



MOONGATE
ISLAND
MATES 3

ACCIDENTALLY
UNDEAD
ON MOONGATE ISLAND

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ACCIDENTALLY UNDEAD
ON MOONGATE ISLAND

MOONGATE ISLAND TALES

BOOK THREE

C.D. GORRI



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THANK YOU FOR RESPECTING THE HARD WORK OF THIS AUTHOR.

*To Jason and Tara, without you both to cheer me on this might
not have gotten finished. I hope you enjoy Lorelei's vampy
adventure!*

ACCIDENTALLY UNDEAD ON MOONGATE
ISLAND

She doesn't believe in vampires, until one bites her.

Lorelei McGiven isn't known for her great judgement calls. When she answers an ad boasting an all-expense paid vacation at an exclusive resort for people who enjoy the nightlife, the curvy normal gets a little more than she's bargained for. Imagine her surprise when she hooks up with a totally hot, *totally hungry*, bloodsucking vamp.

The thing is, she kinda sorta doesn't realize her new boytoy is a little bit undead until *after* he bites her. Lorelei is furious, and worse, she's getting hungrier by the minute.

Xavier DuMont is a Vampire Prince. He is determined to bring the Tenebris Clan into the 21st Century, but first, he needs to relax. What better place than the *Sanguine Vita Vampire Retreat*? With scrumptious delights promised to all who attend, Xavier can't resist the promise of a getaway with libations included.

The royal bloodsucker was not planning on meeting his fated mate. But once he sniffs her out, Xavier will do anything to keep her as his own.

Can Lorelei resist the temptation that is Xavier? Or will she give into her thirst and embrace being accidentally undead?

**FORMERLY TITLED FANGS FOR NOTHIN'*

CHAPTER ONE



“Late again, Lorelei.”

Misty Rivers snarled as Lorelei hurried into the boutique. Yes, she was late. *BFD*. It happened now and again. *Ugh*. She ignored the skinny female’s disapproving eyes and dropped her drenched umbrella in the bin by the door. The woman thought she was the big boss at *Kiki’s Closet* instead of a glorified shop manager. She was Lorelei’s immediate supervisor, but she didn’t have to be such a bitch about it.

“Sorry, Misty. The bus was late,” Lorelei explained.

“Why don’t you just drive then?”

“Because there isn’t any parking around here,” she said, quoting the same reason she used every single day.

“The lot is—”

“More than makes sense for me to pay. Now, if you can bargain with them to give us some kind of discount, seeing as how they are the only lot in the area and this street is full of shops whose employees could use a discount, then maybe I could afford it.”

“You shouldn’t speak of your finances like that, Lorelei. It’s so gauche.”

“I didn’t bring it up,” she told the other woman.

She tried for calm, but the woman was always harping on her about one thing or other. Super thin and chic, Misty was the total opposite of Lorelei whose voluptuous frame was a lot more chubby than Monroe-esque.

What could she say? She loved chocolate and hated squats. Going to the gym seriously skeeved her out. All those people sweating, burping, and farting when they exercised made her want to hurl. She'd tried joining an all-woman gym but couldn't get past the whole bodily functions thing.

Trying to adjust her diet to healthier foods to lose weight didn't work, either. Lorelei rarely had time to cook. She was always working. And while she enjoyed dining out, she hated ordering salads in restaurants. All that chewing made her feel like a cow.

Sigh.

Nope. She liked real food and ate real portions. Design was her true passion though, and *Kiki's Closet* was the only haute couture house willing to take her on as a rising designer. Other establishments did not see the benefit of catering to plus size women.

Fuck them, she thought with a snarl of her own. She'd been laughed out of more than one house, and politely refused at others.

But Lorelei was determined to make herself a name in the design world. Fuller-figured women deserved pretty things too, for fuck's sake. Besides, she had a marvelous head for fashion. And she could sew like the devil was on her tail.

A fact that earned her points with the *actual* owner of the design house, if not Misty. It might annoy the current manager of *Kiki's Closet* that Lorelei was a certified in-house designer for the trendy haute couture label, but there wasn't a thing the female could do about it. Try as she might.

"Well, I'm making a note of your tardiness for the monthly reports, Ms. McGiven."

"I bet you are," she murmured back.

With a flip of her pin straight, chin length hair, Misty turned around and walked away, tablet in hand. No doubt, she was putting another black x on Lorelei's employee file. Misty just hated her guts, but today Lorelei was too tired to care.

Sigh.

It didn't really worry her. She knew she wouldn't lose her job. Lorelei was talented, but the real clincher was the fact she was also Kiki's BFF. The woman whose name was on the door.

There was no getting rid of Lorelei. Even if Misty stared daggers all day and night, wrote her up ten times a month for being late, and scolded her every chance she got. Whatever. She spent way too much energy on Lorelei, anyway. She shook off the woman's nasty vibes as easily as she did the rain that clung to her blonde locks and set about preparing for her workday.

Her ass might be a tad rotund, but her hair was flawless. Flaxen and plentiful, today she swept the almost waist length mane into a high ponytail reminiscent of a 1960s glamour queen, complete with fat curls on the end. She wore black eyeliner and red lipstick over a pair of tight black pedal pushers and a flowy chiffon tunic with big daisies printed all over.

The outfit was easy to move around in and maintained a certain cuteness that she wholeheartedly approved of. Comfort was a huge plus to Lorelei since much of her job was spent on the floor tearing out and resewing hemlines or creating new pieces from scratch to appeal to today's woman.

Kiki's Closet focused on weddings and other ballroom type apparel, and she just loved working there. It was like being swept away in one of those fairytales she used to devour as a child. Of course, there was always a prince in those books, but nowadays a woman didn't need a prince to enjoy a good party.

Besides, princes were thin on the ground. Still, being exquisitely outfitted was not something only skinny woman should enjoy. With this belief firmly in mind, Lorelei pitched her ideas to her BFF, Kiki.

Her former college roommate was wild and sweet, and her daddy just happened to own a slew of department stores. He had set his daughter up with her own design house after graduation, gave her enough capital to make a splash, and just

like Lorelei had hoped she would, Kiki had hired her on the spot!

That was two years ago, and she did not regret it one bit. Except for Misty. The woman was just over the top when it came to being snotty. Must be a skinny girl thing, she'd decided at first and started bringing her muffins and cookies from the corner deli. After the first week, Misty put a stop to that with a nasty retort that not everyone ate like her.

After that, Lorelei had given the woman a wide berth. She'd worked with clients Kiki chose for her and within a month, Lorelei had single-handedly started their plus-sized line. It was one of the fastest growing markets out there, and though she could not branch out on her own just yet, it was her dream.

Plenty of women with full figures had the money and the fashion sense to want haute couture, there were just too little offerings. With her keen eye and ability, she'd convinced her highly energetic, if not flighty, bestie to allow her to showcase some gowns in the store window.

When they sold to the tune of five figures, Kiki had offered her a permanent position and title. She wanted Lorelei to be a partner, and she was still considering that. But right now, Lorelei just wanted to create.

It wasn't that she didn't trust Kiki, she just wasn't sure if this was where she wanted to remain. Plus, there was Misty to consider. Her best friend might own the shop, but Kiki had no business sense at all. Misty Rivers was top of the class at the all-female university the women graduated from.

Misty hated Lorelei from day one for whatever reason, and Lorelei didn't know or care why. She just wanted to work. Though lately, she was feeling the imminent need to relax. Maybe get away for the weekend. Meet some sexy man who could make her see stars, which by the way, hadn't actually happened in, well, ever. Wouldn't that be nice? Unfortunately for her, sexual frustration was the least of her worries.

Sigh.

CHAPTER TWO



*L*ater that morning...

*L*orelei poured hot water from the gooseneck kettle into her mug where her sloth shaped tea diffuser was currently filled with her favorite apple cinnamon gourmet tea leaves. The scent was lovely and helped her focus. Coffee made her too jumpy to have more than one cup a day.

After dealing with Misty's snide comments and having her watch every move Lorelei made for the last hour, she needed a break. Kiki was late again, but of course, that didn't matter. Not when she was the boss. Misty was doing inventory, and she kept walking to Lorelei's workstation in the back and dropping things. Loudly.

This was all part of her routine. She loved to grate on Lorelei's nerves. Reminding her constantly that had she been on time, she wouldn't be in that part of the shop while Misty was in there.

Sigh.

Whatever.

Lorelei was still going to have her cup of tea. Whether Misty glared at her from across the room or not and banged boxes of lace and thread from now 'till kingdom come! Besides, if she had her tea now, then maybe Misty could finish whatever the hell she was doing in the backroom.

Tea steeping, her gaze drifted to the open newspaper sitting on Misty's desk. Typically, Lorelei wouldn't have noticed if not for the strange dark paper and white ink. Like a reverse newspaper or something. She took a closer look and an advertisement for a vacation exactly like the one Lorelei was thinking about caught her eye.

Looking to recharge your batteries? Love the nightlife? How about an all-inclusive getaway? Enjoy an exotic locale, incomparable cuisine, luxurious surroundings, and relaxation guaranteed.

Yes, please, she thought with a sigh. Her mind drifted and she could just picture herself on some sandy shore, sipping a margarita, and sunbathing with a couple of hunky cabana boys fawning over her. Damn. That sounded fantastic.

"Give me that! Well, are you going to stand around all day? You have two important clients coming in today, you know," Misty snapped and grabbed the newspaper, hiding it from Lorelei's view.

"I know. I'm going," she mumbled.

"And I'd appreciate it if you did not read my personal mail!"

"I apologize, Misty. It was just lying there open, after all," she replied, hoping to salvage some goodwill before the day got totally ruined.

"Nonetheless, it's my desk," the woman huffed.

"Okay, okay. Sheesh." Lorelei rolled her eyes and headed to the back room.

Her clients would be there shortly. But this was the last visit for the two of them. Both gowns would be complete today. Then she could work on some of the newer designs she had in mind for the upcoming winter months. That was her favorite part of being a designer, the creation period.

For some reason, Lorelei kept dreaming about a ball gown made from the most delicate crimson colored silk. Layer upon layer of gossamer fabric with a long train trimmed with hand sewn silk roses. The deep v bodice would cling to the wearer

like a second skin, revealing creamy shoulders and ample bosoms. Though she hadn't exactly discovered how she was going to pull that off. She sat down and picked up her sketchpad, biting her lip as she traced one of the several drawings of the gown that had been haunting her sleep.

"That design is for thin women, Lo. See how you have her breasts practically standing up? They would have to be implants cause no plus size woman I've ever met has tits like that," Kiki said and whistled, taking a moment to grab her own plump mounds. "Imagine that! Ha! I'd love it if my tatas could defy gravity! I mean, I wish they did."

"Oh Kiki, really?" Lorelei tsked and tried to keep in her giggle.

"It is beautiful, Lo. But a big girl could never pull it off," Kiki said gently from beside her. "Shit. Did I put my foot in my mouth again?"

"What? No. Of course not, Kiki. And I know it's not right for plus sized women, but I just can't get it out of my head," Lorelei replied.

She smiled at her friend and shrugged, putting her sketchpad back in the top drawer on her desk. Grabbing her measuring tape and sewing kit, she stood up off her stool. It was time to focus on the tasks at hand.

"Your September bride will be here in an hour," Kiki added, looking at her watch.

"What? But she wasn't due 'till this afternoon!"

"She called Monday and changed appointments. Didn't Misty leave you an email or text message?"

"No, she didn't. I better hurry or I'll be unprepared," Lorelei said through gritted teeth.

"Hmm. That's not like Misty to forget something," Kiki replied.

"I know you depend on her, Kiki, but she has it out for me."

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Kiki scoffed. “Misty is a straight arrow. Her grades blew ours right out of the water. You just need a vacation, Lo. It’s been nine months since you took a break. I mean, look at all this. You’re working yourself into an early grave!” Kiki gestured to the piles of sketches, fabric samples, and then finally to the two gowns she was just about finished with.

“Yeah, well, these women were depending on me. I am fine,” she answered.

“Lorelei, you have worked day and night for weeks. How long until you are finished with these two clients?”

“One more fitting should do it, I guess.”

“Then I insist you take a vacation as soon as you are done. Two weeks paid vacay. No excuses.”

“Misty will love that,” Lorelei returned, snorting loudly in a very unladylike manner.

“What is with you and her, anyway? I mean, I get along with her, no problem. Is it some weird sexual thing?” Kiki asked with mischief sparkling in her hazel eyes. She always was a rascal.

“I have been finished with my brief foray into *same-sex-fun-times* phase for years, Kiki,” Lorelei replied calmly. “I like dick too much.”

“That’s true enough,” Kiki remarked.

“Shut up, heifer! If I recall correctly, you blew half the bowling league of our brother school, St. Pious.”

“Ah, yes, I believe I did. Good times.” Kiki laughed loudly.

“Look, I don’t know why Misty hates me, she just does. Besides, she was always a weirdo. All those night classes and that freaky thing she has about food.”

“What? Oh, you mean because her diet is almost all protein?”

“She eats raw meat, Kiki. It’s fucking gross.”

“Lorelei! I am shocked at you! You know we did both try Atkins for a while,” her best friend returned smartly.

Lorelei did not appreciate the reminder about that time in college they’d all tried that particular low to no carb diet. She still couldn’t look at bacon the same.

Oh well. Pasta and bread were this curvy girl’s sinful pleasures, and she was never giving them up. Not for any man, and definitely not to fit in any damn dress. If she was determined to have a specific style dress, Lorelei would simply make it in her size. With that pleasant thought, she got back to work.

It was slow going at first, but after her first client came in late even after switching her appointment to hours earlier, it pretty much zoomed by afterward. Lorelei was sublimely satisfied to have made both her clients happy to the point of tears.

“I just never knew I could look like that!” one imminent bride had exclaimed. And hearing her say so made it all worthwhile.

“Are you all finished for the day? I have to lock up and take the deposit to the bank.”

Lorelei’s gaze flashed to where Misty stood with her usual annoyed expression on her painfully thin face. Kiki had gone hours ago, and it was just the two of them. After standing up for nearly ten hours straight, Lorelei was more than ready to leave work.

“Yes, I was just getting my things,” she answered.

“Forever late, aren’t you?” Misty sniped.

The tall brunette walked to the front door, leaving Lorelei to trail behind her. She was positive the woman did it on purpose to show off her lithe figure, but Lorelei had enough of her rudeness. She hurried behind, passing Misty’s desk. For some reason, as she walked by, Lorelei had the sudden urge to reach out and grab the carefully folded newspaper that had caught her eye earlier that day.

Before she could stop herself, she did. She just reached into Misty's inbox and grabbed the thing! Stuffing it into her oversized pocketbook before the other woman saw, a pang of regret stabbed at her. She knew this was wrong, even though minor, and was about to return it, then Misty opened her mouth.

"Come on, will you? I don't have all night!" She stomped her foot impatiently.

"Alright, I'm coming. Goodnight," Lorelei replied, and headed for her bus stop.

Why did you take that newspaper, Lorelei?

She asked herself the question repeatedly as she sat on the semi-crowded city bus. She was not a thief, and this would bug her forever.

Shit.

The bus hit a pothole, and she was jostled in her seat. Luckily, no one was beside her. She hated the bus when it was crowded. Hated more that it would leave her several blocks from her apartment. But she was used to the routine by now.

Lorelei glanced around, making sure she went unnoticed before she unfolded the thin black pages of the paper. *The Nightly News* was inked across the top in a scrawling font that was more decorative than legible.

Lorelei was able to make it out, but only just. She quickly scanned the odd articles until she found it. The one she was looking for. Stamped along the bottom, with other advertisements. She bit her lip, and read it to herself, bypassing the part she'd already read that morning.

Are you bored with your current situation? Is hard work getting you down? Come to the exclusive Sanguine Vita Retreat and recharge your batteries and refresh your blood with us! Call 111-733-7374 or 111-REF-RESH.

**Use promo code TASTYRETREAT for an exclusive discount. You may bring your own sheep, or you may choose from among our exclusive selection.*

Hmm.

That sounded heavenly. Except for the sheep part, but so many people had emotional support pets these days it was hardly unheard of. Lorelei bit her lip. Kiki said she should take a vacation. Throwing caution to the wind, she did something out of the ordinary.

She called the number.

“Hello? Yes, I’d like to make a reservation, oh, and there’s a coupon code,” she began, smiling to herself.

CHAPTER THREE



“Are you out of your mind?”

Xavier DuMont, Vampire and Prince of the Tenebris Clan out of DuMont, New Jersey, ran a hand over his face. It was almost five in the morning on Wednesday, and he was still going over the weekly requests and complaints.

He could not believe it. One after the other, he’d received dozens of requests for formal introductions for most of the eligible young females in the Clan by their parents or some family matchmaker or other. It was the 21st Century, and yet, the Vampires of the Tenebris Clan still thought he needed an arranged marriage to run things!

“No, Lucius, I assure you my mind is sound.”

“How can you be thinking of going away? To some retreat? At this time of year! You know, the whole Clan is up in arms over the tax laws your father had set into motion before his demise. Some are questioning your right to rule. Then, there is still the matter of your mating—”

“Lucius, for the love of fuck! I know what is going on in my own Clan. I am even now revoking those tax laws, people will just have to be patient.”

“And what about meeting with these young females? Maybe that will quell some of the unrest—”

“No! I am not inclined to take a mate at this time. My father’s grave has barely begun to grow grass. There is no rush!”

“There is pressure though, sire,” Lucius Redwing insisted.

He was Xavier’s oldest and most reliable friend. At nearly three hundred years old, they’d known each other for a considerable length of time. Lucius had been his childhood companion when they’d fled France for the New World. After settling the town of DuMont, his father had not only been the most productive of the local normals, but he had taken over their branch of the Clan.

Breaking ties with the old regime, and establishing their own rule, the DuMonts had done exceedingly well. Of course, coming into the new century had been difficult for some, but Xavier was determined to do it, to breathe new life into the old-fashioned world of Vampires. He would see them succeed and blossom in this age that was simply exploding with technology.

“I know you have plans, sire. But the anxious mamas are already parading their daughters resumes as if they were applying for a job.” Lucius grinned. He waved a manila envelope bursting with applications for audiences with him from the most prestigious Vampire families in all of DuMont.

“For fuck’s sake, Luc. Get rid of them,” Xavier growled, and ran a hand over his face.

“Now, now. Surely, you know enough not to disrespect tradition and courtesy. These families are your staunchest supporters. Without their aid, your ascension to leadership could be challenged. The right mate would stop all of that—”

“I will not be forced into this, Luc. If anyone wants to challenge me for the right to lead, then he or she can face me out in the open. Not hide behind some political game.”

“But sire—”

“No. I will not be manipulated. You should know that of me, old friend.”

“Yes. Of course.” Lucius nodded, placing the hefty envelope on the corner of Xavier’s desk.

Vampires did not always inherit the right to lead. Princes were not born but made. Wasn’t that what his father had

always said? And yet, royal blood flowed in his veins. And it was because of that blood—*his royal DuMont blood*—that so many hungry mamas yearned to tie one of their young to him for eternity.

Fortunately, Xavier had avoided them. He refused to be pressured to take any of the hungry misses for his mate, as of yet. But with his recent ascension, that pressure was now on full keel.

Shit and fuck.

“I’ve got an idea,” Lucius said, thrusting a copy of *The Nightly News* at him.

“What is it, Luc? I am in no mood.”

“Read there,” his friend said, pointing at an article on the bottom left.

“A retreat? I haven’t been on one of those since I was ninety.”

“Yes, but remember the fun? I brought my *sheep* at the time, and you pouted because I wouldn’t share her!”

“As I recall, she came quite willingly to my bed when summoned, Luc. Why do they still call them sheep? My gods, that is positively medieval!” he replied.

“In case normals see the newspaper, of course.”

“Impossible. The Covens bespelled the paper to only go to supes.”

“It has happened, Xavier. You know this as well as I.”

“True. And Luc, I am sorry about Temple. That was your donor at the time, was it not?”

“Temple? Yes. Not to worry, sire. You always did woo the ladies without trying. Besides, now they have their own donors on hand. You do not need to bring one.”

“You don’t have to do that, you know.”

“What?”

“Calling me sire.”

“I do have to call you sire, *sire*. You are my Prince.”

“Oh, do shut up. I am your friend, Luc. You’ve known me my entire life.”

“Yes, sire.”

“Luc,” he growled his friend’s name.

“Shall I make the arrangements then?”

“Fine. I will go to this retreat for the weekend if only to shut you up. And to get away from all this.” He indicated the pile of correspondence.

“Very good, sire.”

Xavier waved Lucius away. His old friend insisted on putting this ridiculous class distinction between them, and it was grating on his nerves. Yes, he was a Vampire Prince, but this was the 21st Century, for fuck’s sake. He didn’t have to act like that. All pomp and circumstance.

Xavier had been trained since he was a boy to take over the Clan, but the fact was, he held onto his title through pure strength. He was powerful, smart, and utterly ruthless. He’d been challenged twice in his lifetime and had decimated his opponents to mere dust.

His father had only succumbed to the true death that year, true, but Xavier had taken over the Clan months before. Still, the days of war and bloodlust were behind him. He’d been groomed to use his brain to win at all costs. His success in fattening the Clan’s coffers with innovative and scientific endeavors to the global conglomerate that was DuMont Industries had won him many staunch supporters.

Branching the business to include the world’s most capable providers of blood, platelets, plasma, and red cells was the perfect cover, enabling him to provide fresh blood to his Clan, and that of other Vampires around the world without the casualties that sometimes came from lack of control when feeding from the source.

But there were those who would rather they return to their old ways. Vampires who refused to walk in the sun. Who

wanted to live in the darkness and hunt down humans for sport. The Tenebris Clan would not fall victim to that barbaric way of thought. Xavier would do anything in his power to stop it.

It simply would not do for them to be found out. The supernatural world was still a secret. Their very survival depended on it. With human innovations and ingenious technological advances, staying secret was more difficult than ever. Humanity had grown less tolerant of aggressive displays, and the supernatural communities, Vampires in particular, had to learn to curb their natural aggression and violence. Predators had to learn to hunt quietly, secretly, and in other ways.

Remaining a secret in the modern age was a feat in and of itself. After all, cell phones and CCTV cameras were running amok. One couldn't simply glamour the girl next door in the backyard, drink her blood, then send her on home with a kiss and a wink anymore. Used to be a Vampire enjoyed the hunt. Spent all his days learning the art of the predator. He was a skilled hunter after all, and sweet, succulent blood required for him to live was his ultimate prize.

Revered and reviled throughout history, Vampires were the most well known supernatural creature. Even though they were thought of as mere urban legend. Of course, not every folk tale had it right. Vampires could eat food. They could even stand in the sun, though it weakened them considerably. And for the love of blood, they were not *dead* or *undead*. Whatever the hell that meant.

Vampires were, at the most basic, humans with a little something extra. That extra thing was actually a unique sequence in their DNA. A mutation to be exact, not long since discovered by scientists, and kept a closely guarded secret for decades. But even with all the advances science offered, Vampires remained hidden.

They needed to keep a low profile, especially nowadays. That meant they had to rely on donors for their blood. Donors were typically humans in the know who were willing to feed a

hungry Vamp for whatever carnal thrills it gave them. That was where the blood banks came in.

Families of Vampires could not feed in the community they lived in, or they would be found out. His blood banks relieved the stress and pressure of having to find a blood source. Of course, mated Vampires did not have to worry so much as they could feed from the other.

To Xavier's thinking, that must be terrible. No spice or variety to liven things up. Having to feed off one blood supply for eternity must suck. No pun intended.

Blood was life. There was no getting away from that fact. The blood banks were a terrific idea. Being a Vampire meant something different these days.

There were no more wars to hide their instinctual bloodlust. No more blatant seduction to carry their victims willingly home. No more fun, some thought. Boring, that's what the modern world was to many. And a bored Vamp was a dangerous one.

As Prince, he was responsible for not only the Vampires in his Clan, but for the surrounding humans. He had to find a way to keep them all safe. Allowing the Clan matchmakers to meet with him and to arrange for the eligible females to come to the mansion for introductions might be a good start. If the Clan had that to focus on, perhaps then they would be satisfied.

Like a stallion standing at stud.

He snorted at his own derisive mood. With no little amount of disgust, Xavier stood up and crossed the room. Truth was, he was feeling shitty about the whole thing.

Maybe Luc was right. Maybe a vacation was exactly what he needed. He picked up the newspaper and his cell phone, then dialed.

CHAPTER FOUR



“It’s about time you are going on a vacation!” Kiki squealed.

She ran to where Lorelei was standing, attempting to shrug on her raincoat before leaving work that Friday. It was the weekend, and she was more than ready to begin her mini vacay.

“It’s only a few days.” She shrugged. “Still wish you were coming!”

“I know! Bummer! Where are you going anyway?” Kiki asked.

“It’s an all inclusive weekend getaway at a private beach. A sort of retreat for people who work a lot,” she casually replied.

It wasn’t that she didn’t want to tell Kiki. She had asked her BFF to go with her, but the other woman couldn’t get away. Besides, Kiki had a way of barging in and taking over, and Lorelei really wanted this weekend for herself. She couldn’t exactly ponder the questions of whether or not to sign on as a partner of *Kiki’s Closet* with her breathing down her neck.

And what if she got lucky? She didn’t need her acting as a third wheel. Ever since Lenny had dumped her, Kiki had been savagely anti-male. Girl’s nights were fine and good, but Lorelei was up for a little casual flirtation, and perhaps a little more. Her pink bits had been neglected far too long. It wasn’t healthy! At least, she didn’t think it was.

“Oooh. Mysterious! So, where did you hear about it?” Kiki interrupted her thoughts.

“Uh, a newspaper ad. Anyway, it’s only for three days. You said it was okay, right?”

Lorelei might be Kiki’s bestie, but the other woman was also her boss. She would not want to jeopardize her career. Especially not now when she was finally gaining a following with her *Women with Curves* designs. That was the name she was toying with for her label. Even as a subsidiary of *Kiki’s Closet*, she would hit the ground running this way.

“Oh yeah, of course, I did,” Kiki replied. “You know, Lorelei, both your clients were exceedingly happy with what you created for them. I don’t know how you do it, but you make them look better than anyone else ever could. Your designs are like magic.”

“Being chubby doesn’t mean you have to be unfashionable, Kiki,” she scolded.

Kiki was not exactly skinny, but she wasn’t plus-sized either. She had a real good eye, though. Even if tact wasn’t exactly her thing. Especially when it came to speaking. Kiki was a blurter.

She had initially questioned Lorelei’s desire to be a designer. That was until she saw the fabulous things Lorelei created for plus-sized women. Even in this day and age, it was an open market. No one really catered to bigger females for some odd reason. Haute couture was no longer for the rail thin, Lorelei thought with a satisfied smirk. The second Kiki had seen her sketchbook and some samples she’d brought with her for the interview, she had offered Lorelei a job immediately.

“This is because you are really talented, Lo. Not because we are besties and we French kissed once when we were drunk.” Kiki had told her that with a perfectly straight face, and that was how Lorelei started working for her.

They might not agree on what was appropriate for bigger women all the time, but Lorelei made it work. She did not

have the money at the moment to open her own house. And she was satisfied with her clientele at *Kiki's Closet*.

“I am so proud of you, Lo! Those women were glowing today. Alright now, enough shop talk. You get going. And call me! I want to hear all about it when you get back,” Kiki said and waved goodbye, her short curls bouncing in the evening breeze.

Lorelei smiled and waved. She was in a good mood after hearing her boss and BFF praise her work. Heck, she thoroughly enjoyed making a client's dreams come true.

Especially after years of being told things like “honey, you're too big to wear that”. Lorelei had always been on the fluffy side. Her body type was less gym chic, and more ice cream curvy.

Fine.

She was fat. Lorelei could admit it. Her curves had curves, for Pete's sake. She had an ass that wouldn't quit, thick thighs, a soft belly, round breasts, and plump arms. It wasn't a case of “oh she just gained a little weight after college” or “after he dumped her, she put on twenty pounds” or anything like that. Nope. Lorelei had simply never been skinny. Not ever.

When she was a child, her mother stuck her in bubble gum pink jogging suits with her hair stuck into short pigtails. She'd made her look and feel exactly like a little piggy. Something the school kids loved to taunt her with. Lord, she hated every minute of it.

She still cringed at the memories of cheap fabric and that deplorable color. It still plagued her. Why designers thought bigger women wanted to wear colors more suited to baby showers than adults, or even worse, loud, obnoxious prints that reminded her of wallpaper from an episode of *The Golden Girls*, was beyond her! She loved those sassy women, but she didn't want to wear prints reminiscent of their decor.

And the cuts were all wrong! Plus sized women did not want to look perpetually pregnant! Did designers know how

terribly embarrassing it was to be asked how far along she was when she wasn't even dating!

Ugh.

But she didn't waste her time getting angry. She'd spent much of her childhood reading fairytales and storybooks, but she'd never been picked to play *Beauty* or *Cinderella*. It was always the evil witch or the baker's wife.

Ugh.

When she was in college, she'd been invited to a costume ball, but the only dresses she could find at the local costume shop and Halloween stores were not at all flattering. Only hags and other ugly costumes were available in her size. And Lorelei wanted to be a princess, dammit. She could still hear the salesperson's nasal voice ringing in her ears.

"Sorry, dear. We don't have anything like that in your size. All the princesses are petite and, well, you're just not."

She'd been humiliated by the saleswoman. But Lorelei did not give up. Instead of crying about it, she'd made her own dress. A beautiful blue, not pink, rendition of Sleeping Beauty's gown, and it had been a hit. That was how she'd found her true calling.

Fuller figures needed love too, and Lorelei McGiven was just the gal to give it to them. Her own wardrobe was mostly hand sewn, designed by her. She loved dresses and figure flattering pantsuits. She was a solid size sixteen. Her breasts were full, and her hips wide, but she was always on the go. She worked twelve to fourteen hour days, so comfort was important, but it was all about style too.

Lorelei knew what looked good and what didn't. She was very aware of her own attractiveness, which was often to the annoying surprise of her thinner friends. But, oh well. Heck, she'd never been one to brag or let others get her down.

Confidence was not her problem. Neither was finding a man. It was finding *the right man* that had eluded her.

Sigh.

CHAPTER FIVE



She shook her head and made her way home. Taking the bus as usual, she was walking down her street when she started to get the feeling she was being watched. Lorelei hurried on her way.

Her neighborhood was all right, but it was dark and rainy. Chills ran up and down her arm, and that feeling persisted. Far as she could tell, no one was on the street or sidewalk with her. Dammit. She should never have stayed up watching that old Vampire movie marathon. Gave her the willies. Her heart sped up as she turned the corner. She was being silly.

The all-inclusive package she'd reserved for her vacation had included all her travel plans. She was set to leave in just thirty minutes, and still had to change her clothes and grab her already packed suitcase. Three days or thirty, Lorelei had packed three bags for the trip since she was unsure of the weather on the island. Also, the Rep she'd booked the trip with had mentioned the exclusive resort's unique dining experiences, including some sort of gala that left her to believe she would need to be dressed in formal attire for at least one night.

Lorelei entered her apartment and changed, swapping work clothes for a smart travel suit she'd made herself in a dark blush color that went well with her hair and skin tone. The doorbell rang, and she jumped.

"Ooh," she muttered to herself. "Coming!"

“Hello, Miss McGivens?” A tall, almost unhealthily pale man dressed in a black suit with a crisp white shirt and a chauffeur’s hat on his head stood on the other side of her door.

He leaned forward and sniffed. An odd thing to do, for sure, but it was the hungry look in his eyes that really caught her off guard. What the heck was up with him?

“Can I help you?” she asked, and pushed the door closed another inch, regretting her decision to unlock the chain when she answered.

A girl can’t be too prepared, she thought, eyeing the mace she had sitting on the small bookshelf next to the door.

“You smell fantastic,” he groaned, and his eyes rolled back in his head while he leaned forward and took another sniff.

Ew. Gross.

“Uh, thank you, I guess. Must be my perfume. Anyway, it’s *McGiven*. Lorelei McGiven. No *s*,” she automatically corrected his mispronunciation.

“Ah, apologies. I am here to take you on your journey to the *Sanguine Vita Retreat*. Are these your bags?” He flashed her a wide smile, and Lorelei followed his gaze, and nodded.

“Yep, those are mine. I am sorry there are so many, I just couldn’t decide what to bring.”

“You do not need to apologize, Miss McGiven. It is my pleasure to see to your comfort. Is this your first time with us?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Lucky for us then! My name is James. Excited?”

“I suppose.” She smiled. “Well, I am a little nervous.”

“No need. If ever you require help, just call me and I will render aid,” he said, offering her a card.

She took it to be polite and dropped it in her purse. James, her driver, smiled reassuringly, and for some reason, it gave Lorelei the shivers. The man looked at her like she was a tall glass of water and he’d been stuck in the desert.

Eek!

Truth be told, he kinda gave her the creeps. Okay, he definitely gave her the creeps. There was just something not very sane about the way he kept sniffing around her.

Not nice, Lorelei!

She scolded herself and nodded back, forcing a smile. James looked positively overjoyed at that, and she looked down, pretending to check her bag.

Sheesh. What a weirdo!

After he took her bags, she followed the tall man into the hallway. Purse in hand, Lorelei looked around one last time and locked the door behind her. It was only for a few days, and she'd already set the timer for her automatic fish feeder. Her aquarium was one of her most precious possessions.

"I see you have a fish tank. Salt water or fresh?" James inquired.

"Yes. I love fish. It's salt water."

"I see. Very nice." He smiled again, and Lorelei shivered.

She was anxious to start her one weekend of luxury and considering the cost, she figured she should start right then. Odd driver or not.

James stepped back and placed her luggage down. He opened the door to a glossy, black, stretch limo and Lorelei smiled her thanks. She noted a bucket of champagne on ice with a single flute waiting, and she grinned.

Very nice.

"Shall I uncork the bottle for you, now?"

"No, I'm okay."

"But the champagne, miss?" He looked upset, nervous even. She frowned. Maybe he would get in trouble if she didn't indulge in the perks.

"How long is the drive?" she asked thoughtfully, mulling it over.

“Forty-five minutes to the private airport, then another ninety to Moongate Island, miss. The champagne?”

“Oh, fine. Yes, please,” she replied.

Champagne was a funny little drink. Not that she’d indulged often, but she’d had a glass or five in her day. The bubbles truly did tickle her nose, and she expressed a small sneeze with the first sip. Sighing contentedly, she allowed the sweet, fragrant liquid to slide down her throat. *A girl could get used to this*, she thought with a dreamy sigh.

“Alright, miss?” James asked, and she opened her eyes to see him looking a little alarmed at her reaction.

“Oh, uh, yes, I am fine.” She laughed. “Champagne makes me sneeze sometimes. But it is truly delightful.”

“That’s good, miss.”

“Is that really your name?” she asked on impulse.

“Excuse me?”

“Your name is seriously James?” she asked again.

“Yes.”

“I have a driver named James,” she said, and giggled. That was odd. She usually didn’t laugh for no reason. But here she was, ready to bust a gut.

“I don’t understand. Are you alright, miss?”

“Oh, sure. It’s nothing.” She cleared her throat. “So, tell me about the *Sanguine Vita Retreat*. What’s it like? Are a lot of people going to be there?” She batted her eyelashes in an attempt to keep her sight focused. Something was weird. She seemed exhausted all of a sudden.

“It is exactly how the advertisement described, Miss McGiven. A retreat to refresh the *blood*. You just rest and I will endeavor to have you there shortly, all safe and sound.”

The glint in his eyes when he said the last word should’ve been a warning, but Lorelei was well into her third flute of bubbly and failed to notice. In fact, the rest of the trip seemed a great big blur to the blonde who arrived at the enormous

estate-like complex on a secluded island, which she learned was one of many that fell under the same name as the main body of land called Moongate Island even though it was not connected, some hours later.

CHAPTER SIX



“*W*hat time is it?”

“It is just past ten, Miss McGiven. Here is your room key. Your bags have already been sent in. Now, you are expected to join the other guests for refreshments and to begin choosing your host as soon as you are ready.” James, the chauffeur extended a hand and helped her out of another limo, this one silver, that she had no recollection of getting into.

“Host?”

“Yes, Miss McGiven. You will be able to make your selection tonight and may I say, without being too forward, you already have my card should you choose me or need any aid.” He looked hungry as he said it, and Lorelei stepped away with a tight-lipped smile on her face.

That was odd.

Lorelei yawned loudly. She must’ve dozed off sometime during her travels. Heck, she couldn’t even recall getting on the plane. Probably from the champagne. She tucked a few stray strands of hair behind her ears.

Maybe she would just wear it down now that she was here. She glanced down at the key James had handed her. It was an old-fashioned key. Not one of those key card thingies she was always losing or mistakenly putting next to her phone, so they never ever worked.

“Cool key,” she mumbled and glanced at the room number.

1313. That was kinda cool. Not many places she stayed used the number 13 for rooms or floors. Then again, this resort was not like any of the high-rise budget hotels Lorelei had spent her vacations at during her lifetime.

“And here is your itinerary,” James said, taking a step closer and breathing in deeply.

“Uh, yeah, okay. Thanks,” she replied, discreetly moving back and reaching into her purse for a five-dollar bill to tip him.

“Oh, um, thank you, miss.” He tipped his head and turned back toward the limo, leaving her to climb the stairs.

Fancy, she mused as she took in the carved stone stairway adorned with statues and climbing ivy.

The moon was almost full, and the crisp sea breeze was cooler than she would’ve guessed for an island. But it was late, so she supposed that had something to do with it. She never did have a good sense of direction.

Working in the city and living just over the bridge made it unnecessary, anyway. She took public transportation. Why did she need to know where things were when someone else was always driving?

This little vacation was hardly planned, and she didn’t have time to research the exact whereabouts. It said Moongate Island. How many of those were there anyway?

Besides, she wasn’t going sightseeing. Lorelei planned on indulging herself with the spa treatments the ad boasted, and the relaxing, luxury atmosphere the retreat representative she’d spoken with on the phone had promised her. There’d been no mention of sheep, so at least she wouldn’t have to worry about taking her allergy meds.

That was a plus. Of course, James had said something about choosing a host, and she wasn’t exactly sure what he meant. She just hoped the tall chauffeur wouldn’t hold it against her when she didn’t call. He was so not her type.

Not at all. Nope.

Lorelei was more a tall, dark, ridiculously built, and handsome kind of a gal. Sighing at the mental image of her newest fantasy lover, she stepped into the lobby.

Immediately, she got the sense something was off, noting the absence of a formal front desk. She looked down at her itinerary. The black folder was glossy and smooth with *Sanguine Vita* etched in silver on the front in a delicate script. She ran her fingers over the words, wincing at her lack of manicure. She'd have to see if they did them there.

Hmmm.

Lorelei opened the folder to find the same old-world typography in gleaming white on a few printed pages of black paper. She frowned as she started to read.

Welcome to the Sanguine Vita Vampire Retreat!

The what now?

STOP.

Wait a second, Lorelei.

She growled and reread the title. Fucking hell. There it was. The fine print she never ever bothered to read. This place was chock full of weirdos playing dress up! Exhaling slowly, she continued to scan the letter.

Are you here with a specific escort in mind? Be sure to call the front desk for an identification bracelet so that you may be paired with your Vampire.

Here alone and willing to offer libations to searching hosts? Great! We invite you to our nightly soirees for you to meet and feed the Vampire who chooses you.

We hope you enjoyed your transportation to the island. You will be picked up and brought home on Monday evening, three nights hence. Take advantage of your stay with these spa treatments to really get your blood pumping and put you in the mood. Each treatment is part of your reservation fee. Maximum one per day.

Choose from the following:

Deep tissue and vein massage

Platelet-rich-plasma facial

Blood typing and matching

Teeth whitening

Lorelei frowned and turned to the next page. There was something really, really wrong here.

What the hell had she gotten herself into?

She closed her eyes, recalling the weirdos from school who were always playing corny games like *D&D* and *WolfMoon*.

Ugh.

One particularly skinny female came to mind. Misty was one of those people. They always hated girls like her who preferred activities like sunbathing and watching reality TV.

FML.

She sighed, hoping her itinerary was just a mistake.

Maybe she'd gotten someone else's *vampire weekend* folder?

She crossed her fingers and kept reading.

Room service is available 18 hours a day. Please be considerate of your noise level during the day. The hotel is on half-lockdown during the daytime hours to permit our nocturnal friends some rest.

Remember to tip your servers.

P.S. Emergency medical treatment is available 24 hrs.

What the hell?

She read that part twice, biting her lip. Lorelei should have known this vacation was too good to be true. *The Nightly News*. Ha! Just some weirdo paper Misty subscribed to where she and other lonely role-playing cosplay folks over thirty met with each other.

Not that she had anything against anyone getting their kicks whatever way they could. It was a free country! Sort of. Lorelei was totally cool with folks doing what they wanted. It just wasn't her scene.

Sigh.

And here she thought she might even meet someone interesting for the weekend.

Dammit.

Lorelei waited a beat, determined to correct her erroneous mistake, and turned back toward the door. She could still salvage her weekend. Even if that meant spending it on her sofa in her jammies. So what if she came all this way for no reason? And too bad if she had to spend the next six months paying off the massive debt, she'd incurred with her hasty purchase of this weekend package. Even after the coupon.

Ugh.

It didn't matter. Lorelei was a hard worker. She would survive. Just not here.

People dressing up as vampires!

Great.

Just fantastic.

She huffed and raced to the heavy front door.

Dammit.

James was gone and she was stuck having to spend the night at this freaky Halloween themed retreat without any way out of here!

The lobby was empty. Not a single soul passed by, and she waited for fifteen minutes.

Hell.

She would've taken anybody.

Even a cape wearing Dracula wannabe.

The plush burgundy carpet and heavy wood furniture was imposing, but she was past the point of caring. The sounds of

someone walking in the front door caught her attention and Lorelei turned around.

Oh my.

She gulped audibly, licking her lips as her nerves seemed to light up and stand at attention. The impossibly handsome man stopped in his tracks.

All six and a half feet of him.

Holy hell.

The dark-haired stranger was at least a foot taller than Lorelei, with shoulders so wide he was forced to move sideways to walk into the building. Her eyes widened as she tried to fit all of him into one sweep of her head.

Whoa.

Besides his obviously superb size, she noted his fine sense of fashion with undeniable glee. It always thrilled Lorelei when a man was well put together. This one wore an impeccably tailored suit. As a designer, she could tell quality, and that was quality.

First off, she'd never seen a suit in that size available off the rack. Second, the fabric was phenom. The authentic bespoke suit was made of vicuna and qiviut, fitted to his magnificent form by expert tailors in the business. The fact the suit was comprised of two of the most sought-after fabrics in the design world meant this man had taste.

Vicuna and qiviut were both lightweight, soft, and versatile. Both had been beautifully blended for the handsome man by experts in the field of men's fashion. Her eyes grazed over his body, hungrily taking in the elegant lines and superb cut of the excellent suit.

A master's hands had sewn that gorgeous navy-blue design. Lorelei's fingers itched to touch it. To run across his figure from those wide shoulders to his narrow hips, all the way to the ankles.

Hell.

Lorelei had to close her eyes to count to three in order to regain some semblance of self-control. She wanted to ask him the name of his personal tailor. That was how much she admired the construct.

Her gaze moved upward, meeting his steady stare, and she paused. His focus was unwavering as he captured her attention. His eyes glittered at her. Silver in color, not gray or steel, they resembled the edge of a knife in direct sunlight. The ferocity in them made her gasp aloud.

He was beautiful. The dark hair meticulously combed back contrasted with the careless trace of shadow on his chiseled face. His olive skin tone should have been at odds with the delicate fairness of his face, neck, and hands that shone in the soft glow of the wall sconces. He was, without a doubt, the single most handsome man she'd ever seen.

While she appreciated the diminutive lighting for its ability to hide certain physical flaws in her makeup and other odds and ends, she suddenly wished for full on florescent bulbs. Lorelei was in awe. Dumbstruck by the sheer quality of his clothes, or simply by the man himself?

How about both? She thought with a soft sigh.

"I'm Lorelei," she said.

Whether she was bold or struck dumb remained the real question, but there it was. She'd just offered her name, as if he'd even asked.

Ugh.

Any minute now the floor would open up and swallow her, or so she prayed. But the beautiful man's silver eyes flashed, and he grinned.

"No," he replied, and shook his head slightly.

The resounding rumble she recognized as coming from his chest echoed in the small foyer. Before she could utter a reply to his odd statement, his mouth opened again. Lorelei noted a glint of something white and sharp behind his full lips, then he was speaking again, and it was all she could do to not melt

into a puddle of *please-take-me-goo* at his Italian leather clad feet.

That deep voice sent sparks of awareness shooting down her spine. Nipples erect, and other places she had long since forgotten about started to tingle with renewed interest. She'd never felt such immediate desire for anyone. It frightened her a little.

My oh my.

They just didn't make men like that anymore, she mused. He was like the dark prince of some storybook or other. The wolf and the huntsman rolled into one. Rochester, Darcy, Heathcliff, Rhett Butler, Prince Charming, and Eric Northman rolled into one. He made her mouth positively water.

"You are not just Lorelei," he stated with such confidence, stepping into her space, and placing his extraordinarily large hands on her waist, making her feel positively tiny by comparison.

Lorelei could do nothing more than breathe in response. When she remembered to, that was.

The gorgeous man's lips parted. He sucked in a deep breath, nostrils flaring, silver eyes boring into hers, and continued with his voice so low and deep she trembled helplessly in response.

"You are mine!"

Well, okay then.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Xavier scented *her* the second he exited the limo outside the mansion where *Sanguine Vita* was holding this weekend's retreat.

The female's blood smelled positively divine. Like sunshine and honeysuckle, freshly baked bread drizzled with honey, and crisp cotton sheets dried in a summer breeze.

His heart thudded almost painfully as he took the stairs two at a time. He needed to find the source of that delicious scent. She was a woman. That much he'd inferred.

But who was she?

And more important, was she there with someone else?

Not that it would matter. He would have her as his own in short order. No one would deny him. He was Xavier DuMont. The reigning Vampire Prince of the Tenebris Clan. His reputation as a mighty warrior was only matched by his lethal business cunning. He was shrewd and yet, daring. With an iron will, a clear vision, and tenacity. Xavier was relentless. And he always got what he wanted.

It might seem like conceit, but to Xavier this was simply fact. He was a veritable powerhouse of a Vampire. A force to be reckoned with. Yes, he would hear some shit from Lucius about this, the dames of his Clan, and perhaps some elders too. But they all lived and flourished at his pleasure. But *he* was the *Prince*. Ultimately, his word was law.

Xavier's entire body seemed to throb and growl with the need to hunt down the source of the tantalizing scent. Human

or not, duties be damned, he would have her.

The female was his.

Fuck tradition.

He moved soundlessly, taking the stairs three at a time, opening the door so hard he almost ripped it off its hinges. His movements were that of a man possessed. Desire burned inside of him and even without seeing the heavenly scented creature, he wanted her like no other. Fangs descended, cock hardening in his slacks, he was positively ravenous for the female.

Then he saw her, and his heart stopped.

Holy fuck.

She was an angel. Golden hair cascaded down her back in a thick rope of a braid. So shiny and thick, he'd never seen hair so beautiful. Like a bolt of silk. He could almost picture it, like rays from the sun itself, sprawled across his black sheets, tumbling over the side of his king-sized bed.

Perfect.

Big, sky-blue eyes blinked up at him from beneath inky lashes, with matching dark brows framing her heart-shaped face.

So very pretty.

She had a perfect bow of a mouth. Like the kind you found on a gift. And she was that. Given to him by the fates themselves. His mate was a beautiful gift indeed. One that he was desperate to open and taste for himself.

She was voluptuous as she was sweet, and the tantalizing scent of her blood permeated the air with a thousand memories of his favorite things. Fresh baked bread, chocolate chip cookies, a cool rain shower on an October morning, just mowed grass, an uncorked bottle of a 2010 *Romanee-Conti Grand Cru*, and so much more.

With curves upon curves, she could've been a pinup girl during the Golden Age of Hollywood, though admittedly, she was no girl. Oh no. His mate was all woman.

His woman.

Or she would be. Very, very soon.

“I’m Lorelei.” Her voice drifted across the hall to his ears.

Like butterflies’ wings, the notes stroked and caressed his sensitive eardrums, and he sucked in a breath to quell the sudden aching in his chest. It was more than desire. He yearned for her. Needed her like he needed blood.

“No,” he said almost immediately. He needed to stake his claim then and there, to declare aloud his intentions and her new status, as it would change her life from that day on.

“You are mine.”

As the Prince of the Tenebris Clan, it didn’t really matter whether it was the 21st Century or not. He was expected to adhere to certain Vampiric societal rules. There were traditions. He knew them by heart.

Had he not been raised to take his father’s place?

Had he not bested two of his own Clan who dared challenge him for his seat?

Irrelevant.

Tradition be damned, Xavier was a Vampire Prince, and he was not used to denying himself.

He wanted her.

Period.

He moved across the floor in slow, measured paces, eyes never leaving hers. Then he stopped, a mere hair’s breadth away, dipping his head to suck in a breath directly from the source of the fragrance that had captured him the moment his car had pulled up to the hotel. Standing this close to her, that crazy sexy scent was even more tantalizing.

He was practically drooling as he breathed in deep and slow, savoring every nuance of her unique flavors. He only managed not to nip her delicate skin and imbibe right then and there for one reason alone.

Possessiveness.

Xavier refused to share even a moment of what they would have together with anyone. Especially not a stray passerby.

“Um, excuse me.” The woman cleared her throat, backing up a step.

She was trembling with nerves or desire, maybe both. He could scent her arousal within those hauntingly delicious notes of hers. She was definitely interested, even if a little wary.

Good girl.

He did not expect any mate of his to be easily persuaded.

Where was the fun in that?

His impulses might be pushing him to jump her, but he was old enough to know better.

“You smell delicious,” he said instead, reaching out, he tugged her closer until both arms were wrapped around her waist, holding her steadily against his taut flesh.

Her dark eyebrows rose as she gaped at him before she decided to try his strength. Lorelei squinted and pushed against his hold, but he merely loosened his grip. After all, he did not wish to harm her. But he liked the way she felt just there. He liked it very much.

As if that small smile incited anger, she drew her eyebrows together and wiggled more firmly.

Did she think she could get away?

He grinned wider as she tried unsuccessfully to push against him.

“Yeah, well, thank you. I mean, it’s just some lotion. I abhor heavy perfumes,” she explained, nonsensically. “Do you mind?”

“No,” he answered.

When she rolled her eyes, he assumed he’d gotten the answer, or perhaps even the question wrong. But then again, he was not a dimwitted man. With one eyebrow raised, she

pursed her utterly kissable lips and gestured between them to illuminate the fact there was not a molecule of space between them. Of course, Xavier could find no fault with that.

“Do you have an arrangement with someone here?” he asked.

“No. Actually, um, I think I might be here by mistake—”

“There is no mistake, Lorelei,” he said her name, and she seemed almost impressed that he’d been listening. “You are here for me.”

CHAPTER EIGHT



“*T*hat’s a little arrogant, don’t you think?”

Her question implied a modicum of displeasure, but the grin teasing her lips told him the truth. She was flattered by his possessiveness.

You ain’t seen nothin’ yet, ma moitie.

The thought crossed his mind, and with a naughty smile of his own, he growled softly in his throat at a decibel he was not certain she could hear. The beautiful female was obviously aware of Vampires, otherwise she wouldn’t be there.

That being the case, he could speak freely, act freely, as it were. This made things much easier. Xavier had heard stories of Vampires in love with humans who knew nothing about the supernatural. What a nightmare! Lucky for him, she was already acquainted with his world. Time for him to make his declaration.

“Sweet lady, you have captivated me from the moment I picked up your scent. I believe you, Lorelei, *er—*” He paused as he did not know her surname.

“McGiven,” she filled in the blank.

“McGiven,” he repeated. “*Lorelei McGiven*, I believe you are *ma moitie*.” He used the French term for his other half. No greater distinction could he offer. She was his soulmate, and he fully intended to win her heart.

“Allow me to properly introduce myself,” he said, and stepped back reluctantly.

Xavier took her hand in an old-world gesture and pressed the soft, pale flesh to his lips. She tasted even better than she looked. Her rapt blue eyes blinked slowly, as if in a daze. Lorelei tipped her head back as he rose to his full height, tempting him with the white expanse of her throat as she continued to meet his stare. Ever watchful for his next move, she studied him, and he thrilled at her undivided attention.

“My name is Xavier,” he said his name with more of his original French accent than he’d spoken with in decades. She brought that out in him. Made his primal instincts rise to the forefront without trying.

Xavier felt the leash he had on his control go taut. She tested his reserve like no other.

Hell.

What would Lucius say if he saw his Prince on the verge of ravishing an unclaimed normal in the hallway of this establishment?

He would be aghast. But dammit, Xavier could not help himself. She was positively mesmerizing. And he wanted her more than he wanted his next drink of that lifegiving liquid his kind craved above all else.

“Your name is Xavier?”

“*Oui*. Xavier DuMont. But to you, *ma moitié*, I am simply *yours*.”

“Mine?”

“*Oui*. In every way.”

“Oh, okay. I get it!” she replied, eyes sparkling. “That’s like, your cosplay name!”

“What?”

“Never mind.” She shook her head and exhaled. “Look, I was about to find the receptionist and ask for a return trip home immediately, but you’re something else, *Xavier DuMont*. Maybe I should stick around a bit?”

“Leave? *Mais non!* You must stay. Have dinner with me? I insist.”

“Um, sure. I’d like that,” she replied coyly.

She felt so good in his arms. Soft and firm, smelling like all his favorite things. His gums ached with need. His fangs begging to descend.

Fuck.

He wanted her.

“Um, maybe I can freshen up first?” She bit her lip, and he followed the movement expectantly.

He’d never been this possessive over a possible blood source or sexual partner. But she was so much more than that.

His fated mate.

His other half.

Oui. Ma moitié.

Yes. She was all things to him. Xavier was certain of it. In fact, he’d stake his life on it. No pun intended.

“Allow me to walk you to your door.” He gestured ahead, and she smiled widely, gifting him with the perfect view of her supple backside as she preceded him to her room.

As if the Fates themselves had a hand in it, and he was certain they did, Lorelei had the room directly next to his suite. In fact, there was an adjoining door, if he wasn’t mistaken. He offered her a smile, took the key from her hands, and opened the door, checking for anything that could be amiss. When he was certain it was safe, he allowed her entry.

“Oh good. My bags are already here,” she said, sounding surprised. “And my things are all put away!”

“Yes. This establishment is five-star,” he commented. “My room is just next door.”

“Is it really?”

“Yes. I will go now. Leave you to freshen up, yes? How much time do you require?”

“Sounds good. Um, twenty minutes?”

“Perfect. I will return in twenty minutes.”

“I’ll be ready,” she returned, and the promise in her throaty words was almost too much for him.

Xavier bowed slightly and retreated to his own suite. Good thing too. His cock was aching for her. If he stayed inside her room a moment longer, there was no telling what he would do.

Shit.

He needed to exact control over his baser needs. Diverting his attention from his physical wants, Xavier began the process of declaring his mate. First, he called Lucius. He needed the man to make the proper arrangements for Lorelei’s return to DuMont with him.

“Sire, all is well?”

“Hello, Luc!” He grinned at the receiver. “All is incredible, old boy. I need you to make plans. You see, I have found her.”

“Her who?”

“*Her*. My intended. My mate. *Ma moitié*. People need to be told, announcements to be proclaimed, my friend.”

“Sire, when a Vampire Prince selects a mate, there are certain protocols—”

“Listen to me quite carefully, Lucius. Lorelei McGiven is my fated mate and I will have her at all costs.”

“Yes, sire.”

The man on the other end of the receiver said all the words, but Xavier could not help but feel suspicious. It was not like Luc to hold back. And yet, he seemed to have given up far too easily.

“She is the one, Luc. I am certain.”

“Indeed, sire. Joyful times lie ahead. I’ll prepare everything for your return.”

Xavier hung up thoughtfully. Luc would come around. He knew it. The other man had known him far too long to remain

angry or this distant with Xavier. It was simply shock. Now, back to his plans for the luscious Lorelei.

Of course, Xavier would give his mate both his *bite* and his *blood*. If the Fates were truly with them, as he knew they would be, her cells would accept the mutation that split his kind into the subspecies known as Vampire. Their community existed alongside and yet separate from the normals for centuries.

It did not always happen that way, of course. There were those who did not change with the bite and consumption of blood. But he was ever optimistic. In his heart of hearts, he knew Lorelei was his already. The rest was just extra.

She was his.

Of that he was certain.

In that moment, he made the toughest decision of his life. Should Lorelei not take to the mutation, Xavier DuMont, Prince of the Tenebris Clan would renounce his throne and his immortality.

He would choose to meet the true death when she did. Something inside of him raged at the thought of anything happening to his precious female. He needn't worry, he told himself. The Fates had already smiled upon them. Look how quickly she'd agreed to be his.

"Success, indeed," he murmured, and picked up his cellular phone to call his press secretary in case Lucius floundered.

"Greetings, sire. How may I serve you?"

"Evening, Nicholas. Has Luc called you yet?"

"He has not, sire."

"I see. Well, then it is good I did."

"Of course, sire. What can I do for you?"

"Prepare an announcement for *The Nightly News* society column. The Prince of the Tenebris Clan has found his mate. Their union shall be celebrated with the coming Full Moon."

“Very good, sire. And might I offer my many congratulations.”

“Indeed, you may.”

Xavier was smiling like a loon, but what did he care? His heart was positively thudding inside of his chest. Three more minutes and the beautiful Lorelei would be ready. First dinner, then forever.

CHAPTER NINE



Lorelei took off her travel clothes and showered quickly, avoiding wetting her hair. She dried off with one of the fluffy white towels and applied the usual lotion and deodorant. She was nervous for some reason, and her hands shook as she reapplied her mascara.

“Easy girl,” she told herself quietly.

She wasn't walking the plank, for fuck's sake. After donning a silk lounge suit, one she'd designed herself, Lorelei glanced in the mirror. Refocusing on the flattering ensemble, she turned sideways and was relieved to see the cut had held up to her expectations.

The pants were wide legged and made of layers of sheer silk with a three-inch band of delicate lace edging the cropped hemline. The blouse was loosely fitted, indenting slightly at her waist, and showing off her full figure at its best while maintaining a light and airy feel.

The top fell off her shoulders with the help of some strategically sewn in strips of clear elastic. It had sheer bell sleeves trimmed in that same wide band of lace that edged her pants. All in all, she was pleased.

Lorelei always wanted to wear this outfit, but never had occasion. It was a touch too elegant for a night sitting on her sofa eating beef chow fun and watching reruns of Dallas. The outfit reminded her of the femme fatales in those steamy old shows, but modernized, of course. All those layers of sheer

fabric trimmed in lace were sexy and comfortable, and made her feel very feminine.

She'd left little gapes in the arms, and pant legs, giving little glimpses of skin. To Lorelei, it was reminiscent of this old hard copy of the *Arabian Nights* she'd had as a child. She just loved fantasy tales and folklore. She should probably be a little more open to cosplay and events like this bizarre Vampire-wannabe-weekend.

Whatever.

Who had the time to play dress up these days?

Not her. She was so busy at work and designing her own creations on her days off. Checking herself over, she arched a brow and approved of the cut of the outfit. She'd done miracles to hide her extra pudginess with a technique she'd learned from her big-boned grandmother. Good thing too. She'd be able to eat dinner, have some wine, and talk with that beautiful man without feeling like she was going to explode out of her clothing.

Her nerves fluttered and spun now that she'd thought of him, causing a slight tremble in the pit of her stomach. Lorelei bit her lip and looked in the mirror. She would do, but her hair was all wrong. Unwinding the long braid, she brushed out her long, golden locks until they were soft and shiny.

"Perfect," she mused aloud, liking the finished product very much.

A knock came from the direction of the door, and Lorelei's heart skipped a beat. She did not know why she should be so nervous. It certainly wasn't the first time she'd been asked out by a man. Okay, so Xavier DuMont was not the average guy. Even so, he was just a guy.

She closed her eyes and inhaled a fortifying breath. She was no slouch herself, and in this outfit, she looked positively cute. Taking a second to check herself over one more time, she walked to the door and opened it.

Hot damn.

There he stood. Even better looking than before, like that was even possible. Her breath caught in her throat as she stared into his silver eyes a second too long to be anything but flirting.

“Hey.” She cleared her throat and broke eye contact.

“Hello, *mon ange*. You look ravishing.”

She was trying not to make a fool of herself, but that little compliment and what she recalled of her high school French lessons made her positively quiver. Men didn’t go around calling her a ravishing angel. She couldn’t have stopped her smile if she tried.

My date, she thought with a pleased grin. *Score one for the chubby chicks*.

“What is making you smile like that? You must tell me,” Xavier DuMont said, taking her right hand and bringing it to his lips in a swoon-worthy gesture that made her pulse race.

“Uh, nothing really. Are you ready to go?”

OMG.

What a cliché, Lo!

The chubby girl who can’t wait to eat.

She shushed that snarky inner voice of hers and focused on the man in her doorway. He seemed perfectly at ease where she was a nervous wreck. Maybe he did this kind of thing all the time. Invite strange women out to eat. Play Vampire dress up. Do a little necking.

She wasn’t into the whole cosplay thing, but the necking part... Lorelei could so be into that. Especially with a guy as gorgeous as Xavier DuMont. It had been so long since she’d been on any kind of date. So, what if he liked to play pretend. Plenty of people did.

“I can see a million and one thoughts are crossing your mind, *mon ange*. And I hope you will share each and every one with me. Now, shall we go to dinner?” He offered her his arm and Lorelei licked her lips, feeling her cheeks heat as she placed her hand in the crook of his very masculine arm.

“Sorry,” she said, ducking her head as heat rose to her cheeks. “Yes. Let’s go.”

The bulge of his muscles seemed to tense at the contact, and when she glanced upwards it was to find his eyes closed as he inhaled a deep breath. He’d said before that she smelled good.

Hmm.

So, did her driver, James, for that matter.

Weird.

But she supposed she had her good hygiene to thank. Lorelei was not fond of heavy perfumes, but since her skin tended towards dry, she used special organic soaps and lotion often scented with rose, lavender, or sometimes honey. The fragrance must be heavier than she’d thought.

She worried her lower lip as she walked with him down the hall. The hotel décor continued the macabre theme of black matte walls and burgundy carpet throughout the lobby. It was impeccably clean, but not really her taste at all.

“This is a bit over the top, isn’t it? For a hotel to match their decorations for one themed weekend?”

“I’m sorry?” he asked as they approached the restaurant, but she was already looking at the other guests with mild interest.

The maître d’ approached, and Xavier was busy speaking to him. Again, he spoke French, but her limited familiarity with the language left her with nothing more to do than smile. She started to pull away from him, so he could talk, but his hand on hers kept her by his side. A fact that secretly thrilled her.

That such a striking man should want her beside him was quite flattering. Not that she hadn’t dated good looking men before. This was simply dinner, but she was determined to enjoy it. Quite frankly, it had been some time since Lorelei had anything resembling a date.

Even if this whole shebang was not her scene. She could forgive his little eccentricities if he proved good company. Maybe even long enough to stay the weekend. She was human. She had needs. And dammit, her little personal massager was fine and good for blowing off steam, but there was nothing like the feeling of a warm flesh and blood man in her bed.

Fuck.

It's been too long since you had any real interaction with a flesh and blood man!

She waited for her snarky inner voice to reply. Was used to second-guessing and criticizing herself. But she'd gone completely silent.

Hmm.

Maybe that meant she was totally on board with getting a little *something-something*. The maître d' escorted them to a table, and she noted the stares they were gaining as they paraded through the entire establishment. There was quite the crowd there. Odd, since she'd seen neither hide nor hair of the guests when she'd arrived.

“So, how did you hear about this little retreat, Lorelei?”

“Newspaper.” She cleared her throat.

“I see. And you've been to many of these *Sanguine Vita* retreats?” Xavier asked as he helped her to her seat and nodded at the host.

“Many of what? Oh, you mean one of these weekend *cosplay* events?” She leaned in and whispered as she spoke.

Fact was, Lorelei did not want to insult him. Some people took these role playing games very seriously. He was obviously wealthy, which probably meant eccentric. She could tell from his six-figure suit and exquisite manners that he was used to the high life.

That all suggested he was more than likely in a high-pressure job. An investment banker perhaps, or some type of corporate guru. Who knew? Maybe this was his means of

relaxation. Getting dressed up and playing a part, pretending to be a Vampire wasn't all that strange, she thought with surprising liberality.

“What did you say?”

Xavier stopped perusing the menu and turned towards her, but Lorelei was too busy taking in the room to notice his confused expression. Then it was too late, their waiter was approaching with a strange little smile on his face.

“Excusez-moi, madame et monsieur. Puis-je prendre votre commande?”

Xavier and the waiter spoke, and she allowed herself to simply relax and allow the rich timbre of her date's voice to wash over her as he continued his conversation with the waiter.

“Any allergies? Preferences?” he asked, and she shook her head no.

She was surprised he'd bothered to ask her what she liked. Was impressed, really. Most men liked to show off their money and taste by running roughshod over their dates. But not him. Xavier was smooth and refined. Asked her questions as he placed their order.

Very nice, she thought, feeling more than willing to allow him to take the lead. For some reason, she trusted him to take care of her. And that was very dangerous, she knew. Maybe she was falling under his Vampire love spell, she thought with a smirk.

Must be the atmosphere. Sanguine Vita did a remarkable job making the place into the perfect supernaturally themed getaway. She pretended to peruse the menu when Xavier pointed to something. But it was still no good. French again.

Sigh.

She really should grab some language lessons if she was going to be dating Xavier DuMont. She frowned at the thought, then shook it off. This was only one dinner. Hardly a permanent situation.

“Anything you choose will be fine,” she said and watched him smile with pride shining in his silver eyes.

God, he was gorgeous. And for the first time, she really was not concerned about the food. She was on edge, and yet relaxed. It made no sense. Like half the butterflies in her stomach were napping and the other half were whirling about in a frenzy. She reached out and touched the bottom of the black candle that sat on the table.

“Careful,” Xavier said when she snatched her hand back after some hot wax fell on it.

“Let me see,” he said, frowning, and she gave him her hand.

He held her gaze while he lifted her finger, turning it so the tiny pink spot where the wax had burned her faced him, then he kissed the digit. The whole room seemed to spin the second his lips made contact. He whispered something again, she could not make it out, then kissed her hand one more time before allowing her to take it back.

“Thanks,” she said, aware that it no longer throbbed.

Well, she did.

But somewhere else entirely.

“I hope you don’t mind that I ordered for us. I gather you do not speak French.”

“No, not at all,” she returned, a little embarrassed. “I was always lousy at languages.”

“I’m sure you have a great many talents, Lorelei McGiven.”

He said it with such absolute certainty she felt herself glow at the praise. Foolish, but again, she was only human. It made her feel good to know this man seemed to truly believe she was special.

How many times had that happened in her lifetime?

Not many. And that was the sad truth.

CHAPTER TEN



“Well, thanks. So, do you do this kind of thing often?”

“What kind of thing?”

“This place. I mean, it’s fascinating, but it kind of looks like a goth-themed wedding.”

At her critique of the establishment, he laughed. A good, full-sounding deep rumble that made her ridiculously pleased with herself for having amused him.

Shit.

She was in trouble.

If making him laugh made her feel this way, she was dangerously close to being in serious lust with the almost-stranger.

“I suppose it does at that.”

“I mean, look at this matte black paint on the walls. Though the white marble floors in here are admittedly better than the burgundy carpet.” She grinned, clearly having a good time.

“Yes, what of the silver and red accents? Do you not approve of those?”

She glanced across the room at the small candles and vases that graced each of the small tables placed throughout with mathematical precision. Okay, they were quite pretty, she

admitted with a small nod. “Fine, but what of the enormous columns. I’d say they were compensating for something.”

Again he laughed aloud, and Lorelei joined him in a giggle. They chatted more, and she felt quite cozy and comfortable. He was so easy to talk to. A roaring fire blazed nearby despite it being no less than sixty degrees outside, and it felt nice.

“You are the most fascinating person I have ever met.”

“Oh. I’m sure, I’m not.”

“You truly are. And a fashion designer? I am very impressed.”

“Oh, sure you are. And what do you do? Run a business or ten?”

“Yes, actually. But I am also the Prince of my Clan.”

Fuck.

Here it was.

The crazy train had arrived.

Her stomach tightened, but she ignored it. Determined to salvage the evening. “Yes, well. Um, did you see the terrace?”

“What?” He turned his head for a moment, but his eyes narrowed back on her face. “It is lovely. You know, I hope you will always tell me what you really think, Lorelei.”

“I don’t plan on lying,” she returned.

Focusing on the door that led to the terrace, which was also visible through the ceiling to floor windows, helped her ignore the elephant in the room. It was all lit up with fairy lights and candles against the darkness of the midnight sky. The effect was dizzying and for a moment she felt as though she’d stepped into the pages of a fairy tale. She remembered the tales of Alice and the Mad Hatter from her youth. Of course, the Tim Burton movies had replaced any childish cartoon notions she’d once had. A fan of his work, she was beginning to see the appeal of cosplay.

She would have to tell him eventually what she really thought of this whole cosplay situation. One glance around the room, and she noted many were far more into it than he. He was wearing a superb suit, but there were men in floor-length capes, women in skintight red dresses with plunging necklines.

Every cliché of Vampires she'd ever seen seemed represented. Then some were actually dressed like any average person. As she looked about, she noticed many eyes on her and Xavier.

Of course, it was unnerving to have so many people staring. She brushed it off and waited for their server to come back with a bottle of wine and glasses. Xavier bent and whispered something to the man, but his hand gripped hers when she tried to move away to offer him some privacy. It was kind of nice, the way he wanted her near him.

“Here we are, *monsieur et madame*,” the server said in the same exaggerated accent that made her wonder what part of New York he was really from.

With a grin on her face, she accepted the glass from Xavier, gently lifting it to her lips and nodding her approval. Not that she knew one bottle from another, but whatever. She felt the thin waiter's eyes on her as he began filling her glass when she replaced it on the table.

Scanning the crowd again, Lorelei noticed some lovely designer outfits the women had on, along with the expensive suits of their male counterparts. Though no one looked like Xavier. He was clearly in a class all his own. She wondered if maybe he really was a prince.

Yeah right. And you're his princess.

She shook her head, trying to erase her foolish and fanciful thoughts. Quite embarrassing, really.

“Do you like the wine?”

“Yes, thank you. But honestly, I wouldn't know one bottle from another.”

“Those are things that can be learnt over time. I will teach you.” He nodded as if the thing was decided.

“Hard to do in a single weekend.”

“*Ma moitie*, I plan on having you much longer than that.” His voice deepened with every word, and she felt the promise in them down to her toes.

He was working very hard to seduce her.

Should she tell him now, there was no need?

Hell.

A girl like her wasn't used to this kind of thing, and it was nice. But Lorelei did not want promises from him. She just wanted him.

“So, some of these folks went all out with this thing.” Lorelei changed the subject, ignoring his casual declaration.

She might not be as sophisticated as Xavier was, but she could fake it. Only, she was really hoping she wouldn't have to. Fake it, that was.

“I am not sure I understand,” Xavier said, scooching his seat closer to her “You keep mentioning cosplay? Like people dressing up for *Comic-Con* or something?”

“Yeah. I am sorry, I did not mean to insult you, but it's just not my thing,” she returned, crinkling her nose.

The waiter had left a copy of the menu on the table, and she glanced down. It appeared to be handwritten in a long, delicate hand. Like calligraphy from another age, she mused as she tried to make out the selections.

“Is this a fixed menu?”

“*Oui*,” he said, scanning the paper quickly. “There is a choice of entrees. Wagyu beef filet, rosemary roasted pheasant served chilled, roasted rack of lamb, and porcini mushroom ravioli.”

“Wow. They all sound divine,” she returned.

“I am glad you think so. I ordered everything,” he returned.

Lorelei was surprised. The place was expensive, no doubt. But that was not surprising, it was the fact he had ordered one of each entrée, plus a few appetizers. If it was a gesture, it was a good one. Lorelei appreciated food. *Obviously*. And more, she hated being chastised about her weight.

“You know, my last date told me I should eat more salad,” she began with a twinkle in her eye.

“You should have anything you like all the time, Lorelei McGiven.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Wasn't that just the perfect thing to say?

She very much liked the sound of having everything she wanted. Who wouldn't? Maybe it was the wine, or the food, or just him, but Lorelei was starting to feel very good just then.

"Well, I sure like the sound of that, but as merely an employee of *Kiki's Closet*, I am afraid my bank account would disagree with you."

Xavier chuckled and leaned forward, dropping another quick kiss on her hands that she currently held loosely together on the table. The sound was deep and rich, and yes, it drew many more pairs of eyes to their table.

Lorelei did not mind. Not exactly. It was strange for sure, but not unwelcome. The fact was, he intrigued her. He wasn't like anyone she'd ever met.

"What do you do for a living?"

"I have many interests. The DuMont family has been involved in several entrepreneurial endeavors over the centuries. Right now, we are primarily involved in banking."

"Like investments?"

"Blood banks, actually. DuMont Industries is the world's foremost supplier of blood, as well as the more refined, red cells, platelets, and plasma."

"Wow. No wonder you like all this," she commented, and lifted the glass of Cabernet to her lips.

Missing the confused expression that crossed his handsome face, Lorelei ignored the stares from the threesome at the table nearest them. The man in the center was a tad rotund and balding, his two eager companions were rail thin with severe haircuts, but really nice clothes. Still, they were staring, and that was just rude.

Lorelei ignored them, taking another sip from the exquisite crystal glass. The wine was perfect. Just the right amount of sweetness and dryness to really hit the spot. She was a sucker for a good red.

“You are unlike any woman I’ve ever met, Lorelei. From the moment I picked up your scent outside the hotel, I knew you were different. Perfect, in fact,” Xavier said between courses.

“Ha! Sorry, I’ve just never been called perfect before.”

“Then you’ve been hanging around with idiots, *mon ange*. But I am glad. This way, I do not have to dispatch anyone for your hand.”

“My hand? You know you keep talking like that, and you are going to have a *helluva* time getting rid of me,” she teased.

“Good,” he replied, but for some reason, she did not think he was teasing her back. The knowledge sent shivers racing down her spine.

“Did you make that lovely confection you are wearing?”

“This? Yes, I did,” she said with no small amount of pride.

“It’s superb.”

“Thank you. As a bigger woman, I suppose it is natural that I design plus sized garments.”

“Bigger woman? *Ma moitie*, you are positively petite next to me,” he replied with a confused smile on his gorgeous face.

Lorelei felt her face flame like a beacon. This was never the most comfortable conversation to have, but she assumed his eyes were in working order. He could obviously see her, and yet, he was still there.

“Next to you, some buildings would look petite. I mean, you are huge.”

“But maybe a little bit cute?”

Awww.

He is fishing for compliments.

How sweet!

She could practically feel herself falling head over heels for that line. Imagine a hunky man like him needing some sort of validation from little ol’ her.

“Xavier, do you really need me to tell you I think you’re cute?”

“I would not object, my beautiful Lorelei.” He grinned, and the way he said her name made shivers dance down her spine.

If he kept that up, she was going to catch a chill, she thought as he flashed one of his panty-melting grins her way. She wasn’t one to pander to any man’s ego, hot or not. But since he’d been so generous with the compliments, maybe she could return the favor.

“You are one of the most handsome men, I’ve ever seen.”

“One of? Who are these other men so that I may wipe them from the planet and erase them from your mind, *mon ange?*”

She chuckled at his fervent response. Clearing her throat when he continued to look slightly murderous at the other diners. As if she could possibly find any of them attractive.

“Stop,” she said and snorted a laugh. “You know you are gorgeous. I’m sure throngs of women flock around you wherever you go.”

“I don’t know, I’ve never noticed. In fact, the only thing I can see is you.”

“Oh,” she said, swallowing the bite of what she was certain was perfectly cooked wagyu beef without really tasting it.

The rest of the meal was lovely. Lorelei and Xavier talked and flirted freely. She felt all kinds of feminine and powerful in the fact he truly seemed interested. It was quite a change from her daily life. Far better than any of her more recent dates.

The food was brought to them by highly trained servers, far as she could tell. They were silent and unobtrusive. Perfect for the setting, she figured. A string quartet played softly from somewhere in the room, leaving the atmosphere mysterious and far more interesting than Lorelei had expected for this group of adults who liked to play dress up.

Yes, she'd had misgivings about the entire thing, but as the night went on, she found herself positively dazzled. Xavier DuMont was gorgeous, with impeccable manners, and for whatever reason, he seemed to find her attractive. That was a win in her book.

“How long have you been coming to these retreats?”

“This is my first time in many years,” Xavier replied. “I admit, I would have come more often had I known there was a possibility of finding you here.”

“Oh, this is my first time,” she admitted, almost embarrassed at being caught. “In fact, I don't think I would have come, had I known about the whole, *you know*.”

“Let's not discuss that then, because to be honest, Lorelei, the idea of you not being here does not sit well with me at all.”

“Doesn't it?” she asked, a touch more breathless than she'd expected.

“Would you like anything else, *monsieur et madame*?”

“No, thank you,” she replied to the thin server, eyes still locked on Xavier's bright silver ones. She couldn't possibly eat or drink another thing.

“Shall we?” He stood up, rounded the table, and offered her his hand.

The invitation glittered in his gaze, and she knew better than to accept what he was offering. Really, she did. But

Lorelei's body hummed with awareness and attraction, the likes of which she was totally unprepared for.

She was an adult. Consenting, for sure. Why shouldn't she allow this thing to play out between them?

"Alright, Xavier." She nodded.

Lorelei knew damn well what she was saying yes to. She might not be into the whole Vampy dress up vibe, but he was too much man for her to just walk away. If all she could have of him was this one fantasy-based experience, then she was going to take it.

Why the hell not?

A wild streak she hadn't felt in years hummed through her veins as he pulled her close to his side. She thought she heard a growl emanate from his throat, and her surprised eyes met his glittery ones. He really was into this whole thing. Not that she minded, as evidenced in the sudden dampening of her panties.

Eyes followed them as they moved through the room and outside to a large row of hedges. It looked like a maze, and she was delighted by it!

"This is like something out of some Victorian era novel about a handsome rake and the unsuspecting lady he seduces. You know what I am talking about, right? Those deliciously sexy, bodice-ripper novels that always have titles like *The Viscount's Secret Lover* or *Taming the Duke*."

"I'm afraid I have not read many novels like that," Xavier said.

"Of course not," she chided herself, toying with a leaf on one of the hedges.

They'd wandered into the maze, and she worried for a moment that they'd be lost, but he didn't seem to share her worry. Everything about him oozed confidence. As if he was in total command of himself.

He reached down and touched the stem she was playing with, and Lorelei's breath stopped. Her heart was pounding at

his very nearness, and she did very much feel like one of those heroines in those novels she used to gobble up by the dozen back in college.

“Tell me, what would one of your fictional rakes do now if he were alone in a garden in the middle of the night with the object of his interest within reach,” he growled the words, sending zips of lust careening through her body.

Oh, my.

Lorelei’s lips parted as he moved in closer. His front brushed against her side and shivers raced up and down her spine.

“Well, the hero would make some excuse to touch her,” she began.

“Like this,” he whispered, and lifted a thick lock of her hair from where it had fallen forward, brushing it past her shoulders and in doing so, he ran one of his long fingers across her cheek, down her neck, to her bare shoulders, and back toward her clavicle.

“Y-yes,” she whispered back when one naughty little digit dipped down to trace the tops of her breasts, and finally hovering over the valley between them.

She felt her nipples grow erect, stomach clench, and pussy ache with need as Xavier hissed in a breath. The sound was so soft she might’ve imagined it. But there was no way she imagined what came next.

Gulp.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Xavier was holding on to his sanity by a mere thread. Lorelei McGiven was more potent than he could have ever imagined. All the lessons he'd had as a youth and Prince about marrying for duty could not have been more off base. Finding his mate had knocked the very notion of settling for less out of his head for good.

Of course, he had the feeling she didn't quite grasp the situation. He worried that he needed to go slow, to explain himself. But those thoughts fled the second he had her alone in the maze.

Really, he should know better. He'd been with his fair share of beautiful women, but she was in a class all her own. Everything about her tempted him to distraction. She was perfection embodied. Every desire and fantasy he'd ever had rolled into one curvy bundle.

He wanted her.

Period.

Her scent filled his nostrils, and the steady beat of her heart was like a siren's song calling to him. Hungry for her kiss, thirsty for her blood, Xavier was dying for a taste of the delectable morsel.

He knew the rumors of his kind. Vampires from his line were different than some of the others. If there was truth to the tales, then he knew, once he drank from his true mate, there would be no other. Even when she transformed, when her

body accepted the mutation, he would find his thirst slaked only by her.

Instinct and nature warred with his need to treat her gently, tenderly. He'd heard rumor of Vampires so taken with their mates that consummation of the relationship happened in seconds upon sight. It was a bloody miracle he'd waited this long.

But it would be her choice.

Always.

Xavier might go mad without her, but he would use everything within his power to woo her first. He scented her arousal. Knew she wanted him. And it was enough to make him drunk.

Lorelei tipped her head up, giving him a tantalizing view of the ivory column of her throat. There, that was where he would strike her with his needle-sharp fangs. He would drink her blood and bind her to him, then he would offer his own life's source in return.

Fates willing, her body would accept the mutation and she would enjoy the same extended life as he. Otherwise, he would renounce his own Vampirism and live a mortal life.

Yes. She meant that much. More than any familial or Clan obligation.

She was his true heart.

His *verum animo*.

And he would have no other.

Not ever.

Xavier went still, dragging out this moment before his whole world would change. And hers.

The night air was cool, with hints of the sea on the soft breeze. The sheer fabric of her ensemble rustle softly and each movement sent wafts of her luscious fragrance dancing on the air.

He growled a threat to anyone within hearing range. That scent was his and his alone. She belonged to him. Tempting as she was, he knew beyond a doubt that others would have coveted her for that titillating aroma that clung to her skin like sunshine and honeydew.

What paranormal could scent her and not want a taste?

She was unique in that way. A very rare quality to be treasured and cherished.

Like Vampire catnip.

Vamp-nip?

Was that a word?

The random thought left as quickly as it had come. He watched intently as she wet her lips with the tip of her tiny pink tongue. Anticipation had them both breathing like Olympians before he finally made his move.

Xavier turned her to face him, then he dropped his head and claimed her mouth with his own. A rush of emotions flooded him, not all of them his. She was truly his destiny if he could feel her very thoughts beating inside his own head. Fuck, she was perfect. Soft and submissive in his arms, and yet bold and daring.

Lorelei wrapped herself around him then. So warm and soft, she trembled in against his chest and he squeezed her tighter. Tongue delving eagerly into the warm, wet cavern of her mouth, Xavier growled, tasting her hidden secrets. Her desire amplified her scent. What was appetizing before, was positively mouthwatering now.

“I want you,” she boldly whispered against his lips.

He growled and kissed her deeper, appreciating her readiness to admit to and own her sexuality. Fucking hell, she was so damn hot. Sex was natural. Even the most mundane creatures were drawn to it. Call it nature.

Vampires with their heightened senses and endurance craved sex as any other paranormal being did. Perhaps, they enjoyed it a fraction more. Had more time to perfect their skill

and study the art of lovemaking. Xavier was a typical male in that respect. He'd sown his oats and had taken many lovers in his long lifetime.

But none of them mattered in the face of what was to be the culmination of all his desires. Lorelei was no mere woman. She was his mate. He needed her in ways he'd never dreamed. Yes, sex was necessary to complete the binding, but that wasn't why he wanted to sink into the sumptuous woman.

“You taste so good, *mon ange*.”

Her kiss ignited a fire deep in his belly. One he hadn't felt in far too long, if ever. He closed his eyes, wanting to savor every single bit of her. Her lips moved hungrily against his, her flavor hot and enticing.

Fuck, he needed her.

His cock throbbed painfully inside his slacks and if not for his remarkable restraint, he would've torn the exquisite fabric without care just to get to her.

“More,” she moaned, and he obliged her readily.

Lips trailing down her cheek and neck, Lorelei moaned and clung to his shoulders as he sucked on her neck. He felt his fangs pressing against his gums, but he denied the urge to bite her then and there. That was for later.

Still, this was madness. He roamed his hands over her body. Fuck, she was so soft, so warm. Even on top of the silky, barely there, sheer fabric, the barrier proved too much. Kissing her, touching her, was an addiction.

He needed her.

Wanted her.

Had to have her.

“Please,” she begged, and he found himself unable to refuse her fervent plea.

Xavier claimed her lips once more, satisfaction thrumming in his veins as her tongue met his in an age-old duel that she somehow made new and exciting. Her short nails dug into his

shoulders, and he went wild. Lifting her up so that she had no choice but to wrap her legs around his waist. Lorelei gasped, but he swallowed the sound. Her obvious surprise and sheer delight in his strength pleased him.

But of course, he was strong, powerful.

He was a Vampire.

And not the sparkly kind.

Xavier Dumont was Prince of his Clan. His bloodline was renowned for their superior wit and strength, incredible longevity, the ability to heal, plus a dozen other supernatural powers that he had been blessed with.

All the lore and legends had it wrong. He was not undead. He was very much alive. More so than any mortal. Oh, the things he could give her. With a growl, he flexed his hips, rubbing his suit clad sex against the heated apex of her thighs. Fuck, she felt good. Even through the many layers that barred his access.

“Xavier,” she moaned, kissing his neck and biting down hard.

Fuck.

He almost came in his pants from her unexpected fervor. This was no leisurely exploration of potential lovers. This was flat out raw need.

“I need you,” he grunted, stopping their kiss until she was forced to open her lust-glazed eyes to his.

“Yes.”

“Are you sure, Lorelei? Once I start loving you, I won’t be able to hold back. Be certain, *ma moitie*. I beg you, be certain.”

“I think I must be crazy, but the answer is yes. *Yes*, Xavier. I want you. Please. Take me back to your room. I want to spend the night with you.”

That was all the *yes* he needed. Lorelei gasped as he sped to the balcony of his room. He’d been aware the entire time of

its distance. Twelve and a half meters. No problem.

A spiral staircase allowed him exclusive access to his suite. His mate started to speak but held on instead. Closing her pretty mouth while he took the stairs three at a time easily, never breaking eye contact.

“Wow. I just, wow,” she whispered, as if he’d done something impossible. “You must be in excellent shape.”

“You have no idea,” he growled, dropping her on the bed and tearing off his jacket and shirt.

Her eyes widened like saucers, and he grinned knowingly. Pleased to know she found him attractive, he took his time stalking her up the oversized mattress. Lorelei scurried backward until her back rested against the cushioned headboard. Her eyes flirted with him, and her lips threatened to break out into a wide, unabashed grin.

Dammit.

He was already half in love with her. She was downright fascinating.

He didn’t know whether to howl with joy at having found his mate or mourn the loss of his independence.

Fuck that.

Joy.

Xavier chose joy.

He would only ever feel pleasure and happiness where she was concerned.

“I want to unwrap you, *ma moitié*,” he whispered, dropping kisses on top of her clothes on her legs, her mound, her belly, breasts, and finally, her lips.

Her arousal made her scent that much stronger, and Xavier positively drooled while he found buttons cleverly hidden beneath the layers. He would’ve torn her clothing off, but something about the way she’d looked at him warily made him stop. He would treat her tenderly this first time.

“What does that mean? What you called me before,” she asked, lifting her hips so he could slide her pants down her gorgeous legs.

For a moment, he was struck dumb. Her skin was like fresh cream, so pale and lush. He exhaled slowly, eyes raking over her voluptuous curves, and damn near choked once they found the cropped golden curls that covered her honeyed sex. Xavier forced himself to reply to her question.

“Do you not like it?”

“Yes, I like it,” she said breathlessly. “I just don’t know what it means.”

“Nothing bad, *cherie*. My father was French. It was my first language. Sometimes I forget and revert back to it.”

“Oh.” She sounded surprised as he tugged the sleeves of her top, parting the blouse and sliding it off to reveal her heavenly bosoms to his hungry gaze.

More French terms of endearments slipped past his lips, and when he couldn’t stand to be apart from her anymore, he touched her with only his fingertips, tracing her curves and committing them to memory.

Xavier felt like a boy with his first naked woman. She was so fucking beautiful, it hurt. But the brief flash of fear in her gaze told him everything he needed to know. He did not like that look one bit.

It was the look of someone who feared rejection. One who might have even experienced it. But he could not dwell on that. Far as he was concerned, she was a virgin. Lest he be forced to find her former lovers and gut them one by one. Yes. Better not to think on that.

Lorelei McGiven was gorgeous. A veritable goddess. And he would make sure she knew it from this day forward.

“Do you know what you do to me, *cherie*? Lying there like a beautiful sacrifice for my taking? You are testing every ounce of my control.”

“Then let go, Xavier. This one time, let go.”

He closed his eyes. This woman was the answer to his every dream. A wish he'd made a hundred years ago and forgotten about until right now. Leaning down, he captured her lips and slid his body along hers. She was the perfect foil for him. Ivory to olive skin, hard muscle to soft, womanly flesh, Xavier nudged her legs apart with his knee and she opened for him while he sucked one ripe nipple into his mouth.

Kissing her chased away the darkness for him. Yes, he could walk in the light, but he'd been so alone. And he never realized it until now. Their passion burned and blazed, a fury of emotion washing over him as he licked, kissed, and sucked every inch of her.

His fingers found her honey slicked sex and he teased her outer lips, wanting more of those soft panting moans, wanting them all. He growled and slid the tip of his index finger inside her heat. She was scalding hot, and so fucking wet for him.

"Xavier," she moaned his name, scratching his shoulders and flexing her hips, but he was immovable.

Teasing her more and more, he wanted her at the very cusp of completion before he gave her what she desired most. Fuck, she was sweeter than he imagined. He suckled her other breast, tugging gently on the tight nubbin with his front teeth, avoiding his sharp fangs, while tracing the seam of her pussy with his fingers. She was so hot and wet, Xavier growled, dipping his digits into her honey, a tease of what was to come, before gliding her juices over her tight little clit.

Lorelei moaned and pulled his hair, his own cock was throbbing painfully with need, and the careful control he was so proud of damn near broke. But not before she shattered. It was a thing of beauty. Her orgasm soared and her pussy tightened around the two fingers he slid deep inside her sheath.

Her blue eyes went wide, but unseeing as she arched her back with her mouth hanging open in a silent scream. Then she was panting, flexing her hips, drawing out her pleasure, and Xavier moved with her. Replacing his fingers with the head of his cock, he pushed inside her still contracting sheath and cursed at the intense pleasure that rippled through him.

“Fuck, you feel so good.” He sucked in a breath, inhaling her sweet fragrance, and pulling her close.

Lorelei went willingly, lifting her body, opening her legs wide to accommodate his width. He framed her face with his hands, dropping a long, deep kiss on her lips and pressing her tightly to him. He wanted to touch her everywhere. From head to toe, and he might’ve just managed it.

“*Vous êtes plus belle que dix milliards couchers de soleil,*” he whispered to her in his native tongue, meaning every word. She was more beautiful than a billion sunsets, he thought.

One of the more common misinterpretations in all Vampire lore was the rumor that Vampires could not walk in the sun without dying. Fact was, they could walk in sunlight, though it drained some of their preternatural strength.

At any rate, being inside Lorelei was beyond anything he could’ve ever imagined. She cradled him perfectly.

Mouth still clinging to hers, Xavier started to move. Finding a rhythm that suited them both, he had every intention of driving her mad with pleasure before he took his own.

“Oh yes,” she moaned, scratching his shoulders while he thrust harder, deeper than before.

Circling his hips, he couldn’t get enough. The desire so intensely savage, he did not know if he was going to burn alive from her heat or his need. But it would be worth it either way. Xavier was no virgin, but fuck, she made him feel like one.

“Need you,” he growled, fangs descending as he licked a trail from her lips to her neck.

“Yes, please,” she whimpered.

All the while, he continued to plunge into her sweet tight little sheath. His cock seemed to grow harder, thicker with every move. He’d never felt such ferocious hunger welling up from the very depths of his soul. Even fucking her was not enough. He wanted to consume her. To become part of her and make her part of him. He wanted her for himself, demanded full possession. In turn, he would belong to her and no other. It was a vow he would make in front of every god, every court or

sect known to every civilization and species. Yes, she was his. And he would make her so. Now. But first, she needed to come again.

Fangs descended, Xavier kissed the spot where he would bite her, and make her his. In a deep, hardly recognizable voice, he growled into her ear, “Come for me, *ma moitié*. Come now, so we may become one.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Lorelei's entire body was so tight, she thought she would snap like a rubber band if he didn't make her come soon. Oh, she was greedy tonight, she thought with a long, drawn out hiss. He'd already made her come once. For that, she should be grateful.

Sex was never easy for her. It was uncomfortable most of the time, and unsatisfying more often than not. In fact, she'd never really, well, *come* with a man before. Or another woman for that matter. Only herself.

Sigh.

But Xavier was a veritable god between the sheets. She felt her pussy moisten and throb, so ready to be filled by him. It was like she suddenly realized she was a woman, and she needed him inside of her.

Like, now.

Having sex with random strangers, especially strangers who liked to play dress up, was not something Lorelei did lightly. But she was ever so grateful she'd taken a chance on him. Even if it was only this one time.

Xavier was remarkable. He made her feel so feminine and powerful in her sexuality. He didn't act like this was some pity fuck, or a dare. Yes, she had the unfortunate experience to have an ex tell her he only slept with her because he felt bad for her.

Like what the actual fuck?

Needless to say that ass was treated to a well-deserved slap upside his head. Still, her ex's callous treatment was why she'd buried herself in work. Facing the fact she was destined to be alone had taken a big chunk of her own confidence to do, but she'd done it.

Still. This was her weekend, right? She was entitled to unwind. Sex was perfectly natural and acceptable between consenting adults. And she was definitely consenting.

Hell. She was salivating for the guy. That his silver eyes had followed her all evening had been flattering. His kisses left her knees weak. But once he'd undressed her and started teasing her with those fuck-me-please lashes of his, those soulful kisses, and his tantalizingly long fingers buried deep in her slit, she could not help herself.

Lorelei had finally come.

Long and hard.

And what's more, she wanted to do it again.

"Yesssss," he growled, freeing his fingers from her still throbbing pussy.

Finally. She whimpered as he reared up. With his eyes on hers, and his hand wrapped round his thick, long, *magnificent* cock, Xavier placed his head at her sopping wet entrance.

"Now, we become one," he grunted and drove himself deep inside of her.

"Oh god!"

Yes, she screamed. Yes, it was a cliché. But holy fuck, did she have a good reason. About eleven inches worth. Thick and veiny, perfectly curved, and filling her to the brink, Xavier was like a beast. A big, sexy, wildcat, and he couldn't get enough of her.

"S'good, *ma moitié*. So good," he growled, plunging his tongue into her mouth so she was tasting, hell, make that breathing, only him.

He was tireless, and so very thorough as he fucked her into oblivion. Lorelei had been halfway to coming again ever since

he touched her. The man was loving on her like some ancient sex god who needed to fuck more than he needed to breathe.

His dick filled her perfectly. So big, thick, and curved! He touched that secret place she'd only ever reached with her battery-operated boyfriend and never, ever had it felt this fucking good. Lorelei scratched at his shoulders, loving the heat from his sweat-slicked body.

“Want to make you come again, *mon ange*. Want you to scream my name this time.”

Yes, please.

She mewled and moaned. Incapable of forming words as she grabbed his buttocks and slapped him when he slowed.

“I will give you what you need,” he promised, tilting her hips so he could slide even deeper into her hot core.

“Oooohhh,” she cried out.

Lorelei was all feeling now. She wanted to lick him from head to toe. He was so into her, she could hardly believe it. Her last boyfriend had needed the help of pornographic movies in the background to even get hard, but Xavier didn't need anything but her.

He was so intensely focused on her pleasure, she felt tingles all over whenever she met his silver bullet stare. *Gorgeous*, she thought on a moan.

So fucking hot.

He pressed deeper into her, pushing her legs even farther apart and ground his pubis right on her clit.

“Come for me, *ma moitié*. Come now, so we may become one.”

His gravelly voice was like fucking magic. That husky command sent her spiraling, and soon she was arching into him. He sucked her neck, hitting that spot she loved, and—

“Ouch!” she yelled in surprise at the sharp sting she'd felt.

But whatever brief pain had appeared, it vanished just as quickly. Replaced by a molten hot pleasure that blew her mind

and rocked her whole world.

“Xavier!” she cried out his name. Lorelei would later swear on the bible if asked, but she saw actual fucking fireworks bursting behind her eyelids as her orgasm pulsed through her.

White hot pleasure roared throughout her body, and that sweet carnal bliss carried her to another plane of awareness. She felt him stiffen. Heard his thunderous roar as he came inside of her.

Xavier, she thought his name. Feeling him in every inch of her being. The room was spinning madly, or maybe that was just her head. She felt alive and somehow beyond life. Like she was existing but for the pleasure alone.

“That was,” she panted, trying to find words as she ever-so-slowly came back down to earth. “It was—”

“Only the beginning,” he finished for her.

He appeared to wipe his mouth, but she could not be sure. The room was dark save for the light of the moon filtering in through the window. Lorelei thought she saw something dark on his lips before he pressed his mouth *oh-so-urgently* to hers.

His cock was still hard, and she felt a throbbing ache begin inside of her.

How was this even possible?

She’d never been so ravenous for a man in her life. She tasted something sinfully rich in his kiss. It was sweet, spicy, and decadent. Like the best chocolate and more of that amazing burgundy he’d ordered.

She kissed him and kissed him some more. Sucking on his tongue, wanting to devour him. Then he started to move again, and Lorelei couldn’t think anymore. She could only feel.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



*S*ome hours later...

Lorelei blinked. The room was dark, but it was starting to come into focus. As was the fact she'd spent the night in Xavier's room. The man in question was still asleep, arms wrapped around her. She bit her lip to stop the excited squeak that almost escaped her mouth.

The things they'd done last night. She was positively glowing with happiness and satiation of the carnal variety. It wasn't every day a man made her come like that. In fact, it had never happened before.

Xavier had awakened a whole new world of possibilities to her, and for once she'd woken up after sex feeling satisfied and positively glowing with happiness. It wasn't just his mega hot body and rockstar moves that had her abuzz with feelings. It was the other stuff too.

He was funny. And smart. Cute and thoughtful. Hell, if she didn't know better, she would think she was in love with the guy. Of course, there was that odd tendency of his to believe he was a Vampire. But maybe once they were off this weird little island retreat, he would forget all about that.

Everyone had their quirks. Kiki had a habit of shaving her head every two or three years and dying what was left blue or pink or purple. She also started a conga line every other Sunday night at *The Thirsty Dog*. That was the name of this

Jersey shore bar near the woman's summer house. It was a weird place, but full of hot guys, or so Kiki always said.

Who was Lorelei to judge? If he wanted to play dress up and nibble on her neck once in a while, that was just fine with her. She'd never had this instant connection with a man before, and she wanted to see where it led, if anywhere.

Still smiling, she wiggled free of his embrace, sliding off the bed to the floor without hardly a sound. A girl had to pee, she mused and smiled all the way to the bathroom. She had to admit, his suite was the absolute shit.

Twice the size of her room, it boasted gleaming marble floors, the same matte black walls, and silver sconces that lit up dimly as she walked by. The bathroom was enormous with a sunken tub and waterfall spout.

Maybe later, she thought with a sigh.

First things first.

After seeing to her business, Lorelei washed her hands and brushed her teeth using a new brush she'd found in the drawer. Still thinking soft, dreamy thoughts, she rinsed and spit.

After washing her face with the bar soap, she reached for a towel and dried it. She just felt so good. Better than ever, in fact. She'd read somewhere that red wine could have that effect. But she wondered, with a slight chuckle, if good sex couldn't do the same. All of that went right out of her head as she got a good look at herself. Most notably the two small, though visible, puncture wounds on her neck.

Lorelei looked down.

Dammit.

She couldn't see her neck unless she looked in the mirror but found two more puncture wounds on her right breast!

What the fuck?

Panic, fear, then finally, anger coursed through her blood. The fucker had bitten her!

“Lorelei?” Xavier’s voice reached her from the other side of the door, and she turned to glower at it. “Are you okay, love? Open the door!”

“Okay? Am I okay?” She grabbed the cool doorknob and flung it open. “What kind of sick games are you all playing on this island? Dress up is one thing, but this, this is criminal!”

“Darling? What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about this! You bit me!”

“Of course I bit you. I’m a Vampire. You are mine. I told you this last night when I first saw you.”

“Oh come on, Xavier! That was make believe. This is real. I don’t live my life according to some costume party, buster! And you, with your stupid sexy little French sayings, can’t just pick women up and bite them!”

“Lorelei,” he began, but she could tell he was as confused as she was pissed off. “Darling—”

“Don’t you call me that,” she growled between gritted teeth.

“*Ma moitié*, but you are here, at the *Sanguine Vita Vampire Retreat*.”

“So fucking what, pal? That doesn’t give you a right to, to leave bruises cause you think you’re a member of the undead!”

“What are you talking about? Vampires are not unde... wait. *Merde!* You really don’t know?”

“Don’t know what? That this was all too good to be true,” she yelled, and grabbed one of the soft, fluffy, white robes from the hooks inside his master bathroom before storming past him.

Lorelei was feeling mighty vulnerable in her birthday suit. She was all pink and chub while Xavier looked like some knight without his shining armor from the days of old. He had muscles on his muscles, for fuck’s sake. And yet, he maintained an elegance she’d hardly thought possible.

His frame was long and powerful, but she kept coming back to his face. Chiseled and hard, those crazy gorgeous silver eyes glittered like stars in a midnight sky, though blinking in disbelief as he came to some realization, but whatever. She was still too busy looking and taking his measure.

Xavier's olive-toned skin was fair and blemish-free. He was beautiful. Prettier than her at any rate and didn't that chafe her ass!

"This event is advertised in supernatural newspapers and websites only. How did you come to be here? Tell me everything."

"Fine. I saw the ad from a paper on a coworker's desk. When she pissed me off later that day, I grabbed it to read at home because I was intrigued. There was no mention of Vampires!"

"I know, it is for just this reason. Shit. Look, let's get dressed, then we will talk, okay?"

"I don't think I want to talk to you right now. Fuck. Am I dead? Did you kill me and turn me into one of your nocturnal brethren!" She was near hysterics now, and the pained look on his face did not help.

"Lorelei, Vampires are not undead. It is a mutation, darling, that is all—"

"Great! I'm an undead mutant! Oh, you are some winner, pal!"

She held the robe tightly together, but it was admittedly snug over her breasts.

Fuck it.

She grabbed her discarded clothes and shoes and headed for the door.

"Lorelei, please!"

"I'm taking a shower. Then I'm going home."

“Talk to me first, Lorelei. I beg you,” he said, blocking her way out with his big, beautiful, and yup, *hard* body.

“Let me go, Xavier.”

“Okay, *ma moitie*. I will let you go for now. But I will come for you in half an hour. Okay? Then we shall talk.”

She moved past him and went to her room, opening the door with her key as quickly as her fumbling hands would allow. She was so mad, she could spit.

And hurt.

For some reason, she was hurt.

Had he only wanted her for a snack?

Maybe chubby chicks had thick blood or something?

Oh hell.

She sniffled as tears ran down her face. Quick as she could, she showered and dressed. She had to get out of there. Needed some space. Then she saw his card.

James.

He had offered to help her should she need it. Well, she couldn't think of a better time to take the driver up on his offer.

“Hello, James? This is Lorelei. Can you get me off this island? Great. Come right now.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Xavier showered and dressed, then waited. And waited. Twenty minutes seemed reasonable. But each minute away from her caused him no small amount of unease.

“Lorelei?” He knocked on the door to her room. As the seconds passed and he heard no reply, a terrible feeling began in the pit of his stomach.

He did not need to bust down the door to realize she had gone. He knew it, deep inside. Agony swept through him, so much so, he could hardly stand. Dropping to his knees, he barely heard his cell phone ringing, but managed to pull it out.

It was Lucius.

Fuck.

He did not want to talk to him right then.

Wait.

Actually, he did.

“Luc, I need you to find me an address. A place by the name of *Kiki’s Closet*. And find out what supernatural works there. Yes. Call my pilot next. I leave immediately.”



he next morning...

T

Patience was not one of Xavier's strong suits. In fact, he was chomping at the bit as he sat outside the establishment known as *Kiki's Closet* in his limousine. It had taken precious few hours to find her, but he had.

His heart damn near broke as he made sure she arrived home safely. So sad, his *ma moitie* looked as she'd climbed her stairs. Her lovesick driver had looked homicidal as he confronted Xavier in the shadows, but once the man saw who he was, learned that it was the Prince of his own Clan who desired the fair creature, he'd regained control of himself.

"She is the light, sire. It is why she is so attractive to us, I believe."

"Yes, James. I think you are correct in that."

"Do you intend harm to her? I could not bear it if you did, sire."

"No. I wish to wed her. Lorelei McGiven is my fated mate, James. Now, do you vow to serve your mistress true and well?"

"I do," James said.

As Xavier instructed him to keep watch over her while he saw to the arrangements, the man nodded.

One of the perks of being Prince, he supposed, and was grateful. He had every intention of wooing his mate. Of solidifying their union and bringing her home to rule at his side. Incidentally, the town of DuMont was only a ninety-minute drive from her apartment.



orelei sniffed and wiped her eyes. She felt hollow, empty, and all kinds of wrong ever since she'd left Moongate Island.

L And him.

Okay, fine.

Mostly him.

She grabbed her cell phone and dialed the number for Kiki's Closet when her BFF failed to answer her cell. That wasn't exactly odd. Kiki was notorious for not charging her mobile.

Sigh.

Lorelei waited for the click that signaled someone had picked up. She only cringed slightly when Misty's nasal voice greeted her coldly.

"*Kiki's Closet.* Misty speaking."

"Yeah, hi, Misty. Can you put Kiki on?"

"Who is calling?"

"Me!" she yelled. Lorelei growled into the receiver, then squeaked and covered her mouth. Dang it. Now she was starting to sound like *him*. She grabbed her water bottle and downed it. Her throat was so dry. Maybe from the flight or something, she was not sure.

It grated on her nerves that Misty pretended not to know who she was, but she could not go around growling at folks. Her temper was out of sorts, and this constant thirst was making her nuts.

"Um, one second Lorelei. I will get her."

"Hey, Lo. Wassup? How's your vacay?"

Lorelei couldn't help herself. She sobbed uncontrollably as she told Kiki all about the events that had taken place.

"Slow down, Lo. Say that again."

"What part?"

"I don't know. All of it," her BFF demanded.

Lorelei took a fortifying breath, then she replayed the entire last thirty-six hours, give or take. Ending on a sob, she wiped her eyes and tried to regain some sense of calm. But she missed him so damn much it hurt.

“Well?” she asked, hoping against hope that Kiki could shed some light on her insane situation.

“Okay, lemme see if I got this down. You went away to some Vampire cosplay weekend, only it was real not a costume party. You had dirty, dirty sex with a stranger. Kudos, by the way. And then he bit you, made you one of his undead minions, and you ran away?”

“Oh god! I’m undead?” She yowled. “I need your help, Kiki. Can you come over?”

“No way! I don’t want you biting me. Then, there is the whole sex and Vampire blood thing. I am so not going there, Lo—”

“Kiki! I won’t bite you. I definitely don’t want to fuck you,” she hissed. “And what if I am undead? OMG! I did not even think about that!”

“Fine. Give me ten minutes. Sheesh. Are you hungry? Never mind. I got this.” Kiki hung up hurriedly, and Lorelei sobbed some more.

Holy hell.

What if she really was undead?

What then?

No more sunbathing?

And what about food?

Was she even going to be allowed to eat?

Well, wait a second. She’d had dinner with Xavier, so that answered that.

But Kiki did have a point about sex and biting. After all, he did bite her while they were doing the dirty and she didn’t even feel it. Well, just a pinch, but not really. So many

questions. And no real answers. She stalked over to the mirror and looked at herself.

Aside from the crying, she looked good. Her hair was thick and shiny. Her skin luminescent. She had the healthy, slightly rumpled glow of someone who'd just fucked their brains out the night before. In fact, she looked like she lost a couple of pounds. Maybe being accidentally undead wasn't so bad.

Her doorbell rang and she ran to open it, stunned when she saw Kiki with a plastic butcher bag overflowing with what looked like animal blood.

"Here, I brought you a drink."

"Eww!" Lorelei closed her nose with her fingers and grabbed the bag from Kiki, throwing it into the sink. She opened it up and hit the garbage disposal, tossing a few lemons in there for good measure.

"Kiki, that is fucking gross!"

"What? I thought you would like it," her friend said grumpily.

She was sporting a garlic necklace with a huge wooden cross dangling from it. She was also holding what looked like a little bottle of holy water.

Lorelei just blinked.

"Are you seriously trying to ward me off with garlic and crosses, Kiki?"

"Well, er, sort of. I just didn't want you getting any ideas, Lo." She had the grace to look embarrassed at least.

"Look, I called you cause you are my best friend. I have no desire to eat you or whatever."

"Thank god," Kiki said and relaxed, plopping down on one of the kitchen chairs.

"So, my best friend is now a Vampire—"

"I mean, I guess I am. I have no idea, Kiki. All I know is, well, I miss him."

“You miss the bloodsucking parasite who bit you?”

“Hey! Don’t call him that. Xavier was lovely. He treated me better than anyone ever had.”

“Oh. Well, then why did you run?”

Lorelei stopped moving and stared at Kiki. Her overzealous bestie was famous for putting her foot in her mouth. But she sure hit the nail on the head this time, hadn’t she?

Why *did* Lorelei run like that?

Her time with Xavier had been awesome. He was smart, funny, thoughtful, and he really seemed into her.

Shit.

She’d really fucked this all up.

But in her defense, she’d never been bitten by a Vampire before.

How was she supposed to know how to act?

Doubts, coupled with renewed anxiety, plagued her.

Shit.

She needed to talk to Xavier. But how was she supposed to reach him.

“Don’t you have his number, Lo?”

“What? No! I don’t have his number. Did you think I asked for it before I ran out on him?”

“So, you love him?” Kiki asked, once again nailing it.

“It was only a day, Kiki, but I think,” she hedged. “Well, that is, I might. Just a little bit.”

“Okay, this is what we will do,” Kiki replied, leaning forward. But before her bestie could devise a plan someone was knocking at her door.

“Who is it?”

Lorelei was trying to listen to Kiki as she opened the door only to be clonked in the head. Before the darkness took her,

she got a whiff of strong perfume and sleek black hair. Kiki's scream resounded in the apartment, but she couldn't move.

Fucking hell.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Xavier's heart pounded, and he took the stairs three at a time. When James had called explaining that he'd heard a scuffle, then did not report back, he'd rushed right back to Lorelei's apartment.

The scent of Vampire was thick in the air, and his fangs descended full force. If anyone harmed her, they would pay. He growled as he came face to face with the closed door, Lucius on his heels.

"Sire, I smell a female. And I hear someone moving about inside," his most loyal friend whispered. "What do you want to do?"

"We have the element of surprise, I am going to use it."

He could not risk another second passing without seeing his mate with his own eyes. Whoever had been bold enough to attack her would suffer if they'd harmed a single hair on her head, female or not. Of course, he never expected the scene that lay before him when he kicked down her door.

"OMG! Is that the sex god?"

"It is the Prince!"

"My door!"

"Sire!"

Four voices sounded at once, and Xavier stopped in his tracks as his former fury fleetly fled his veins, leaving a mild throbbing curiosity in its wake. There, unharmed save for a bump on the head, sat Lorelei holding an ice pack on her skull.

Beside her was a human female with a rather strange smile on her face. She whispered something to his mate, and Lorelei shushed her none too gently. There was a female Vampire whose mouth was hanging open as she realized who he was, and of course, James, who sat with a besotted smile on his face. The dolt.

“You are so going to pay for that,” Lorelei growled and stood up to face him.

Her attention was on the splintered shards of all that remained of her door, but his was on her.

All of her.

Glorious her.

“You left,” he said and swallowed the hurt that threatened to choke him.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “You came after me,” she added, as if realizing for the first time that he was there.

“I will always come for you, *ma moitie*.”

“Excuse us, sire. Perhaps an explanation?”

“Your majesty, I am your loyal subject, Misty Rovers.” The female Vampire jumped up and addressed him with her head bowed.

“I owe you a deep apology, sire. You see, Ms. McGiven took the Nightly News from my desk. I know it should not have been accessible to a mortal, and I am ready to accept my punishment for such a transgression—”

“Miss Rivers, you know better than that,” Lucius interrupted her with a snarl.

“There is no need for that,” Xavier said. “If anything, I am grateful for your transgressions, Miss Rivers. They brought me my mate.”

“Your mate? Lorelei McGiven is *your* mate?” Misty gasped.

“Indeed,” he confirmed.

“So, she messed up with the paper thing?”

“Apologies,” Misty said again through tight lips.

“Sure. I forgive you, and for clocking me on the head,” Lorelei grumbled.

“She did what?”

“It’s nothing,” Lorelei replied.

“Tell me, Miss Rivers.”

“I eavesdropped on her conversation with my boss, Kiki,” she said, nodding to the human female with the odd smile. “I knew she’d gone to the *Sanguine Vita* retreat, met a Vampire and was bitten. My plan was to glamour her into forgetting, but, well, her transformation has already begun.”

“It has!” Luc exclaimed.

“Lorelei?” Xavier’s eyes flashed to hers. She looked hearty and hale, though he’d heard transformations could be terribly painful. She seemed fine.

“Yeah. About that. So, Misty was telling me, I’m not undead?”

“No,” he smiled, lifting a hand to cup her cheek, not-so-secretly thrilling in the fact she allowed him to touch her. “You are very much alive.”

“And we are mates?” She bit her lip, her voice tentative and shier than he’d ever heard it before.

“Yes, *ma moitie*. Will you come with me now? Allow me to explain,” he asked, wanting to shout at her small nod of assent. Keeping himself still proved momentous, but he managed it, just.

“Lucius. I am taking the car and Lorelei to explain things to her. See to it her door is repaired.”

Xavier guided her to the limo and held the door while she slid inside. He was so nervous. He felt his palms sweat for the first time in over a hundred years. To think this voluptuous little female could reduce him to such a state was worrisome, but he’d take it.

He would take her.

Any way he could get her.

“So,” she began, sitting across from him in the back of the luxury car.

Xavier knocked on the window and the driver took off slowly. The partition was up and would remain that way lest he command otherwise. The DuMont family crest decorated the interior of the vehicle. He watched Lorelei’s blue eyes sparkle as she ran her fingers over it.

“You really are a Prince. A Vampire Prince.”

“I am. But that doesn’t mean I am not the man you met the other night. The man you shared yourself with.”

“No, I suppose not.” She bit her lip. “I need your help, Xavier. What does all this mean? Being a Vampire, being yours. I don’t understand.”

“Then let me help you, *mon ange*.” He moved slowly, giving her ample time to turn away, and sat beside her when she didn’t. “You are my fated mate, Lorelei McGiven. My soul mate, if you are more comfortable with that term.”

“It’s more familiar, but how can I be? I’m just, just me,” she said, like that explained everything.

“It’s because you are you. Don’t you know how spectacular you are, my darling?”

“Xavier, please, you don’t have to say things like that to me now. We already slept together—”

“An experience worth dying for, I assure you. And one I plan to repeat several times a day from now until I leave this world.”

“Oh,” she said, and her mouth formed a perfect bow that he could not help but taste.

Her stomach growled then, interrupting the silence of the vehicle and she gasped covering her mouth.

“I am so sorry!”

“No, *mon cherie*. I am sorry. You must be starving—”

“But how is it we can eat food?”

“Most of what you think you know about Vampires is false news. Things made popular by the great Hollywood machine starting with *Nosferatu* in 1922.”

“So, you don’t sparkle in the sunlight?”

“Lorelei,” he said her name with a teasing growl, kissing her lips, because he couldn’t be so close and not.

She moaned and opened for him, and desire flared to life, making his pants tight, and his heart pound with need. He was dying for her. Reverently running his hands up and down her curves, cupping her breasts and kneading the mounds with his long fingers, he’d never felt such raw desire before.

The resonance of her stomach growling sounded again. Xavier could’ve kicked himself for overlooking her hunger. He must take care of his sweet mate.

“I ate lunch, though. So, why am I still hungry?”

“You’re not hungry. You’re thirsty,” he corrected.

“Oh. Oh! But I can’t, I mean, I don’t want to bite people!” she said, her face still showing a mix of hunger, lust, surprise, and shock. She was positively adorable.

“We are mates, love. You will only ever feed from me. And I from you.”

With that, Xavier shrugged out of his jacket and opened his shirt. He tugged Lorelei onto his lap, loving the feel of her luscious body. She was wearing a flowy little dress with tiny flowers dancing across the skirts. The silky fabric was a dark plum color that made her look positively delicious.

His left hand stroked the globes of her ass, teasing along the crack while he pulled her head down toward his neck. Fuck, his cock grew even harder. He could not wait for her to bite him, though he’d rather be buried deep inside her when she did so. This would do for now.

“Oh, but I don’t know how,” she whispered, gasping when her fangs dropped down.

“There now, your body knows how, *ma moitié*. Trust it. Trust me.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am more than sure. I am yours.”

“Xavier,” she moaned, running her tongue along his neck.

Xavier moaned as more of her weight pressed down, settling against him. Fuck, she was perfect. Felt heavenly inside his arms. He wanted to keep her there always. Kissing her was second nature. He couldn’t stop himself if he tried. He’d made a mistake before, assuming she knew what to expect between them. He’d failed her once, but would never allow himself to do so again.

“No, Xavier,” she whispered against his mouth. “You didn’t fail me. I think this all happened for a reason. What did you say it was?”

“Fate, *ma moitié*.”

“Yes,” she smiled, and his heart stopped. She was so beautiful. “Fate. You’re my fate. If you want me, that is.”

“I want you, *mon ange*. Always, I want you.”

He tugged her panties to the side, sliding his fingers between her slick folds. He fumbled with his belt buckle with his other hand while she kissed and sucked at his neck. They pressed against each other, passion building, desire coming to a head. Just when she bit down, he freed himself and plunged into her silky hot depths.

Xavier roared as she struck, and he felt his blood flowing into her mouth. He thrust upward, impaling her on his cock. Fucking hell, he was already coming, and it was better than ever before.

EPILOGUE



Lorelei swallowed the hot liquid ambrosia that flowed over her tongue and down her throat so easily. Better than any wine or chocolate. She could not quite name the flavor. It was simply him. And he was hers.

Xavier tasted like home.

Like sin.

Like sex.

Like *love*.

It was too soon for that word, and yet there it was. Floating into her brain. Whether put there by him or her, she could not tell.

He flipped them over so that she was beneath him in the wide leather seat of the limousine. Xavier tilted his head, showing her what she wanted to see without ever voicing her request. The two small puncture wounds she'd made were already scabbed over.

“We heal, quickly, my love. In another minute, they will be gone.”

His cock was still buried deep inside of her, and she flexed her hips tentatively. He felt so good there. Like he was made for her.

“I was made to love you, *mon ange*.”

“I think you’re reading my mind,” she gasped. And just to be sure, she thought about him pinching her nipples.

She moaned as his hands reached up and pinched the tiny nubbins on her plump mounds.

Xavier grunted approvingly as her core tightened around his cock in response. He swiveled and circled his hips with more deftness than any of those guys from *Magic Mike*. The stray thought earned her a nip on her ankle, and she opened shocked eyes to see him licking blood from the small puncture while he continued to fuck her.

“You are in my head, and I am in yours. It’s so good, *ma moitie*. Perfect.”

“Yes!”

Every single move he made stimulated her. Her clit throbbed steadily, begging for more, and he gave it to her. Grinding and swirling until she could not see straight. Inside the limo, the sounds of their sex were loud. A skin-slapping, sucking, pounding rhythm that would forever be tattooed in her brain. She loved every decibel.

They moved in time together. A tangle of limbs, clothes, and whispered vows. Yes, she was willing to forego rationale for fantasy. Would cling to it with her very last breath.

“This is our new reality, *ma moitie*. You and me. Together.”

“Yes, oh, yes.”

The words seemed to spark something else between them, and then she could not speak, could hardly think. Xavier took control, rocking them both into sweet oblivion. Seductive little trembles wracked her body and Lorelei spun out of orbit with him driving the way.

“Mine!” Xavier’s thunderous howl as he bit her neck and sealed their bond once more had her orgasm skyrocketing.

He gave and gave and gave. Feeding from her and gifting her with the same as she took from his vein. Their matebond wove tight around them, and Lorelei felt the change rock through her down to the very molecules that made her.

Eons later, Lorelei opened her eyes. The limo had been stopped now for a while, but neither of them had strength to move. This was real. It had happened. And her life would never be the same.

“Is that alright with you, love?” Xavier asked, and she turned her head to see her beautiful lover staring at her with eyes made of liquid silver.

“Yes. Surprisingly, yes.”

“We will make a good life, Lorelei.”

“But you’re a prince.”

“And you are my mate.”

“Holy shit! Am I a Princess?” She smirked.

“Yes. Well, you will be,” he corrected. “Once you marry me.”

“I don’t recall you asking,” she said, narrowing her eyes. Lorelei sat up and shrugged her dress back into place.

“What? After all we did. How could you think I don’t want to marry you?”

“You have to ask a woman to marry you, Xavier. You can’t just assume she will.”

“But what about what we just did? The blood exchange, the vows we whispered—”

Lorelei knocked on the partition.

“Take me back to my apartment, please.”

“No! *Mais non!* Lorelei, you cannot be serious. We have shared blood. You are my fated mate, *ma moitié...*”

The limo began to move, and even though Xavier was sputtering in English and French, she was not listening. It was too much fun to see the big man so distraught. Besides, she now knew four things for certain.

One, Vampires were real. Like actual, blood-sucking Vampires walked the earth, and most of what people knew about them was totally fucking wrong.

Two, Lorelei was honestly and desperately in love with an *honest-to-garlic* Vampire.

Three, she finally had the perfect occasion to make that red gown that had been haunting her dreams. And as an added bonus, it was going to be for her.

And four, Lorelei was so going to marry Xavier DuMont and become his Princess. As soon as the big, sexy, and oh-so-clueless Vamp got around to asking her.

What? A girl had to have standards!

The end...for now.

Did you enjoy the story? Be sure to post a review so others can find it, too!

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Co-written with P. Mattern

G'Witches

G'Witches 2: The Harpy Harbinger

G'Witches 3: Summoning Secrets

Witches of Westwood Academy.

Co-written with Gina Kincade

Water Witch

Air Witch

Fire Witch

Earth Witch

Blood Witch

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EXCERPT FROM PURRFECTLY MATED



How the fuck did I wind up here?

It was all Elissa could do not to slam her face down on the table as she pondered that question for the umpteenth time since leaving her cozy Hoboken apartment to go on this so called date.

“So, babe,” the over-stuffed, heavily-cologned, and downright fugly man said.

Her date of the evening looked like something out of a bad sitcom as he tried to lean over the stained tablecloth of the rundown hotel buffet room, he’d driven two hours to get to. Wagging his caterpillar-like eyebrows, he gave her the once over and Elissa’s skin crawled.

Oh, hell no.

“I got a room upstairs, you know, for *after*,” he told her, nodding his head, and biting his lower lip in a manner she assumed he thought was provocative.

At best, it was nauseating.

FML.

How was this guy Elissa’s date for the evening? What had she done to deserve this?

Little Gianni. Yup, that was how he’d introduced himself. And here she was. On a blind date with a guy who had the word ‘little’ in front of his name.

Well, what did she expect? Roses and champagne? In this economy? She didn't know where Cinder-fucking-ella got her prince, but it sure as fuck wasn't in Jersey.

Elissa could only blame herself for agreeing to go on this blind date. Initially, the whole Little Gianni fiasco had been intended for her roommate.

Wait a second. Scratch that thought.

It was all Gretchen's fault. That ungrateful cow!

She tried to play it off like she was some sweet little homegrown maiden. Oh, just wait till Elissa got home. Gretchen was never going to hear the end of it.

She owed Elissa. Big time. Like a whole month of washing the dishes big time. The rat trap they shared in her hometown of Hoboken was all the two women could afford, and for the most part, they got along just fine.

In fact, they'd grown to be close friends over the three years they'd lived together. It was the only reason she'd ever agreed to this date from Hell.

Elissa sighed and looked over at Little Gianni. Maybe he wasn't all that bad?

“BEEEELLLLLLLLCHHH! ’Scuse me, doll. Better out, am I right?”

Gianni winked and Elissa wished for a black hole to open up and swallow her up right through the floor.

OMFG.

The man just burped out loud like he was in a frat boy belting contest, only those days passed him up about thirty years ago.

For fuck's sake. Gretchen, you so owe me.

Elissa cursed her roommate and tried not to groan. But Little Gianni wasn't quite done. The grown ass man lifted his leg and let one rip.

Right. Fucking. There.

Elissa was going to die before the end of the night.

Literally.

This is what you get when you do a friend a favor without asking for details! Idiota!

The voice of her Italian grandmother sounded in her brain. She tried to ignore it, willing herself not to wince at the man while he sucked air, and who knows what else, noisily through his coffee-stained teeth.

Ew. So gross.

That was the perfect word to describe it. The only word, in fact. The entire date was just so fucking gross. She still couldn't believe her sweet little roommate from Iowa, *Gretchen Kaepernick*, she of the wispy hair and baby blues, had set her up with this guy!

What the actual fuck was up with that?

Little Gianni was a slob. Actually, he looked just like her Uncle Nico, and that was not a good thing. Seriously, not good at all.

He wore his hair slicked back in a too tight ponytail that emphasized his rapidly receding hairline. As if that wasn't enough to put her off, he was sporting an enormous paunch. Now, being a curvy girl, Elissa appreciated food and was in no way against men showing the same appreciation.

She liked bigger men. Always had. But bigger did not mean you had to be sloppy. Little Gianni's stomach was literally hanging out from under a tight tan golf shirt that had definitely seen better days.

The man didn't even look like he had ever played a sport of any kind. With it, he wore brown polyester pants that were three inches above his ankles and unbuttoned at the waist.

He didn't look like he tried at all for this date. What kind of guy did that? His shirt collar was bent and wrinkled, and all three buttons were open to his chest, revealing a mat of oily, dark hair and pimples.

Somehow, he'd managed to tuck the back of the shirt in, but the front simply would not hold in that stomach. What worried her more were the tight brown pants.

As he sat back and stretched, she wondered if she should take cover. They looked like they were one bite from exploding off his body. Elissa shuddered at the image.

Please God, if You have an ounce of mercy, don't let that happen, she prayed.

"Hang on, doll, I gotta take this," he said, and turned to answer his cell phone.

It was ringing to the tune of '70s disco music she hadn't heard since the last family reunion. Her eyes kept going to the huge stain on the front of his shirt. It was a little game she liked to call *what the hell is that*.

Coffee, she guessed.

"Up your ass, Bruno. I gotta have it by Monday," he cursed into the receiver.

Elissa winced at the spectacle he was making of them both. There were only a handful of people there, but still.

Deep breaths.

Ew. Maybe not.

She coughed as the strong body spray, that he'd obviously used a ton of in lieu of a shower, bad move in her opinion, invaded her lungs.

Oh, this was so bad.

Elissa was, by no means, a snob. But this guy looked like he'd stepped out of a bad 1980s mafia spoof film. What's worse, he kept smacking his lips together as he hung up the phone and looked her over from head to chest.

Thank fuck for the table, she thought, wishing she could hide her bosoms from his view.

"Ssssss," he hissed, like it was sexy or something.

She just grimaced. Elissa might be able to forgive a lot of quirks, but she hated mouth noises. Really hated them. It was a super pet peeve of hers. Never mind his totally inappropriate and unwelcomed leer.

She started counting the minutes, willing the date to be over already. Plenty of people would tell her she shouldn't be so choosy, but really? She was not this desperate.

Not yet anyway.

So, she was curvy and a little mouthy too. But was it wrong to want a man with good table manners? Even if men were thin on the ground for someone like her.

As a chef, she'd worked in a lot of restaurants and even as a personal cook for professional couples. She'd seen her fair share of unhappy couples and downright uncomfortable marriages. But as far as she was concerned, all relationships went downhill when good table manners were dismissed.

Good manners were merely a sign that a person was thoughtful and respectful. At least, that was what Nonna had told her. Gianni here had clearly missed that lesson as a child. Elissa had to work not to groan in disgust as he slurped a raw clam down his gullet.

Shudder.

Was there no end to his feeding? That's what it reminded her of. Feeding time at the zoo.

OMG. That was rude, she scolded herself. But it wasn't like she said it out loud.

All she wanted to do was go home. At least she was comfortable. *She'd* worn her softest pair of black leggings for this disaster date, paired with one of her favorite tunics on top.

It was dark green with tiny black buttons down the front and showed just the right amount of cleavage. She'd gone for neat and tidy as opposed to downright sexy.

Good call, in her opinion. Elissa looked perfectly fine for a nice *getting to know you* dinner, which is what she thought she

was getting when her roommate asked her to step in for her on a blind date that one of her best client's had set up for her.

Elissa shuddered now, thinking how good old Gianni here would've reacted to the red dress and heels she'd contemplated before checking the weather report.

Gulp.

The lewd man was already salivating, and she was so not having it. Fending off his unwanted advances was not how she wanted to finish the night.

Ew again.

Elissa shivered, slightly chilled despite the fact they were indoors. It was a cold, gloomy evening, and the forecast called for even more rain later that night. Not at all unusual for this time of year in the Garden State.

November was always chilly in the evenings, rainy too. Elissa tended to run warm, but she was glad she'd brought a jacket with her. Especially since her date refused to turn the heat on in the car.

When she'd asked, he'd looked offended and told her it wasted gas.

Um. Okay.

She checked her phone. It was only seven o'clock, but the two hour drive was still ahead of them. Maybe they could make it home before ten if they left soon.

Ugh. Did he just blow his nose?

"Allergies, doll. Say, you gonna eat that?" he asked before scooping a fry from her dish and swallowing it down.

Elissa was gonna kill her roomie. Gretchen was a hair and nail stylist. A lot of her clients were elderly, and they just loved her. They were always offering to set her up on blind dates with their nephews and grandsons.

Mostly, the sweet old ladies were kind. They swore they could find her curvy roommate the right man, assuming she was single because she was new to town. Well, when Elissa

got home tonight, she was going to tell Gretchen she needed to fire the old lady who set this date up from being her client.

Like *ASAP*.

No one who liked Gretchen would've sent her out with this guy. Gianni reached over and touched her hand and Elissa pulled back, reaching for the napkin.

Gross.

"I sure hope you ain't a cold one, doll," he said, shaking his head.

"What?"

"Ain't gonna matter. I know just what you need, doll."

She was still wiping the greasy residue he'd transferred to her skin from the food he ate sans utensils. This was too much. Elissa was beyond uncomfortable with all the leering and bad attempts at innuendo.

Plus, she was starving. One look at the dump he'd taken her to, and she knew she could never eat there. The chef in her wouldn't allow it.

To think they drove two hours for this! She'd practically frozen to death in his maroon Cadillac, listening to a CD of the Rat Pack, while Gianni crooned loudly, and off key, to the music.

Normally, she was a fan of the famous group of legendary singers. Having grown up in Hoboken, she couldn't not be a Sinatra fan. Though, to be honest, Dean Martin had always been her favorite.

Still, Elissa was a firm believer that there were just some people you did not try to imitate. Especially not if you were Little Gianni. While he was belting his heart out, he'd been trying to get his right hand on her thigh. She'd asked him politely to stop.

Twice.

Then she'd been forced to try something a little more drastic. Like spilling her hot tea on the offending hand the

third time he'd tried it. Finally, he'd removed his hand from her leg. Not making a fourth attempt, which she was grateful for.

Elissa should've taken that behavior as a sign and gotten out of the car. But no. She'd wanted to do Gretchen a solid. So, against her better judgement, she gave the creep another chance.

Idiota, her grandmother's voice echoed in her brain again.

The old woman had loved her. Elissa knew that without a doubt. She'd raised her after her own parents had passed on in a tragic automobile accident when Elissa was just twelve.

Her grandmother was a no-nonsense kind of lady who dished out priceless wisdom with brutally honest insights. It was the same way she dished out huge bowls of pasta with her amazing meatballs and homemade sauce. Not to mention a side order of back-breaking hugs that Elissa still missed.

Nonna cooked like that all the time. She made a huge pot of sauce every weekend, and she was happy to serve it to Elissa and her teammates and friends, especially after games and tournaments.

Soccer had been her sport of choice, and cooking had soon become her favorite hobby. Her grandmother had encouraged her in both pursuits. Guiding her in one and cheering her on in the other. Elissa still missed her terribly.

"Hey babe, ain't you gonna eat nothin'?" You know they charge twenty dollars just to sit down," Little Gianni interrupted her train of thought.

Elissa was forced to turn her mind back to the present, which unfortunately included watching, *and hearing*, him as he sucked on his teeth and stuffed another breaded shrimp down his throat.

"I'm fine," she answered with a polite smile plastered on her face.

Just get home, Lissa. Just get him to take you home.

Elissa closed her eyes when he looked back down at his dish. Thank God for small favors, she mused. At least he was more interested in eating at the moment.

He'd taken her to the rattiest looking hotel and casino she'd ever seen in her life. And the buffet room?

Ew.

Seriously, the place had to be violating at least a dozen health codes. When Gianni had said Atlantic City, she'd thought at least the atmosphere would be exciting. But they were so far from the real glitz and entertainment, they might as well be anywhere else.

She sighed, looking at the plate she'd made for herself. Elissa couldn't even fake an interest in the food. As a chef, it was hard enough to dine out.

She was always judging the food, the service, the ingredients. How could she not? It was her business. And that was when the food was good!

This was not good. Not at all.

She'd been to hospitals that served better food. Old yellow lights buzzed and blinked around the buffet, giving it an abandoned kind of feel. The menu was made up of mostly frozen then fried or baked cuisine.

Reheated actually. It was like a giant TV dinner buffet where every item was previously frozen when already cooked and warmed up in an oven.

It was the kind of food sold cheap at restaurant supply stores in bulk. Yeah, this was much worse than hospital food, in her opinion.

There was a worn carpet on the floor, a handful of scattered tables in the dining room, elevator music on in the background, and the entire place smelled like canned soup.

Not to mention not one of the five people there besides them was under sixty years old.

"Gianni," she said, leaning forward so as not to hurt his feelings.

“I thought you mentioned something about seeing a show tonight. Is it here?”

Please don't be here.

If he was taking her somewhere else, she could beg off and hire a cab to take her home. There was no way she was sitting through anything else with this man. Not now. Not ever.

“Ah, I see, babe, you want some entertainment first, I get it,” he snickered loudly, and she blanched.

Whatever he thought was going to happen wasn't. She needed to disabuse him of the notion, and fast.

“Alright, alright. Lemme finish this, babe. Then we'll go up to the room I got for us,” he said.

Before she could make sense of the ludicrous statement, he slurped another fried shrimp, don't ask how. Then he grabbed her arm and yanked her from the seat before she could even react.

Elissa tugged on his hold, but the man was immovable. Tossing a five-dollar bill on the table, Little Gianni snatched a toothpick from the hostess stand before dragging her outside.

Great, he was a cheap tipper, too.

All she wanted was to go home. Figuring the best way to do that would probably be to get him to the car, she let him lead the way.

Once inside, she would ask him to drive back to Hoboken so she could wring Gretchen's neck. Fuming, she pulled her arm out of his hand and walked behind him.

The rain was really pouring, and the cheap bastard had refused valet. Elissa ducked her head so she wouldn't get so wet. Of course, the jacket she'd brought was light and had no hood.

Gianni had an umbrella, but he didn't offer to hold it for her, and honestly, she did not relish the idea of getting any closer to him than necessary.

Seriously, not happening.

Now all she had to do was break the news. She had no intention of watching a show or returning to the hotel with him.

What could go wrong?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



C.D. Gorri is a USA Today Bestselling author of steamy paranormal romance and urban fantasy. She is the creator of the Grazi Kelly Universe.

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Thank you and happy reading!

del mare alla stella,

C.D. Gorri

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