

Cold in California **EXCERPT – Chapter One**

Gabriel wondered if he'd stumbled across his first 'familiar' human since 1931. No one had ever suspected he was vampire before. No one. Ever. Had she known his kind? Perhaps fed them? This could be easy, it should be pleasant and it might solve a multitude of problems. Gabriel was tired of moving around so much. Something a bit steadier might be just what the doctor ordered. Any relationship required a boatload of lies and apologies for his seeming accidental, over-zealous biting. Cursed by the life he lived, hit and run was the norm for his sexual encounters. Keeping his secret demanded he leave sooner than he liked, before things got out of hand like they did in Omaha. There's a boredom that comes with complete variety whether one believes it or not. Living forever had its drawbacks. The mere idea of seeing the same face and tasting the same blood day after day for a while nearly charged his batteries to overload. It also raised his radar.

She may be the answer to an undead's prayer, but she could very well be the opposite. He'd never crossed paths with Buffy the Vampire Slayer but that didn't mean she didn't exist. Still, he felt an imaginary warmth under his skin and relaxed into the possibilities. Gabriel tried to be an optimistic kind of guy. He knew that if things went bad, his host went to heaven. That was a positive outlook, now wasn't it?

Through the boring innings they chatted casually about the weather and various cities they'd seen. If, or in that case, when Chicago lost, they'd end the year in dead last but hope reigns eternal. It was the only reason the crowd was so big. At the bottom of the ninth, Brent Titler struggling at the plate, and right in the middle of describing her best friend's cowboy-themed wedding, Starling made a statement that would have caught Gabriel's breath, if he breathed.

"I always wondered about the wounds. Do they heal?"

His eyes were cold and hard, he didn't dare show his intrigue. She didn't even flinch.

"I mean, do you leave a bad mark, and does it have to be where people can see it ... when you ... you know ... drink? Will I need to take out stock in antiseptic?"

"You'd like to be ..."

"Oh yes, especially with a great looking guy like you. You are a man, right? In every sense of the word?"

Gabriel glanced around. Behind them sat a row of nuns, all dressed in medieval black and white habits and clicking rosary beads in their gnarled fingers. Chicago Cubs caps were precariously propped, tilted on their heads over ominous black veils. No doubt they were serious, biblical Cubs fans. Like God, if there even was a God, really gave a damn where the Cubs ended the season. Gabriel could hear their whispered Hail Marys and wasn't sure if he was more uneasy talking about sex or his unholy nature in their presence. He drew close and spoke quietly in Starling's ear. "Are you asking if I can perform intercourse with a woman? Yes I can. Antiseptic optional."

She giggled a nervous laugh. "So, no infection?"

"Not that I've ever caused."

"Maybe we can go now?" she suggested in a husky low voice, leaning closer even though he could have heard her whispered indecent proposal from across Wrigley Field. "This will be so cool!"

By the look of her, he could only assume she'd voraciously read Anne Rice. He just as voraciously hoped he could meet her expectations. A shiver rippled over his body like a minor earth tremor. Gabriel stood, smiled and reached to grip her hand. This was more than promising and he actually felt giddy for the first time in decades.

They had great seats, third row, just past the dugout on the first base side. Sweet seats, even with the Cubbies losing. Her warm hand gripped his as the crack of the bat resounded and he turned. It was a high pop up, but unlike all the other fans around him, Gabriel wasn't watching the ball, illusively hidden in the lights. He was watching the sharp shard of a broken wooden bat soar ... at breakneck speed ... right ... at ... his ... chest ...

Well, this sure as hell wasn't supposed to happen. Staked in the heart by a fucking broken bat? Who does that happen to? His hand shot to the wood, it was buried deep and he was weakening by the second. Agonizing sensations of explosion and implosion flooded through his body, noise blasted in his ears and suddenly he was staring up at the lights. Behind them, black night. There were stars but he couldn't see them. The pain was excruciating and Gabriel begged any god who'd listen to make it end quickly. Heat. Searing. A stench. Then came the blackness and peace he had dreamed of for nearly eighty years. Finally, an end to it all. Dead as he was meant to be.