those kisses to my breasts and sucked each one of my nipples to fine, firm points. My body arched to meet his mouth. He reached down and pushed the tip of his dick into my drenched pussy. My body shivered as he pushed in deeper and deeper.

I placed my index finger in my mouth to muffle my moans. After he was all the way in, he started beating my insides to bits with his massive dick. He was fucking me on autopilot, and my body was shaking and convulsing as he poked my pussy to death.

“Oh god Zand!” I wrapped my legs around his hips and pulled my hands off the

mattress to entangle them in his hair.

“You’re mine. Say it.” He groaned into my ear. “Say it!” He started to pull his dick out of me when I hesitated.

“I’m yours.” Came out of my mouth at the same time as my orgasm crashed through my body. I grabbed his hair so tight I thought I pulled some of it out of his head.

My face was wet with tears because that shit was great and then Zand pumped his hot liquid inside me and his entire body shook so fiercely he lifted my limp body off the bed. I thought he was done, but he pumped himself inside me three more times for good measure. He released my trembling legs and let them fall to the mattress.

I hurried and wiped my face before he could tell my tears from my sweat. My heart was racing so fast it was scaring me. I needed to calm down. I was too young to have a heart attack.

Zand kissed my cheek. “Don’t you ever ghost me again.” He playfully bit into my cheek. “Did you hear me?” His voice pulsed through my ears and curled my toes.

“Yes.” I heard him, but my throat was too dry to come up with a full sentence.

I was overheated and wet. This workout didn’t compare to the gym. I had been stretched in twenty-two different directions. I was bent over and sideways. All I wanted to do was lay flat. I wanted a quick nap because his dick had put me into a coma.

“Chanel, if you disappear again.” He stopped to control his words.

“I’m not. I’m here.” I hated he had hooked me with his charm, his good looks, his amazing tongue and his rapid fire incredible Hulk dick.

“Look at me.” I opened my eyes, and he was hovering over me. He was staring down at me with those fucking sweet caramel fuck me eyes of his. “I meant everything I said when I was inside you.”

“You’re still inside me.”

His lips curled into a half smile. “Yeah, I am.” He placed a passionate kiss on my lips and I felt his dick flinch inside me. He shifted his weight and pulled me into a more comfortable position while managing to keep his dick inside me. “You’re tired.”

“I’m exhausted.” I couldn’t move my body. I’d taken a beating. He wasn’t playing when he said he wanted to fuck the shit out of me.

“Close your eyes. Sleep.”

I was physically and emotionally drained. My pussy was raw. My nipples were sore. I would never feel comfortable under these awkward circumstances, but Zand was different. He made me feel complete. I would be lying if I didn’t think he was peculiar. But he seemed honest and genuine, and it cancelled out all the apprehension I felt about his weird behavior. I knew I was falling for him in the worse way and there was nothing I could do about it. There was just one thing. I could strap on a parachute and hope it opens.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHANEL

One night of sex turned into three additional lust-filled nights of getting my back blown out. The sex was intense, satisfying, and passionate. Sometimes he fucked me and sometimes he seemed to be making love to me. My body bent and twisted to his every command. I never felt so tired and energized at the same time. I wanted more of him. I wanted all of him. The thought was exciting and frightening. I knew I would be devastated when he was done with me. For now, I would revel in what this was. Even though I didn't have a name for it.

I went to work and came home to Zand, knocking on my door only a few hours later. I appreciated he gave me time to unwind. But I would've been okay with him standing at my apartment door to greet me with a kiss as well. Men were always sweet and caring in the beginning and I was on pins and needles, waiting for the ball to drop. The real Zand was going to come out one day, and I was going to have to deal with it.

Zand cooked meals for me. His food was seasoned and delicious. He made sure my coffee was restocked. He even washed my clothes while I was at work. I had at least two loads piled up. Dirty leftover laundry from when I was trying to avoid bumping into him. I wasn't used to this kind of behavior. Sure, I had been treated well by men, but Zand was caring and considerate. He put my feelings and me first. His thoughtfulness was different and unique. We had already slept together, and he was still putting forth an effort.

We were acting like a couple. He was treating me like I was important and special to him. It was too good to be true. I didn't care. It felt good in the moment and I was willing to live in the moment for now. In this short time, I felt like I was in a relationship. I loved this feeling.

We ended the night in my apartment like usual. We talked about so many things. We laughed and being around him felt real. I just didn't know how long this would last and somehow I was okay with it. After dinner, we cuddled under my bed sheets, watched a few episodes of Snowfall and I fell fast asleep.

I didn't know how long I'd been asleep when I heard my cell phone ringing. I cracked my eyes open to pure darkness. I didn't have any clue where my cell was located. I looked over at the nightstand. It wasn't there. I looked the other way and there was Zand. He was asleep on his stomach. His face buried in a pillow, and pointed toward the door. I had the urge to touch his messy hair, but I didn't. I needed to find my loud ringing cell phone.

I sat up in bed and tried to pinpoint where the sound was coming from. I blinked to hear better, even though that wouldn't work. The sound was coming from the nightstand, but I had already looked over there. I leaned over and my eyes drifted down to the floor. There was light. I spotted my cell phone down on the floor. I leaned over the edge of the bed, smashing one of my breasts into the corner of the mattress.

I looked at the cell screen and it was a picture of Morgan. I unlocked my cell with my face and answered the call.

"Hey Morgan." I glanced over at Zand. His handsome face was buried deeper into the pillow. He looked comfortable and like he belonged here with me and under my fluffy duvet. This was nice. I really had the hots for this man .

“Coco, this is Mitchell.” His husky voice reeked with distress.

“Hey.” I covered my bare breasts with the duvet and sat up straight. “Mitchell.” Morgan’s brother never called me. He was on his sister’s cell phone. This wasn’t a good sign. My heart picked up the pace. “What’s going on?” I just knew it was something bad. “Is Morgan okay?” I offered another question before he could answer the first one.

“Morgan is fine. I mean she’s, she’s, it’s Craig.” He stumbled over his rushed words.

“Craig.” Her boyfriend. “What happened?”

“He was in a car accident.”

“Wait! Was Morgan in the car?”

“No, no. He was alone.”

“Car accident, is he—” I didn’t want to say it.

“He’s still alive, but it’s bad. The state trooper said he ran into a semitrailer truck. It’s really terrible. He’s in ICU. Morgan is with him. She’s upset. I’ve never seen her like this before. That’s why I have her phone. I had to let you know. I don’t know if you can come to the hospital, but Morgan is really in bad shape. I didn’t know if I should call you or not. It just seemed like the right thing to do.”

“No, of course you call me.”

“I don’t know where you are. I just know you moved away.”

“I did, but you can always call me.”

“She’s really out of it. We don’t know if he’s going to make it. I really don’t know what to do. Craig’s family is here. I’m here with Morgan at the hospital.”

“Don’t worry. I’m going to come. What hospital?”

“Silver Cross over on 95 th in Evergreen Park.”

“I’m going to get there as soon as I can. It will be a few hours.” It was more than a few, but I didn’t need to burden him with my distance.

“I’ll tell Morgan. Coco, honestly, the way things are going. I don’t think he’s going to make it. ”

“You pray for him and I’ll pray for him.”

“Ah, ah, right.” His voiced cracked.

“And pray for your sister, too. Pray for her strength.”

“I will.”

“I’m leaving soon. It’s going to take me awhile to get there. Just make sure her phone is charged up. Tell her I’m coming.”

“Okay. Thanks Coco.”

Mitchell ended the call while I held the phone and tried to process all the information that was given to me while my brain wasn’t fully awake. I felt Zand’s eyes on me. I looked over and he was sitting up in bed, watching me. His back was against the headboard. Those eyes were staring deep into me, but not judging me.

“Did you hear my call?”

“Yeah.”

“I have to go back. My best friend’s boyfriend was in a car accident. It’s a really bad accident. He’s in ICU.”

“When are you leaving?”

“Soon.”

“Do you need to find a flight?”

“No, I’m going to drive. It’s only about six hours. I’m going to pack really quickly and shower.”

“Okay, I’ll drive you. We can take my car.”

I stopped staring off into space to regard him carefully. Had he just invited himself on my road trip? I think so. I think he did.

“You don’t have to come with me. I will probably be there for a few days.”

“I can’t let you drive that far alone.”

“You have an entire club to run. I may be gone for a few days.”

“My staff can run The Castle without me. They’ve done it before.”

“Yeah, but I don’t know how long I will be in Minnesota.”

“It doesn’t matter. We can figure that part out when we come to it.” Zand stood and grabbed his pants off the chair. “I want to drive you there. You can’t deny. It will be less stressful if you don’t have to worry about driving. You can focus on your friends.” He jumped into his pants in one swift motion.

“I don’t want you to just stop everything for me.”

“I don’t care. I want to stop everything for you. It’s final. I’m driving. I’m going to shower, pack some clothes and gas up the car. How long do you need to get ready for the road?”

It was clear. He was in charge. I just sat there and watched him grab his shirt, his cell phone, and his shoes.

“Chanel.”

I was already looking at him, but now I was really seeing him. He was kind. He was caring. He was real, and I wanted to revisit these feelings at a later date.

“Chanel, you need thirty minutes, an hour? How much time do you need?”

“An hour. I’m going to shower and pack a few things.” Probably in the opposite order, but my brain wasn’t working well under the stress.

I watched Zand move toward me. He stopped over to my side of the bed and leaned over to kiss my forehead. The tenderness— I didn’t expect an innocent forehead kiss to go straight to my sweet spot, but it did. I watched my lover walk to the bedroom door. I was mentally shaking off the kiss, and I was in a trance trying to absorb the information Mitchell gave me.

“Chanel, get out of bed.” He said as he exited my bedroom. I sat there and waited

until I heard my front door close. I jumped out of bed and shuffled naked to the kitchen to start a pot of coffee. I had one hour to get myself together. I could call my job when I got there. I needed to be there for Morgan. She had always been there for me.

I was secretly happy that Zand was willing to drop everything and drive me to Minnesota. I didn't need a reason to like him more, but this just made me fall just a bit harder for him.

I rushed into the shower because I didn't have time to waste. I prayed Craig would be okay. He was a good guy. He was good for Morgan and good to her. I wanted to think positive, but there was a nagging feeling that things would only be what they were meant to be.

It was a little over an hour when Zand showed up at my door to collect my suitcase. I threw a few essentials inside and hoped I remembered everything I needed. He was wearing black jeans and a black t-shirt. His hair was wet and pushed back off his forehead. Effortlessly sexy was what came to mind. No jacket or coat. He never seemed to be cold, although it was a freeze-fest outside.

Zand didn't let me lift a finger with my bags. He packed my things in the trunk of his vintage sports car. His black leather jacket was tossed on his backseat. I wondered if this old classic car could make it that far. It seemed to be in pristine condition. The car was beautiful and sexy, but I didn't know his car. I did know he rarely drove it. He liked to walk.

I thought about my friend because I didn't want to worry about getting along with Zand. Six or seven hours cooped up in a car with a man could be problematic. I hoped it wouldn't be. I'd never taken any kind of a road trip with a man, a new man.

My fear was going to take over if I let it. Zand had done nothing wrong. I was just

being overly dramatic, and I knew it. Zand was in charge of the navigation, and I didn't want to challenge his sense of direction. After we stopped for gas, I was going to just check to make sure we were driving on the right path to Bloomington. Of course we were. This man ran an entire nightclub. What made me think he couldn't drive from Illinois to Minnesota?

We listened to music, and I tried to not stare over at his handsome profile. Mr. Vampire was sort of my saving grace. I didn't want to drive while I was a bottle of nerves. I was able to send a text to Mitchell saying I was on the road to Minnesota. It was selfish, but I didn't want to hear my friend upset. I knew Morgan's despair would seep into me and I wasn't ready for it. I wanted to deal with the drama when I arrived. I was brave about a lot of things, but I didn't know how to handle bad news. I was headed to the state that was full of bad news for me— bad news and bad memories.

"This is nice." His warm eyes stared out the front windshield.

"Nice." What did he mean?

"Us, together, cruising the highway."

"Yeah."

"It feels natural." He glanced over quickly to smile at me.

"It does." He had no idea how natural it felt. I trusted him and I knew I shouldn't. I didn't know him from a can of Sherwin Williams. Basically, all I knew could be summed up in three sentences. He owns a club. He lives in the basement of my apartment complex. He was very good at sex.

"You don't have to worry. If you want to stay a few days, I can get us a hotel."

“Do you want to stay in Minnesota?” I asked. I didn’t want to impose on him. After all, this was my drama, not his. “What are you going to do when I’m at the hospital?”

“Don’t worry. I can find something to do. I can work on my memoir.”

“You’re writing a book?”

“No, I’m not, but see there’s always something to do.” He took his eyes off the road to wink at me.

“I appreciate you coming, driving me up here.” I corrected.

“I missed a lot of time with you when you were dodging me. I’m trying to make up for lost time.” He jokingly added.

“Are you going to keep reminding me about that?”

“I am. You hurt my feelings.”

“I did not.” I half joked.

“I was broken. I thought my sex game was awful. My ego was crushed into a trillion pieces, self-worth crashing fast. I was on the verge of a deep depression. ”

“Ha, right. I doubt it. You have women lined up to be with you.”

“I don’t have any women currently. I don’t want them. I want you.” Zand took his closest hand off the steering wheel to grasp hold of my hand. His touch warmed my heart. His touch made me feel better in any situation. This guy was different.

My mind wandered with the possibilities. Maybe he had feelings for me. Could this

be turning into something real? We held hands for at least a mile. I did something I'd never done before. I raised his hand, kissed it, and put it back on the steering wheel. I wasn't being rude. I'd just had a flash of Morgan's boyfriend. He was in a car crash and my mind took me to that place. I hated how random thoughts would creep into me and take away my bliss.

We stopped for gas and a quick bite to eat at Wendy's before we got back on the road.

"You never told me why you moved to Chicago."

I paused briefly to think of my response. "No, I didn't."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"It's not that I don't want to talk about it. It's embarrassing."

"I doubt you have anything to be embarrassed about." He tilted his head and flashed a closed-mouth smile at me.

"Ha, yeah. Stupid decisions that affect your life, my life."

"We all make poor decisions. I've made more than my share."

I couldn't imagine Zand making bad decisions. Maybe he accidentally wore a colorful shirt one day. I shouldn't be making jokes, but he seemed to have what he wanted in life. He also seemed to be living the life that he wanted, if there was any difference between the two.

"I sort of ran away from a huge problem." I confessed.

“I’ve done that before.”

Was he being honest or just agreeing with me? “I ran away from an extremely toxic relationship.”

“Sounds like a familiar story.”

“You have a similar story? Spill it. ”

“Why do you think I came to Chicago from L.A.?”

Was it really a nasty breakup? “Seriously? Tell me why?” I was intrigued. I wanted to know more. I wanted to know all there was to know about Alexander Valentine. His story had to be fascinating. He was a mysterious character without even trying to be.

“Did you break up with someone?”

“Yes, it was a breakup. We were broken, severely. My ex did some things I couldn’t forgive. I bolted, left as fast as I could. I wanted to start over in a new place.”

“Your ex-girlfriend, you were in a relationship?”

His lips formed a grin. “Yes, I was in a committed relationship. I see you have judged me. You see me with one random woman and now I’m a full-time gigolo. I have been in relationships before.”

“Gigolo? Where did that old word come from?”

“What’s the word they use today? Man whore.”

I was thinking fuckboy, but I wasn’t going to say it out loud. “I wouldn’t say that.”

“It’s your turn. Did you break up with a man from Minnesota and flee to Chicago?”

“Ah, sort of. No, it was that exactly.” I let out a nervous giggle. “My ex was, is, very dangerous.”

“That’s a vague statement.”

“Well, he’s a criminal.”

“I’m intrigued.” I noticed his smirk from the corner of my eye.

“I didn’t know that when we first met.”

“And this criminal? He’s back in Minnesota?”

“Yes.” I didn’t want to tell him he was out on bail for a murder charge. I would look like a real fool.

“Do you think you’ll run into him when you’re back in town?”

“I don’t think so. I hope not. He doesn’t know where I live now. I have a restraining order on him. ”

“Was he violent?” Zand looked over at me. He apparently not only needed to hear my response, he also needed to see it.

“Yes, not with me, with other people. But there were threats of violence.”

“Huh.” Zand paused dramatically. “It’s a good thing you got away from him.”

It was better than good. “I did, get away.”

“What’s his name, your ex?”

Did he have a motive for asking? Probably not just making conversation. “Alonzo.” I offered because it didn’t make a difference.

Zand shook his head a little bit. “You got away from him. I got away from her. We fled and we’re all the better for it.”

I wholeheartedly agreed with him. I wanted to share the entire truth about Alonzo, but I was afraid it would scare Zand away. That was the last thing I wanted to do. Zand was a regular guy and a legit business owner. He didn’t know anything about a Mexican drug lord for organized crime. I was quite sure of that.

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHANEL

We made good time when we arrived in Bloomington. I went directly to Silver Cross Hospital. Zand found parking near the entrance and he went inside with me. I was relieved he wasn't going to let me go at this alone. Hospitals weren't my favorite place. It was a place that held terrible memories for me. It was the place that my mother and aunt took their last breath. I associated hospitals with cancer and death.

I messaged Morgan that I had arrived at the hospital. She met me in the first floor waiting room. She looked worn out. I knew she wasn't doing well. Swollen eyes, red nose, she had been crying, and I didn't want to start crying. That would only make things worse.

I approached her and extended my arms. She rushed into them and hugged me tightly. Her body was rigid, and I knew she was worried. The situation was stressful. But I needed to know what was going on.

"Hey." I greeted her while grasping her forearms.

"I'm glad you're here."

"I packed some things and came as soon as Mitchell called me. How's Craig? "

Morgan let out a deep breath. "He's not good. He flat-lined an hour ago. They had to resuscitate him. It doesn't look good."

“Oh no, I’m sorry.”

“I don’t even know what happened. The police were asking all kinds of questions. They say it wasn’t just a random accident. There are eyewitnesses. They think it was road rage, but Craig doesn’t rage. You know him. He’s like the most laid-back guy ever.”

“Yes, he is.” I agreed. Craig, being involved in a road rage accident, just seemed ludicrous.

“The police said there was a white pickup truck driving erratically, and some witnesses said Craig was trying to get away from the truck when he drove into the semi.”

“Let’s just focus on getting him better.”

“Right.” Morgan noticed Zand standing a few feet away. “Oh, he’s with you?”

“Yeah, he drove.” I mumbled.

“Good. I didn’t want you driving here all by yourself.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m good.”

We hugged another again and this time Morgan’s body was more at ease. Our embrace was interrupted by the static over the hospital’s intercom system.

“Dr. Ramadi, Code Blue. ICU.” A peaceful voice rang out from the overhead speakers.

Morgan’s face got tense. “That has to be Craig. He’s in ICU. Dr. Ramadi, that’s his

doctor.”

Morgan sprinted toward the bank of elevators, and I hurriedly followed her. There was one open elevator and without hesitation, we dashed into it. Morgan pushed the button for the floor. As the doors closed, I looked out at Zand standing there in the visitor’s waiting room. I lifted my hand slightly to him right before the elevator’s door closed.

When the doors opened on the third floor, we were ushered into a room by Mitchell. I knew what that room was. It was the room where doctors brought you bad news. Craig’s parents were in the room, along with his sister. Our mutual friend Donna was there, too. I briefly wondered why I didn’t think she would be. She was Morgan’s friend just as much as I was. Maybe even more now that I was away. A pinch of jealousy hit me and I quickly swiped it away. This wasn’t the time for those types of negative feelings.

I walked over and gave Mitchell a hug. Donna stood and hugged me tightly. Which made me feel worse for having envious thoughts. Donna grabbed my hand and pulled me into the chair beside her. We all sat in silence, but Craig’s father paced the carpet under his feet. I didn’t think Craig had any brothers. He was his father’s only son. This had to be heartbreaking and tragic for Craig’s family.

I fished my cell phone out of my bag. I’d left Zand downstairs, and I didn’t know what he was going to do while I waited. I pulled up his last text message to me. I could feel Donna’s eyes all on my lap as I looked down at my cell screen. I would normally scold her, but this wasn’t the time and place for me to check her nosy ass.

[Are you still here?] I texted him, even though I was sure he was right where I’d left him.

[Yes, how’s it going?]

[I'm going to be here for a while. I think there's going to be bad news coming soon. I believe Craig coded again.]

[That sucks. I really hope he pulls through.]

[I do too.]

[I'll go get us a hotel for the night. Text you when I get the room.]

[Thanks.]

[No problem. Call me when you need me to come pick you up.]

[I will.]

[Are you okay?]

[Yeah, I'm fine.]

[Ok.]

[Give me a call when I need to come back.]

[I will.]

Zand texted me three red hearts. I hearted his emoji and slipped my cell phone back in my purse.

“Is that your boyfriend, you're texting?” Donna whispered.

I briefly forgot that she was sitting next to me. I only looked at her without giving her

any confirmation about her question.

The waiting room was getting colder and colder as we sat and waited for news. I rubbed my arms slowly, trying to erase the goose bumps as they flooded my skin. My intuition said the prognosis wouldn't be good. I wondered if I was the only one that felt this way. There was no way I would ask anyone with Craig's parents and his sister right here with us.

I scanned the room in search of something to take my mind off the frigid temps. I studied the carpet, the light fixtures, the windows, and the coffeemaker.

Morgan stared out into space as I replayed the words she relayed to me. Road rage, highly unlikely. It was too farfetched to think that this had anything to do with Lonzo. He'd met Morgan once or twice in passing, but he didn't have any information on her. As far as I knew, he only knew her first name. I knew for a fact I never mentioned anything personal about her and definitely never mentioned her boyfriend's name.

In my heart, I knew this had to be a random accident. It was the only thing that made sense. It was a car accident, not a shooting.

Thirty minutes later, everything was a blur. The worse news came barreling down on all of us. Craig had died. His mother sank into the floor sobbing uncontrollably while Craig's sister wailed in agony. I hated I couldn't remember Craig's sister's name— Phyllis, Felicia, Alicia, Erica. What was her name? Focusing on that made it easier for me to contain my grief. I knew Craig. He was a really good brother. I was holding on to Morgan and trying to console her while she whispered no over and over again. Mitchell was rubbing his sister's back and wiping tears from his eyes. Donna had wrapped her arms around the both of us. This was tragic. I wanted answers for my friend. But with car accidents sometimes there wasn't a resolution.

This was not what I expected when I drove back here. I expected broken bones and a few weeks' recovery, time off work, and shopping for a new car. That wasn't this. This was the end. Craig was dead. My best friend had lost her boyfriend, and I didn't know how to comfort her. She'd always been the one to comfort me. Morgan was the strong one. I was the weak one. I was the one who got involved with the criminal. But Morgan always had her head on straight. She picked a good guy. Craig was one of the good educated Black men. I hate that it had to end this way for him. He didn't deserve this.

I didn't have to wait long for Zand to arrive at the hospital to pick me up. Mitchell waited with me. Morgan left the hospital with Craig's parents. I could understand that. I'm sure they wanted to be close to her. She was an important connection to their son.

Zand pulled into the no-parking zone and I dashed out the door after giving my play brother a hug. I can finally breathe again. This entire ordeal had my heart beating so fast. I really didn't think it was going to go this way, and maybe that was naïve of me.

The hotel was only a few miles from the hospital. I was happy about the distance because I wasn't in the mood to sit in a car for a long time after driving from Chicago.

Zand had taken my luggage into the room when he checked in. All I had to do was drag my tired behind and my purse into the elevator and up to the sixth floor. Zand took charge. He opened the hotel room door and let me in to the room. I was immensely grateful. He probably would never know just how grateful I was.

"How are you feeling?"

"Tired. I didn't think this would happen. I mean, people have car accidents every day

that rarely ever turn into a fatality. I just never thought we would drive here and get this bad news.” I was rambling. “I need to take a hot shower. I feel yucky.”

“You need a relaxing bath. I’ll run you some water. Unwind, take off your clothes.”

I stood idle as Zand walked from the room and into the bathroom. In seconds, I heard him turn on the tub’s faucet water.

I slowly peeled out of my clothes, only leaving my bra and panties on. I sat on the edge of the bed and replayed the tragic events of the day. I needed to decompress. He was right; a bath would work better than a shower. Zand could read my needs and me, and I’d never had that before.

Moments later, Zand had my hand and was leading me into the bathroom. His touch was warm and soothing. Just being with him was relaxing.

I removed my panties as Zand watched me. Before I could remove my bra, I felt his hands unclasp my bra. He pulled the straps off my shoulders at the same time. He removed my bra for me. My breast freely hung down and released the pressure I felt on my chest. My nipples hardened as soon as I felt the hotel air graze my skin.

“I know you like the water hot. Test it out.”

It took me a moment to realize what he was talking about. Oh, the bathwater. His touch made me space out. I was going to hate when this was over. He was just what I needed at this time in my life. He was what I didn’t know I wanted. A man like Zand could have all of me. I wish the honeymoon stage of whatever this was would last for a long time. He was all the man that I needed and he arrived at the perfect time in my life.

I went to dip my foot in the water and Zand meandered his arm around my waist to

aid me. The water was hot, but not too hot for me. I gradually lowered my entire left foot into the water. Zand quickly took my hand to help me all the way into the tub. Once both of my feet were submerged, I slowly lowered my body down into the tub while still holding onto his hand .

When I was sitting, something inside me wouldn't release his hand. I held it. I held it tightly and deliberately. I couldn't let go. Looking down at me, his eyes searched mine. Those honey brown orbs of his were hypnotic. Could he read my mind?

“Move up. I'm getting in.” He ordered, while kicking out of his size twelve shoes.

Those were the words I needed to hear to release his hand from my grip. I watched him remove his black t-shirt, and I scooted up toward the bathroom spout to make room for him. I bent my knees to my chest as the water splashed around the tub. I cradled my legs in my arms and rested my face on my knees while he undressed from the waist down. I shut my eyelids.

I could hear him enter the water behind me. I could feel his legs brush against my body as he descended into the water.

I was able to relax when I felt his arms wrap around my body and pull me backward. Releasing my legs and straightening them, I leaned back into his bare chest. He embraced me wholly, and I exhaled deeply. I was so comfortable in his arms, and it scared me. But it was also exactly where I wanted to be. The water soothed me in all the ways I needed. Zand's hands gliding up and down my thigh calmed me.

His other hand held one of my breasts. “I love your tits.”

I turned to face him. I had to get on my knees in between his legs. I sat back on my legs and took his hard dick in my hands.

I slid my wet hand over the head of his dick. I rubbed my palm in tiny circles over the tip of his thickness. I watched his head fall back against the wall tiles and smiled to myself.

I leaned over his throbbing erection and opened my mouth. I lowered my wanton mouth over the head of him. I let my lips engulf him before relaxing my jaw and coasting down over his thickness. My mouth watered as I slid up and down his juicy package. I was going to take as much of him as I could.

Zand rested his hand on top of my head and guided my head down over him. I was determined to take him deep down into my throat. I blocked the gagging and choking that tickled my throat when I plowed down on his huge dick.

“Ugh!” Zand groaned.

This was a signal he was at his peak.

He grasped a huge chunk of my hair and pushed my face down into the water and further down on his pole. I pressed my lips tightly over his veiny skin. I wildly sucked his dick like a pro.

“I want to be inside you.”

No! I said in my mind. I was going to make him squirt all his cum in my mouth. I covered my teeth and pressed my lips as hard as I could. I salivated and rolled my mouth up and down his shaft.

“Oh shit! I love you!”

I hurried my pace. I sucked and choked all over him but I was willing to do whatever it took.

“Fuck!” His fingernails scratched my scalp and he exploded in my mouth and tears leaked from the corners of my eyes.

“Oh Fuck!” Zand released my hair and more liquid seeped down my throat. I swallowed all his little Zand’s and gradually removed my mouth from being wrapped around him.

I sat on my legs and watched him. His eyes were closed and his head tilted to the ceiling. He looked so blissful. I looked down and most of the water was missing from the tub. My hair was a mess. I couldn’t stop staring at him. He reached up at me and opened his eyes.

“Come, let me hold you.”

I turned my body around and glided back into his chest. He wrapped his arms around me and held me closely. I closed my eyes. He’d said something in the heat of passion. I heard it and I loved hearing it. I wanted more. I wanted him and if he wanted me too, this could be something.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ZAND

We were in Minnesota for five days. I couldn't call the road trip a success. Although death was something I was used to, it wasn't some badge of honor. There was a time I was surrounded by death. Those were dark days for me. Days I prefer to leave in the past.

We stayed in Bloomington long enough to attend Craig's funeral and his burial. Craig's family moved quickly when it came to putting their loved one to rest. There were no hiccups or quarrels that I noticed. There were no silly issues about money, casket color, or floral arrangements. The funeral went smoothly and I'm sure that helped Morgan, which in turn helped my dear Chanel.

The drive back to Chicago was somber. We rode in silence most of the way, and it wasn't awkward. It seemed appropriate given the situation. There were things I'd seen and kept to myself, observations I made as the person that wasn't actually distracted by grief. I was there to support Chanel, the woman they all called Coco—the woman I was willing to open my heart to.

I had skills Chanel didn't know of. One was my keen sense of observation. There was a man at the cemetery lurking around. He didn't belong there, but I was the only one that noticed him. He was out of place. He was pretending to visit a gravesite, but he seemed far too interested in the mourners at Craig's final resting place. He could've been just a very nosy grave keeper. But that seemed highly doubtful. Sometimes my need to protect the ones I cared for overshadowed my judgment.

When we reached the city limits, I felt Chanel relax back into my leather seats. I could feel she was anxious, tired, and a host of other emotions. Chicago gave her some comfort, and I hadn't forgotten she was running from her ex— Alonzo Lopez. I'd acquired his last name while having a chat with Mitchell. He didn't know he was giving me information I didn't already have, but he was quite talkative. I used that to my advantage, of course.

I unloaded our luggage. While walking toward the building, I glanced down at the flowerpot by the door. I led us into the apartment building. Chanel was moving slowly. I'm sure it was from being cramped up in the car for such a long time.

"I'm exhausted. I'm happy to be back. I can sleep in my own bed."

"Or mine." I offered. I felt so intensely connected to her, and I was sure she didn't know what I was feeling. The feeling was scary, but I embraced my fear. Chanel was mentally and physically exhausted, so I tucked her into my bed. I cuddled up to her and waited until she fell fast asleep.

I'd been away from the club for a week's time. Chanel tried to convince me to go back to Chicago days ahead of her. There was no way I would leave her alone. I had a connection to her I couldn't explain. It wasn't obsession. I'd been obsessed before and it didn't work out well for me. It didn't bode well for the lady I was infatuated with also.

What I felt for Chanel was vastly different. It was a unique feeling that I couldn't put into words. It was a feeling I refused to deny. It was maybe, it couldn't be, but felt like— love.

Chanel didn't accompany me to The Castle on our first full night back in town. She had to fall back into her work-home routine. Also, I was well aware that she knew Craig and didn't really want to be at a nightclub right after burying her friend.

Things instantly had fallen back into a rhythm between us. My sabbatical was over. I had to go back to the club the third night back in town because we had a very famous deejay spinning.

Surprisingly, Chanel came to the club with me. I loved having her by my side. She was the buffer I needed to ward off the women that were bold enough to approach me. Her presence scared away the women I had slept with once. Chanel wasn't intimidated, by these women. Her confident attitude and bitch resting face was just enough to send the harlots on their way.

I knew I shouldn't use her as a bodyguard, but her presence calmed me. She put me at ease. She had been working long hours to make up for the days she missed while in Bloomington. I wished she didn't have to work so hard. If she were mine, she wouldn't have to work at all. My modest living did not equate to my wealth. I just didn't flaunt my riches, but I was rather wealthy.

This wasn't the time to be throwing my fortune around. I wanted her to love me for me. I actually wanted all of her love. I would stop at nothing to get it. She was so poised and polished. Men undressed her with their eyes. I saw it happen too many times, but she never seemed to notice. Or she didn't let on that she knew how desirable she was.

After welcoming the deejay and introducing Chanel to our celebrity and his entourage, I took her over to a table at the bar in the VIP section. We sat, and I waited for someone to take our drink order. Through a crowd of clubbers dancing, I could see my head of security. Natasha was approaching our table. She was good at her job, so I could see her mind at work. Her instincts were impeccable. Since she'd been in her position, there hadn't been any serious incidents at The Castle.

In seconds, she was at our table. Natasha leaned down and placed her face at my ear. "Sir, you have an important phone call in your office." She took a step away from the

table and glared at me.

I gave Natasha a pensive look. “Is it?”

“Yes.”

There were only a few people I deemed important enough for me to drop everything and accept calls from them. Chanel was the newest edition to that list, but she was here with me.

“Chanel, I have a call. I need to take it in my office where it’s quiet.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

I leaned over and gave Chanel a kiss on her cheek.

“I’ll be right back.” I stood.

“I’ll be here.” Chanel belted over the loud music.

“Natasha, stay with her.”

Natasha nodded her head once and took the seat I’d left. I hoped she didn’t ask Chanel too many questions. It was her personality to be intrusive.

I walked across the dancefloor and acknowledged the regular clubgoers that were familiar with me. I made it over to the hallway near the private elevator. I nodded at Jim as he took a step aside to let me pass. He was standing firm in the entryway of the halls that led to the elevator. I rode the elevator up to my office and mentally tried to prepare myself for this impending exchange because this conversation was inevitable. That didn’t mean I wanted to have it. My life was changing, and the past was the past.

I exited the elevator and walked down the hall to my office and sat my rear in the chair behind my desk. I removed a clean, empty glass from the shelf below my desk. Reaching on the same shelf, I grabbed a bottle of red wine. I twisted the cork, leaned back, and tilted the bottle up to my lips. I guzzled the liquid down. I didn't need the glass. I needed a drink before I took this call.

Removing the cordless phone from the base, I took the call off of hold with a tap of a button. I placed the phone on the desk and put the call on speaker.

Leaning back in my chair. "Hello, this is Alexander."

"Son." His voice and cadence hadn't changed.

"Father."

"How are you doing in your new city?" His slight Irish accent seeped in and out of his words.

"I'm doing well, living." I tried to sound casual when this call was completely the opposite of casual.

"I wanted to share the good news."

"Good news."

"Your brother has left the country."

This wasn't newsworthy, but I played along. "When?"

"I think it's been a month or so now."

“Why?” I wasn’t sure I cared, but he could be running from something.

“He said he wants a change of scenery. You know he’s always been a nomad.”

“He has.” But I knew there had to be more to the story.

“I’ve written to you with my sincere apologies.”

“You have.”

“To no avail. No response from my beloved son hurts me deeply.”

“I didn’t have anything to say— father.” I grabbed the wine bottle and took another long swig.

“I don’t want there to be any animosity between us. You were my last child. I hold you near and dear to my heart. One mistake shouldn’t dictate our entire future.”

“I hold no ill will. I’m whole and content. You have introduced me to the finer things in life, and I will forever be grateful.”

“I’ve called for another reason. Teresa is gone. ”

“Gone?”

“Yes, vanished. Oh no, I don’t mean dead. She’s fled. I believe she is looking for you. I wanted to warn you as a courtesy.”

“Thank you. I’m not worried about her. I made it clear to her ages ago, we are over.”

“I warned you about her. You defied me.”

He seriously thought that meant something to me when it didn't. "You did. You should come up and visit me in the spring. It's rather cold here now at this time of year."

"Yes, I accept your invitation. I would like that. Alexander, if I haven't made it clear, I humbly apologize for my role in the demise of your marriage."

"I've accepted your apology long ago." Fuck you, father! "I no longer have any feelings or regard for Teresa."

"A wise decision. Son, I will leave you to your new life in Chicago. Until we speak again."

I waited for my father to end the call. I sat there and thought about the talk. Time healed. I picked the wrong woman to bring into my family. She was a manipulative snake. It was really my poor judge of character that caused the riff in my family. Regardless, I expected more from the man that gave me life. I was over the past, but still harbored a bit of resentment.

None of it mattered. I had a new life, new friends, and a new woman in my life. My cell phone buzzed, and it was Natasha. I answered on the second buzz.

"Yes."

"There's someone trying to enter the club through the side entrance. They want to speak with you."

"Someone?"

"Yes, a young man. I told Nick not to let him inside the club. He claims to be your brother."

“My brother.” Shit, could it be him— Harlen? “He’s supposed to be in another country. How did he track me down?”

“I don’t know. I can look into it.”

“No, I will go take care of it. Keep him away from my girl. ”

“Of course, that’s why I told the guys not to let him inside the building.”

“Good thinking. Thank you.” It was good thinking. It would be a major disaster if Harlen saw me with Chanel.

“Call me if you need me.” Natasha said.

“No, no, I’ve got this. Just stay with Chanel.”

“Yes, boss.”

I was already out of my office and stalking down the hall before the call ended. I looked down at my cell and accessed the security footage that was a live feed to the side entrance near the alleyway. While in the elevator, I zoomed in and I saw him. He was standing with his arms crossed and talking to my security officer, Josh.

Harlen was strong, but Josh was like me. There was no way he could push past him. Josh was a brick wall. I reached the ground level and exited the elevator. I rounded a corner that led to the side entrance of The Castle. I stepped by my men and out into the alley. There he was, Harlen Corbin.

At first glance, he was an unassuming common man. He had long dark hair, drawn back into a ponytail with raven-colored eyes and a slender build. I instantly remembered all the damage he done in my life. What was once an unbreakable

brotherly bond was now a patch of ash. He was evil. He was a backstabbing bastard, and he was someone I wanted nothing to do with.

“I told you I knew the owner.” He had to get one more round of vitriol out, just because.

“Harlen.”

“Alexander, it’s been a long time.”

Not long enough for me. The way he said my name was more annoying than I recollected. Clearly, he was here to bother me in some form or fashion.

“Let us move away so we can have a private conversation.”

“Of course, that’s exactly what I would like a private conversation with my brother.” Harlen said as he rolled his eyes at my security staff .

I gently grabbed his forearm, even though gentle was exactly the opposite of how I felt in the moment. I led him down the alley and into utter darkness. I let him go just to turn to him and ask a question.

“Why are you here?” I tried to keep my tone even.

“You know why I’m here.”

I didn’t know why that was precisely why I asked the question. But he was the type who played silly games. Games that I was in no mood to play. “Enlighten me.”

“I miss you.” He purred.

“I doubt you’re capable of such emotions.”

“Please, Zand, it’s been a long time.”

“Not long enough.” In my humble opinion.

“I’ve come all this way, and this is how you want this to go between us?”

“I want you to go, Harlen. That is all I want.”

“You can’t mean that.”

“I can, and I do.”

“After all, we’ve been through.” He pleaded.

“We only share lies. You are a liar. Nothing has changed, I’m sure of it. You don’t believe there is anything wrong with your actions.”

He took a step forward and rested his palms on my shoulders. His touch repulsed me. I swiftly removed his treacherous paws.

“Time heals wounds. I want my brother back with me. I want us. Time is a construct that means absolutely nothing to us. We are family.”

His words were laughable. But for this man, I couldn’t even muster up a chuckle. The audacity to come back to this country with these feeble pleas. His nerve knew no bounds.

Looking at him now, I couldn’t even remember the brother I used to love above all else. I had forgiven my father for his indiscretions. I would never forgive Harlen.

What we had will always be tarnished and trashed because of his deceitfulness, jealousy, and greed.

“Alexander, I am very sorry. I beg you to give me one more chance. I can prove to you I am the brother you once loved. We are family. Family is forever. I still believe you love me.”

But I didn't love him. We weren't blood brothers. We didn't share the same mother or any familiar blood. He was adopted without my consent. I didn't want him or ask for him. I tried to love him as a real brother, but that was impossible. I knew better.

Harlen was vindictive. He did things to hurt me. Chanel would be in jeopardy if I allowed that clown back into my life. I preferred to just part ways with my adopted brother.

“I'm not sorry. I no longer want anything to do with you. I prefer that our paths never cross. These are not words I say to you to be cruel. I say these words because they're true.”

“Alexander, I don't believe you.” There was a slight quiver in his voice. I didn't care.

“Please believe me. You are dead to me. You have been dead to me. Seeing you in the flesh doesn't change your death.”

“This is not you. This is not who you are. I made one mistake just one. You have to give me another chance.”

“You have got to be joking. This wasn't just one mistake. You fucked every single woman I dated, and that wasn't enough, so you fucked my wife.”

“I have a problem, an impulse problem.”

“I don’t care about your problems.”

“I’m sorry. I, I would do anything. Tell me, and I will do it. Brother, I love you. Alexander, give me one more chance. We are family. If you only give me a chance, I can prove to you I am trustworthy.”

His words seem like they were coming from someone speaking another language. Did he really think he could betray me? Did he really think he could just show up out of the blue, wave a magic wand, and repair are fractured relationship? Maybe he was crazy enough to think I would jump at the chance to be a part of a family that didn’t act like a family.

“Harlen, leave my city.”

“Your city.” He smirked with lips so thin they were barely noticeable.

“There will be no reconciliation. I’m done with you. If you persist, I will turn father against you. You know I can do it.”

“But you wouldn’t.” He scoffed. I had evidence against him and this was the first time I threatened to use it.

“But I will. You are no longer part of my family. Go off and make your own family.”

“I can’t believe you’re saying this to me. Who are you? What have you turned into?”

“Please spare me the theatrics. You’re not welcomed. Leave now or I will have you thrown out.”

“I’m already outside in a filthy alley with the garbage and the rats.”

“Exactly where you should feel at home. Nonetheless, you know what I mean. I can ruin you. I can make you disappear. You know that I can. You’ve seen what I can do. Don’t make me do it to you. I spared your life once. I won’t do it again. You have used your get out of jail free card. There will be no other. Leave.”

Without bothering to turn back, I walked away from him, leaving him alone in the dark alleyway. I hoped he would heed my warning. I was only going to give it to him once. I would not let him come into my new life and disrupt my world. I knew how easy it would be to take his life. He didn’t know everything about me. He didn’t know the life I led before he came into it. He only knew they changed me, the me that was a better man. He knew the brother that he could use and take advantage of. That guy was a facade. Now I was back to being the original, the version of me that’s not to be fucked with.

I approached the side entrance. “Make sure I never see him again. He isn’t welcomed inside or anywhere near my establishment.” I stated to Nick and Josh .

“Sure boss.”

I turned back, and he was standing just a few feet away, just as I’d left him.

“Remove him from the premises. Use whatever force you deem necessary. He is no fighter. Treat him like trash. Just get rid of him.” With a slight wave of my hand, I stepped inside the threshold of The Castle.

“Will do.” Josh stated as he stalked down the alley towards the man I refused to call my brother any longer. He was nothing to me now that I deemed him my sworn enemy. He had been nothing to me and seeing him again hadn’t changed that at all.

This chapter of my life was closed for good. I hadn’t killed anyone in a long time and I didn’t want to take a life, but my patience had run out.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ZAND

The next day proved to be a new one. I woke around noon only to notice an excessive amount of missed calls on my cell phone from a number I didn't recognize. I checked my voicemail, and the message floored me. A nurse from UIC medical was muttering something in broken English.

Chanel.

Chanel.

Chanel.

I remembered her kissing me goodbye as she left my bed early this morning. She was dressed for work. I watched her leave my bedroom, and I turned over and went back to sleep. What could've happened in that time?

I didn't have time to think about it. I only had time to brush my teeth and dress. I'd slept too long. I wasn't going to waste my time in the shower. I splashed cold water on my face before grabbing my car keys and leather jacket. Sprinting out my front door, I rushed to my car. I was headed to my girl.

I sped through traffic, rushing to the hospital. I tried to control my panic. Something happened to Chanel and the fear of losing her entered my veins like pure heroin. I had little information from the voicemail and I had to fill in the blanks. The blanks were

violent. The blanks had my mind thinking of the worse case scenario.

I pulled into the hospital parking lot and started looking for a parking space. I drove around longer than I should have. I made sure to suppress my anger before stepping out of my car.

The emergency room information desk was buzzing with people, sound, and action. It seemed the entire family of a nineteen-year-old Black man was grieving. What my eavesdropping gathered was he'd been shot four times in the Lawndale area. This was, I dare to say, typical for young Black men in Chicago. It was a normal day of death in the inner city.

The chorus of sobs was commendable. This young man was loved. I wondered if I would be missed so profoundly as Donte—I heard someone wail, “Why they have to get Donte?” A good question, but not one for me to answer and one I was sure CPD would be looking into as soon as the storm settled.

There was a huge police presence in the emergency room. I've seen death so many times I should be numb to it, but I wasn't. I didn't know this young man's story. I didn't know if he was a good person or a bad person, a gangbanger or a junior pastor at some Baptist Church. I knew there was a thin line between the two. I would never judge his choices or the path that led him to death. I had been considered a bad man. Now I lived to change my past and leave it behind. But sometimes the past had a way of catching up to you. It even had a way of showing up in an alley at your place of business.

The receptionist that looked up Chanel's room number was clearly overworked. She needed a vacation to a tropical paradise and a few hits of Botox around her weary eyes. I could read all of this in her face, body language, and demeanor. She was on the precipice of rudeness. I couldn't fault her. How many dead bodies and bodies on the fringes of death had she seen since working behind this desk.

I learned Chanel was no longer in the emergency wing. She had been moved to a room. I was allowed to go up with a sticker for a visitors' pass and with leaving my driver's license at the desk. I took the sticker from the scowling lady.

"You better put that on your clothes." She barked.

I looked at her, and she glared at me. I slapped the stupid sticker on my leather jacket and scoffed at her. I guess my White privilege meant nothing to her. I noticed early on that I was one of two colorless people in the emergency not counting the Chicago police officers mulling around Donte's family.

I needed to hear what happened to Chanel. I refused to jump to conclusions.

I had to show my sticker pass to another desk to get into her room. She was in a private part of the hospital and I had little to no information. When I entered her open hospital door, relief hit me. I had the confirmation that she was alive and breathing air. It seemed silly, but I'd seen death. I had been tricked by death and I had a love hate relationship with death.

I sat in the chair by her bed and watched her sleep. I removed my jacket and walked over to the whiteboard across the room. I grabbed the clipboard and read her chart. After putting it back I went back to the chair and leaned back.

Chanel was out. I'd read the meds they administered, hydrocodone and acetaminophen. There was no way I would wake her. She looked like Chanel, but the version of her that was an extra in the Netflix movie *Bruised*.

It took a few minutes before she opened her eyes. I leapt from the chair and dashed over to her bedside. It was only a few steps, but it seemed like the longest distance.

"Hey, doll."

“Zand.” I leaned over to Chanel and planted a kiss on her one uninjured cheek.

“Oh, babe. I got here as soon as I heard.”

“I didn’t know who else to call. Well, the nurse called. I, I, had to get X-rays and scans and tests and—.” Chanel cleared her throat. “Oh, the pain was, they had to give me something, and I was out before I could call you myself. I wasn’t trying to worry you. I didn’t have my cell phone or my purse.”

“No, you were supposed to call me. You can always call me.”

I took another look at the plum-colored bruises on her face. The black eye, the swollen lip and the black stitches that lined her forehead.

“Babe, tell me what happened?”

“Someone attacked me while I was emptying the garbage.”

“At the apartment?” I needed details.

“Yeah.”

I was confused. I saw her leave my apartment for work this morning. She was dressed in scrubs. “The garbage?”

“I left you and went upstairs to my place. I forgot my work I.D. I had time to make me a cup of coffee. While it was brewing, I grabbed the garbage. I was going to dump my garbage, come back upstairs and get my bag and my coffee and then get in my car and head to work. I just remember having garbage in my hand and being at the dumpster. Then I got hit from behind. I tried to fight, but they beat me until I was unconscious. I don’t know how long I was out. Miss Hampton from apartment 1B

found me when she took her dog out?—”

I was listening to her words and trying to keep my temper at bay. My anger sent my brain to another place. I missed a few of her words as she continued to speak. There were some parts I missed and I only heard the words— “The police.”

“What happened with the police?” I asked, willing myself to calm down and listen intensely. My blood was boiling. I wanted to kill the man that put his hands on her. I was doing a good job of concealing my anger. Chanel hadn’t noticed my rage and continued on.

“The police, they came to the hospital and questioned me about the attack but I didn’t have anything on me, no purse, no cell phone. There wasn’t anything to steal. The police couldn’t classify it as a robbery. I was just emptying the garbage and got jumped. They were just hitting me. There were punches coming from everywhere. I don’t know what to think. I don’t know if it was random.”

They, she said they, more than one? The worse thing came to my mind and my hands shuddered. “Did they?—?”

“No, when I came to, I was in the ambulance. My clothes were on. I felt so much pain. My head hurt, my face hurt, and my neck. I didn’t feel like I had been violated. My clothes were dirty, but they weren’t out of place.”

“Okay.” My mind swirled with the possibilities. The first possibility was her ex-boyfriend, Alonzo Lopez. It could be my ex Teresa. Could it really be Teresa?

“They didn’t get anything. Maybe it was just some kids or something. I wish I’d seen my attackers.”

“I have hidden video cameras on the property.”

“You do?” She seemed genuinely surprised by this.

“Yes. There are cameras everywhere.”

“What do you mean, you said, I have cameras everywhere?”

Oh shit. “Yeah, I do. I never mentioned I owned the apartment building.”

“Zand, you own the apartment building?”

“I own the club, the apartment, and a few other properties around the city.”

Something changed in her eyes. I wasn’t sure what, but something. “Are you in pain?”

“No, not now. I was, but they gave me something. I’m highly medicated.”

“That’s a good thing.”

“Yeah, but I look like a monster. It looks worse than it is. I promise.”

“Your wounds will heal. Nothing is fractured.”

“How do you know?”

“I read your chart.” I pointed to the whiteboard where a clear pocket held a clipboard.

Her eyes followed. “Oh, what does the chart say?”

“It says you’ll be fine. No broken ribs, just bumps and bruises and a concussion.” I wanted to reassure her she would be safe. “I should’ve been there.”

“I never needed an escort to the garbage can before. It’s so dark in the morning. I should’ve waited until after work.”

“No, it should be safe for you anytime. Did you get any description at all? I’m going to check the cameras, but did you see anything?”

“No, not really. I think there were two people. It felt like I was being hit from different directions.”

“Men, or women?”

“They were small like women but they could’ve been short men. They didn’t speak. I don’t know. I was hit right away. Then I was fighting. Then I was seeing stars. There were more punches and I think my head slammed into the side of the garbage dumpster and I was knocked out.”

“Probably how you got the concussion. Do you know how long you’re going to be in the hospital?”

“If everything looks good, I can go home tomorrow.”

“I will pick you up, take you back to the apartment. Do I need to call someone for you?”

“No, no, no.” She shook her head, but her movements were stiff.

“What about your friend, Morgan?”

“No, no. I don’t want to worry her. With Craig’s funeral, I don’t want to add anything else on her. She has a lot going on. I’m going to tell her, eventually. Later, when I don’t look so hideous.”

“You can never look hideous.”

“I’m sure the mirror says otherwise.”

“Fuck the mirror!”

Chanel tried to giggle, but it came out as a choking cough.

Someone would pay. As much as I wanted to be a changed man, I sort of knew deep down that someone would die.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ZAND

I stayed at the hospital until the end of visiting hours, which was 8PM. My drive home was somber, but I was fuming underneath my skin. I knew Chanel would be safe in the hospital because of its location. There was around the clock security and Chicago police officers stationed at the hospital. I had questions that needed answers. I didn't know if her physical assault was random. Could it be a random attempted robbery? Chicago offered a buffet of violent crimes all year round. Only the security camera footage could offer me the answers I was looking for.

What was their intent? Did they want to take her life? Did she escape death because they didn't want to kill her? Did they spare her when they realized she didn't have any money or credit cards? It didn't matter. I would do anything I could to protect her.

My sporadic thoughts didn't seem to matter. The truth would be revealed. I had to look at the video surveillance. The tapes would give me the answers I seek. Then I would know the face of my enemy. I would uncover who went after Chanel and I would know whom to focus my wrath.

There was a chill in the air that pierced the back of my neck as soon as I got out of my car. As I approached the dumpster where Chanel was attacked, I made plans to install motion censored lights, the brightest ones I could find. It was important for my tenants to feel safe. I looked up at where the cameras were hidden on the building. Everything seemed normal.

As the landlord, I was going to have to inform the other tenants of the attack. Transparency in situations like this was always best.

I entered the building and got a whiff of— her. Anger, I shouldn't still be this infuriated by her. I wouldn't let her know the wound she left hadn't fully healed. She may take pleasure in it. I would never give her the satisfaction.

I rounded the corner, and my sense of smell was undoubtedly correct. Teresa was leaning on my apartment door. Head to toe black like she was in mourning. Her breasts were hoisted up to her throat. Such blatant tactics would never work with me. Was she an idiot?

Was this a coincidence? She was here in Chicago at the same time my shiftless brother had arrived. Did Gillian tell them I was here? No way he would betray me in such a manner.

"Teresa Protenza." I wanted to make the first move. I wanted to punch her in the face. Speaking her name would have to suffice, for now.

"Teresa Valentine." She purred a name that no longer belonged to her.

There was a ceremony, but we were never legally married, although I never cared about legalities. "In your dreams." It was a juvenile thing to say, but it seemed fitting for this unexpected visit.

"Where were you? I was waiting for your return."

"I'm never coming back to L.A. Why are you here?"

"You didn't return any of my calls."

“So you rushed to the city of Chicago?”

“It took me forever to find you. I never dreamed you would go somewhere cold. Alexander, what was I to do? You never came home to me.”

I ignored her words. I needed answers. “How do you know where I live?”

“I followed you one night when you were leaving The Castle. I love your new vibe. It’s cute, but it doesn’t seem like you.”

“My new vibe.” I chuckled. “I don’t have time for this. I am no longer attracted to chaos and destruction.”

“Since when?” She sneered as her eyebrows rose.

I ignored the question. I didn’t owe her honest responses.

“I noticed there was a huge police presence around the apartment early in the morning.”

“What were you doing here?”

“I came to see you. Are you going to let me into your apartment?”

“No.”

“Why are you living in an apartment?”

“Fuck you. Leave.”

“I came a long way just to see you.”

I had my suspicions and instead of beating around the bush; I went straight to it. “Did you hurt my girlfriend?”

“Your girlfriend? That nurse?”

She’d seen Chanel. “Answer the goddamn question.”

“Alexander, she’s a fucking nurse. She is no threat to me.”

“You were a fucking bartender when I found you and gave you a life.”

“You gave me your love. There’s a difference.”

“You still haven’t answered the question.” I gritted my teeth in an effort to contain my anger.

“Alexander, what good would that do?”

“I have no idea why you do the things you do.”

“Well, in this case, I’m not the villain. I didn’t attack your Black Nurse Barbie with the ugly Sesame Street shirt. I had every right to. You are my husband.”

“Not anymore. ”

“Says who?” She crossed her arms under her ample breasts.

“You broke our vows and we are no longer anything at all.”

“Is that what you truly believe?”

“It’s far from a belief. I no longer have any ties to you.”

“I made one mistake.” Her eyes were pleading, but it had absolutely no effect on me.

“Just one?”

“Don’t you think it’s about time you’ve forgiven me?”

“I prefer to hold a grudge for infinity, eternity, and beyond.”

“I see you’re still dramatic.” She rolled her eyes. “We should talk inside.” She looked at my apartment door.

“Why are you here? Have Gillian and Harlen grown tired of you?”

“I’m here for you and only you.”

“You’ve come a long way for no reason at all.”

“I’ve come because of the love we shared and still do.”

“I believe it’s adorable that you believe I can forgive you and we can just pick up where we left off. It’s very charming indeed, but there is no way in hell or heaven that will ever happen.”

“How can you forgive Gillian and not forgive me?”

“You fucked my father!” I’d lost the battle and my rage took over.

“You don’t share the same DNA.”

“That’s your argument for your betrayal. Gillian and I are blood!”

“Do you want me to beg you?”

“No, I want you to disappear from my life forever.”

Teresa swiftly fell to her knees and grabbed the waist of my jeans. She made a feeble attempt to unbutton my pants before I swatted her head into the door of my apartment.

“Ouch! What about the love we shared?” She peered up at me.

“It’s dead just like you are to me.”

“You were never this cold before.”

“You never really knew me before. Get off your knees! ”

I watched her hobble to standing. She smoothed her hooker dress down on the sides.

“I don’t want to give you up. I’ve given you more than enough time to be angry with me. This is ridiculous! We’ve had other people in our bed, our union was open.”

“It never was open to my father! I can never forgive you!”

“But you have forgiven him?”

“I have.”

“That’s not fair.”

“He is my father, and you were a mediocre bartender that didn’t deserve the life I gave you.”

“You have your life and your money. What good is it if you have no heart?”

“I have no heart for you, Teresa. It is a very different thing.”

“I mean nothing to you?”

“You have been dead to me for more than a year. Nothing has changed.”

“I can get to your little nurse.”

“You can, but it won’t make a difference. I will never love you again.”

“Never is a long time.”

“If you touch her, I will kill you.”

Teresa took a moment to think about my threat. “Well then, I won’t touch her.” Her lips pressed together tightly, and that wasn’t a good sign.

“I mean it. Move on with your life. I’ve given you gifts.”

“And I am grateful. I want you. I want us.”

“I don’t want you. We are over.”

“I will win you back.”

“If I see you again, I will kill you.” My anger erupted. I had both my hands around

her scrawny throat. With just a smidgen of my strength, I pushed her back and her body slammed into the wall.

She slid down and landed on the floor. I swiftly turned and removed my key from my pocket. I opened my apartment door and entered, closing the door behind me.

I had never hit a woman before today. Teresa was no woman. She was a heartless whore, a deceitful monster. I thought what we had was unique. I believed our love was special, but she fucked my father and my brother. I could never forgive her. I didn't want things to be this way. Her treachery led me here to Chicago. It led me to Chanel. I had to check the video cameras. If Teresa lied about attacking Chanel, my warning would be moot. I was going to find her and kill her. There was just no way around it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ZAND

I made my way to The Castle. I arrived around ten and stayed until sunrise. There were no surprise visitors, but that didn't put my mind at ease. I hoped Teresa had made her way back to the Golden State. She had been warned, and I meant every word of my threat.

I gave second chances with great rarity. There was nothing between us, and I would end her life if she defied me. Leaving California was a mercy on my part. I wanted to kill her when I found her with her mouth around my father's cock and my brother fucking her in her ass. It hurt to see it, but it wasn't the first time a woman had betrayed me.

I thought I changed from the man I used to be. But that was a lie. I hadn't changed. I adapted to the new environment. Once upon a time, I woke every day and chose violence, death and destruction. Now I've chosen peace, life and living. I'm not an imbecile. I knew I could fall back into my old life. If things escalate, that would happen sooner rather than later.

Using my key, I picked up Chanel's purse from her apartment. I didn't think about the coffee she was making before they attacked her. The coffee maker was on a timer. The pot was full of cold coffee I poured into the sink. Chanel's purse, coat and keys were laying in a chair in the living room. I scooped them up and locked her door before leaving. I had revealed things I was going to have to answer for.

Chanel's discharge went smoothly. A nurse wheeled her out of the entrance where I had pulled my car around. I helped her inside and pulled the seatbelt over her body.

There was a thick silence in the air for minutes after I pulled my car into traffic. What was she thinking? I didn't know. I was worried.

"Zand." She cleared her throat.

Her voice made me take my eyes off the road for a second.

"Yes."

"I didn't know you had video cameras on the property."

"They're hidden. It seems the people that assaulted you made sure their identities were hidden. I couldn't make out any faces. I'm sorry there wasn't more I could do."

"You're here, and that means a lot to me."

"Of course, where else would I be?" I glanced over at her and took her hand in mine.

"I appreciate it. I'm sorry I couldn't be more helpful."

"It's fine. It had to be a random robbery. Could've been a carjacking. I don't know. I didn't have a purse, a wallet or my keys, so they picked the wrong victim."

"You were right. There were two of them and I believe from their stature they were women. They were in all black, hoodies, sweats and dark shoes. Their faces just weren't visible."

"I remember being hit from behind. I remember fighting. I couldn't see anything.

Then I must've passed out."

"I have someone coming out tomorrow to install brighter motion sensor lights at the rear of the building. Did you call Morgan?"

"I don't want to worry her. I'll call her tomorrow. I need to get back to work as soon as possible. I can't get fired. I took days off to go back to Minnesota and now this. "

"Don't worry about that. I own the building. You don't have to worry about rent."

"You missed your Halloween bash when we were away."

"I didn't miss it. I preferred to be with you." I raised her hand to my lips and kissed her knuckles. "I have a question."

"Yeah."

"Did you ever think this could've been your ex?"

"I thought about it but?—"

I don't know why I was looking for a reason.

The rest of the ride was quiet. I didn't know if it was wise for me to disclose some things that were happening around me. I didn't want to scare her. She had just been through something traumatic. If she knew I had a lunatic brother and a crazy ex-wife in town, she could leave me and flee like she did with Alonzo.

I helped Chanel up to her apartment and waited while she showered. I didn't want to leave her side. As long as she would have me, I would stay. I tucked her into bed and crawled under the covers with her. This was the only place I wanted to be.

“You don’t have to stay. It’s the middle of the day. I know you have things to do.”

“I don’t have anything to do but wait on you.”

“Do you have cameras in the hall in the basement?”

“Yes, I do.” The same camera that captured me choking my ex-wife. Sure.

“So you know.”

“I do.”

“You know about the notes.”

“I do. I checked the cameras after the second one.”

“I don’t know how to feel. Why did you let me just keep making a fool out of myself?”

“I didn’t think it was foolish.”

“It was silly and childish.”

“I have never received love letters from a woman. Having a secret admirer has been a highlight for me. ”

“Seriously? First, I don’t believe you at all.”

“Why would I ever lie to you?” I would withhold the truth, but never just offer lies.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CHANEL

My boss allowed me to take an entire week off of work to heal from my injuries. Going back to work after all the fanfare my assault caused was enough to wear me out. My coworkers had a welcome back party for me and it surprised me since I hadn't been working there for long. I was a real deal Chicagoan now. I survived the mean streets of Chi-Town and I guess that was a good thing.

It was awkward every time Shawn came into the office. We'd only gone on that one date, but it was odd having to look at him. I ghosted him when I got with Zand. I ignored his text messages. Giving him the cold shoulder was hard when he popped into the office to drop off his pharmaceutical samples.

I could tell he was salty, even though I pulled him to the side and apologized. I lied and told him I wasn't ready to date. He was a good guy, just not my good guy. Shawn saw my face and I'm sure he probably thought my little ass whooping was warranted. That's what I get for ghosting such a handsome man like him. I'm sure he thought I'd made a big mistake letting him go.

None of it mattered. I had completely fallen for Mr. Valentine. I forgot any other men ever existed on planet earth. Zand had me in mind, body, and soul. He nursed me back to health. I felt safe and protected when I was with him. I could truly be me, and I had never felt that way with any other man.

Work was hectic, with parents trying to hurry and get flu shots for their kids before

the frigid winter hit us. I was having my bagged lunch in the back of the pediatrician's office when my cell phone rang.

A picture of Zand with his head on my pillow popped up on my cell phone screen. His perfect face glowed. I smiled before I answered. His face made me happy inside and out.

"Hello." I answered with my sugary good girlfriend voice.

"Hey Daywalker. Are you having lunch?"

I loved when he called me Daywalker. After he admitted he knew I was his secret admirer, things changed. They got better. We were closer. Daywalker wasn't your typical term of endearment, but it was something unique to us. It was personal and sweet.

"Yes, Mr. Vampire, I'm eating my turkey sandwich. What are you doing right now?"

"Uh, I'm just drinking blood."

I chuckled into the phone. "Funny. No, seriously."

"I'm looking over payroll. I want to take you out to dinner later tonight."

"You don't have to be at the club?"

"We can drop by the club for a few minutes, then go to dinner. You love seafood and I've heard of this five-star restaurant on Michigan Avenue. I made reservations for ten. I know it's a little late to eat. But you can come home and take a nap if you need one. I want to take you out. You've made a full week back at work without a single complaint. You deserve a good, fancy meal. We can have a few drinks and come

back to my place. You're off the painkillers and you can drink as much as you like."

"I could go for a drink."

"I'm driving and I promise to drink responsibly. Are you up for it? "

"Yes, I would love to have dinner with you." I would love to have the dessert he was packing in his pants afterwards.

"Just dress up and I will be there at nine-thirty to pick you up and show you a good time."

"I can't wait to get out of this office and out of these scrubs."

"You'll be ready on time?" He asked.

"I will be ready. I promise."

"Babe, I know I just saw you this morning, but I miss you."

"I miss you too."

"I have never felt this way. No, no, we can talk about it at dinner."

"I look forward to our date." I smiled into my cell phone.

"See you later, Daywalker."

"You can just use your key to get into my apartment." At first, it was weird knowing Zand was my landlord, and he had a key to my apartment all along. Now I didn't feel any way about it. "My doorbell needs batteries."

“I should have some. I will bring them tonight. I’m going to the club to sign a few contracts and I will see you later. Call me if you need me for anything.”

“I’m good.” I said because for the first time in a long time I was good.

“Okay, later babe.”

“Bye.” I waited for the phone to go dead. My face was grinning so hard. Any sudden movements and it would crack. To go from a hardened criminal to Zand was a godsend. My cheeks were ballooned out as I thought about what dress I could wear to dinner. It needed to be something he’s never seen before. Would I have time to go to the mall and treat myself to something brand new? I could get my nails done and still have time to come home and lay down for about an hour.

I picked up my cell and placed a call. It rang a few times and when I was about to hang up; she answered.

“Hey girl.”

“Morgan, you sleep? ”

“No, I left my phone in the kitchen. It’s your lunchtime?”

“Yeah, I’m eating. I ran into Shawn today.”

“Oh, how did that go?”

“I was okay. I could tell he can’t stand me. But I kept it classy and cute.”

“That’s all you can do, girl.”

“Zand asked me out to dinner tonight. I think he wants to tell me something. But I don’t know what it is.”

“I hope its good news.”

“I do too because I can’t take anymore bad news. How are you feeling?”

“I’m just taking one day at a time.”

“Have you talked to Craig’s parents since the funeral?”

“His mom called me this morning. Craig still has some clothes and some other things at my house. I know she’s going to come by and get the stuff she wants. I just don’t know when.”

“Is that okay with you?”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s her son. Whatever she wants, she can have. You know what? I forgot to tell you. I was at the grocery store and I ran into someone. Well, I didn’t run into him. I thought I saw someone who looked like your ex-boyfriend.”

“Lonzo?”

“Yes. It was weird. Like I saw him one minute, then I didn’t. It probably was someone who looked like him. Because why would he even be in my area? It was just weird.”

“He lives nowhere near you.”

“Yeah, I’m sure it was just some guy that looked like him.”

“Zand asked me if he thought Lonzo was the one who attacked me.”

“He doesn’t even know where you live. You’re in another state.”

“Right. How could he know? Zand showed me the security camera footage. It was definitely two women. Lonzo is tall and huge. It wasn’t him. ”

“Lonzo has never put his hands on you, right?” Morgan asked.

“No, he’s just threatened me. He never physically hurt me.”

“Maybe it was just some random crime. It’s bad everywhere. Crime is up all across the country.”

“I think it was just some random crime. They tried to rob me and probably beat the crap out of me when they saw I didn’t have anything on me.”

“Do you want me to come to Chicago? You know I can work remotely.”

“I know, but you still have things to deal with. Zand has really been taking care of me. He even was helping me put my makeup on to cover my black eye.”

“Oh shit, he’s a keeper. I’m glad to hear everything is working out with you and your vampire. I just wish I could’ve seen your face when he told you he knew you were the one writing those damn letters. Woo child, did you almost fall over and faint?”

“Yes, I certainly did. I died. Came back to life and died again. I was embarrassed.”

“I think it’s sweet. He just played along with it, knowing he was blowing your back out.”

“Well, that’s certainly the truth.”

“It looks like your guy got a little bit of money in his pocket. I mean legitimate money. You might have a winner this time.”

“I really like him. I don’t want anything to go wrong. Being with him is just so easy. I like easy.”

“Think positive thoughts, and I’m sure everything will be fine.”

“I am. My lunch is over. I have to go back to work.”

“Okay, call me when you leave work.”

“Okay, bye.”

I went right back to work. I used my workday to think about what I was wearing on my date with Zand. We were Facebook official without the Facebook part. Zand didn’t have any social media presence. It was strange, but I recognized a long time ago he wasn’t an average guy. None of that mattered because he was the man for me.

I was having an out-of-body experience. I was sitting across the table from my sexy boyfriend. My hair was up in a flawless bun. My makeup was on point and I was wearing a fitted one-shoulder black dress that set my leopard print Manolo heels ablaze. I just didn’t remember how I got here. I know I was in his car. The drive to the restaurant I couldn’t recall. My brain was in a fog. I remembered the valet taking the car. I recall we were seated immediately.

I barely looked at the menu. I decided I would order whatever Zand ordered. My brain wouldn’t let me think about food. The server had taken our orders. He left us with two full glasses of red wine and the open bottle. The urge to grab the bottle and

turn it up to my lips came over me. I wanted to be drunk enough to not feel the emotions that had a chokehold on me.

I was overheating. My armpits were sweaty. I was happy my hair was up in a bun. Loose hair would've irritated me since I was so damn hot. My eyes wouldn't stop moving around the room. They darted around the restaurant and to every table. I was looking for something— someone. I was trying to hide it, but I was having a full-blown panic attack.

“Are you okay? You seem nervous.” Zand’s voice pulled me back to our table.

“Oh, I don’t know.”

“Whatever it is, you can tell me.” Zand reached over the table and took my hand in his. “Your hand is cold and wet. Babe, are you okay?”

I took a huge sip from my wine glass with my other hand. “Something happened while I was getting dressed.”

“Something, like what? I know you’re not pregnant.” He joked .

“No, of course not.”

“Whatever it is, you can tell me.”

“I got a phone call before we came here.”

“Okay.” Zand nodded once.

I seized the deepest breath I could muster. “It was my ex, Lonzo. He called me.”

“Your ex?” Zand’s eyes widened, and he leaned toward the table.

“Yes, he called. I don’t know how he got my new number.”

“You seem very upset.”

“I am. He’s not a good person. He has my cell number and he might know where I am.”

Zand shrugged nonchalantly. “Huh, maybe yes, maybe no.”

It was clear Zand had absolutely no idea how notorious Lonzo was in the streets of Minnesota.

“Zand, I think we should cool it for a while.”

“You’re breaking up with me?”

“No. I just don’t want anything bad to happen to you. I never wanted to drag you into my bullshit.”

“Chanel, I’m not afraid of him.”

“You don’t know him. He’s a really bad guy.”

“Well, yes, but?—”

“Zand, look, you’ve been good to me. He could kill you. He has murdered people.”

“You care about me. I get it, but I can handle myself.”

“I don’t just care about you. I love you.” I vomited the L word right out like a weirdo.

“You love me?” Zand smiled with his caramel eyes.

“Yes, fine. I said it. I love you. I don’t want anything to happen to you because I care about you and I love you.”

“I love you too. I’m in love with you. That’s exactly the reason I can’t abandon you in your time of need. I could never abandon you. We have something special. We have love.”

Pleading with him was my only option. “If something happened to you because of me. ”

“Nothing will happen to me or you.”

“Zand, listen, this is not the time to be a hero. My ex, he’s killed people.”

“Yes, it was two men and their sister. He murdered a rival gang member with a machete a few years back, but they didn’t have enough evidence to arrest him for that. He’s suspected of other crimes.”

“How do you know this?” His knowledge floored me.

“You told me his name. I looked into him.”

“Why?”

“Curiosity. Don’t worry. It could never be traced back to you or me.”

“How did you look into him?”

“Natasha is my head of security. She can get information on anybody. She has connections with certain people in important positions.”

His voice calmed me, but I still feared he didn't really understand the type of man he was dealing with. Lonzo was a menace.

“Lonzo is the head of some Minnesota crime gang. He's some big criminal that the police have been trying to get for years.” I added.

“He's been too smart up until this point. They can't seem to make any federal or criminal cases stick.”

“So you know he's dangerous?”

“Uh, I'm sure he thinks so.”

“Zand, why aren't you listening to me? You're not taking this serious.”

“Believe me, I am. I just don't scare easy.”

What did he mean by that? “Do you own a gun or something?”

“No, I don't have any guns at the apartment, but there are guns in a safe at The Castle. My security team has concealed carry licenses, so they usually carry a gun on their person while at work. I just tell them to keep the weapons hidden from the public. Chanel, I will not leave you to deal with that bastard all by yourself. If he's brave enough to come to my city and mess with my girl, I'm ready for him.”

I didn't know what Zand meant. I'd never seen him raise his voice. How could he even think he could take on a gang lord? His bravery was nice, but Lonzo was a big, thick guy with tattoos all over his body.

“Chanel, I want you to feel safe. Whatever it takes. You can move in with me. Or I can move you to another property I own. I can take you to and from work. Or I can get one of my security guards to escort you. I need you to understand you’re safe with me.”

I was starting to believe him. I knew I was crazy for thinking a club owner and apartment landlord could protect me from a seasoned criminal. Could he, though? He could probably hide me. Lonzo got my cell phone number, but that doesn’t mean he could get any information on Zand.

“Zand, I don’t think my attack was random. Lonzo said to me, I heard you got into a scuffle. I don’t know if he sent someone to beat me up? Were they supposed to kill me? I don’t know.”

“Tell me exactly what he said to you on the phone. Did he threaten you?”

“No, he said— Hola, Coco. Mi pequena flor, como estas?”

“What did you say?”

“I was just quiet. As soon as I heard his voice, I froze.”

“Did he say anything else?”

“Yes, he said— I know you’re here. I can hear you breathing. Then he said, I heard you got into a scuffle. Then he said, don’t worry. Papi will be there soon to make it all better. Then he hung up. I didn’t know what to do. And like two minutes later, you were at the door to take me to dinner. Do you think I should call the police?”

“No, don’t. They can’t do much. He probably placed the call from a burner phone. What he said to you wasn’t a real threat. He might not even be in the state of Illinois.

To get bail, I'm sure he's wearing an ankle monitor. If he leaves the state, the authorities will come for him."

"I don't know what to do." I was at my wit's end.

"First thing, take a deep breath. You don't have to figure this out right this minute. You don't have to figure it out alone. I'm here. Tell me as much as you personally know about this, Alonzo?"

"There's not much I know. He's a criminal. I didn't know it when I met him. He's a drug dealer of some kind of drug gang. He also has a lot of businesses around Minnesota. He's dangerous, and I was so stupid. I didn't have a clue. I thought he was a legitimate businessman. He owned some auto-body shops. Now he's out on a million dollar bond for the murder of three rival gang members, those two men and the sister."

"He was trying to scare you with the phone call."

"It worked."

"You'll be okay. I'll make sure of it."

"I don't want you involved in any of this."

"Chanel, babe, listen, I'm not afraid of Alonzo Lopez."

"I believe you, but you really should be."

"I'll take you back home. You can pack some clothes and we can stay at my place downtown by the lake."

“You have a place downtown?”

“Yes, it has everything you need but food. We can stop at the grocery store and grab a few things. Don’t stress about this. He could never find you at my loft.”

“Okay, I think I would feel better at a different location.”

“We’re going to figure this out together. You have to just trust me.” Zand reached across the table and took my other hand in his. “Do you trust me?”

“I do. I do trust you.” I didn’t even have to think about it. I trusted him. After what happened with Lonzo, I didn’t even think trusting a man completely was an option.

“Let’s eat and have a few drinks to take the edge off. I think we need them.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CHANEL

The panic I felt subsided immensely. I could get a few bites of my entrée down. I also had three glasses of wine before Zand had the server take the bottle away. I wasn't even mad at him. He knew me. He knew my limits. Zand had a way with words and he had the resources to keep me safe.

A tremendous weight had been lifted off my chest. We waited for the valet to bring the car round. In a few hours, I would be somewhere new. With the tap of a button, I turned on the radio. Music would soothe me on the drive home from the restaurant. He held my hand, and I listened as he sang along to the radio. He had the nerve to have a great singing voice. The songs were old and I couldn't place most of them, but the radio station played songs from the seventies and eighties.

This was the life I wanted. Zand was the man I wanted. I knew I was jumping ten steps ahead, but I could see a life with him. He seemed perfect and more so perfect for me. Sitting next to him in his car, I daydreamed about our future together. I pushed all doubts to the side and thought about us together, married, with kids.

My insides glowed with excitement because this dream felt obtainable. This life with the man I loved was so close. I had all this baggage, and it hadn't made him run away.

Zand looked over and caught me staring at him.

“Babe, what are you thinking?”

“Nothing. I can’t wait to see your place. Your other place.”

“I think you’ll love it. You can redecorate it the way you like. It can be our place. I’m not trying to pressure you. I just want to be with you all the time. We already know we can be together for days at a time... I’m talking too much.”

“No, no, you’re not.” I loved to hear his voice.

I knew I couldn’t stay in my apartment while my crazy ex was out on the loose. Zand had somewhere safe for us to stay. I was only going to pack a few things. Maybe enough stuff for a week. I could always grab a few things at a later date.

Hopefully, I was going to have some peace. Zand was too Zen. He didn’t seem to fear my ex and that would’ve worried me, but he was so confident with his words. I didn’t ask, but Zand had to know some karate, Kung Fu or some form of martial arts. He was too cool for school.

We pulled into the apartment parking lot. Zand parked. He took my arm and ushered me into the building.

“You forgot to check under the flowerpot.”

I abruptly turned to him and playfully punched him in his chest.

“I should be mad at you. I can’t believe you knew it was me all along.”

“Kiss me.” Zand commanded and wrapped his arms around my waist, drawing me closer to his firm body.

He parted my lips with his tongue and pushed his tongue deep into my mouth. He reached up and grabbed my perfect hair bun forcing my face into his. This was what passion felt like. This is what lust looks like. This is love.

We kissed this way until we both had to come up for air.

“Go pack your stuff. I’ll come up and get your suitcases in a few minutes. ”

“Okay.” I rubbed my lipstick off his lips with my thumb.

“Don’t forget to pack lingerie.”

“That’s not a necessity.”

“For me it is.”

“Okay, Mr. Vampire.” I rolled my eyes. And this was his trigger.

Zand grabbed me tightly and buried his face in my neck. He took a playful soft bite of my skin without breaking my flesh. His teeth grazed my skin and his tongue sucked the place between my neck and my shoulder. My entire body tingled with pleasure. My nipples creased. My insides moistened. I was going to have to remove my wet panties.

His hands left my waist and glided down my dress. He was palming my ass with his hands and pressed my body into his stiff erection.

“Oh, shit!” Lights from a car lit up the hallway. Someone was pulling into the parking lot. It was someone that lived in the building or was visiting a resident.

“Someone’s coming.”

Zand sluggishly pulled away from me. He kissed me quickly on the lips. “Hey, go pack.”

“Okay.” I twirled around to head for the stairs and whack; he slapped my ass with his open hand.

Oh, my god. He was a mess.

I trudged up to my second-floor apartment. My heels were high, and I had already stumbled down at least three steps before. I was in love with the landlord, so I couldn’t sue him if I broke my neck. I already had my key ready, so I entered my apartment and vowed I wouldn’t take too long to pack a few things. I would probably forget something important, but I would worry about that later.

I went straight into my bedroom and stepped out of my shoes. I grabbed my suitcases out of the closet and laid them on my bed. I unzipped them both. This was a big step. We were essentially going to live together. It was actually a gigantic step, but I knew it could work. We spent a week together in a hotel room. A day didn’t pass without us being together. We were almost living together already.

This would work. I believed in us. What we had was good, and I was happy he wasn’t going to let my past break the bond we formed. Zand’s need to protect me was admirable. I felt safe with him. He made me feel like I was a priority in his life.

This was new. We hadn’t known each other for long, but this just felt right. I needed bras, panties and socks. I left my coat in Zand’s car. I probably needed a hat and gloves. I couldn’t forget my Savage Fenty lingerie. I had a few sexy items Zand hadn’t seen, so I packed them.

I didn’t want to forget anything. I needed a lot of scrubs, a pair of jeans and a robe. I went over to my closet and grabbed my long bulky hooded sweater off the hanger. I

giggled inside because I was going to be so surprised if Zand's place was some ramshackle hole in the wall. I knew Zand, and I knew his taste. He wasn't a fan of bright colors, but he had good taste.

"Baby girl."

LONZO! — I couldn't move when I heard his voice, a voice I recognized and feared. I dropped my sweater on the floor of the closet.

"Did you miss me?" His slight Mexican accent crept out so effortlessly.

I slowly turned around to see if my ears were playing tricks on me.

No, my ears worked just fine. He was standing inside my bedroom, blocking the doorway.

I felt like I was falling and my fear was all I had to keep me standing on my feet. He was here. Lonzo was standing before me and I wanted to faint. I wanted to yell, but I just couldn't get my vocal chords to agree. Deep down, I knew this day would come. But something inside me prayed that the next time I saw this monster was in a court of law.

I knew this man would kill me. There was absolutely nothing I could do about it. Everything made sense now. But it didn't make sense at all. Why was this happening to me? I didn't want to die. But my options were limited.

My mind went into overdrive trying to come up with a way to escape. This man was clever, but this time I wanted to be a few steps ahead of him. I wanted to get away. I desperately wanted to live to see another day.

My heart lurched. The panic that invaded my body crashed through my skin and

heated my face. He was standing in the doorway of my bedroom. Lonzo was here in the flesh and this time I was sure it wasn't one of my nightmares.

"Coco, I'm not talking to myself."

I never hated the name Coco as much as I did in this moment.

"Lonzo." I whispered just loud enough to be heard.

"Oh, you remember my name." He smirked in a way that made me feel like this was a game to him, a game that I would lose.

"I'm sorry." I blurted.

"Chica, what could you be sorry for?"

"Everything."

"Could it be you talking to the feds? Could it be you turning states' witness against me?"

"I don't know anything and I didn't see anything."

"Why'd you run to Chicago?"

"I just moved." My voice was shaky and unstable. "I needed a fresh start."

"You moved away from me! Your muthafuckin' man!"

"I'm sorry. I didn't know what to do. You were in jail." My eyes darted around the room. I didn't know how I was going to escape.

“I’m out now and it took me awhile to track you down. I would’ve come to the hospital to see you, but I figured I should let that pretty face of yours heal up first.”

“It was you?”

“Don’t be mad at me. I sent them to find you not beat the shit outta you.” Lonzo shrugged his broad shoulders. “At least they didn’t kill you.”

I needed to keep him talking. “Why did you send them after me?”

“You know why. Like I said, my sister, and my cousin might have gotten a little carried away. Forget about them. You still fine. Oh baby, I missed you. You didn’t contact me once when I was in county lockup. What’s up with that?” He gestured out with his hands.

“I was advised not to.” I looked over at the sliding balcony door and wondered if that’s how he got in. I was on the second floor. Did he climb up?

“Yeah, and you’re such a good girl. That’s why I love you. You’re my own little goodie two shoes.”

Could I jump off my balcony and escape? Would I break my legs?

“I told the police I didn’t see anything. You didn’t have to come look for me.”

“Baby girl, you are a witness to a triple murder.”

“But I saw nothing.”

“I’m not stupid. I know you’re the star witness.” Lonzo took a few steps in my direction.

“No, they told me I might not have to testify. They told me they had all this other evidence against you and I was the last resort. The D.A. said they probably would never, ever call me to the stand.”

“Why are you shaking?”

I looked down at myself, and I was trembling. “Killing a witness is automatic life in prison. You know that, right?”

“So, are you a witness or not? You just said you weren’t. Do you think that would stop me?”

“No, I don’t, I don’t know. I don’t know you. I thought I did.”

His hands were clasped in front of him and hanging below his waist .

I wanted to run, but I didn’t have anywhere to go. I couldn’t fight this man. He was six-two and over two hundred pounds. I did not prepare my mind and body with an exit strategy.

He took two steps into my bedroom. “Hey.” His single words came out so smoothly you would think he hadn’t threatened to kill me.

“Coco!” His baritone traveled across the room and smacked me in the pit of my stomach.

“Yes.” I whimpered.

“Coco, that dress, I could just rip it off of you and fuck you face down, ass up.”

His words were vile. I held my breath because I knew I had to hide the disgust I felt

for him. I was going to have to act nice.

“Are you really that surprised to see me?” He unclasped his hands to ball them at his sides. “Hello, I’m talking to you! Are you happy to see me?”

My knees buckled a little, but I was able to remain standing. “I’m surprised. Really surprised.” I mumbled after a wave of heat invaded the inside and outside of my body. I was sweating under my armpits and above my top lip.

“You’re surprised. What, did you think I was your new boyfriend?”

“I don’t have a boyfriend.”

“No, you don’t, because we never broke up. I just went to jail. You are still mine.”

I didn’t know how to respond to this, so I stood frozen in place and melting with sweat.

“Coco, you know you’re dressed like a high-class hooker.”

I shook my head no, then stopped when I recognized I was doing it.

“I love it when you dress like this. I thought this was all for me, but you dressing like a slut for that other muthafucka. I saw you with him. You got you a cracker now. He can’t protect you from me. Fuck him. Let’s catch up. How are you doing here in Chicago? ”

I knew he wanted that question to be answered. “I’m working.”

“Yeah, you’re at Advanced Pediatrics. You just love working with kids. I probably should’ve made you a baby mama. Are you going to ask me how I’m doing?”

“Lonzo, how are you doing?” My voiced trembled, but I got out the full sentence.

“I’m happy you asked. As you know, I went to jail. I bonded out. I wasn’t supposed to leave the state of Minnesota, but nothing can stop me. They put on ankle bracelet on me but those things are a joke. One of my boys wearing that shit like hoes wear gonorrhea.” He chuckled.

I didn’t find it funny. All I could think about was the police officers that were going to find my dead body in this tight black dress. I didn’t want to die in this dress. It seemed inappropriate and almost offensive. I preferred to be murdered with pants and a thick cable-knit sweater.

“Coco, stop spacing out on me. Oh, wait. Are you planning your getaway? I see you looking around.”

Something snapped inside me. “Where am I going to go?” Being nice and docile would not stop him from murdering me. I was trapped, and I needed to figure something out.

“I really missed you. I haven’t seen you since you ran away from me.”

“I didn’t run away. You were in jail. What was I supposed to do?”

“I got out and I couldn’t find you. You skipped town.”

“Lonzo, you had your sister threaten to kill me.”

“I was just fucking with you. Soon as I got out of county lockup, I thought about how I was going to deal with you.”

“I didn’t see anything. They came to me. I never placed you at the scene. I only

answered the questions. I never saw you do anything illegal.” Somehow this was technically true, but didn’t mean much to the police. I heard people being murdered, but I never actually saw Lonzo pull the trigger. Of course he did it. Of course I saw the gun in his hand before and after three people lost their lives, but what my ears heard, my eyes never saw. Whether that mattered in a court of law, I didn’t know. I was a nurse, not a prosecutor.

“I don’t know what you said or didn’t say, but I know the States Attorney had been trying to lock me up for two decades.”

“Lonzo, you know I don’t want to have anything to do with any of this.”

“I can’t control what you say when you get on the witness stand.”

“I’m not going to say anything.”

Lonzo’s eyes left me to rest on the bed. “What’s up with these suitcases? Where are you going?”

“Just a quick little trip back to Minnesota.” I had to make up a lie. It seemed to be a good one. Since he was closer to the bed, that gave me a little space to run for the door. Could I make it? I just didn’t know for sure.

“Who you packing lingerie for that White boy that I saw you with at the funeral?”

“Who?” It was time to really come up with a lie. The only funeral was Craig’s, and Lonzo didn’t know him. I needed to get Lonzo out of my apartment before Zand came up to get me.

“That White muthafucka at the funeral?”

My first response was, my cousin. No one would believe that Zand was related to me. I had to come up with a better response.

“Oh, that’s Morgan’s cousin.” That was believable. Morgan was White passing and Lonzo wouldn’t know her race. She looked White.

“I thought you were fucking him.”

“No, he’s White.” I made a sour face.

“That’s good, because I didn’t want to put some lead in that muthafucka head.” Lonzo slowly lifted his shirt and removed a gun from the waistband of his jeans. “I already ran your little friend Craig off the road. ”

“You killed Craig?”

“Yes, I needed to find you. I tried to follow your friend, but she’s too smart. I got Craig’s cell phone from the wreck and he was texting his girlfriend in Chicago. You remember when your girl came down here to visit you.”

I remembered it vividly. Now I can never forget that Craig’s road rage accident was no accident at all. It was Lonzo trying to find me and killing some innocent person just for that purpose. I was sick to my stomach. I wanted to throw up. If I survived this, Morgan would never forgive me. I’d talked to Morgan earlier when I was at work. I hoped and prayed she was okay.

“Did you do something to Morgan?”

“No, I didn’t have to kill that White girl.”

I needed to live. “We should go out together on a date. We haven’t been out together

in a long time.”

“I want to stay in your little apartment. It’s cute. You got pillows and shit. You got food in the fridge. No Mexican food, but we can fix that. You got that fat, juicy pussy right here. I don’t have to go nowhere.” He grinned like a villain in a MCU movie. “Come here.” He used the gun to wave me over.

He was talking to me, but I couldn’t even move my fragile body to take a step in his direction.

“Lonzo, I think we should go out, get food or something.” Lonzo waved the handgun around and stalked over to me. He waved the gun in my face.

My heart lurched. My eyes grew large. Knees, what knees? They were as fragile as glass. I looked down at the bed. My cell was inside my purse. I couldn’t get to it.

“I don’t want to go anywhere. I told you that. I haven’t been with anybody since you. I want some of the good shit you got.”

“I’m on my period.” I hoped that lie would work.

“I don’t care. I don’t give a fuck about blood.”

Shit, it didn’t work. “I have cramps.”

“Look, I don’t give a fuck. Get your ass over here.” Lonzo pushed both of my suitcases and my purse off the bed. Everything landed on the floor. He waved the gun at me, signaling for me to come close. I didn’t budge, and that proved to be the wrong move.

Lonzo rushed toward me and grabbed me by my neck. The shock hit me before my

urge to fight him off. The sight of the gun so close to my body made me limp. I never saw him kill, but I heard him shoot those three people in that warehouse. That was all I needed to be afraid of this man. It was all I needed to comply. I wanted to leave the apartment because I didn't want anything to happen to Zand. I didn't want to let anyone else die or get hurt because of me.

I clawed at his hand around my neck, and this made him squeeze tighter. My eyes watered as all the air I had on reserve was being taken from my lungs. I was so close to losing consciousness that I could feel my eyes rolling to the back of my head.

With a quick toss, I was let go and pushed down on my bed. I gasped for every piece of air I could take in without choking to death. I reached for my sore throat and was held down on the bed until I was flat. He had the gun pointed directly at my face.

This was it.

I was going to die.

One sudden move and the trigger would go off.

All the tears I had locked up inside were running down the sides of my face and pooling in my ears. I couldn't see his face. All I could see was the barrel of his gun pointing only inches from my head.

I felt Lonzo pulling my dress down in the front and exposing my breast. He grabbed my breast and twisted them like a brute.

"Please stop." I moaned into the air. Lonzo lowered the weapon to look at me. He pointed at my breast. He touched my breast with the gun.

"I will shoot your fucking titties off. You, shut the fuck up, and take this dick just the

way you used to.”

A man had never violated me. But this was going to happen. I didn’t know if I should lie and be still or fight him. I could die either way, but no obvious line of action was coming to me.

Lonzo bent over me to place the gun on my nightstand. He rested all his weight on me and I felt crushed under him. He pinned my arms above my head and I squirmed and bucked, but he was too heavy and too strong.

“Get off me! I said no! Get the fuck off me!”

He slapped me with his free hand. It hurt so bad I saw stars.

“I’m going to rip you a new hole, you fucking traitor.” He said through gritted teeth. He was trying to pull his pants down with his free hand.

“Stop! Lonzo, no please don’t do this.”

“I’m going to give you a baby.”

“NO! NO!”

He stopped removing his pants to slap me again. This slap hurt more than before. His anger had risen, and I was in trouble. My tears didn’t matter to him. My pleas didn’t matter to him. He was going to force himself on me. I closed my eyes as tight as I could. I wanted to disassociate from the violence that was going to happen to me.

I squeezed my eyes tighter when I felt Lonzo’s hand tugging at my panties.

“Noooooooo!” I had to try to coax him away one more time before I went numb.

With no notice, the heavy weight of his body was gone. He wasn't on top of me. I immediately opened my eyes to see Lonzo climbing off the bed. He tripped over the suitcase he tossed to the floor. He scurried to the nightstand and grabbed his gun, and pulled his pants up at the same time. His hand held firm as he pointed the gun across the bed. My head followed, and I saw him.

Zand was standing in the doorway to my bedroom. His eyes were trained on Lonzo. This was exactly what I didn't want to happen. I didn't want Zand to get hurt, or worse, killed .

"Chanel." Zand said my name as I watched him not even look at me. "Get up. You're coming with me."

I wanted to run to him, but I knew that wouldn't be wise. Instead of sprinting, I sat up and scooted over to the edge of the bed near where Zand stood.

"Coco! Stay your ass on that muthafuckin' bed!"

My heart lurched. I froze in place. Lonzo had my attention, and the fire and rage in his glare scared me to death.

"Lonzo." Zand called out to him.

"How you know my name? Who the fuck are you?"

"It doesn't matter. You need to leave. She said no. You should go."

"Go." Lonzo laughed out loud. "I should go. Coco, where you find this dumb muthafucka. I should go. No, yo' bitch ass should go. I'm having a conversation with my bitch. You go before I buss a cap in your clear ass."

“I’m not leaving without Chanel. I don’t want to hurt you.” Zand calmly stated, like he was a hostage negotiator.

Why the fuck was he so calm? I was about to pee on myself.

“Hurt me?” Lonzo waved the gun around. “This muthafucka crazy. I’m the one with the gun.” He took the steps needed to walk around the bed. He landed only a few feet from Zand.

My current beau glanced over at me with an expression that I could only describe as mildly annoyed. I tensed when I saw him take a step toward Lonzo.

“Really, you stepping to me. I’m the one with the fucking gun, son, and you, the dumb muthafucka that showed up here without a strap.”

“I don’t need one.” Zand took two more steps toward Lonzo.

Oh, my god! No! No! Zand, no!

“I gave you a chance to leave. I wish you would’ve taken it.”

“You wild. Coco, where you find this fool?”

I looked at Lonzo and then back at Zand, who was looking right at me instead of the gun that was pointed at his chest. Something in his eyes told me this was the last time I would see him. When Lonzo shoots him, he’s going to have to shoot me because I am a witness to another murder.

Zand turned away from me. He stared right into Lonzo’s eyes and slowly took step after brave step toward him.

“Stop!” Lonzo said, but it was too late. The gun went off.

A scream pierced the air, and it was coming from me. I jumped off the bed and stumbled back into the wall.

My body shook. The fear I had inside me was amped up to one hundred percent. I waited for Zand to fall, but he didn’t. He just stood there. Lonzo just stood there. I leaned against the wall, waiting for something. I looked down at Zand’s gray t-shirt and there was a red bloodstain right in the center of his chest.

“You fucking shot me.” Zand coolly stated, just like someone in shock that was going to fall to their knees and die in seconds. But he wasn’t falling.

His hands reached out and karate chopped the gun from Lonzo’s hands. The pistol went flying across the room. Lonzo went to retrieve it but Zand kicked him so hard he went flying across the room and landed inside my open closet doors.

Dazed, Lonzo stumbled to his feet and charged toward Zand like he was unscathed. Zand was ready. He punched Lonzo in his face and I heard a loud cracking sound. Blood gushed from Lonzo’s nose, but that didn’t stop him from charging right back at Zand.

I moved closer to the door. I needed to call the police, but my purse had landed on the other side of the bed. I tripped over my shoes, making a thumping sound with my feet as I inched toward the door. It was only a small sound, but it was loud enough to distract Zand.

He looked over at me and... and...and...breathe, focus.

Zand’s eyes weren’t normal. The warm tan was the brightest red. They were glowing like vast pools of blood moons. His teeth were different. He had fangs. His skin was

pale, nothing like his normal color. I could see blue and green veins jagged across his face and neck. It didn't look like Zand. His face was like a grizzly bear or some other animal.

While his red eyes locked with mind, he reached behind him and grabbed Lonzo by his neck. He lifted Lonzo into the air. I could see him lift this two hundred pound man in the air like he was a newborn baby.

Lonzo was gagging and his bare feet were swinging at least three feet above the ground. Zand looked away from me to look up at the petrified Lonzo. He lowered him just as Lonzo was passing out.

I jumped back when Zand opened his mouth and took a huge bite out of Lonzo's shoulder. Blood ran down Zand's face. His red eyes closed for a quick second only to open and land on me.

Screaming was an option, but I couldn't yell. My vocal chords weren't working. My legs got a boost, and I went running for the bedroom door. I ran into the hall and made it through to the living room and as soon as my hand touched the doorknob I was out.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ZAND

I sat behind my desk trying to figure things out. Natasha sat quietly across from me. The partygoers were gone. It was six in the morning and even the janitorial staff had cleaned the entire building in record time. Last night went badly but it seemed my luck could be changing.

My body had just calmed down from the events of the previous night. I hadn't killed anyone in years. This time, I didn't have much of a choice. The bastard shot me. And worse, he was trying to force himself on my girlfriend. He was probably going to kill Chanel once he had his way with her. I didn't feel any remorse but it felt strange to sink my teeth into a human when I'd been drinking from blood bags for years.

"Boss." I looked across my desk at Natasha. "If you're worried, you shouldn't be. Everything is under control."

"I hope so." I exhaled but not from relief. I was mentally drained. Mayhem. Murder. Disposal of a body. Not the day I had planned. I thought I was going to have my girlfriend move in with me and take a step toward our future together.

"We are always prepared. The apartment has been scrubbed clean. It was done quietly and discreetly. Here, look for yourself." Natasha slid her cell phone across my desk .

I swiped right. I glared down at the pictures and stopped after four swipes. I'd seen

enough. “So, there’s is no trace of a struggle? No blood pools or splatters anywhere? What about his vehicle?”

“Stripped. Everything is good, we even removed the bullet out the wall, fixed the hole and retrieved the shell casing.” Natasha placed the bullet and casing on my desk. “A souvenir.”

“What would I do with it?” I asked.

“I would save it and make it into something.”

“I’m not into trophies.”

“It doesn’t trace back to any handgun. The gun is gone. The weapon has been cleaned and melted down.”

I looked down at the items. “You take them.”

Natasha reached for the items without hesitation. “As you wish. Your girl, Chanel, what is your plan?”

“I don’t know.” I leaned toward the desk. “Your advice is welcomed.”

“Don’t kill her right away. Give her a chance to join us. She isn’t a coward. She’s just a human.”

“I don’t think I can kill her.”

“You don’t have too. There are other options.”

“I know but all the options are fucked up.”

“Maybe, maybe not. She’ll be out for a few more hours. You have time to come up with a feasible explanation for tonight’s events. Or you can lie and hope she buys it.”

“I don’t think I can lie to her.”

“You don’t have to lie. Just don’t volunteer information. Wait for the questions. Do not force her to comply. It has to be her idea. She is either rocking with us or the other alternatives will prevail.”

“I wish I would’ve taken care of him before he got this close to her. I could’ve taken him out in Bloomington. I could’ve hunted him. Murdered him and dropped his body in an open grave right where Morgan’s boyfriend was buried. Then she never would’ve seen me as a vampire .

“The past is the past.”

“Did you wipe my video cameras?”

“Yes, we took care of it. I handled the CCTV personally.”

“I’m trying to think about every single detail.”

“The only detail left is Chanel.” Natasha stated the obvious. “I have her cell phone in my possession. She can’t call the police or anyone. When she wakes up, you have to make her understand what we are and why we can live amongst her kind in secrecy. I know you love her.”

“I do, but I will handle this.”

“I know that you will.”

“Has my brother been back around?”

“No, I don’t believe so, but I can find him if you like.”

“Yes, I just want to keep an eye on him. I want to make sure he’s left town.”

“Yes, of course. Any other requests?”

“Human food. Chanel will be hungry when she wakes. If she can eat I want to make sure there’s something here for her.”

“I will send Josh out, and see what Uber eats can deliver.”

“I appreciate everything you have done.”

“It’s my job. Don’t worry. I am here to make your life easier. This is our sanctuary.”

“I need one more thing.”

“Of course.”

“My ex-wife, I want to make sure she’s left town. I don’t have time for any more drama.”

“If there’s drama. I will handle it. It’s business as usual.”

“Seems you have everything under control.”

“We have everything under control.” Natasha stood. She had an instinct for timing and there was really nothing more to say.

I watched her leave my office. I needed guidance and calling my father was an option but I couldn't bother with him. He would have many questions. He would scold me for falling for another woman. He would admonish me for involving myself in human issues. He had been a vampire for so long he couldn't remember when he was human. I remembered that time and I didn't think I was superior to them.

Chanel was different. She was mine, and I wouldn't be made to feel guilty for loving her.

I reached under my desk and removed a bottle of wine. My wine was blood but it was all the same to me. I removed the corkscrew from the desk drawer. I didn't need a glass. Turning the bottle up to my lips did the trick. I drank the bottle to the half way mark. It was a nice blend but never as good as drinking from the vein. Lonzo's blood was satisfactory. I wouldn't call it delicious but it was nourishing all the same.

I needed to shower and change. I used the shower in my office. I had a pair of black jeans and a black t-shirt in the attached bath. I sat quietly for a while and then I knew it was time. I had to face the music, in this case, Chanel.

CHAPTER TWENTY

ZAND

Chanel was truly a lovely sight lying in my King size bed with crisp white linens. Her hair was a tangled mess, but to me she was still a sleeping beauty. She had been out for over eight hours. If I couldn't hear her breathing, I would've panicked, believing I had given her too much of the M99. I had only used etorphine a few times. I wanted to use something that wouldn't harm my girl.

This could be the end of us, and I knew it. I loved her. I was in love with her. I never thought I would ever feel this way again. I'd lived too long and seen too many things to ever truly believe in love. I thought I loved Teresa, but that was a false love. Chanel was the real thing.

My love didn't matter now. Chanel had seen the real me. Decisions had to be made in order to preserve my people and our way of life. I didn't want to see her dead or institutionalized. There were only two options for people that knew the truth about me and were unwilling to wrap their minds around it. If she had to die, I didn't want to be the one to do it. It would rip me to shreds. Now that I'd found love, it could be ripped away from me. If I could get a migraine, I would have one now. There was so much to contemplate and not enough time to think. This was a crisis that twisted me in knots.

I could hear her rustling in her sleep. In seconds, her eyelids fluttered open. I wanted to rush to her side and comfort her with a slew of kisses. That gesture wasn't wise. So I sat at least ten feet away from her in a chair. I led with trepidation. I could repulse

her with who I am.

There was no need for more panic. With any luck there was no need for more death. She'd seen it all. She'd seen the monster. I just didn't know how she would react after the tornado moved out to sea, after damaging all that she once knew.

"Zand."

"Chanel." I sat very still. I didn't want to alarm her in any way. She had been through a lot of trauma in the last twenty-four hours.

"Where am I?" Her delicate voice was slightly raspy.

"The basement."

Her mouth frowned, and her eyes darted around the room. "No, I'm not. This isn't your apartment."

"It's the basement of the club."

"The Castle?"

"Yes."

"What am I doing here?" She paused and I could see she was thinking. "Did you drug me?"

"Yes." I tried to keep my tone even.

"Why?"

“You were afraid. I needed you to calm down. You probably would call the police. I couldn’t have that.”

She released a sigh. “I saw you?—”

“You saw me.” I looked away briefly. “The real me.”

Chanel’s mouth opened and closed. She moistened her top lip with her tongue. Her face was strained. “Was that— real? Or was that drugs too? Did you drug me then—? What? I was hallucinating right, from drugs?”

“No.” I said curtly .

“No?” Her voice raised an octave. “It seemed so real.”

“Yes.” Only a few words crept out of me at a time. I felt encased in cement. Something was crushing me, holding me, and freezing more than my age.

“Why am I here? Did you kidnap me?”

“Yes, something like that. I had to keep you safe.”

“Why? We were supposed to go to your place downtown.”

“But we didn’t.”

“Why?” She asked.

“I had to take you away from the scene of the crime.”

Chanel inhaled and exhaled. She was thinking. “Lonzo, is he dead?”

“Yes.”

“You killed him?”

“Yes.” I looked away, recalling the brutal nature of last night’s events.

“Zand! Look at me.” It appeared she reached her limit with my dry answers. I looked her in her eyes because she commanded it. “I saw you turn into something. I don’t think it was a dream.”

“It wasn’t a dream. You saw me, the real me.”

“Your teeth were, your eyes were red. There was blood everywhere. You threw Lonzo across the room like he weighed nothing. You, you, oh god. You were acting like a?—”

“Monster.” I finished her sentence.

“No, a vampire.”

“Monster, vampire. They’re all the same. We’re all the same. Now you know what I am.”

“You’re a vampire.” She said it with a tinge of uncertainty. She didn’t trust her own recollections.

“Yes, I am a vampire.”

“No, no. No fucking way. That’s a joke. Tell me what’s really going on? This isn’t funny.”

Chanel leapt from the bed and rushed over to me. She moved so fast it almost seemed like she was like me, a vampire. She was in my face, glaring at me with the most beautiful brown eyes any human could possess. Her eyes unarmed me. I could never take her life. I could only mourn her absence for one hundred years. Maybe more, this would be more difficult than I ever imagined.

“Zand, come on. What is going on?”

“I’m sorry. I told you the truth. I am a vampire. I didn’t want you to know the truth, but I couldn’t let him hurt you. He had to die. It was the only way he would leave you alone.”

“I believe that’s true.” She agreed with something.

“What part?”

“Lonzo is dead?”

“Yes.”

“And you killed him?”

“I did.”

“Because he was going to kill me.”

“Yes, I believe he was going to rape you, murder you, and conceal your remains. Without my permission I fell in love with you and I couldn’t see any other way to keep you safe.”

“I don’t care about him. If he’s dead, he’s dead.” Her response surprised me. “Why

are you saying you're a vampire? Like, come on. That's something we joked about. Remember the notes, you're the vampire. I'm the daywalker."

This was the moment of truth. This was the moment she got an up close glimpse of the real me. I could anticipate her reaction, cringing, screaming, and running in horror. The saying I can show you better than I can tell you came to mind.

Here goes. Opening my mouth, I let my sharp, deadly fangs descend from my gums. I let them hang so she could see their razor sharpness. I blinked my eyes once to release the hot crimson glow that illuminated my eyes when I was ready to hunt my prey. In this state my skin turned a pale gray color and every vein on my face glowed a cerulean color. I knew I knew I appeared monstrous. That was the point. I held this deformed vampire face for a time so I could really let it sink in.

Chanel's eyes grew the size of tennis balls. She took a huge step back, then another step forward. She didn't run. So I was tempted to put her reaction in the win category. I knew better than to get my hopes up. Good things never happened to people like me.

I rushed toward her with my rapid speed and grabbed her shoulders, lifting her off her feet. I tossed her in the air like a rag doll. I made sure she landed on the bed. I leapt down on top of her unsteady body.

I could see the fear in her eyes as I glared down at her.

"What are you doing?"

A good question that I didn't have any answer to. What the fuck was I doing?

"Zand, go back to the way you were. Don't bite me."

What? “I wasn’t going to bite you.” I let my animal-like face settle back into its inactive human looking one.

We were in an intense staring contest that I lost. I blinked when she tilted her head up and pushed her lips into mind.

What the fuck?

Now I was questioning if I was hallucinating. She pried my lips open with her tongue. Her wet mouth was stuck to mine. Her tongue was licking my fangs and turning me on. My cock pressed against my zipper. I was getting mixed signals. Was she afraid of me, or did she want my cock? My confusion about her behavior was answered when she wrapped her arms around my shoulders and tried to pull me into her flesh.

She had no idea how badly I craved her. I had her sexy body and now I fucking wanted her blood. It took the strength of the Roman army to keep my fangs from puncturing her creamy melanin skin. I cupped her nipples through the t-shirt I dressed her in.

“I want you.”

“You have me.” She whispered in my ear.

I smiled into the crook of her neck. I pulled up from her body to remove her t-shirt. Her hands reached between us and grabbed at my jeans. She quickly undid my single button and unzipped me while I pulled my t-shirt over my head and discarded it. I jumped out of the bed to remove my jeans.

Chanel held her hand out for me to take. I seized it and crawled into bed with her. She guided me by pushing my shoulders back onto the bed. She straddled me and

meticulously lowered her delectable pussy down on my cock.

She worked her hips in sensuous circles. Then she rocked her hips back and forth over every single inch of me. If only I could give her a baby. I would give her so many.

I watched her perfect tits through hooded eyes. I gazed up and her brown eyes burned into mine. She was biting her bottom lip looking as alluring as ever. I was enjoying her taking the lead and riding my dick with everything she had in her.

This pussy was the bomb and she wanted me to know it and feel it. I did. She felt so good to me. Her canal was so taut and sweet. I couldn't think of any place I'd rather be in the world.

Chanel pressed her pelvis down onto me as she vacuumed me deep inside her flooded hole. I palmed both of her ass cheeks and guided the rhythm that was only meant for us. We had a love dance that rivaled anything I'd ever felt.

She leisurely rocked her hips back and forth on all of me. She could ride my cock with style and grace. I felt her essence slide down my length and coat my balls. I opened my eyes to see her work her twisted Black girl magic on me. My human love was really the supernatural of us two. That truth hit me hard. I was hers forever. Chanel bucked her body rapidly and popped her tight pussy all over me. This connection was a once in a lifetime.

I rose from the bed and wrapped my arms around her back. I held her in a tight embrace that only sped up her hard grind down on my cock. Kissing her lips as she moaned into my mouth was my only option. I was growing so close to coming my body shook with excitement.

I roared and buried my face in her neck while she clawed at my back. I sniffed and

then licked at the delicate skin on her neck .

“Can I bite you?” My voice was hoarse and husky.

I wanted just a taste, a teaspoon or tablespoon worth of her salty metallic tasting nectar. I wanted to get a little nibble. Not because I was thirsty but because I was curious. Her pussy was fire and I wondered about her blood.

“I don’t know.”

“Please.” I begged. I wasn’t above begging.

“Okay, don’t kill me.” She purred into my ear.

I haven’t heard those four words in over two decades.

“I would never hurt you.” I licked the area where her jugular vein lay under her skin. “Relax. Don’t scream.” I whispered. I shut my eyes and plunged my fangs into her neck. It was always best to stab into the flesh with a quickness.

Chanel let out a gasp, her hands wrapped in my hair. Her nails clawed at my scalp, sending shock waves to my firm cock. I pondered rather or not she could take double penetration. I made an executive decision to thrust my cock deeper inside her from beneath her bottom. Plowing into her this time, she squealed. I’d been attached to her neck for far too long and needed to unplug. But no, not just yet. I loved the taste of her blood. She took her multivitamins. I could taste all the iron, D3, B12, Vitamin C and pure zinc. There was even a hint of elderberry.

Her body clung to mine. Mine clung to her and inside her.

I instantly became light-headed. I was swimming in delight. This was beyond

anything I'd ever tasted. Blood that had every ingredient I craved and desired. This was too good to consume in its entirety. Her blood was like a well-aged merlot, something to savor, something to relish, a gift that was cause for celebration.

I broke rules, more than one. I should have never revealed my true nature to her. And of course I should've never drunk her blood. The practice is primitive and a habit I broke ages ago. But for my love I would break all the rules.

Enough, I told myself as I removed my fangs from her flesh. I kissed her lips and her blood seeped into my mouth. I knew better. I should've never done that.

My sheer ecstasy was prolonged when she ground her hips deep down on my cock. It was too much pleasure. I pinched her ass with my hands and shot all of my venom into her damp hole. My body collapsed down onto the bed. She had come too. I could feel her pussy opening and closing over my spent cock.

I couldn't move and felt a sense of abandonment when she glided her pussy up and off of me. She moved to lie beside me.

Come." I reached over to my love. "Sleep here. Close to me."

She rolled into my arm and laid her head on my chest.

"You didn't kill me." She muttered.

"I would never kill you. I love you."

"Do you have to drink blood?"

"Yes, I do."

“Do you bite all the people you have sex with?”

“No.”

“Why?” I welcomed her curiosity.

“Many reasons. I think the average human woman would scream, cry and call the police on me. That’s if I bit her and drank her blood. Blood doesn’t have to be straight from the vein for us, for me to survive.”

“Us? Are there others like you?” She asked.

“Yes.”

“You drank from my vein. I’m not going to turn into a vampire, am I?”

“No, it’s a more complicated process than just a bite.”

“Okay. What are we going to do now?”

We, she said we. “I don’t know. What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know. I know what you are now. Do you want me to act like I don’t know? Do we act like you didn’t kill Lonzo? Wait, have you killed other people?”

A question I didn’t expect. “Chanel, do you want to know these things?”

“I don’t know. I think I do. ”

“I can tell you this. I can be very dangerous. But, I don’t go around killing people. I didn’t want to kill Alonzo, but I feared he would kill you. I wouldn’t be able to live

with myself if something happened to you. The Zand that you knew before, he is still here. The Zand that loves you is still here.”

“I know you can control yourself and I know that I love you. That’s all that matters to me. I’m tired.”

“Close your eyes and sleep. I will keep you safe.”

Chanel exhaled and I felt her breathing settle until she was once again my sleeping beauty.

EPILOGUE

Teresa

In an effort to win my husband back, I stumbled on a crime. Not any regular crime, a murder. Mr. Valentine walked around like he was a better monster than the rest of us and he was just a monster.

Alexander killed for this woman. He shows his true self to this woman, and he acted like a mere human when he was with me.

Watching him put a body in the trunk of his car was a thrill. Even better was watching him take the limp body of his little human pet and put her in the back seat. Following him to The Castle was easy enough. He was too busy to notice me tailing him. The strange part was he removed his little nurse from the car and took her inside the club.

What was he doing, leaving a dead human in the trunk of his car? It didn't take long for me to see for myself. He was back in his car and driving the streets of the city. I was following him and he didn't even have a clue. His vampire instincts were lacking. He drove the speed limit to Lake Shore Drive and parked at a secluded dock cloaked in darkness. This is when he opened the trunk and removed the big dead human man. I wondered who he could be. What did he do to make such a perfect vampire like sweet Alexander take his life?

None of it mattered. I watched from afar as my old flame tossed the stranger's body into the freezing temperature of Lake Michigan. Oh, for shame. He could just dispose of a body and get right back in his old black Chevy and casually drive away. As I

looked into the lake, so many things came to mind. So many questions swirled in the chill of the air. One thing remains certain.

What is done in the dark will always come to the light. I learned that from my dear Mr. Valentine.

The End