

GRAVES' ANATOMY

by Jace Anderson and Adam Gierasch

EXCERPT

It was one of the few remaining no-man's lands in downtown Los Angeles – the kind of area that was commonplace before the neighborhood's transition into "DTLA." A desolate block of Wall Street, down where the fabric district juttied up against the flower district and all of the storefronts were blocked off by corrugated metal doors.

Silence reigned. To the west and north, loft windows lit up the night.

Chelle strode down the center of the street, her black overcoat swinging by her sides. The chunky heels of her Doc Martens boots splashed through puddles left after the flower sellers had hosed down their stalls. Her high cheekbones gleamed in the amber streetlights. Like Minx she was a *matianak*, a type of creature that could pass for human. But Chelle knew the *matianak*, though vastly outnumbered by humans, were the superior species. They measured their lives in centuries, and, with their tall, thin builds, had it particularly well now that Rubenesque was no longer the physical ideal. Of course, eating wasn't an issue as they were incubi and succubi. It was a misunderstanding that they gained energy from sex, however. What really provided them with nourishment were human feelings like anger, grief, pain and passion. Sex and touching were just the most economical ways to get there.

She turned down a decrepit alley, her boots crunching on gravel. Rats gathered on the lip of a nearby dumpster glanced up, then returned to feasting on garbage. *Save some room, guys*, she thought. *Fresh pickings are on the way.*

Chelle's target was up ahead: an alley door, covered in dull red peeling paint.

A six-foot-high statue rested next to it: a stone gargoyle. The fierce features were worn with age: cocked eyebrows, squinted eyes, long claws. It would seem out of place if it weren't for the broken beer bottle at its feet and the green and yellow graffiti tags on its haunches.

Chelle's footsteps were steady, unfaltering. As she passed a streetlight it flickered, one-two, one-two.

When Chelle was eight feet away from the door, the stone gargoyle opened yellow eyes and turned its head. A low growl sounded from its throat.

Chelle froze. Her prey was in her sights.

The gargoyle's lips twitched into a snarl, revealing long canines and a glistening black tongue. It shifted its weight, turning to face Chelle.

A smile played around the edges of Chelle's lips. She raised her right hand in front of her face, watching as her sharp red fingernails receded and long talons emerged from her nail beds. *Come on, bitch.*

For a moment both matianak and gargoyle remained still, staring at each other.

They leapt at the same moment, as if responding to some agreed-upon signal. Their bodies crashed together in mid-air, the gargoyle's muscled jaws aiming for Chelle's neck. At the last moment she pivoted, all willowy grace, and the gargoyle's teeth closed on air. She ducked and the gargoyle sailed over her, landing in the alleyway and thundering toward the street before turning around, the growl in its throat growing deeper.

Facing the dull red door, Chelle raised both arms in front of her. A soft breeze played around her feet, and her long coat billowed around her legs. The door began to shake in its hinges: barely perceptible at first, then stronger, stronger...

The gargoyle leapt, smacking Chelle in the back and sending her to the ground. The door fell still.

It tried to bite the back of her neck but she elbowed it, knocking it to the side. In a blur of limbs, teeth and claws, the two creatures rolled in the alley muck, fighting with everything they had.

A few of the rats looked up from the dumpster, distracted from their evening meal.

Just a few minutes more, guys. It's almost over.

The loss of focus cost her. Sharp teeth flashed, sank into Chelle's shoulder. She screamed, in rage as much as pain, and drew her right hand back. Her long talons glinted in the low light. *Now you're just pissing me off.*

With a quick stabbing motion she plunged her talons into the gargoyle's abdomen, puncturing the stony flesh. Gray fluid spurted out and the gargoyle let out a high-pitched, piercing scream.

Her advantage secured, Chelle raked her fingernails through the creature's belly. Three deep gashes opened. The gargoyle writhed.

Chelle threw the gargoyle to the side. *Enjoy being rat food.* She thought she heard the rodents closing in but didn't bother to look back.

Her focus was only on the door. She ripped it off its hinges and headed into the dark.