



Shades of Gray

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Chapter 1: A Business Proposition

Everyone stumbles over the truth from time to time, but most people pick themselves up and hurry off as though nothing ever happened.

Sir Winston Churchill

MICHAEL MOORECOCK SEEMED a little edgy the night he returned to LA, more nervous than I'd ever seen him. Usually he was implacable, as if a tornado wouldn't faze him, but as we sat in my office, he couldn't seem to focus on the spreadsheets in front of us.

For the last several hours we'd been going over the books of the business we owned together, the Cavalcade. We'd opened the club a few years ago, but he had always left the management of place up to me. Since Michael had just gotten back into town we were going over the expenses and events of the last several weeks.

Los Angeles had been a hot bed of gang activity during the last few weeks, making even the normally safe streets near the Cavalcade a dangerous place to be alone at night. I'd hired additional security both in and out of the club hoping to keep the rebel element away from both our establishment and the private club beneath ours. Things were starting to settle down now, but I had to wonder if Michael disagreed with dismissing the extra guards so soon.

I sat back and studied him for a moment, trying to gauge at his mood. At one time I would have said that I knew Michael well, but in the last year or so he'd become much different from the man I'd met in Vegas three years ago. Finally I decided had to speak my mind.

"Something wrong, boss?" I asked softly.

"Not really," he said as he leaned back in his chair. He fingered one of his cufflinks nervously, which put me on edge. Michael wasn't one for nervous gestures. "I wanted to talk to you about something other than business."

I barely stopped myself from frowning at his words. While we were friends, our relationship centered mostly on business; we rarely discussed personal matters, and when we did it was always serious.

"I'm sure you've heard about the violence of the last few weeks," he began slowly.

"I've read the papers," I admitted. "They've all been talking about gang violence; you knew I hired more security. Even the club downstairs was on red alert. Do you think we should keep them on a while longer?"

"No," he dismissed with a wave of his hand. "What I wanted to talk to you about has nothing to do with security." He rose and moved to stand behind the chair he'd vacated, leaning on its back. "You know how much I trust you, right? We go back a long way."

"We do, Michael. I like to think that you trust me." I leaned forward, concerned at his mood.

"I have something that I want to ask you," he told me, meeting my eyes at last. "It's probably going to shake the foundations of your life but I need someone like you. There isn't anyone else I want to ask."

"What do you mean, someone like me?" Three years ago, Michael had helped me change my name, my very identity, and he'd never mentioned the girl I'd been again. I couldn't help but wonder if my poverty-stricken origins were finally starting to bother him. "What are you saying, Michael?"

His eyes never wavered. "The newspapers were wrong. Gangs had nothing to do with what happened here." I wondered how he could be so certain as he walked to the large window that overlooked the club floor and gazed down at the crowd of people below. After a long moment of silence, he turned back to me. "What do you know about vampires?"

"What, are you kidding?" I chuckled, but I sobered quickly when I saw from the expression on his face that he was not. "You can't seriously be telling me that vampires were tearing the city apart!"

"That is exactly what I'm saying, Meg. What the papers are calling gang violence was actually one bad ass Brujah who was out for revenge." He made a violent movement with his hand that I'd never seen him make. "God, I wish I'd been here."

His behavior didn't make sense. He knew how practical I was, how I prided myself on being firmly grounded in reality. It both hurt and confused me that he was trying to convince me this fairy tale was real. "Michael, this isn't funny. What kind of game are you playing?"

He crossed the room in a few brisk strides and squatted in front of my chair. "This isn't a game Meg. I am a vampire, a Kindred. Come on, think about it," he demanded. "Haven't you ever wondered why you've never seen me during the day?"

My eyes widened as I realized he was right, I had never seen him when the sun was in the sky, and never once thought about that fact until this very moment. "A vampire?" I whispered.

His next words surprised me even more. "I need your help."

Shock was numbing my mind, and it took a moment for me to shake it clear. "If it's true, Michael, what could I do to help?"

"The battle with the Brujah killed most of my kind in the city," he explained softly. "We need to rebuild numbers and I have gotten permission to make another vampire. I would like it to be you."

"What?" I couldn't process what he was saying; I was still stuck on the part about vampires being real.

"Meg," he soothed as he reached out and took my hand. "I know that this is a lot to throw at your feet at once but I really think you would be an incredible asset to the clan. You're smart, you think on your feet and most importantly, I trust you." I could see pain in his eyes before he looked away to hide it from me. "I've felt too much betrayal in the past couple of years. I need someone to protect my back."

I tried to remember that regardless of what he was, this was still Michael, the only man I'd ever really trusted. His expression and body language told me that he was taking a big risk telling me these things but that he was deadly serious about it all. I ran my thumb across the skin of his hand and it felt cool and dry, giving weight to his claim of undeath.

"Michael, my god," I breathed as I realized that I believed him. "If you trust me why didn't you ever tell me?"

"Meg, I couldn't," he said earnestly. "That's a law of my kind. We have to live by the rules of the Masquerade. If I'd told you it would have meant your death, and mine."

"Then why are you telling me now?" I asked, shaking my head and trying to make sense of his words. Suddenly what he'd said earlier rang through my head. "Because you want to make me like you?" Shock sent me reeling and I leaned back in the chair, pulling my hand from his.

There was hurt and disappointment on his face as he stood and moved away from me. "I had hoped to."

Instantly I regretted hurting his feelings and stood to take a step after him. "Michael, this is a lot to take in. I've just—" I stopped and found myself running a nervous hand through my hair, a habit I'd thought I'd broken years ago. "Hell, I've never even considered that vampires could be real, and now you're not only telling me that you are one, but you want to make me one. Give me a minute, will you?"

"I'm sorry," he replied softly. "I'm not the best at this sort of thing. I thought that Brenda was going to run out of the room when I told her."

I frowned, not recognizing the name. "Brenda? You've made someone else a vampire?"

"No, she was my ghoul," he explained, his voice heavy with something I couldn't identify. "I knew I was going too fast when I broke this to her, too."

"Okay, wait a minute." I ran my hand through my hair again as if doing so would settle my thoughts into some kind of order. "You're a vampire, and these attacks around the city are because of a—" I struggled to remember the word he'd used. "Brujah? What's a Brujah?"

His face tightened and his fists clenched at his side. "The Brujah is a group of vampires. We call ourselves clans and the Brujah is one of them," he explained tersely. "I don't know what the guy's name was but he was bad news, came here after Talon or something. Anyway, he and his buddies took most of the city's vampire population with them before Talon and the others found them and put a stop to the whole thing."

"Talon?" I wanted to ask more, but I knew that, for now, it wasn't important. What was important was for me to decide whether or not I'd accept his offer. I crossed the room and stood within arm's reach, trying to show that I had not lost my trust in him. "Maybe first you should explain exactly what it means to be a vampire, Michael. We can discuss politics after you change me, if it comes to that."

The smile that lit his face was the most genuine smile I'd seen from him in years. He relaxed a bit too, and put his hand on my shoulder. I reached up to cup his elbow as he took my advice and began speaking.

"Kindred live alongside mortals," he told me. "We live by a tradition called the Masquerade that makes this possible. We aren't invulnerable, we can die, but it isn't always by what the works of fiction say. Sunlight, fire, beheading, these are what kill my kind. A stake through the heart doesn't kill, but it will immobilize us." Once again shadows filled his eyes and I knew without asking that he'd felt wood buried deep in his heart.

"I've traveled down this path for a few years, Meg," he continued. "When we first met I had already been a vampire for four years. I've met many of my kind and been betrayed by some. I know that I can trust you, I know this above all else. I want to give this to you."

His story seemed impossible, but I knew without a doubt he wouldn't lie to me. "And you live forever?" I prompted, intrigued by the thought of something I'd never let myself believe existed. "Never aging, never dying?"

He smiled and nodded. "Never," he promised, reaching up to touch my hair. "You will always be as you are tonight."

I smiled back at him, but soon my mind filled with Hollywood's image of the Nosferatu. "And blood?" I asked. "Is that true as well? What's it like?"

"You will have to drink blood to survive but life doesn't have to be taken to sustain you," he explained. "I can teach you all that."

That was a weight off my mind since I wasn't sure I was willing to kill to survive. "Will it hurt, when you change me?" I asked, suddenly concerned.

"No," he assured me gently. "I will drain you until you have almost no blood left in your body. Then I will cut my wrist and you will feed from me. It will not hurt. In fact, it will almost be the most incredible experience of your life."

He made it sound so romantic, so appealing. With centuries stretching out before me, there was no telling what heights I could climb to, what I could accomplish. And of course the idea of being forever young and beautiful had its own appeal.

At last I smiled up at him. "Then make me like you, Michael," I said firmly. "Show me your world."

He smiled wryly and put his hands on my shoulders. "I want you to think about this," he told me gravely. "Take tomorrow to think things over and if this is what you want I will come to you after dark for your answer. Get your things in order, see your last sunrise." His face lit up with a playful grin. "Go to the spa and make sure that your hair is in a style that you can deal with for the rest of eternity. I'll come back tomorrow, okay?"

"All right, Michael, I will," I smiled in return. "I'll be ready and waiting for you."

He pulled me close for a brief hug, then pulled away to straighten his coat and tie. "I'll be here around nine," he told me as he headed for the door.

I let him go without another word, thinking of all the things I wanted to do with my last day of sunlight, of life.

Chapter 2: The Dotted Line

No one gets out of this world alive.

Dr. Leo Buscaglia

I TRIED TO wait in my office for Michael to arrive, but I was too nervous. I found myself downstairs among the crowd with a glass of Meursault in my hand, savoring its dry taste. The crowd was jumping and I stood near the edge of the dance floor spending my last few moments of mortality wondering if I had made the right choice.

At precisely eight I felt a light touch on my hip from behind. I couldn't stop myself from jumping a little, but I quickly realized it was Michael and relaxed. I could feel the jealous eyes of every woman in the room on the two of us, women wondering how I'd managed to snag the most attractive man in the room. I found their jealousy amusing; one of the reason I trusted Michael so much was because he'd never once tried to bed me.

"Taste good?" he asked in my ear, just loud enough for me to hear him above the crowd.

"Yes," I replied, lifting my glass a little. "I'm assuming it won't be the same, after." I turned to look up at him, searching his face for some sign that becoming like him was the right thing to do.

He smiled handsomely and took the glass from my hand, sipping at the dry wine. "It won't be the same," he told me, his tone wry, "but you can still enjoy some fruits of the mortal life, although you will have to get rid of it later. Are you ready?"

Taking a deep breath, I smiled up at him. "I'm ready," I said, hoping it was true.

I turned and led him toward the door that led upstairs, nodding to the security guard as we passed. Moments later, we were in my office, alone. Music from the band below seeped into the room, wrapping us in the sultry voice of the singer. I ignored the furnishings in the room and walked over to the large one-way windows that looked out over the club, staring down at the mass of humanity, waiting for Michael to tell me what to do next.

"By the looks of things you took my suggestion," Michael observed from the sitting area. "I take it you've decided to say yes to my offer?"

I'd spent most of the day at a spa in Beverly Hills, and the afternoon driving down the coast for my last view of the sunset. I was as ready as I'd ever be for what was to come. I turned to smile in his direction. "I told you yes last night, Michael. Did you think I'd change my mind?"

He smiled back, but it was a nervous smile. "I learned long ago never to assume anything until the deal is sealed. Are you ready?"

I couldn't stop my smile from wavering a bit, but I gathered my courage and took a few steps toward him. "What do I have to do?"

"I have to drain the blood from your body," he explained gently, "then give you my blood. You may be uncomfortable for a while but it won't last long. You will be fine after that."

He was talking about killing me, turning me into a creature of the night. I glanced around the office, feeling a little awkward at the situation. Normally when I felt that way I took charge, but in this case I knew that wasn't an option. "Did you want to do this here? On the couch perhaps?" I spent most of my time in this club, much of it in this room, and it seemed fitting that Michael end my mortal life here.

He put his hands on my shoulders and looked down into my eyes. "Calm down," he said softly. Although I hadn't exactly been tense, I could feel myself relax at his words. "The couch is fine. Why don't you take off your jacket and come over here?"

I did as he said, laying my jacket on the back of a chair before following him to the couch. When he sat on one end and indicated that I should lie across his lap, I couldn't help but smile. If it had been any other man who wanted me to lay with him I'd have ordered him out of my office, but this was Michael.

After sitting beside him on the couch, I carefully laid my upper body across his lap. My movements were awkward at best; it had been a long time since I'd been this close to anyone. His hands guided me until my head was resting on the arm of the couch. I looked up at him as he cupped the back of my neck gently, trusting him.

He sent a glance down my waiting form. "Ready?"

I took a steadying breath and tried to smile. "Ready."

Behind his lips I saw movement, as if his canines had suddenly grown twice as long. Gently, he moved my hair away from my cheek and neck as he lifted me closer to him. I put my hand on his shoulder as he whispered, "Just squeeze my arm if I hurt you."

I could feel his cool breath on my neck and goose bumps shot across my body. I closed my eyes with anticipation and only a little fear as I felt his teeth against my skin. He inhaled deeply before sinking his fangs into my flesh. I felt only a brief flash of pain, but then waves of liquid heat filled the pit of my stomach and swept through my body. I moaned softly and relaxed in his arms, letting the sensations wash over me.

He drank, and I could feel my heartbeat slow. My breathing became more and more shallow until finally it stopped. I felt my body dying as he pulled away from my neck. Dimly I could sense him moving, and through slightly opened eyes I saw him bring his free hand to his mouth. His fangs were long and white as he bit into his wrist before lowering the wound to my mouth.

"Cordelia," he whispered softly, using the name I'd been born with, the name only he knew. "Drink."

I couldn't move, but something cold and wet was dripping into my mouth and I did my best to swallow. The blood went down hard and strong, like a fire raging out of control. My head spun with the power of it, and the next thing I knew I was holding his arm to my mouth and gulping down the blood as fast as I could.

Too soon he whispered that it was time to stop and I released him slowly, regretfully. I was dimly aware that he was moving as the act of dying took over my consciousness. I couldn't breathe, couldn't feel my pulse, and for a moment I panicked. My body was on fire as Michael's blood moved through me, and only his hands stopped me from clawing at my chest. My legs drew upward and Michael's arms tightened on me as I rolled into a fetal position. His voice soothed me as my body changed.

Gradually the overwhelming sensations lessened and I became aware that I could see things differently. I laid there in his arms for a long moment, just feeling my body and the hunger that raged inside. Slowly I sat up and looked at him. "Michael," I whispered. "It's so... overwhelming."

He took my face in his hands and studied my eyes for a minute. "You'll be okay in a while but you will need to feed more."

The hunger within me leapt at the idea, but I had no idea how to begin. "I suppose it's a bit late to be asking this, but how does that work?"

"You will have a certain group of people that you will be drawn to feed from," he explained. "How are you feeling? Do you want to go downstairs and see what happens?"

"I think I'm okay," I told him, wincing at the tremor in my voice. "Hungry. You sure it's okay to go downstairs? I wouldn't want to lose control and freak out."

Once again, his eyes swept over me. "No, you'll be okay. Don't worry, I'll stay right with you."

"As long as you're with me," I told him, trying to suppress the hunger that told me I needed to feed right now. "What do I do?"

"Just a minute," he said suddenly, rising and walking to the phone on the desk. "Let me make a phone call." He picked up the handset and started dialing, muttering to himself that he should have thought of it sooner.

While he talked on the phone, I walked to the viewing window and looked down at the people filling the club. The seen looked so much the same, but so much different at the same time. I hugged my stomach and told myself that I couldn't possible smell their blood from this far away, but the hunger raged just the same.

"Ready?"

When I heard Michael's voice at my elbow, I looked up at him in surprise. "Yeah, I'm ready." As I followed him toward the door, I asked, "Is it always like this? The hunger, I mean."

"No, you'll be fine once you have a little more blood." He paused before opening the door, looking me over yet again. After a moment he took my arm and led me back to the couch. "Maybe we should just wait here for Anna."

"No, I'm okay, really, or at least I think I am." I protested weakly. "Don't we need to go downstairs so I can feed?" I could feel the hunger raging through me, and I wanted blood more than anything I'd ever wanted in my life.

"No, Anna is bringing some bags over," he explained softly. "Why don't we just stay here to be sure?"

"Bags?" I asked, more than a little confused.

"Blood bags," he told me. "She'll be here soon."

"We can feed like that?" I frowned at the idea. The hunger told me I wanted warm blood, fresh from a human, not cold and processed in a bag.

"Sure," he replied easily. "Some hate the thought and only drink from the 'tap', but blood is blood. The bags are cold and you will need to know how to drink from a mortal but we will handle all that in time. Okay?"

I had trusted him this far, a little farther wasn't much to ask. I let him guide me to the couch where he sat beside me. "Tell me more, Michael. How do we hunt?"

While we waited for the blood to arrive, Michael explained the generalities of hunting. He also told me about the Masquerade and different ways to hide what I was from mortals. To my surprise, he said that I would have to be presented to the prince, and explained what was expected of me. I listened carefully to his instructions, knowing that my existence depended on living by Kindred laws.