

CHAPTER ONE

Sweat.

Rivulets of it snaked between my breasts and down the hollow of my back.

Hot writhing bodies scented the air, as heady and intoxicating as the Ecstasy and Astro Pops circling the dance floor.

Despite how it looked, I wasn't here to enjoy myself. It was a simple job in a bitter divorce case. Of course no one hired me if everything was going well.

I solved *problems*.

My job was simple: pass along a message to a client's cheating husband. Piece of cake. A phone tap had led me to Phoenix, the hottest new club in town. My methods weren't always within the law, but my clients expected results.

And I always provided them.

I was familiar with the club. It catered to a variety of clientele. Some - like me - enjoyed the energy. The sheer simplicity of shedding the day's problems and losing themselves in the throbbing beat. Others used the club for more nefarious deeds. Deals were made - drugs, arms, human. Hunters stalked their prey. People disappeared.

Fortunately for me, I didn't have to worry about being the next victim. I was just as dangerous as anything or anyone here. Maybe more so.

Throwing back another shot of Ciroc, I enjoyed the burn but vowed this was the last of the night. I had to walk a fine line between staying in control, and relaxing enough to keep myself sane.

The control part was important. Vital even. But not just for me, for everyone around me.

As I set the empty glass on a random surface, I caught *him* staring. His intense blue eyes followed my progress across the packed room. I could almost feel their caress as they moved down my body. His sinewy frame moved with the music like he was a part of it, the hard techno backbeat his pulse. Intricate tattoos danced across his skin as the muscles beneath rippled with his movements.

Recognition flared - he was a regular. One of the special few with upstairs access.

Ignoring my narrowed eyes and fuck-off vibe, he made his way over, laughter dancing in his eyes. Finally close enough to sense, I was surprised to discover that he was only human. Unlike a lot of the dancers at Phoenix.

Unlike me.

The four-inch heels of my knee-high boots made me tall enough to look straight into his crisp blue eyes. Eyes that reminded me of the waters of the nearby Gulf. My breath caught as I saw something familiar in their depths; a darkness that was mirrored in my own. That hid behind the blithe facade.

Intrigued, my reluctance fell away. My purpose at the club forgotten, I closed the gap between us. A move I would regret, but not for a long time. Not before my life was nothing but charred remains.

His warm hand settled on my waist, fingers brushing against my exposed skin.

They trailed fire, igniting desire. I shivered in response, my heart tripping over itself. Moving together we flowed like water. Our bodies in sync, like we had done this a million times.

As we danced the world around us ceased. Narrowed to just us. Just our bodies moving, brushing against one another. Everywhere we touched went up in flames. And no one knew more than I how deadly flames could be.

Reality came crashing back when I spotted another face I recognized in the crowd, Charles Dannon. The errant husband. The job.

Time seemed to shift as if coming back to itself. I shook my head at the unsettling feeling and forced my focus back to the reason I was here.

My heart clenched as I slid into the crowd and away from him. Away from the intense pull that called for me to stay and let the world go.

I honed in on my quarry, disgust curling my lip when I saw the two working girls he was gyrating with on the floor. No one could mistake what they were doing for dancing. Being morally flexible myself, I was the last to judge anyone, but there was just something skeevey about men who paid for women. But I wasn't here to get involved in that mess, I was simply here to send a message.

My body hummed, energy swirling in my limbs. The desire to return to my mysterious stranger pulled at me. Shaking it off I focused on Charles, forcing myself to be patient - a trait I possessed very little of. Sliding into one of the dark alcoves I watched, waiting for my moment to strike.

Fortunately for my limited patience, I didn't have long to wait. Things reached a fevered pitch on the dance floor and the three of them stumbled off, searching for somewhere a little more private. They slid out a door hidden behind a set of thick black curtains and into a deserted back alley.

A back alley. I shook my head in disbelief. It was so cliché.

The weight of the knife at my thigh was comforting in the cool night air. Well, as cool as it gets in south Florida anyway. I palmed the blade, gliding from one shadow to the next until I was about twelve feet from the oblivious threesome. As wrapped up in each other as they were, they were fodder for any creature lurking in the darkness.

They reeked of drugs, sweat, and stupidity. Although my stomach revolted at the thought, not everything out here would be as choosy.

The shorter brunette was on her knees in front of him, unbuckling his pants. As she reached her hand into his tights-whities I cleared my throat, not wanting to see any more of Charles than I had to. Both women jerked, startled by my unexpected interruption. When they caught sight of me, I rolled my eyes at their laughable attempts at a menacing glare.

“Busy here, bitch,” the taller brunette called out to me. “Go get your own.” Dismissing me she turned back to my prey, kissing sloppily down his neck.

Charles’s eyes met mine over her head.

“Looking for a show, or do you want to join us?”

“That’s going to cost extra.” The taller of the two women turned and frowned at me. Her eyes widened almost comically when she caught sight of the knife in my hand.

“What the-” She and her friend didn’t wait around to find out what was going on. Their heels clicked on the pavement as they scurried back into the club. The slamming of the door echoed in the eerie silence of the alley, punctuated by Charles’s sharp indrawn breath as he caught on to the fact that the fun was over. His hands flew up, palms forward, as his knees shook in fear. The seven-inch serrated blade tended to get that type of response.

“I d-don’t have a lot of money on m-me,” he stuttered, “b-but you can have all of it.” He pulled his wallet out of his back pocket, his jeans still open, flapping at his waist. “Here. It’s yours.” He tossed it onto the ground in front of him. Two credit cards and a twenty fell out as his wallet bounced and skittered across the filthy concrete.

“I’m not here for your money.” I cocked my head to the side, staring coldly into his wide eyes. The sheen of tears caught the light from the single bulb a few feet away.

“What do you want?” His voice took on a pleading, desperate pitch. I stalked closer, toying with him, enjoying his fear. I caressed his neck with the blade of the knife in a mockery of what the tall brunette had been doing moments earlier. I savored the mewling sounds that spilled from his lips.

The point of the knife pressed sharply into the delicate skin of his throat. A fraction more force behind it and I’d pierce his artery. The air was potent with the cloying scent of his fear.

I leaned into his trembling body. My lips brushed against the shell of his ear as I whispered, “Sign the papers.”

“Wha-what?” Confusion clouded his eyes.

“Diane doesn’t want you in her life anymore. She is done. Done with you, your manipulation. All of it. Sign. The. Papers.” Each word was emphasized with a tap of the blade’s edge against his vulnerable neck.

Understanding dawned and his eyes grew cold, his body stiffened. Anger poured from him in waves.

“You can’t do that! I’m not signing shit. That bitch doesn’t deserve a penny. She is nothing! My lawyer will be so far up her ass-”

He choked on his spit as he felt the tip of the blade break the skin. A drop of blood slithered its way down the stubble on his neck. His eyes met mine again as he remembered who was in control.

“Sign the papers. Move on with your life. And you’ll never hear from me again.” My eyes followed the crimson drop as it rested in the hollow of his neck. I let the animal out, just a little. Let her peek out from my eyes as I met his again. They widened and the sweet smell of his fear blossomed like an orchid. Giving in I licked the drop of blood from his neck as he trembled against me.

“Sign the papers,” I repeated.

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“I’m not going to ask what you did,” Allison Thatcher’s hazel eyes met mine and skittered away. She continued, “But he signed the papers at nine this morning. He was waiting on the steps of the building when I arrived.” Her laughter tinkled, causing my jaw to clench. “My client is very, very, very pleased.” She counted a couple of extra hundreds with each *very*. She handed the bundle of cash to me, the corner of her lips tilted upward.

“As always, Kyra, it was a pleasure doing business with you.” Her curly blond hair bounced with every movement, an echo of her personality. A lot of my referrals came from the bubbly attorney whose sharp intellect and shrewd business practices earned both of us quite a bit of money.

“Thanks, Allison.” I took the payment hiding my excitement. The bonus alone would pay my lease for a month.

“Do you want to grab lunch or a cup of coffee?” At my hesitation she added, “My treat of course.”

I considered her offer. Coffee was a strong lure, one of my serious weaknesses. Noticing my interest she brought out the big guns. "Paradise is trying out a new flavor - salted caramel." Her eyebrow rose knowing my weakness for their cupcakes.

Unable to resist the lethal combination, I pocketed the cash.

"Your treat."

Grabbing her purse she triumphantly gestured me ahead of her, calling out to let her secretary know she was leaving.

Walking down the streets of downtown Tampa, one would never consider that the almost perpetually sunny Florida metropolis hid a dark underworld controlled by vampires. Most of the world still considered them and other paranormal creatures as nothing more than fantasy. Oh, I knew about the bureaucratic programs that culled the herd, so to speak. The hidden among us that went missing far too often. The preternatural that were deemed too powerful, too much of an unknown factor to continue to exist among the general population.

Some of us did everything possible to blend in, staying under the radar or doing our best to fit in with the humans. I was fortunate - it was easier for me than others. Not only did I look human but my otherness was generally easy to hide. I knew the tricks that helped me hide - stay calm, stay in control, keep moving.

I had actually thought I was human for the first fourteen years of my life. Finding out otherwise had been a traumatic moment I tried to revisit as little as possible, especially considering the *way* I found out.

Taking a deep breath, I shoved those memories back in their box and slammed the lid. Lately thoughts of my past had begun seeping through, often popping up at the worst moments.

Allison chatted about another case she might need me for, another stalk and stab as I liked to call them. I really enjoyed working with the bright attorney, her blind eye to my tactics allowed me to exercise my control, but let the animal out just a little. For someone like me it was sometimes hard to keep the beast at bay. She liked to come out and play a little, and I'll admit, I liked to let her. However, I couldn't risk drawing any unwanted attention. I enjoyed breathing too much.

After placing our order we grabbed a booth next to the window, I sat with my back to the wall, my eyes roving over the other patrons. In this bakery alone there were three other preternaturals. Two fey sat together in a table in the middle of the room, while a booth along the opposite wall from us held a preternatural I couldn't identify sitting with a human. Most of us blended so well anyone else would never know. The only reason I did was because I could sense

them - sense their otherness. None of the others even glanced my way so I figured they assumed I was like the other humans in the bakery.

I wasn't close and personal with any other preternaturals in the area, like I mentioned, I tried to maintain a low profile. Some of them could sense me, but they usually kept their distance. I didn't exactly put off a friendly vibe. I liked my solitude. Allison was one of the few people I went out with socially, and even then it was a rare thing.

The moment our sugary treats and aromatic java hit the table, I shifted my focus to the indulgent treats. As the first delicate flavors of the fluffy confection hit my taste buds my toes curled in my boots. I couldn't keep the smile off my face if I tried. Just the right balance of sweet, sticky goodness and salt to make it heavenly.

Laughing at my expression, Allison bit into her own confection moaning as the flavors hit her tongue.

"This is fabulous," she mumbled around her sugary bite. Now it was my turn to laugh at her. Moments like these made me regret the fact that I was different. That I had to push people away. I missed that connection, that feeling of belonging. I hadn't allowed myself the luxury in years.

Having devoured our goodies in minutes, we leaned back in our seats and savored our coffee. I liked that she appreciated a good cup of java and didn't feel the need to pepper the air with useless bits of chatter. Moments of silence were comfortable and appreciated.

At the ringing of the bell above the door my gaze sharpened and I assessed the shifter that walked through. The canine immediately caught my scent and his eyes swung to me, narrowing. Calculating. Confusion quickly marred his brow as he was unable to place exactly what I was. He knew I was something other than human, but as usual, couldn't identify what. I was equal parts relieved and disappointed. I'd like to know exactly *what* I was too.

Since I had grown up a product of the foster care system, I knew nil about my background. Running away from a horrific foster family at fourteen, I was fortunate a nice family of shifters found me and taught me the ins and outs of controlling my other half. Too bad they hadn't found me a few years earlier. Before the damage was done and the darkness found a foothold. It hid for a while, I spent almost five years with the Guarani family - probably the best years of my life. But I saw what my presence was doing to them.

To him.

I did the best thing for them and left. Sure I took off in the dark of the night like a criminal. But there really wasn't another option. The poison I carried within had started to spread. I had to take off before I ruined them.

The werewolf left with his purchase, flashing me another cautious glower as he sniffed the air in one last attempt to figure me out. Resisting the impulse to flip him off, I glared right back at the canine. Probably not the smartest move but he thankfully kept walking.

Perceptive as ever, Allison followed my gaze to the beefy wolf leaving the bakery.

“Do you know him?”

“No, I just didn’t like how he was looking at me.” Her head fell back as she laughed so loud several of the other patrons looked over.

“He was probably hitting on you and you just scared him off. You need to relax chica.” Her foot nudged mine under the table. “When was the last time you got laid?”

“I’ll have you know my sex life, while none of your business, is very active.” I wasn’t lying, I saw my share of action. I just didn’t talk about it with her. Well, with anyone I guess. I knew Allison had a boyfriend she had been seeing the last three years. Just because she was happily in a relationship, didn’t mean I wanted one.

“I’ve never heard you talk about a guy.”

I took another sip of my coffee as I considered how to answer. I’d try for a little diplomacy. She wasn’t exactly one to sleep around.

“I don’t have a guy.”

“See. I could fix you up with Jake’s cousin. He-”

So not where I wanted this conversation headed. I should have just stuck with my usual bluntness.

“I said I don’t have *a* guy. I have a few.”

She blinked at me for a couple of seconds as she figured out what I was really saying.

“Oh.” A light blush stained her cheeks. “Sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it.” She brightened at my shrug. “But if you ever want to double date-” I cut her off with my hand.

“Let’s just get this straight. I don’t date. I don’t do relationships. Relationships get messy. I just hook up.”

“Alright, as long as you’re happy.” She regarded me shrewdly. Unable to hold her knowing look I watched the people passing by on the other side of the glass.

I wouldn’t say I was happy, but a relationship? That wouldn’t fix what was broken inside me. It wouldn’t fix the festering blackness that seemed to spread every year. I would only contaminate someone else. Hookups were what worked for me. No strings attached. No complications. No one trying to figure me out.

Understanding that she was treading on thin ice and I was moments from bailing, she switched to a more mundane topic.

“Did you hear about the body that they found just outside of downtown?”

I returned my focus to the closest thing to a friend I had and shook my head.

“There were cops swarming all over the place last night. Apparently they found a body, but no one knows much of anything. Not even the media has much to say other than the cops are looking for anyone who might have seen something. I heard the feds are getting involved.”

I hadn't heard about it. My busy lifestyle didn't leave a lot of time for watching the news. Plus I didn't have cable, preferring not to throw my hard-earned money away on the needless expense. Especially when I could get news through the internet with a keystroke.

“They think this body is connected to another that was found last month.” She leaned forward, worry shadowing her eyes. “Do you think we might have another serial killer?”

Tampa Bay was generally a safe area, but when you had this many preternatural creatures in one area, especially a rather active vampire underworld, bodies happened. It was inevitable. A lot of work was put into covering up most of these, but the occasional slip-up happened. I wondered if that was the case with these bodies. If so the local vampire House needed to step up their game and fix the problem. Especially if the feds were being pulled in. That wouldn't be good for any of us.