

The Purveyor

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Chapter One



L as Vegas, Nevada

“Who would have dreamed that what started out as a dusty little water stop on a wagon trail would have turned into all of this? When my father encouraged me to invest in property here in the 1930s, I thought he was out of his mind and the time had finally come to check him into the nearest retirement home. I had serious doubts, but he assured me this was the perfect place to put down roots and establish my name and reputation.”

She had a vivid recollection of what the area had looked like when she first arrived, stepping out of her cherry-red 1938 Lincoln Zephyr convertible sedan. Removing her sunglasses, she had watched an errant tumbleweed coming down the middle of the street, blowing directly across the toe of one of her high-heeled pumps. Immediately beginning to have her doubts, she even went so far as to wonder if perhaps her father was having a little fun at her expense, until she remembered—he didn’t have a sense of humor. Besides, he would never have steered his precious little girl wrong. Pursuant to his advice, she had marched into the nearest real estate office and purchased enough land on which to build her empire.

Pointing to a construction site up the street, she continued to reminisce. “In 2000, they blew up the one building left from the first casino and resort to be built on the strip back in 1941, to make room for THAT. I remember when the El Rancho first opened. It was a gaudy little thing with an Old West theme, complete with a fifty-foot neon windmill on the top

of the main building. It only housed four gaming tables and seventy slot machines back then. The humans couldn't get enough of it and, once they started coming, they never stopped. It boggles the mind to see how quickly it grew into what it has become now. Though, I have to admit, Daddy was right."

"Vegas must have been something special to see back then," he said as he reached for his vibrating phone on the desk, scrolling to check the new message that had just flashed across the screen.

"It most certainly was!"

CEO Harlow Thornhart stood with her back to her assistant, staring out over the spectacular Las Vegas skyline, her crimson eyes casting a sinister reflection in the glass. The window from her sleek, modern office penthouse suite afforded her the best view of the city, especially when the sun went down, and the strip sprang to life. From atop her privately-owned building, she kept a watchful eye over humankind and creatures alike. In a city where two entirely different worlds mingled, one without knowledge of the other; she was the bridge that connected the realms.

"Your new client is almost here," Sawyer called out, slipping the phone into the inner pocket of his jacket and fastening it closed. Crossing the room to the far wall, he entered a six-digit code into a concealed pin pad and unlocked the secured walk-in wine cooler, one that housed a rare collection of unique libations. Pulling open the door, a loud hissing was heard, and a rolling fog emerged, eerily enveloping him from the waist down. "I was just notified by our driver that the limo is less than ten minutes out," he added before stepping inside, wanting to choose something special for the occasion.

"Who is it?" she asked, turning with her arms crossed.

"Matthew Broussard, an extremely wealthy vampire from New Orleans," he replied, returning with two chilled bottles, one in each hand. Pursing his lips, he looked back and forth between them, pondering

the choices before him. “Which blood vintage do you think he would prefer —‘young French prostitute’ or ‘middle-aged Roman Catholic Cardinal?’”

“Definitely the Cardinal! Being from Louisiana, I am sure he has sampled every French variety there is, and since we specialize in diversity, we will offer him something he is unaccustomed to enjoying.”

“The Cardinal it is!” Sawyer set the other aside and reached for a corkscrew.

“How was your weekend?” she asked.

Her assistant’s blond hair was just a shade lighter than it had been when she saw him last, indicating he had spent some time in the sun. There also seemed to be a little extra spring in his black wingtips that evening.

“Wonderful!” he gushed, filling two trumpet-styled wine glasses. “Mason and I flew out to Cali and stayed at this lovely little vineyard to celebrate our twentieth anniversary. The inn was surrounded by two hundred acres of the thickest groves of trees you have ever seen. We hiked deep into the woods and had the entire place all to ourselves. Mason was sweet enough to take down a twelve-point buck and bring me the still-beating heart as a gift. It was so romantic. Words aren’t enough to express how much I love that wolf.”

Harlow smiled. Sawyer Evans had been her client once upon a time, coming to her in a last-ditch effort to find his ‘happily-ever-after’. It was hard enough for a werewolf to find a mate these days but when you added that he was gay, it just made meeting and dating someone twice as difficult. Mason Roark was Harlow’s personal art dealer, and as soon as Sawyer had stepped foot into her office, she knew the two would be perfect for each other. Playing matchmaker was not her usual forte, but she had prided herself on bringing those two love birds together. Sawyer chose to give up his life in Seattle and moved to Las Vegas to be closer to Mason at about the same time as Harlow’s previous assistant had to be dismissed under less-than-ideal circumstances. The timing could not have been better. Not

only was his loyalty and on-the-job performance unsurpassed by any other, but the pair had become the best of friends in the process.

“I am glad to hear it.” Stepping to her desk, she asked, “What do we know about Mr. Matthew Broussard of New Orleans?”

“Well, he is extremely wealthy, obviously. It looks like he joined the world of *The Diverse* around the mid-1800s, but he got his financial start pirating during the Civil War, eventually moving on to discreet smuggling over the years. Recently, he has expanded his holdings by getting into real estate. He currently specializes in locating private high-end properties for select well-to-do humans and members of “*The Diverse*.”

Harlow chortled at the term and remembered thinking it a little pretentious when she first heard it used by a four-foot-high Yeti in Tibet in reference to himself. He had been the smallest one she had ever encountered, obviously due to some genetic issue, but what he lacked in height, he made up for in confidence. His name was Chodak, and he wanted nothing more in the world than to teach others how to find inner peace through mediation. He had been shunned by his own kind because of his height and was desperate to become a part of a bigger community, yet he found himself mostly alone. One stormy night while looking for a dry place to rest, he happened upon a sickly blind man in a hut in the middle of nowhere. The kindness he held in his heart prevented him from passing by when he heard the pitiful cries for help. Chodak nursed the man back to health, and in return, the man had taught him the secrets of finding an inner peace, no matter what challenges the outer world might be experiencing. The joy he received from this gift made him only want to share it with the world, so he wrapped himself in clothing from head to toe, traveled to the nearest village, planted himself in the middle of the town square, and announced himself as a mystical guru. People flocked from miles around to learn from him and word soon quickly spread of his gift. That was two hundred years ago, and Chodak was still planted in that