

A NOVELLA OF THE
KNIGHTS OF DARKNESS

AWAKENED KNIGHT



VIKTORIA KARLYLE

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*This book is dedicated to Bones, Lizzard, Hoseffi, and Xaxar.
Thank you so much for always believing in me, even when I
don't.*

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CHAPTER 1



“Fuck me; whose idea was it to put a city in the middle of the desert?”

Roman breathed a sigh of relief as the group entered the building, thinking that the AC might be his favorite amenity of their choice location for debauchery and release— Muse.

Well... almost.

“I don’t know, but I’m glad they did. I’m ready to get wrecked and dick-deep into something after that BS,” Xavier replied, punching Roman in the shoulder.

“Yeah, *something* being the key word there, ‘ey Xavier? We know you like to get freaky.” After his comment, Vance quickly moved just out of Xavier’s reach to avoid any backlash.

Roman absently rubbed his arm near where Xavier punched, groaning slightly, then moved his hand up and over to his back, rolling his shoulder, realizing he was actually incredibly sore.

“Hey, Roman, you’re looking like an old man over there. That measly human who was handing you your ass do a number on ya?” Vance taunted.

“Shut the fuck up man; cool it on the ‘human’ talk. And wasn’t that you I saw looking like a youngling popping his first fang?”

Vance made a move to shove Roman but surprised crossed his face as Roman made a quick dodge and follow-through,

tripping Vance, causing him to land face first onto the marble of the lobby.

The group busted up laughing, including Vance, as Ashford helped him to his feet.

“Thanks, Ash. Alright, alright, enough dickin’ around. Let’s get this party started!” Vance took the lead and headed off toward the club.

Ashford hung back and pulled Roman to the side to slow down a bit as the others carried on through the casino floor, receiving more than curious glances.

“What *did* happen back there? Everything was going according to plan and then that huma... err, soldier was like nothing we’ve seen, and we’ve seen some shit.”

Roman’s brow furrowed as he reflected on the mission. Ashford was right on all accounts; it was a strange and surprising experience. The Knights had received verified intel of where Lucem Diem’s vampire trafficking caravan would be moving through. The ambush was set up and executed expertly, like they’d done a thousand times in the last century. But when Roman pulled the doors off the van he was assigned, a human soldier came barreling at him at a surprising speed—way faster than any human should be able to achieve.

That alone took Roman by surprise, but when he engaged with the soldier, he was stronger, more agile, and executed complicated maneuvers that should not have been possible given his species. The fight took everything out of Roman, and if he was being honest with himself, rattled him a bit. And now, he wasn’t as healed as the rest of the group. It was odd for a vampire’s wounds not to resolve quickly.

“You’re right, Ash. And between you and me, I wasn’t a hundred percent sure I was going to win that battle.”

“Yeah, and I saw the fucker actually get away with the rest of their team—although missing an arm. Do you think maybe we’ve seen the proof of our suspicions, that Lucem Diem has developed some advanced weaponry?”

“I think so. I’ll bring it to the meeting tomorrow. I don’t know what this means for us, but right now, I’d like to attend to the after-mission, business as usual, fuck around and wind down routine.” Roman forced a smile he wasn’t quite feeling, slapping Ashford on the upper arm.

“Yeah, we’d better catch up or Xavier will have saddled every woman in the club by the time we get there,” Ashford agreed, picking up his pace as he and Roman headed toward the “members only” entrance.

The nondescript, black metal door slid open with their cards. Roman spotted his team in their usual, semi-private location, throwing axes and surrounded by beautiful females. He recognized a couple of them from previous trips to Vegas; one platinum blonde in particular he remembered being exactly what he needed to take the edge off the mission and his lasting soreness.

She didn’t waste any time sauntering over, dropping Vance’s hand in the process. He looked irritated momentarily, then saw it was Roman who captured her attention and deferred to his privilege of rank. Vance seamlessly moved on to another blonde who just arrived.

“You want to take a turn?” the female asked, extending an axe to Roman with one hand and a shot of something, probably gin, with the other.

Roman gave her his most mischievously handsome grin, reaching for both, and trying to remember her name. *Leah? Lilian? Le—*

“Leighton,” she supplied. “And Roman, if I remember correctly... and I *do*.” She was all sultry temptress as she lazily slid her copper-colored eyes up and down Roman’s body, biting her lip directly in the center, her two fangs barely brushing her blood-red lips.

Roman could feel his body responding, thankful for a little distraction from his pain. He threw back the shot with his left hand, flipped the axe around in a small 360-degree arc with his right, then expertly threw it at the target, almost grazing Xavier.

Just before the axe collided with the center of the target, Roman gasped and swore as he grabbed for his shoulder, dropping the shot glass in the process.

Leighton caught the glass before it hit the ground. “Are you alright?”

Roman’s good mood, and semi-hard-on, evaporated. “Yeah, just my damn shoulder. It’s nothing. Another round?” Roman motioned for their attendant and was swiftly provided with a new bottle of Nolet’s Reserve and a couple glasses. They made their way to a little corner table and booth; Leighton draped herself against Roman’s left side, crossing her left leg over his lap, allowing him to place his fingers just under the hem of her minidress which had inched upward.

As Roman twisted his neck toward her, bringing his lips to just behind her ear, he winced and hissed in a breath, feeling the strain in his right shoulder again. “God dammit.” Roman gently pushed Leighton’s leg off him and stood up. “Fuck this. Hey, cretins, I’m out.” The rest of the crew barely acknowledged him, except for Xavier who gave him an assessing eye.

On his way to his suite, Roman texted the owner of Muse to see about a last-minute massage. By the time he arrived in his room, he received a confirmation text from Muse’s spa.

Muse Spa: Thank you for booking a platinum massage service. Your therapist, Jessica, will arrive at your room at 9:00 p.m. Please let us know if we can further assist you.

Roman saw it was just about 8 p.m. and thought that he’d have just enough time to take a hot shower.



Jessica absently hummed to the song streaming—“whatever it was called” by who cares—as she drove her regular, boring commute to Muse under the punishing sunshine of Las Vegas. She’d been in Vegas for less than a year, probably only six months, but for some reason, it was already starting to feel like a sand trap she’d wandered into and couldn’t get out of while she choked to death on the smog of extravagance.

She was coming up on the exit that would take her anywhere but here and felt that familiar pull to crank the wheel to the right and drive off away from the sunset. *Why don't I? Why don't I leave this shithole and never look back?* The thought was momentarily invigorating, but per usual, thoughts of her grandmother came rushing to her.

She's why, Jessica. Get it together and grow up; that woman sacrificed so much to take care of you when there was no one left. The least you can do is suck it up and keep rubbing down the wealthy; it could be so much worse.

Although not a terribly inspiring self-pep talk, at a stoplight no less, Jessica met her green eyes in the rearview mirror and renewed her “I got this” mantra with a little nod. She switched the stream to her favorite podcast, *Before They Were Murders*, which was not only fascinating to her but also helped remind her that people don't always start off terrible; somewhere inside these rich dicks that she serviced daily, there was probably once a neglected child or some other scenario that helped her not become a feature episode on the same podcast.

Jessica parked, made her way to the staff entrance, and navigated the pseudo calm facade of the spa to the locker room. The day shift of massage therapists was getting ready to leave while the evening shift was just getting started, changing and reviewing their bookings.

Jessica was grateful that her schedule that day would end a little earlier than usual. Although she needed the money to make all her payments this month, she was really not into it today, and getting to leave a couple of hours early would probably allow for some much-needed self-care. She could swing missing a little bit of work; plus, she'd be able to sign up for extra shifts on the weekend if she needed.

“Hey, Jessica, did you do anything fun on your days off?” Marnie, one of the senior therapists, was always trying to encourage Jessica to hang out with her; not in an annoying, overbearing way but with genuine interest that Jessica appreciated. She just wasn't great at making friends and always felt a bit awkward; best to just keep to herself.

“Well, if you consider spending time with your grandmother fun,” Jessica replied with a raised eyebrow and smirk. She flipped her hair forward and gathered up her long, red, rambunctious waves into a thick but clean bun.

“I don’t know; depends on what your grandma is into,” Marnie said and then laughed.

“Honestly, she can get a bit out there.” Jessica chuckled, more to herself reflecting on just how far “out there” her gran could get. People generally didn’t understand her quirkiness, and she really wasn’t that old to be considered graciously losing her marbles.

“We’re all heading out a bit later to grab some apps and drinks at Ember. I saw you don’t have any clients booked past eight. You should join us. In fact, one of the guys meeting up with us might interest you.” Marnie gave Jessica a knowing look.

“Thanks, Marnie. I’ll think about it.” *But not really*, Jessica thought as she slipped out of her flip-flops, pulling on socks and sliding into comfy sneakers.

“Please do, hun. Live a little! You’re young and beautiful; you need some love in your life.” Marnie gave her a wink and continued out the door.

Jessica sighed deeply and shut her locker. *I just need to make it through a few hours*, she reasoned with herself to force some elusive motivation. Jessica checked the schedule and headed to one of the couple’s massage rooms to wait for her first appointment. Kylie was already there, putting fresh linens on the table and stocking the towel warmer.

“Hey, Jess. How’s it going?”

“Hey, Kylie. Same shit different day, I guess.” Jessica laughed and Kylie chuckled as well. Vegas from the point of view of those who worked there was less glitz and glam and more routine boredom. If this wasn’t the closest large city to her gran, she’d be anywhere else.

The spa’s welcome liaison escorted the clients into the room. Jessica and Kylie made their introductions, gave them

some instructions, and popped out of the room to let them get undressed and situated.

“Are you coming out tonight? I think you should; it will be fun,” Kylie said as they waited.

“I’m thinking about it,” Jessica lied again. *God damn, what is with people today? Am I the only person in the world who just wants to change into comfy clothes, pour a glass of wine, and watch bad TV? I can’t wait to not be surrounded by these people throwing money into a pit like it was trash, not go out after work and join them.*

Kylie looked like she didn’t quite believe her, perhaps her thoughts were written all over her face per usual. She knocked on the door. “Are you two ready in there?” she said brightly as she eased the door open. They were met with an affirmative sound in response and headed into the room.

Throughout the session, Jessica’s mind kept returning to Marnie and Kylie. *Maybe I’m just not interested in dating, like anyone, at all; why is it everyone’s business? I’m so sick of the assumptions that I want something more... well... I guess I do want something more, but I’m a hundred percent sure it’s something, not someone.*

“Um,” the person on her table cleared their throat, “that’s just a little too hard; you’re hurting me,” she said.

“Oh! I’m so sorry, ma’am. Yes, you wanted medium pressure. How’s this? Is this better?”

“Yes, thank you.” Jessica could feel the woman physically relax a bit more as she provided a lighter touch—a touch that should have been requested as “light” to begin with, but people always assumed they knew what they were talking about when they didn’t.

Jessica was sure she just pressured her tip right out the door. She looked over at Kylie who dramatically rolled her eyes and made a face that caused Jessica to try to hold in a laugh and had to cough a little to cover it up.

Her next client was a spa regular who had every person attracted to men drooling over him. As she worked on Sam

without sharing any of her coworkers' enthusiasm—except that he was usually a generous tipper, and she could make up for her earlier blunder—Jessica started to wonder if maybe there was something wrong with her.

As much as she was bitching about her day to herself, she really did love making people feel better; through her hands, she felt like she got the sense of easing someone's life, even just a little bit, by soothing out the tight spots and lessening some pain. Wouldn't a partner provide that for her?

Why don't I care about dating? Well, it would mess up my already perfect life, she joked to herself. For a little while, when the topics of gender and all the various possibilities of sexual orientation and expression were trending, Jessica really wondered if she fell in the asexual category. It would really explain so much, and this idea stayed floating around in the back of her mind; however, she was too busy to worry about it.

"I mean, who cares whether Sam is hot anyway?" she absently mumbled to herself—out loud.

"Excuse me? I don't think I quite caught that," Sam said.

Jessica had never been so thankful for a client to be facedown and unable to see her face which was now so flaming red, it matched her hair. *Oh my god,* she thought.

"Oh, um, I was just wondering if the temperature was alright in here or if you're too hot?" She awkwardly tried to recover.

"No, I'm good," Sam said.

At the end of the session, Sam approached her before leaving. "Hey, so this is probably inappropriate, but I was wondering—"

"Let me stop you there," Jessica said with a strained smile. "Anything that starts with 'this is probably inappropriate' probably is." She winked and continued, "Thanks so much for coming in today, Mr. Miller. Find Your Muse Spa is grateful for your patronage." This was not the first time she'd said something similar.

Sam smiled and thanked her for her services.

The day turned out to be the type that fell into the category of “if it could go wrong, it did.” She was so ready to leave and return to the sanctuary of her measly apartment, which was as dull as a rock compared to the shiny gem that was Muse.

At around eight, just as she was heading to the locker room to take off, her manager, Sean, let her know about a last-minute late booking.

“Hey, Jessica. We have another one for you. A VIP client, personal friend of the owner. In-room, platinum tier, nine o’clock.”

“Oh, I was just about to leave... platinum? That would be a three-hour job. I didn’t think I was eligible for those just yet.” Jessica was torn between what a great opportunity this would be, both for experience and money, but damn were her sweatpants calling out to her.

“Correct, newbie, but everyone else is either booked up or otherwise unavailable. You’re the only one we have, and as this is a personal request from Mr. Novik, it’s not optional. Plus, you’ve had amazing feedback from the client surveys and some of the highest tips for the spa. You’ll do a fantastic job.” Sean gave her a slightly stiff reassuring pat on the shoulder and continued on his way.

Jessica sat on the bench and sighed. *Well, at least this day has some potential to end on a high note now*, she thought as she tallied up the money plus a possible, and hopefully probable, tip from a high roller. Maybe he’d even appreciate her talent so much that she became his regular massage therapist. Adding a returning platinum customer would help her tremendously. *Please don’t let him be a prick*, she wished.

For the rest of the hour, Jessica did some prep work for the spa morning staff, restocking rooms, rolling towels, refilling lotions and oils, and filling eye mask sachets with fresh lavender. When it was time, she grabbed her cart that included a portable table and everything she’d need for an in-room client, including a few extra items in case they wanted to add on any services while she was in the room, and headed to the staff elevators.

CHAPTER 2



“A hhh, yes,” Roman said as he leaned against the tile of the steamy shower enclosure. The tile was just a little bit cool, providing a sharp contrast to the hot water which felt heavenly on his back. He could probably have stayed in that warm cocoon for hours but knew his massage therapist would be there any minute.

He shut off the water, ran his fingers through his blond hair to remove excess water, opened the glass door, and wrapped a plush, white towel around his hips. Roman heard the door to his suite open and a woman’s voice.

“Mr. Smith, I’m from Find Your Muse Spa and here to provide your service,” she called out as she came into the suite’s entryway. Roman went to the touch screen embedded in the bathroom mirror and used the intercom feature.

“Hello. Please set up; I’ll just be a minute.”

Roman put on a luxurious robe, barely noticing the quality, and grabbed a small towel to continue drying his hair as he left the bathroom. He absently noticed a woman with a poofy but neat red bun atop her head with her back to him setting up by the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Roman’s hair towel partially obscured his vision as he continued forward, and he again noticed the incredible soreness he was having difficulty shaking, which was also causing him increasing concern. *What the hell is up with my shoulder blade?* he wondered. *Hopefully this massage will—*

Roman ran into the outstretched hand of the masseuse.

“Oh, my apologies, sir,” the woman said and quickly pulled her hand away.

Roman couldn't move; he was pinned to the spot on the carpet, towel paused in fluffing motion, staring at the most captivatingly beautiful woman he had ever seen. The longer they stood there locked in awkward eye contact, the more every feature of her face almost became alive with crisp details.

Her eyes were green, but was it possible for every shade of green in existence to be present in one pair of eyes? Why did it feel like she just stripped him of his skin and could see his essence? Roman was unnerved, and at the same time, elated by the dusting of almost invisible freckles across her nose, taking the time to look at every single one, noticing the shade of pink that was blooming on her fair skin under his intense scrutiny.

Roman could not even be bothered with acknowledging his odd behavior. He needed a freaking minute. The masseuse was unlike any female he'd ever been attracted to; this was different, and he wasn't sure he was still breathing. Roman felt like he was standing in front of someone he never thought would be possible; she was like everything he never knew he wanted; the sight of her, the smell, the energy around her... all perfect.

He finally collected himself and provided an introduction. “I'm Roman.” *Smooth, anything else you'd like to add*, he chastised himself. “Uh, you can call me Roman. And who do I have the pleasure of meeting?” He really hoped this didn't sound creepy; he was having a moment, and his usual aura of charm and charisma seemed to have abandoned him when he actually wanted it for a change.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Smith—er—Roman. My name is Jessica. I'll be your massage therapist this evening. Do you have any injuries or medical history I should be aware of before we begin?” She said this so professionally that Roman was wondering if he was somehow hallucinating the growing energy between them.

“Umm, no, you’re perfect, I mean I’m perfect. I mean, I don’t have any medical history,” Roman stammered out, feeling increasingly ridiculous and unhinged. “Oh, wait, I am experiencing some odd pain in my right shoulder blade area. I’m really hoping you’ll be able to loosen some of my building pressure. Um, tension, that is; in the shoulder area, obviously.” *You are on a roll*, Roman thought as he briefly closed his eyes and moved toward the table to try to salvage any sense of dignity still available to him.

“I can definitely do that, sir.”

“Roman. Please call me Roman.” *Great job not sounding like you’re begging; although, I would beg this woman to do all sorts of things...* Roman quickly shut this train of thought down as he felt his body reacting in a way that would ensure this moment reached maximum awkward status.

“Roman, yes, I’d be happy to help with that. I’ll just pop around the corner here and give you a minute to get situated on the table. Please undress to your level of comfortability and begin on the table in the facedown position.”

Although Roman didn’t want to be out of arm’s length from Jessica, he was thankful for a couple of minutes to collect himself. Between his persistent wounds and now his reaction to this Jessica woman, he was really wondering what the hell was happening to him. Was he just getting older? Three hundred wasn’t really a spring chicken in vampire years, but it was far from the complexities of old age by a few hundred years. *It was just this last mission; I’m just a bit rattled is all*, he reasoned as he removed his robe and slid fully nude under the linen sheet and microplush blanket. He took a deep breath and settled his face into the cradle.

He could still smell and hear Jessica as she waited around the corner and instantly noticed the moment she began to approach him.

“Are you all set? Is the headrest in a comfortable position for you?” she asked as she walked around the table. She pulled out a small rectangular pillow and placed it underneath his feet, slightly elevating his legs. “How does the pillow feel?”

“Everything is perfect, thank you,” he replied.

The instant that Jessica laid her hands on his body, every nerve ending felt like it had previously been asleep waiting for this exact moment to come alive. Roman became so incredibly relaxed while simultaneously feeling invigorated which only helped his confusion grow.

“How’s the pressure?” Jessica asked as she continued to work what seemed like magic to Roman.

“It’s amazing,” he replied and cringed a little to himself realizing he was almost using his sexy voice. Roman’s existence had all of a sudden become so confusing and surreal. He wanted to say more to her, anything, just to hear her voice and be the recipient of even more of her attention, but he really didn’t trust himself at the moment not to, at the very least, put his entire foot in his mouth.

His concerning aches and pains melted away under her deft fingers, and he felt transcendent with how relaxed his muscles were feeling. Roman was concentrating so hard on not making any weird noises or, for the love of god, not getting an erection, that he didn’t realize the shoulder wound had split open just a little bit with blood beading along the seam.

The moment Jessica touched his blood, his world fractured into thousands of shards. His vision became a sea of refracted light as he experienced a sudden realization of who... and what... Jessica was—not only as a human but also what she was to him. Roman realized he wasn’t breathing and gasped as he also discovered he was completely healed.

You have got to be fucking kidding me, he thought. This cannot be happening. Not now; not with a human. I am totally fucked.



Jessica had lost herself to the connection she was feeling with Roman. Whenever she worked on clients, she had a vague sense that guided her to provide the most relief and relaxation possible that was basically on autopilot. With Roman,

however, the connection she felt when she touched him was beyond anything she had experienced. Her focus was so deep, she didn't notice that he had started bleeding from a wound in the area she was working on and accidentally touched it.

When she did, she sucked in a breath and momentarily felt like the earth had swallowed her up. Jessica felt weightless, like she was floating in a deep pool of thick liquid. As reality caught back up to her, she realized she was standing motionless, staring at her client's blood on her finger tips.

What the fuck? Oh my god, oh my god, she thought as she saw her livelihood flash before her eyes. As all her senses started returning to her, it felt like she had a heightened sense of awareness, like everything was too loud, too bright. *Am I having a stroke?* she wondered as she searched for the wound to stop the bleeding.

But she could no longer see the wound. Roman's skin appeared beautifully intact, smooth, and corded with muscles flexing in his back. She licked her lips and tried to think of something to say.

Roman's breath steadied and now it just seemed weird that neither of them had yet to speak. Jessica felt the moment dragging into eternity with no idea how to eclipse it. *Maybe we just stay like this for the rest of our lives,* she thought.

"Ahem, um—" Roman started.

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry," Jessica said as she walked quickly over to the sink in the kitchen space of the suite and started washing her hands. "Oh my god, this is it. I can't believe I fucked this up, now what am I going to do? Jesus, Jessica. What is one of the first things you learn in training? Look for injuries, wounds, blood for Christ's sake. And what? You just drag your stupid fingers through it? Huh? Those were the instructions, right?" Jessica was rambling and chastising herself; thankfully, Roman wouldn't be able to hear her from where the table was set up by the windows.

She noticed him moving out of the corner of her eye as she dried her hands. Roman slowly sat up, facing away from her toward the window for a moment. He then wrapped the sheet

around himself, stood up, and faced her. They stared at each other for a few moments. Jessica felt like his piercing blue eyes could see through to her soul.

“I think you should leave. Thank you for your services. I’ll send your table and materials down to the spa,” Roman said flatly and evenly.

“I’m sorry; I didn’t see the open wound. I’m not sure when it happened; this has never happened to me before. I... I’m not sure... I don’t know... I just...”

“Thank you, again. Goodbye, Jessica.”

Jessica’s eyes began to well up, and she was instantly pissed, sad, frustrated, confused, and probably a handful of emotions that no one had come up with words for. She headed for the door and walked out without looking back.

CHAPTER 3



“Hey, sweet pea. How are you? Is everything okay? It’s a little later than usual,” Jessica’s grandmother, Maureen, said as she answered her phone.

“Yeah, sorry, Gran. I knew you’d be up, and I just needed to hear a friendly voice,” Jessica confessed as she pulled her meal of chicken plus an unidentifiable vegetable medley out of the microwave. She sat her phone against the kitchen backsplash to see her grandmother and leaned against the edge, blowing on her fork.

“Rough day?”

“You could say that. It was just one disaster after another today. I should have just stayed in bed.” She tried to lighten her mood with a little laugh, but there was no real amusement in it.

“We all have days like that, hun. I’m sure tomorrow will feel like a fresh start,” Maureen reassured her.

“Gran, I think I might have made a mistake today that will definitely carry over into tomorrow,” she sighed, “I don’t know. Maybe the spa scene within a casino empire isn’t my vibe.”

“Well, you’re probably right about that; as you know, you’re healing gifts are wasted there, and I just don’t understand—”

“Gran, please. Not the ‘healing’ speech right now. I know how you feel. I’ll figure it out.” Jessica tried not to take any sort of tone with her gran that would cause her to feel like a

guilty chastised child and rethought her attitude toward her gran's favorite topic. "I don't know. Maybe you're right." Jessica was beaten down from the day and couldn't mount her usual resistance to this discussion.

"Oh, I'm definitely right, pumpkin." Maureen chuckled and so did Jessica, this time in genuine lightness. No matter what, speaking with her grandmother always made her feel better. "Look, as much as you don't want to embrace it, Jess, you have a true gift. You're going to need to look this thing in the face someday."

Jessica was quiet for a moment. She knew what she wanted to ask but always got a little caught up in her throat when the moment of truth came. She reasoned that the day was already lost to a bunch of stupid tears so what did a few more matter? She cleared her throat and asked, "Gran... how did... I mean, what did... my mother..." She had to stop for a minute and choke back the nugget building in her throat. "How did my mother deal with all of this? What did she think? What did she choose?" Jessica's forehead wrinkled up a bit and a tear squeezed its way out of the corner of her eye.

Maureen visibly softened, letting out a little breath, and tilting her head to the side. Jessica could almost feel her soft hand brushing the side of her face and leaned in toward her phone.

"Oh, my dear. Your mother, well she had a diff—"

"Hold on a min, Gran. I think I heard someone at my door. Probably just the neighbor lady looking for her cat again." Jessica put her fork down in the meal she wasn't really eating and wiped her face with a paper towel.

Jessica started talking before even opening the door. "Hey, Alice, just a minute." She grabbed the knob and opened it. "I haven't seen Jingles—"

She stopped mid-sentence, mouth slightly agape. The person at her door was decidedly *not* Alice. In front of her meager apartment door stood her last client of the day, Roman Smith—the incredibly sexy, frustratingly quiet, special friend of her boss. Jessica realized she'd been standing there staring

for longer than socially appropriate, but she had no words. *Should I invite him in? He's clearly here to fire me in person. No, no I will not let him into my home to fire me in my pajamas; I don't care how sexy he is even with all his clothes on.*

"Hello, Jessica. May I come inside for a moment?"

"Um, sure. Ok. Alright." *Dammit, Jessica*, she scolded herself. Jessica quickly scanned the small room, hoping there wasn't anything mortifying laying around for this "platinum package" to notice that would cause her to shrivel up and die in shame.

"Sweet pea? Are you there, hun?" Jessica was snapped out of whatever moment she was having trying to decide if her apartment was normal or fell into the "risk to health and habitation" category. She wondered if someone like Roman had ever seen where the help lived, had ever stepped foot inside a dwelling space so small. *Maybe this is one of his privileged elite kinks? He gets to come embarrass and fire me in my home and somehow gets off on it—*

"Jessica Anne Roberts!"

"Oh! Sorry, Gran! Everything's fine..." She eyed Roman. "I think." She quickly returned to the kitchen and picked up the phone. "Um, Gran, I have to go. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Jessica. What is going on?"

"It's nothing, nobody. I love you. Goodnight." She ended the call before her grandmother could reply, and she was confident she was going to get an earful for it.

Jessica surveyed Roman. Although he looked extremely out of place in his high-end clothes, a midnight blue dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up revealing a lavender pattern on the inside of the cuff and dark gray slacks with a barely visible plaid pattern, he seemed more at ease and relaxed than he did an hour ago.

And still, frustratingly silent. *Should I say something? Why isn't he speaking? What does he want? This is so weird. Why do I want to touch him?* With this last thought, Jessica could

feel her hand begin to rise, like she was going to reach out for him, and quickly pulled it back.

“Hello.”

“Yes, you’ve said that already,” Jessica said, a little surprised with her harshness.

“Um, yes, I did,” Roman chuckled nervously and took a step toward her. Jessica instinctually took a step back.

“Look. I don’t know what you’re doing here. If you’re here to fire me, just get it over with and leave.” Jessica crossed her arms over her chest.

“Fire you?” Roman looked so genuinely confused that it gave Jessica pause. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, why else would you come here, to my *home*, after a bungled massage experience?” Jessica was actually starting to get a little fired up. “Was this part of the ‘package’ you arranged with Mr. Novik? I don’t really see how I could be of further assistance to you, Mr. Smith. I’m not interested in being humiliated nor is my body for sale. What the hell else do you want?”

Roman appeared stunned. He shook his head a little and blinked a couple times.

“Dinner,” he spurted out. “Dinner. I was wondering if you’d like to have dinner. With me. Now. Unless you’ve already eaten that is.” He gestured to the barely-touched meal on the counter. “And please, call me Roman.”

“I could eat.” Jessica was just as surprised by her response as Roman seemed to be as he let out a breath. The instant she said it, they both relaxed a little bit. It wasn’t until this moment that Jessica had thought about what exactly she was wearing—a slouchy sweatshirt featuring a tacocat in space with leggings and leg warmers. She glanced down at herself and looked back up at Roman in time to see him hide a grin.

“Right. I’ll just go change,” she said as she left the room.

Jessica returned with her long, wavy hair down, wearing white-washed skinny jeans and motorcycle boots with a fitted

white T-shirt. She grabbed her leather jacket, purse, phone, and keys.

“Ready?” Roman asked.

“As ready as I’m going to be,” Jessica replied while wondering just what in the hell she was doing.

They walked outside, and Roman had a car waiting for them. The driver hopped out and opened the door. “Mr. Smith, ma’am, right this way.” He gestured for them to get into the vehicle.

Jessica rolled her eyes a little and mumbled, “Of course,” before adding, “thank you.”

“I thought maybe we’d go to Ember. Have you been before?”

“No!” Jessica blurted out. “I mean, no I haven’t been, and I’d like to, just not tonight, please. Some coworkers were meeting up there, and I’d rather not run into them.”

“Alright. No problem. What about Jasper’s?”

“Oh, um...” Jessica was torn between turning down a second suggestion in a row, appearing rude, and knowing that Jasper’s was an exclusive restaurant—aka fancy and expensive as hell. “Am I dressed for someplace like that?” she asked, pulling on her jacket a little.

“You look perfect,” Roman assured her. He sent off a text, and they left her building.

The ride was awkward but more in an exciting, interesting way rather than uncomfortable. They both kept trying to ask questions at the same time, and there was a lot of “oh, sorry, no you go ahead.”

When they got to Jasper’s, on the roof of The Cosmopolitan, it was enclosed with floor-to-ceiling windows and had various styles of antique looking chandeliers hanging all over, providing very low light. The booths were arranged along the glass with the side facing the restaurant slightly closed off which gave the feeling of little, cozy, private nooks with amazing views. From where they were sitting, they could

see the beautiful hot air balloon of the Paris as well as the Bellagio fountains of which they could stream the corresponding music through their point of service screen embedded in the wall of the booth.

“This view is breathtaking. I don’t usually get to see Vegas like this.”

“Yes, the view is breathtaking,” Roman replied, and as Jessica met his eyes, she didn’t think he was talking about the view at all. She felt her cheeks flush and swallowed.

“Would you mind if I just ordered for us?” Roman asked.

“Oh god, please do. I wouldn’t even know where to begin,” she gave a little giggle.

Jessica watched Roman push some buttons and make some selections for a minute before turning her gaze back to the outward fantasy. *What am I doing here? This is crazy.* She glanced over at Roman again. *Damn, this man is going to be trouble; I can just feel it.*

A bottle of wine and food fit for a museum showed up shortly. Jessica could feel Roman paying close attention as she tried everything, but she didn’t care. Every bite seemed better than the last, and the wine brought out such interesting nuances in the food as well. She was trying not to make sounds of pleasure while eating, and that was the most self-control she could muster.

As they made their way through dinner and wine, an ease settled between them that created a flow for their conversation. In a blink, it was closing in on midnight. As their table was cleared away, Jessica experienced an overwhelming feeling of sadness which must have been written all over her face.

“Is everything alright?” Roman asked, heartfelt concern in his voice; a voice Jessica didn’t ever want to stop listening to.

“Oh, um, yeah. Yes... everything is... perfect really. I just...”

“Please, go on. You just...”

“I don’t want this evening to end.” Jessica was both appalled and relieved when she said this. “You know. This has been like a fantasy evening. It’s midnight; my carriage is about to turn into a pumpkin, and the prince disappears to be replaced by a shoe detective.”

Roman laughed, and it was the most beautiful sound Jessica had heard. He then settled his dangerously enticing blue eyes on her. “Am I the pumpkin or the shoe detective in that scenario?” he asked, teasing her. Before she could respond, he added, “This evening doesn’t have to end just yet. I sure as hell don’t want it to. Come on; let’s get some spiked coffees and walk around a bit.”

Jessica’s heart jumped in her chest, and she felt shivers all over. Roman took her hand, and she could have sworn it felt like a magnet making a connection. *This is a terrible idea*, she thought to herself.

“That sounds perfect,” she said.

Roman led them down to the strip, stopping for fun boozy coffees before leaving The Cosmopolitan. He only dropped Jessica’s hand when he paid for the coffees, and as they entered the night air, she instinctively cozied up to his shoulder. They made their way down toward The Venetian.

“As silly as it sounds, I’ve always wanted to take the gondola tour,” Jessica confessed. The attraction was closed for the day, but still running for anyone who was in line when it closed.

“I want to show you something,” Roman said, looking a bit smug with whatever idea just popped in his head. They entered the casino, and Roman led them sharply left just inside the doors down a corridor where they encountered less and less people. They took some stairs downward and arrived at a door with a security person standing guard. Roman showed him a card, then they were let through the entrance.

It was completely black at first but as Jessica’s eyes adjusted, she could see a faint blue glow as they approached the end of the hallway. When they rounded the corner, there

were blue and white reflected lights floating in gentle waves along the walls. Jessica had the sensation of being underwater.

“What is this? Where are we? It’s beautiful,” she said with reverence. Just as she finished speaking, the bottom of a gondola cruised by overhead creating new patterns of dancing distortions. They were walking underneath the gondola tour.

“This is incredible,” Jessica said.

“It’s one of my favorite places,” Roman said quietly.

Jessica was almost overwhelmed with the sense of calm that came over her, which at the same, ignited a little, burning ball of energy deep within her. She didn’t understand what in the world was going on with her today.

They stood quietly for a few minutes, Roman lacing his fingers with hers as they shared a long look, then silently, he moved them forward through the passageway that followed along the artificial Canal Grande. They ended up at another doorway which opened into what looked like a museum.

“This is a private showing room for whatever is currently on loan that is for a more... exclusive audience,” Roman said. “It appears that is a jewelry collection of some kind at the moment.”

Jessica dropped Roman’s hand and moved through the room. She gravitated toward a piece that looked like a peacock. “Oh, my gran would love this,” she barely whispered.

“It’s quite exquisite,” Roman said, his lips almost touching her ear, which surprised Jessica for a couple of reasons. One, she thought she might actually blackout from the sensations her nerve endings were firing through her body from her ear, and two, Roman had come up so quickly and silently. She must’ve been distracted and hallucinating to not hear him. Normally, this would be concerning but seemed like a fitting explanation at the moment.

“This one, the Oppenheimer Blue, it matches your eyes...” Jessica trailed off as she stared at Roman.

Roman's fingers slid up under the base of her head, his thumb brushing her cheek, his eyes sparking and crackling just like the emerald-cut diamond. "There is nothing in this room that could even compare to you."

Jessica swallowed and parted her lips slightly, waiting for a kiss... that didn't come.

"Come on," Roman said as he slid his hand down her neck, over her arm, and into her own. Jessica was pretty sure she'd follow him anywhere.



They continued like that for hours into the late-night, early-morning through the neon-blanketed city, touring secret areas Jessica would never have known about, laughing, sharing, and flirting.

The blue hour of twilight was approaching; Jessica could not believe they'd stayed out all night. She should be dropping dead just about then, but there was... something... building within her that felt too precious to let go of.

Roman was watching the sky intensely, seemingly lost in thought. He appeared to make up his mind and turned to Jessica. "Would you like to come back to my suite for a drink? I guess coffee or tea would be appropriate at this time of the morning." Roman nervously chuckled which was incredibly endearing. Jessica didn't let him sweat it out and answered immediately.

"Yes." Although this felt like the only answer, it still surprised her, and if she took a minute to listen to the voice in her head, she would question her decision. But that voice could shut the hell up as far as she was concerned. This had been the best night of her entire life, and it wasn't the exclusive dining, fancy wines, sparkling jewels, or anything else they'd experienced; it was simply—and not so simply—Roman.

When they arrived at Roman's, they had a perfect view of the sunrise that was tinged with pale desert shades and the ethereal mist of the distant mountains. Jessica was transfixed

as Roman stood beside her; the closer he was, the more she couldn't stand the distance.

"I could open a bottle of wine or make something caffeinated. I could order anything to the room. What would you like?"

"You." It was so quiet that Jessica wasn't sure she'd said anything. Roman sucked in a breath and appeared to hold it. *Oh my god, I cannot believe I just said th—*

Jessica's train of thought was abruptly cut off as Roman pulled her into him, kissing her lips, surprisingly tender. She had expected something a bit more forceful, but it was almost timid. The sensation erased every second thought, question, and doubt from her mind. She wrapped her arms around him, parted her lips, and deepened their kiss.

Roman let out a soft growl and wrapped his arms around Jessica so tight, returning her enthusiasm. She felt her anxiety and confusion melt away as a shared sense of extraordinary intimacy took their place, filling a void Jessica didn't even realize was there.

Jessica slid her hands down Roman's shirt and pulled it out from his pants, tentatively feathering her fingers on his skin. Roman pulled up from their kiss, and Jessica held incredibly still, like she was locked in with an unpredictable animal.

"That tickles," Roman said, voice low and husky, and he smirked with one side of his mouth. Jessica returned his smile and pressed her hands more firmly against his sides.

"So you'd like harder pressure, then?" Jessica teased.

"Careful, Jessica. Or you're going to get exactly what you're suggesting."

"Who said I didn't want that?"

Roman was still smirking, and his eyes lit up with that crackling fire she had seen earlier. He slowly removed her jacket, tossing it to the couch, and made to pull her T-shirt up. He stopped momentarily, searching her face for permission, which she gave with a little nod and bright smile.

Roman got to his knees, and Jessica rested her hands on his shoulders as he removed her boots one at a time, then put his hands flat against her stomach before undoing her button fly. Every time Roman slipped his fingers between the buttons and against her underwear, she shivered as heat pooled between her thighs. With the fly deftly conquered, Roman moved his hands to her hips and slowly pulled her jeans down and off.

As Roman moved his gaze from the floor, he took in every inch of her. Jessica normally would have been a touch self-conscious in her white, jersey-knit panties and T-shirt bra, but the way Roman was looking at her made her feel like the most desired creature on the planet. She could also feel herself becoming increasingly wet under his intense gaze.

Roman slipped his fingers under the top edge of her underwear, and Jessica moved her hands to his hair, lightly scraping her nails against his scalp. Roman closed his eyes for a moment, breathed in deeply, and swallowed.

“I want to taste you,” he said, looking Jessica in the eyes as he slowly slid her underwear to the floor. Jessica had never had something so erotic said to her and felt a little like jelly as she watched him. All she could do was nod, and she wasn’t in any way prepared for Roman to immediately drag his tongue deep through her folds and upward. She gasped and felt a jolt of pleasure, knocking her even further out of her head and into the moment. If Roman hadn’t been holding onto her, she was sure she would have fallen over.

“Fuck me, you’re perfect,” Roman said, still on his knees, face pressed into Jessica’s sex. “I never expected... I didn’t realize... I... Just everything about you: the way you smell, the way you taste... I didn’t know it would be like this...” His eyes were closed, and Jessica had the feeling he was talking to her, but she didn’t quite understand as it sounded more like a personal conversation with himself.

“Roman,” Jessica pulled his head back a little to be able to see his face, “I want you inside me. I... *need* you inside me.”

Roman was up off his knees faster than Jessica could register. He picked her up and carried her over to the bed, and she had a weird flash of the old-fashioned tradition of brides being carried over the threshold. Whatever. It certainly didn't last more than a nano-second before Jessica was up on her knees undoing his pants while he pulled his shirt over his head. Roman then undid the front clasp of her bra and finished sliding the bra off her shoulders.

She followed his lead, shimmying his shirt and pants off. He stood before her, the toned ripples of his muscles, begging to be caressed. Roman seemed to enjoy her gaze and momentary pause for consideration.

"I won't hurt you, Jessica." He moved forward, laying her onto her back and positioning himself between her legs. Roman rubbed his cock through her slippery folds while licking her nipple. They were both moaning and writhing as Roman grabbed hold of himself and positioned his tip at her opening. He paused and looked at Jessica, who was breathing heavily in anticipation.

"Oh my god, Jessica, you're so wet." Jessica barely registered whatever he was saying as he began to provide sustained pressure, slowly inching into her.

"Oh god, Roman," Jessica uttered as she tilted her head back and brought her legs around his backside to pull him in deeper.

"Hold on, *kokhana*, no need to rush. I promise to fill you up." Roman eased himself slowly into her center, taking her mouth with his in a hungry kiss. Jessica could feel him all the way inside her, deeper than anyone had ever been in more ways than one, and yet it still didn't feel close enough. She wanted more: more of him inside her, more of him wrapped around her, more of... him.

Jessica had never experienced anything like this; the orgasm building around her had such an unfamiliar intensity. She could feel her pleasure and need for release mounting, but it was almost like she could feel Roman's as well. It was almost terrifying, and if the feeling of him in her, on her, all

around her wasn't there to ground her, she might have panicked.

“Jessica, baby, I need you to come now.” He leaned down so his mouth was just at her ear. “Come for me.”

She didn't need any more encouragement than that. Jessica let loose everything she was holding back, ripples of ecstasy emanating through her core. She felt Roman's pulsing in time with her own, which sent her into eye-rolling, orgasmic bliss.

When they finished coming down and their breathing settled, Roman lightly brushed the hair out of Jessica's face, trailing his fingers down her neck to softly circle her nipple. He slowly slid himself out and laid on his back next to her, both staring at the ceiling.

Well, that was amazingly terrifying, Jessica thought to herself.

CHAPTER 4



Roman stared at the ceiling in utter disbelief over something impossible to forsake. Over the course of nine hours, his entire life had been simultaneously upended and locked into place. For so long, he had pushed against the bonds of his world, the bonds of marriage—the bonds of his *mate*.

Fuck me, he thought, I'm really rollin' in it now, aren't I? I can't believe... a human? Really? Well, not just any human... I mean of course it would end up being someone like Jessica. Jesus Christ, this is bad. Roman's anxiety was quickly rising which he knew wouldn't sit well with Jessica and tried to pull his spiraling thoughts back under control.

"So... um," Jessica started, and Roman realized he'd been laying there quiet for longer than was appropriate.

He propped himself up on his elbow and gave Jessica a smile. "So, would you like some breakfast? I have a favorite spot here at Muse at a table with my name on it."

"I'm sure you do," Jessica said, a bit admonishingly, "but I should probably go. I have work in a couple hours and need to get ready. Plus, after last night," she eyed him, "I likely have some explaining to do, so earlier is probably better."

Roman's brow knitted together in confusion, then he remembered. "Oh, I took care of it. No need to worry about the five-star, professional service I received last night. I believe the review says, 'best massage I've ever had.'" It was Jessica's turn to be confused, and her face displayed this. "I let the spa know I'd send everything back this morning." Roman

gestured to the folded-up table and cart that Jessica clearly hadn't noticed.

"Oh. Thank you for that," she breathed a sigh of relief, "I really appreciate it. But I do still need to get ready." She seemed at a loss for a moment, and Roman realized she was looking for her clothes. He popped up, pulled on his briefs, and put his shirt over Jessica's head. She visibly relaxed and then proceeded to get up and look around the room for her belongings.

"Why don't you stay and get ready here? You can use my bathroom; the shower is amazing. I'll order room service. An even better idea would be to take a day off and spend it with me. You know, I am personal friends with the owner, and it would be an easy ask."

Jessica rolled her eyes a little bit. "I'm not crazy about the idea of special favors," she said in a tone that gave Roman the feeling of being scolded. "Plus, when someone doesn't show up for work, it puts a lot of strain on the rest of the team. I'm still new and don't want to give anyone the wrong impression."

"And what impression would that be?" Roman teased.

"The impression that I'm sleeping with a close, personal friend of Mr. Novik and getting special treatment," she winked which lightened the conversation a bit.

Roman moved toward her and put his arms around her waist, crossing his wrists just above her bottom. "Okay. I understand. But please consider the first offer of a shower and room service. In fact, I think this opens up your morning as you won't have a commute." Roman really felt he was winning her over, which he was deeply happy about; however, he also thought maybe she should leave and never come back.

He'd always championed the stance that he didn't want this. He would just live the rest of his life—his incredibly long life—knowing his mate was out there but not shackled to her.

"Well... I do hate my shower," Jessica mused, "and the breakfast spread here is pretty fantastic... I'll take you up on

it.”

Roman gave her a light pat on the butt as he pointed her in the direction of the bathroom. Before she went through the door, she turned back to look at him, and when she smiled, Roman felt his heart drop to his stomach. *This is really bad*, he thought again as he pulled up the room service app and the room service menu.

Roman had no idea what Jessica wanted, but it didn't matter; he ordered one of everything. He was about to go make some coffee when he got an overwhelming feeling of distress coming from the bathroom.

Knocking lightly on the door first, he eased it open and asked, “Is everything alright in here?” Jessica was standing, leaning against the shower wall, with her head hanging down, letting the water cascade over the back of her. She pulled herself up quickly and looked at him over her shoulder.

Roman's body swelled to attention, seeing her naked back and a bit of breast, but it was her biting her lip that almost made him come in his briefs. “Oh, okay, good, you're good then,” he stammered as the blood in his body abandoned his brain.

“Don't leave,” she said.

That was all Roman needed. He ripped off his underwear and was in the shower faster than Jessica could turn around. She widened her eyes in surprise and puzzlement, but there was nothing confusing about what they needed; there was a frantic energy surrounding them.

As Roman picked her up, she wrapped her legs around his body, and he pressed her into the shower wall as he devoured her lips. He broke the kiss as Jessica was grinding up against him, moaning her pleasure into his ear, which made everything fade away for Roman except instinct. He fixed her with his gaze, effortlessly held her with one arm, reached down between them, and aligned himself with her pussy.

Staring into her unbelievable eyes, he thrust himself all the way inside of her. Jessica gasped loudly, but Roman knew this

was not from pain. He could feel every piece of her; he could smell her sex, hear her heartbeat. He knew what he felt like inside her. She was open to him, all of him, demanding it, claiming him as he was claiming her. Roman held her, locked together in a bonded frenzy as he continued to push deeper and deeper in mind, body, and soul, until he felt she was ready to explode.

“Ahhh,” Jessica screamed as Roman felt her clamp down around his cock. He roared as he released himself into the warm center that belonged to his mate and remained sheathed in her embrace. They stared at one another, and then he kissed her, conveying a deep sense of intimacy. Roman slowly pulled out of her, setting her feet on the shower floor. Jessica didn’t say anything, but she didn’t need to; Roman could sense what she was feeling.

“Let me wash you,” he said as he turned her around and reached for the luffa buff. They didn’t speak as Roman cleaned her, washing her body and then her hair. Jessica seemed to relax into her body as he touched her, as he worshiped her.

When the shower was over, Roman dried her off with a towel and then wrapped a robe around her, wearing one as well.

“There is nothing I’d rather do today than spend it doing that on repeat with you,” he said with a smile. “Please, Jessica, let’s blow off whatever we planned for today and spend it together.” Roman thought he had her, finally. How could she possibly resist after what they just shared?

“I... I don’t know...” Jessica was wavering, and Roman felt victorious.

“Oh, I think the room service is arriving. Hold that thought or rather, change that thought to a solid affirmative,” he winked as he headed out of the bathroom. “Come out whenever you’re ready.”



Jessica wasn’t sure she’d ever been so confused in her entire life. *Seriously, what the fuck is going on with me? This is*

ridiculous; I'm being ridiculous, she thought as she walked over to the mirror.

Standing there, looking at her reflection, she had an out-of-body experience. The robe she was wearing was one from the luxury line they offered in the spa. She'd never actually put one on, although she'd imagined wearing it every time she laid one out for a client. She looked around the opulent room—the *bathroom*—thinking that her whole kitchen and living room would fit within this space.

What am I doing here? she asked herself. *I mean, besides having the best and weirdest sex of my whole life, that is*, she clarified. Jessica peeked out into the rest of the room and had flashbacks of all the places she's ever lived, realizing that Roman's suite was larger than any home she'd ever had. She didn't grow up lacking anything really; her grandmother provided everything for her including a warm and safe sanctuary, but they did struggle from time to time as her gran sometimes worked on a barter system.

Jessica sighed, trying to decide if she should just go along with this fantasy experience while it lasted or end it before it broke her into a million pieces. The second she thought this, Roman glanced up at her sharply with a questioning look. *It's like he can read my mind or something*. She wasn't crazy about that thought as the possibility for embarrassment was too much to entertain.

"Would you like something to eat? I didn't know what you wanted, so there's a little bit of everything," Roman said. *A little bit of everything?* For some reason, this comment pushed Jessica firmly back to her reality of worrying about taking extra shifts to pay her bills.

"Thank you, this is generous."

"It's nothing," Roman said with a smile, not realizing he wasn't helping Jessica's inner conflict.

"Right." Jessica pursed her lips a little, but when she met his eyes, Roman looked like he was hanging on her every word with an almost puppy-dog expression. Jessica had an intense feeling that he just wanted to please her, and she

softened. “I mean, where should I start? It all smells delicious.”

Roman visibly lit up and made her a plate with waffle sticks covered in some berry Jessica didn’t recognize, a miniature parfait in crystal glassware, some creamy scrambled eggs, and a couple of pieces of bacon.

“I made some coffee too,” Roman said. “A little cream and some stevia.” He handed her a cup and sat across from her at the table.

“How did you know?” she asked.

“Oh, just a lucky guess.”

“Right...” Jessica repeated. She was having the oddest sensation; it was like her mind and body had entered into some kind of battle. Her brain was screaming at her that something was off, yet her body—and heart—felt like nothing had ever been more right. *Calm down. You were up all night, and you’re not twenty-two anymore*, she reminded herself.

“Did you give any more thought to mutually blowing off our days?”

“As much as I’d like to,” and Jessica realized she really meant this, “I don’t want to burden the rest of the team, and I... I can’t really... afford to.” She did not look up to see his expression—whatever it was, she didn’t want to confront it.

“I understand,” he said, although Jessica got the impression that he didn’t really understand at all. “Jessica... I... uh... I’m... I mean... we are...” Roman trailed off, and Jessica sensed he was coming to some sort of resolve. “Thank you for a truly wonderful evening and morning. I won’t soon forget it.”

Jessica thought he would ask for her phone number or at least to see her again, but he didn’t. “Yes, thank you, Roman. The pleasure was all mine.” She got up and collected her clothes, which Roman had arranged on the bed for her, and changed in the bathroom.

When she got to the door, Roman appeared right behind her; she was lost in thought and assumed she just didn’t notice

him following. She thought he might argue with her over staying again, but he remained oddly silent and back to his frustratingly quiet demeanor.

“Goodbye, Roman.” She instantly felt like her heart dropped into her stomach and that she was making a huge mistake. But her brain was winning this one.

Roman leaned down to kiss her cheek. “Goodbye, Jessica.”



By the time Jessica arrived at the spa, she was a little early for her shift, which worked out well since she had approximately 12 unanswered text messages from her gran, each with increasing urgency.

Gran: Jessica Anne Roberts, young lady, if I don't hear back from you within the hour, I will be calling the police!

Jessica: Gran, hi, sorry. I'm safe. Everything's fine. About to head into work.

Gran: Gracious child, you about gave me a heart attack. I was about to come over there. You're not fooling me; I know something happened. You know I know.

Jessica: I don't have time right now, but I promise to catch you up later. Love you.

Gran: Oh, you bet you will, young lady. Love you too, sweet pea. Have a great day. Sending hugs.

Jessica could practically feel her gran's arms wrap around her, smoothing out her frayed nerves. *This is going to be a long ass day*, she thought as she looked around the locker room, hoping no one would notice her more-than-yoga-pants-and-a-sweatshirt attire. The boots were a dead giveaway, so she yanked those off quickly, swiftly stuffing them into her cubby.

“Hey, hun,” Marnie said from behind. “Interesting evening?”

Jessica jerked her head up quickly, hitting her head on the locker shelf. “Dammit,” she swore under her breath. “Um, hi, Marnie. What do you mean?”

“We missed you last night. I was really hoping you’d join us, and I wanted to introduce you to my friend, Darren.”

“Oh! Yes, sorry about that. I ended up having a last-minute client added to my books.”

“Oh alright. Next time then?” She sounded sincerely sad.

Jessica all of a sudden felt compelled to touch Marnie. She reached out and placed her hand on the woman’s arm.

“I really appreciate you Marnie and the continual invites out. I have a hard time with new people, but you’ve been incredibly kind and welcoming. I promise I will make more of an effort.”

Jessica thought Marnie’s smile would reach her ears. Not only could she see the change in her coworker, but she received an overwhelming sense of elation, replacing what had been rejection. Before she could stop her, Marnie lunged forward and gave Jessica a huge hug.

“Okay, Marnie,” Jessica chuckled a little, “let’s get to work.” Marnie released her and went to her own locker to get ready.

All Jessica hoped for was to have a better workday than yesterday. Although yesterday did have some unexpected, welcomed surprises, but she left Roman’s in such a state of confusion. *Will I ever see him again?* she wondered as she prepped the room for her first client.

“Hello, Mrs. Sisko. I’m Jessica; I’ll be your masseuse today. Do you have any medical conditions or injuries I should be aware of?” *Or any open wounds that would cause me to touch your blood and freak out?* she almost added but thought better of it.

“Hello, dear. Every so often I get a pinched nerve in my upper middle back. It seems to have been agitated by the flight out here so that area is a little sensitive.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that.”

“Yes, it’s quite frustrating really. Once it starts, I usually have to just rest for weeks. But of course, here we are in

Vegas, of all places for it to flare up.” The woman almost looked like she was going to cry.

Again, Jessica had a compelling sense to reach out to the woman. She touched her arm and offered a warm smile.

“I will do whatever I can to ease your pain,” Jessica said and surprised herself with the conviction with which she replied. The tension Jessica hadn’t really noticed in the room started to lift a little, and Mrs. Sisko wiped a tear from her eye.

“Thank you, dear.”

“I’ll just pop out for a moment. Please undress to your level of comfortability and get situated under the blanket, facedown.”

When Jessica had given her a few moments, she returned to the room and situated the foot pillow. She then began to lightly touch her client on top of the blanket to connect herself to the person and get them used to being touched. She moved around in front of the headrest and slowly combed the women’s hair forward, brushing her scalp with her nails.

“I’m going to start with very light pressure, and we can increase it if you’re feeling alright.” Jessica warmed up some massage oil with citrus notes between her palms. The second she placed her full palms on Mrs. Sisko’s back, she sucked in a breath, receiving an intense shock of pain—but she wasn’t *in* pain, not at all. The pain was radiating from the woman on the table. Jessica couldn’t believe Mrs. Sisko had walked in here; she was more than a “little sensitive.”

“Oh dear,” Mrs. Sisko said and tensed up for a moment.

Jessica pulled her hands away. “I’m sorry. Did I hurt you? Are you alright?”

“I... I’m not sure.” Jessica saw her back muscles moving around a little as the woman shifted her weight around. “There was a little bit of a strange sensation at first but that seems to be over. Probably just an initial reaction to the oil or something.”

Jessica was pretty sure it had nothing to do with the massage oil. She had a feeling she knew exactly what this was,

but she really wasn't in the mood to open up that can of worms; she had enough to deal with already.

She again placed her hands on Mrs. Sisko; this time the pain didn't shock her as much, and she was able to begin working on her back. The more Jessica loosened the woman's muscles, the more at ease she felt, or rather, they both felt. Not only that, but it felt like the room itself was changing color. Before, it seemed almost tinted in gray as soon as the client had entered the room. Now, it was more like a soft yellow, becoming clearer and brighter.

By the end of the massage, Jessica couldn't feel any pain coming from Mrs. Sisko at all. When she removed the eye pillow sachet, it looked like tears had fallen from the corner of the woman's eyes.

“Oh, ma'am. Are you alright? You should have spoken up if something wasn't feeling right.”

“Oh no, dear. That's not it at all. I'm... I haven't felt this good in... well, probably years if you must know. I feel like I could get back into running or kayaking. I honestly feel incredible, and I'm so grateful. Thank you. Thank you very much.” This pushed her over into actively crying.

“Oh. Um. Yes. You're welcome; glad I could help. I'll just give you a few minutes. Take your time; stay there as long as you'd like. When you're ready to leave, I'll be waiting outside the room with some water.”

All of Jessica's clients usually left seemingly very happy and satisfied with her work. This was a bit different and caused the hairs on the back of her neck to stand up. *Well great, this day is off to a weird start*, she thought as she stood outside the room. Although, she couldn't ignore the fact that she also felt pretty damn good considering she'd been up now for just over 24 hours.

Over the next few hours and clients, Jessica tried to be more intentional with her work. She always listened to her customers, but now she paid more attention to what their bodies were telling her. Mrs. Sisko was not the only client to

leave in tears of relief. With every person that she treated, she also felt re-energized and calm.

Throughout the day, whenever her thoughts shifted to Roman and started spiraling, they would stop as soon as she started with another client and her anxiety melted away. Instead of feeling drained when it was time to go home, she felt restored.

But at the end of the day, when all she had left were thoughts of Roman and realizing she'd probably never see him again, she settled back into a familiar feeling of depression wrapped in confusion.

Guess it's time to have it out with Gran, she thought as she headed out to Uber home.

CHAPTER 5



“Hey old man, did you get enough rest after you pussied out last night?” Vance started in on Roman before the meeting had even started. “I bet your wrist is just as sore as your shoulder now. You really missed out on the females; Leighton didn’t seem to mind fucking me instead.” Vance gave Roman a wink and elbowed him in the side.

Roman didn’t have a chance to respond before Tanner cut in. “Wait. I thought I saw you wandering around last night outside The Venetian. You seemed pretty fucking cozy with that human woman you were with.”

“What? A woman? What’s he talking about?” Xavier asked, concern and curiosity mixed in his voice.

Roman thought about denying it and would have if it had been Vance who’d said he’d seen him, but Tanner wouldn’t be easy to discredit. He was the same rank as Roman and also their best scouter so everyone would believe he was telling the truth—which he was, unfortunately.

He met Xavier’s dark brown eyes and said, “Uh, yeah. No big deal. Just a woman I ran into on my way to my room. Thought she might be fun.” He hoped everyone would drop it, but there was no chance in hell. If the situation was reversed, he’d be grilling them in return.

“What the fuck, man?” Xavier was the only one concerned while the others took this bit of news as open season.

“Well, was she? Fun?”

“Come on, man, don’t hold out on us. Give us some details.”

“Was her pussy as tasty as Leighton’s?”

“Yeah, you seem pretty rested, so did she take one look at your cock and split?”

“No way, Roman probably rode her so hard, she’s likely passed out in the room.”

“Perfect! She’ll be ready for a real vampire next. I call dibs after the meeting.” Vance was laughing right up until Roman punched him so hard in the face that he fell to the ground, nose bleeding. The atmosphere in the room changed abruptly. Roman jumped on top of Vance who looked genuinely wounded and confused by his behavior aside from the broken nose. He didn’t even try to fight back, just got into a defensive position until Xavier and Ashford pulled Roman off him.

“Let go of me!” Roman shouted.

“Hey, man. What the fuck? Calm the fuck down,” Xavier said. “We’re all brothers here. Let’s take this shit down a notch, alright?”

Roman tried to settle his breathing. It felt like he was seeing red at the edges of his vision. As he calmed down, he took another look around the room. Vance was holding his nose with a napkin, slapping Tanner’s hands away from him, saying, “I’mb fineb, I’mb fineb,” sounding odd as he choked on a little blood.

What did I just do? That was... I’m... Son of a bitch! Roman realized the room was still incredibly tense and waiting to see what he was going to do next.

“Hey, Vance, man, I’m sorry. That was... I’m not sure what happened.”

Vance stared at him for a minute, but then dropped his shoulders and waved him off. “It’s not like I don’t usually deserve a punch in the nose for one thing or another. It’s cool, man; we’re cool.” Everyone let out a collective breath. They razzed each other a lot and there were hardly ever mean-

spirited physical altercations between the group; they really were like brothers.

Xavier was eyeing Roman closely. "Right then," he said, "lets everyone take a beat before the meeting." The crew, The Knights of Darkness, took their seats around the room and other vampires began to filter in.

Taking the seat next to Roman, Xavier leaned over and said, "I think you might have a bit more explaining to do, but we'll wait until after the meeting."

Roman didn't want to agree, but he knew there was no way to avoid this, especially not with Xavier. *God dammit! Why did I have to lose my shit like that? Well, I know why, but fuck! This is exactly what I didn't want to have to deal with.* When he said goodbye to Jessica this morning, he meant it. He was hoping that getting some distance would change things, and he could go back to normal, pretending he hadn't found his mate, bonded with her, then left.

But that thought was also like torture to his soul; it went against every fiber of his being. He didn't feel like "just Roman" anymore but joined with Jessica. *How can I possibly leave her? But how can I possibly live with her? And what if the others find out what she is? More so than just my mate; that's bad enough. But the other thing? Jessica could be in serious danger.* Roman didn't like this train of thought in the least; he was sure this day could not get any worse, but he was so lost in thought over his Jessica turmoil, that he didn't notice who'd taken the seat on his other side: Arabella.

Roman was thankful the meeting started promptly, so he didn't have to speak to her. Quinn started the session with a recap of the recent mission, highlighting all of their successes and naming each vampire they rescued, a couple of whom were in the room.

"I cannot thank The Knights enough," one of them was saying. "You reunited me with my mate, and I will be forever in your debt." At that moment, Arabella brushed her nails along Roman's thigh, and he shifted in his seat to cause her fingers to fall away. Roman felt disgusted; he didn't want

anyone besides Jessica to ever touch him again. Thinking about her touching him immediately started to arouse him. Unfortunately, he saw that Arabella noticed as well, and she gave him a satisfied smirk. *God dammit!*

Roman received a sharp jab in the side from Xavier. He looked up at him, and Xavier motioned with his head to the front of the room, snapping Roman's attention back to the moment and his blood back to his brain. *How long have they been looking at me?* He tried to filter back through the last few minutes to get a sense of what was going on.

“Roman?”

“Yes. My apologies, Quinn.” He stood up and made his way to the speaker's podium. “Right. So as Quinn mentioned, we had an unexpected encounter while neutralizing the Lucem Diem's trafficking ring. One of their soldiers was somehow enhanced. It wasn't just a suit he was wearing; he seemed more agile in every way, stronger and faster than he should have been for a human. I was barely able to overcome his attack and...” Roman paused. He knew he should tell them all about his odd wounds that wouldn't close and lasting soreness but since they were now all miraculously healed, this would be problematic. They would want—no, need—to know why and how. Unfortunately, the how and why would cause him to implicate Jessica, to out her to a room full of vampires.

Roman made eye contact with Xavier who hadn't taken his god damned observant eyes off him since the incident before the meeting. Someone made a small coughing sound, and he could hear Vance heavily breathing through his mouth.

“And well, the ah... the fight... I... It took a lot of me, and I was surprised.”

“Yeah, but the fucker is now missing an arm, eh, Roman?” Vance said, all hostility forgiven. There were a few light chuckles throughout the room. Roman felt a little worse about punching him in the face; he knew Vance idolized him as a big brother.

“Yeah, that's right, Vance, and we were successful. But we need to re-up and expand our efforts on intel. I think, based on

what we saw, the humans are developing something big which might actually give them an advantage.” The room felt heavy as Roman left the podium and instead of returning to his seat, took a stance at the back of the room.

Jessica could not have happened at a more shit time for Roman—for The Knights in general. They needed to know about what the soldier did to him. Roman was going to have to find a way to tell them what happened and quickly. This was technology the humans already had; who knew when they’d run into it again, probably soon. They had to be ready and by not sharing everything that happened, Roman was putting their lives in danger.

Roman was elated when the meeting was coming to a close. He couldn’t wait to get out of there. He knew Xavier was going to be on his ass for some answers, and if he could escape without having to speak to Arabella, he would personally thank whatever gods existed with whatever sacrifice they demanded.

Luck was not in the cards for Roman today as Arabella followed right behind him into the lobby area of the meeting room.

“Roman, there you are. I was hoping to have a word.”

“Not now, Arabella. I’ve had a shit day, and I’d rather not add to it.”

“You can’t ignore me forever, Roman. Besides,” she placed a hand on the side of his face, fingers lacing through his hair, “we’re inevitable. That’s what it means you know, our arrangement.”

Roman kept his hands in his pockets and stepped out of Arabella’s reach. “I think you already know exactly what our ‘arrangement’ means to me.”

“Oh, Roman, why must you be so difficult? You’ve already agreed to what our fathers have set in motion. I don’t understand why you resist setting a date. I can assure you, I’m the best you’ve never had.” She leaned in close to Roman,

placing her palms on his chest and bit her lip, little beads of blood coming to the surface. “Don’t you want a taste?”

Roman grabbed her wrists, removed her hands from his body, and pulled her ear to his lips. “No, I don’t. You’re nothing to me, Arabella. More so now than before. Go home to Daddy.” He let go of her and finally made his escape. She did not follow.

All day long Roman had tried to talk himself out of running straight to Jessica; he reasoned that the further he stayed away, the better it would be for everyone, especially her. But his traitorous heart took him straight to his waiting driver and car.

“Where to, sir?”

“Same apartment complex as yesterday, Winston.”

“Yes, sir.”

What am I doing? I should just stay away from her. This is a mistake.

“Winston, actually, I changed my mind.”

“No problem, sir. Where to?”

“Let’s turn around and head up to Mandalay Bay. I’m sure there’s a UFC fight I could catch.”

“Sounds good, sir.”

The car flipped a U-turn at the next light and Roman could swear he almost felt physically ill the further away from Jessica they traveled even though it was hardly any distance.

Christ! I can’t. I can’t do it.

“Winston, uh, actually, I’ve changed my mind. The apartment complex, please.”

Winston eyed him the rearview this time, his salt-and-pepper eyebrow giving Roman an appraising look.

“No problem, sir.”

When they arrived at Jessica’s, Roman practically ran to her apartment. He wasn’t even sure if he kept to human speed

standards, but he really couldn't be bothered.

Jessica opened the door, somehow looking both surprised and happy to see him. The bridge of her nose wrinkled up in the most adorable way, her mouth contorting into an odd smirk? Grimace? Smile? Whatever, Roman didn't care as long as she was looking at him.

"Gran, I'm sorry, I'll have to call you back. Roman is here." She moved aside and gestured for him to come through the door. "Yes, I know," she eyed him. "Yes, I promise. I love you too. Bye-bye."

"Hello," Roman said, "my apologies for interrupting your call."

"Yes, well, I guess you could have called or texted first. Oh wait, you don't have my number do you? Sort of easy to forget when one is dismissed."

Roman put his hand to his heart in a fake "you wound me" gesture and buckled on his knees a little bit to animate the pose—although, her words and tone really did feel like a sting; he was hoping they could laugh it off. In all honesty, Roman wasn't sure what to do here. He'd never had any trouble with females, quite the opposite in fact. It was easy to flirt, banter, and fuck when you couldn't care less about seeing someone again or having a future. With Jessica, he was out of his element. But his little performance did change her grimace to more of a smile, so he was feeling more confident.

"You're right." This seemed like the best start he could think of. "I should have asked for your information. I wanted to. I just... I wasn't expecting..."

"Go on."

"I wasn't expecting you."

"Well, glad we have that cleared up." Jessica crossed her arms. "Is there something you wanted, Roman?" She was not going to make this easy, and Roman loved that even more.

"I wasn't expecting to meet someone like you, ever, Jessica. I've been around for a... a long time and been with many fem—er, women," he moved closer to her, resting his

hands on her shoulders. “You’re different from any person I’ve ever met. I wasn’t expecting to find my ma—to find someone who makes me feel as you do.”

Jessica uncrossed her arms and put them around Roman’s neck, pulling him down for a kiss which he deepened, slipping his tongue through to caress hers. She moaned slightly and Roman’s instincts were demanding he rip her clothes off and take her right where they stood, but the little part of his brain that still had blood in it thought maybe not yet.

Roman pulled away and was incredibly satisfied with himself at the look of irritation across Jessica’s face from ending the kiss. *I’ve still got it*, he self-congratulated.

“Jessica, I’d like to ask you something.”

“Anything,” she responded but then looked a bit vexed with herself which made Roman’s ego sore.

“Could I please have your phone number?”

Jessica pulled away and gave him a playful punch in the arm.

“Has anyone ever told you that you can be a bit of dick?” Jessica teased.

“More times that I can count,” he replied, and they both laughed.

“Are you free right now? Could I take you somewhere? Are you hungry? It feels like you’re hungry.” Jessica gave him a confused look. “I mean, it feels like you must be hungry after a long day.” Roman tried to recover. He wasn’t sure what was going to happen when Jessica realized what was going on between them. His expert guess after knowing her for a short time was that she was going to be pissed, more so that he didn’t tell her, and he wasn’t ready to move back into the dog house just yet.

“Yeah, now that you mention it,” again, confusion in her face and voice, “I am hungry. I got off and started a long-overdue conversation with my gran that I guess you sort of rescued me from. No need to be smug about it.” She winked at him.

“There’s actually somewhere I’d love to take you that I think you’d really enjoy.” She looked at her clothes and Roman added, “It’s very casual; what you’re wearing is perfect.” Then he really took a look at her: royal blue booty shorts with white piping and a long-sleeve, white, cotton shirt that he could almost see her nipples through which were hardening under his gaze. Roman was quickly revisiting his first instincts.

“Right,” she said. “I doubt it. I’ll be quick.”

CHAPTER 6



“We just need to stop by Muse to grab something, and then we’ll be on our way,” Roman said as Winston pulled into the temporary loading zone and hopped out.

“Where are we going?” Jessica asked, and Roman could not only feel her excitement but also hear it in her voice.

“It’s a surprise, but it’s a little bit of a drive.”

Winston returned with what looked like a to-go bag mixed with a picnic basket and handed it to Roman from the front seat before raising the separator screen. Jessica’s eyebrows perked up in surprise.

“Yes, it’s a little bit of a drive, so I had the hotel add some extras to our package here.” Roman pulled out some fancy looking crackers, various slices and spreads of cheese, cured meats, random dried fruits, and nuts all arranged within a covered tray. He followed that with a bottle of wine which he poured into a couple of travel tumblers with lids.

“They’re not fancy, but they’ll do the trick,” he said, raising his glass to cheers with Jessica.

“This is perfect,” she replied, all smiles to Roman’s greatest delight.

For about an hour and a half, they drove through the desert as the sun fully set, continuing through the pastel spectrum, and ending in an overwhelming blanket of darkness punctuated with stars.

They arrived at what appeared to be an abandoned building but turned out to be more of an observation deck atop a stone base. There was an iron gate that blocked the stairway, but Roman had a key and let them through carrying some provisions while Jessica carried the picnic bag.

“This is incredible.” Jessica had stopped in her tracks when they came through the trap door of the deck.

“I thought you might like this.” Roman was beyond elated with himself.

“I love this! Before my parents... well... when I was a little girl, my dad would set up his telescope in the backyard and have me try to guess what shapes I could see in the universe. My mom,” Jessica swallowed and cleared her throat a little bit, “my mom, she would tell me stories about the stars and what they mean to us. My gran too.”

Roman reached for her hand and pulled her in close to wrap his arm around her as they looked up, giving Jessica a moment to collect her feelings.

“My grandmother was actually quite skilled in astrology as well. I remember her telling me a long time ago as she sat with me one night under the sky that I would feel lost and alone for decades... for what seemed like decades, I mean. She said those feelings would persist for so long that I would give up on ever feeling differently, that I would inevitably become just like my father.” Roman couldn’t believe he was sharing this but also felt oddly compelled.

“‘Roman,’ she’d said, ‘this will be your fate if you deny The Maiden.’ My grandmother was from the old world, and I always thought she may have had a touch of lunacy,” Roman smiled to himself thinking of her. “I didn’t believe her; I didn’t think there was any way to change my destiny.” Roman looked down at Jessica. “But now I know what she was trying to tell me.”

After they finished their meal and wine, they laid on the deck staring up into the night sky sharing stories about the stars passed on from their grandmothers. Jessica fell asleep nestled in close to Roman, and he realized this was the most

content moment of his entire life. He let Jessica rest for a few hours before waking her up to head back to the city.

“How long was I out?” Jessica asked as they made their way down the stairs.

“Oh, a couple hours.”

“Hours! I admit, I was pretty tired from staying up for so long. You didn’t fall asleep?”

“No, I’m more of a night owl as they say. I’m a day sleeper.”

“Hm. I guess everyone has their own rhythm.”

When they returned to the city limits, Roman asked, “Will you stay with me tonight?”

“Yes, Roman, I’d like that very much.”

The moment Jessica accepted his request, it was like they couldn’t get there fast enough. His body was alive every place Jessica was touching him. She crossed her leg over his lap as Roman moved over and slightly on top of her, maneuvering his hand up her shirt, and pulling the cup portion of her bra down so he could pinch and tickle her nipple.

With every little twist and caress, Jessica squirmed underneath him, pressing herself into Roman. He lifted her top and teased her nipple with his tongue, circling the pebbled area and lightly flicking it. With his hand, he cupped Jessica between the legs, thumb pressed on the outside of her jeans where her clitoris was likely swelling just as he was.

Jessica ground into his hand, pressed her breast into mouth, and put her head back against the window exposing her neck. They hit a little bump in the road which jolted them both.

“Oh, ouch,” Jessica said as she sat up and pressed her fingers to her lips. “I think I bit my lip. Am I bleeding?”

Roman shot backward against his door and held his breath. He immediately knew she was bleeding, and he could feel his fangs becoming more pronounced. Vampires didn’t *eat* humans; he wasn’t afraid of hurting her. But he was definitely

afraid of becoming unhinged with a mating frenzy that would be brought on by tasting her blood. *Which would probably fucking terrify her*, he thought as he tried to regain some composure.

“Oh, you must really have a problem with the sight of blood. I’m so sorry, I didn’t realize that was the issue yesterday. That all makes a lot more sense now.” Jessica’s words didn’t really match what she was feeling, but Roman knew better than to call her out on it.

“Um, yeah, that makes sense,” he repeated unconvincingly.

Jessica held a napkin on her lip until the bleeding stopped, which was incredibly quick. Roman slowly started breathing again and was relieved they had finally pulled up to Muse. He jumped out of the car before Winston could get the door and walked around to Jessica’s side to escort her out.

The walk to his suite was torture. Roman felt like they were moving through mud between all of the bodies and the slow as shit human pace he was reduced to. He kept imagining picking Jessica up and running through the casino to his room at full speed.

Roman was incredibly grateful for the VIP elevator to his floor; as soon as the doors shut, they were alone. Jessica jumped into his arms and wrapped her legs around his waist, fisting his hair. Roman was squeezing her ass with both hands as he kissed and licked up and down her neck. The doors opened and Roman carried Jessica to his room. He was fiddling with the key card and almost decided to just kick the fucking door down, but the light turned green, and he was spared having to explain that to Jessica.

Roman let her down, immediately stripping her out of her jacket, shirt, and bra, exposing her heavy breasts that he hadn’t stopped thinking about all day. He imagined coming on her tits and almost exploded in his pants. He curled his fingers into the waist of her jeans and pulled her against him, while Jessica undid his shirt and belt buckle.

Jessica’s jeans and panties were quickly removed as he stepped out of his pants and briefs as well. Roman’s hard cock

was pressed against her stomach, and she reached down to cup his balls, lightly dragging her fingernails along his sac.

Roman took a step backward to admire her. “What did I do to deserve such an exquisite creature?” He didn’t let her answer; there was no need. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her down to his lap as he positioned them on the couch. Jessica straddled him and rubbed her wet pussy lips along his shaft, unable to cover the full length of him.

“Jessica, baby, I need to be inside you.”

Jessica shifted upward to reach the head of his penis and pressed her entrance against his tip, moving slightly down and then back up as her body stretched for him. Roman supported her weight with his hands as she worked him slowly inside her.

When Roman was fully sheathed within her, they both let out a groan of utter pleasure. Jessica put her head back and began riding him. Roman was incredibly stimulated with her breasts bouncing lightly in his face. He brought one nipple to his mouth and relished in the moan that Jessica released.

He fingered between her folds, locating her clit, and positioning his thumb so that she could ride that as well.

“Ah, ah, Roman, ah.” Hearing his name from her lips as she rode him to orgasm caused Roman to lose all control. He grabbed Jessica’s ass and pulled her into his rhythm, pumping into her and climaxing so hard he felt the pulsing cascade Jessica into another orgasm, creaming all over his dick. He held her to him, his face resting between her breasts as they both took deep breaths.

“Christ, Jessica. You’re incredible,” Roman uttered.

“You’re not so bad yourself,” she replied, kissing him on the forehead. For some reason, it was that tender, sweet moment that caused an avalanche of guilt to crush down on him. *I have to tell her—all of it.*

She slowly eased off him, and Roman could feel the mood in the room shifting from intimate ecstasy to anxious confusion as he sensed Jessica feeding off his emotions. He

got up and grabbed some robes from the closet, handing one to Jessica.

“Why don’t you pick out a bottle of wine and pour us some glasses. I need a moment in the restroom, but then I want to tell you something.” Roman closed the bathroom door behind him and stared in the mirror. He needed to get his nerves under control so he could stop affecting Jessica.

“Get your shit together, man.” He took a deep, calming breath. “Just go out there and tell her the truth. Look her in the eyes and say, ‘Jessica, I’m sure this is all very confusing, but the truth is, I’m a vampire, and you and I are bonded mates. I’m sorry I didn’t say anything before, but I didn’t want this...’ no, don’t say that you idiot.” Roman took another deep breath. “Jessica, you know how things feel a bit different than usual between us? Well, the simple answer is you’re mine. I mean, we are bonded mates. I’m a vampire.” Roman stared into his own eyes and sighed. “Yep, I’m totally fucked.”



Jessica picked a bottle of cabernet with an ornate castle on the label, opened the bottle, and poured their glasses. She took hers to the window and looked out over the lights of Vegas. She was starting to see it through a different lens these last two days with Roman, but something felt *off*. She couldn’t put her finger on it, yet something was definitely weird about their whole situation.

This entire thing was so out of character for her, and she felt really off balance—which in and of itself was odd. Jessica always considered herself fairly grounded and in control; this was like flying wildly around the sky.

What the hell is taking him so long in there? Jessica’s nerves were quickly inching up. *Something is wrong here*, she thought.

Roman finally reappeared from the bathroom and stopped when Jessica made eye contact, blurting out his next words.

“I’m a vampire. I’m 300 years old. You’re... we... we’re...” He trailed off, probably from seeing the look on her

face.

Jessica was dead quiet for a few heartbeats and then started laughing sardonically. Roman at first appeared relieved, starting to smile with her, but then must have realized there was zero mirth and a hundred percent malice as his face dropped.

“You know what? I fucking knew it.” Jessica slammed her glass down on the table, surprised it didn’t break, and ripped her robe off. She aggressively shimmied into each article of clothing as she came across them, muttering to herself while once and awhile looking at Roman and saying something like “asshole,” “piece of shit playboy,” or “cowardly cocksucker.”

Roman appeared to have lost the ability to speak. He just stood there watching her collect her things and hearing everything she said, not just the insults hurled directly at him.

“Jessica... I—”

“Save it. Don’t speak to me. ‘I’m a vampire?’ Really? How stupid do you think I am? Don’t answer that. Clearly, you think I’m an idiotic plaything to distract you while you’re in this hellhole.” She walked to the door and turned around, looking at him stunned to silence over her shoulder. “I don’t ever want to see your face again.” And with that, she walked out the door, pissed that she couldn’t slam it.

CHAPTER 7



Roman didn't move from his post just outside the bathroom for a few minutes after she left. The intense waves of anger and hurt that radiated from Jessica were almost suffocating him. What was he supposed to do? Grab her? Make her stay and listen? Roman was certain he'd never made anyone feel quite like that, and the thought that it was Jessica brought on the most intense waves of self-loathing.

Which, the more everything marinated within him, gave way to floodgates of rage. This was his own fault. As soon as he realized who and what Jessica was, he should have left this place and never come back. He picked up the glass she'd poured for him, drained it, and then threw it against the wall.

Roman was furious with himself for thinking he could actually have her, that he could share his heart, soul, and body with a woman. He'd wanted it too badly, had denied it for so long, and had settled on never having it. Now that he'd experienced it, how was he going to live without her?

He threw the bottle of wine on the floor, cabernet and glass scattered everywhere. Roman walked over to the chair that still had Jessica's jacket on it, picked it up, and threw it against the glass windows where it made an unsatisfying *thunk* sound instead of shattering into pieces like he felt was happening to him.

Roman took a deep breath and went back to the bathroom to splash some water on his face. When he brought his face back up to look at his reflection, he punched the glass and

thought that was a better reflection of how he felt on the inside.

“Fuck this. I have to get outta here.” Roman quickly got dressed and left his room. No way did he want to run into anyone he knew, so he left Muse and headed to a neighboring building. Making his way to a private bar, he figured he’d handle this like any other night: gin and fucking some random female. The moment he thought about the possibility of taking someone else to bed, his whole body began to ache, and his stomach churned. “Son of a fucking bitch,” Roman said, grasping his side and swallowing some bile.

“What was that, sir?” the doorman of the club asked.

“Nothing,” Roman replied, slipping him a wad of hundreds.

“Have a nice evening, sir,” the man replied, moving over to let Roman through. He made a beeline for the back of the bar to sit in a semi-private lounge area with a small purple couch and black table. Roman ordered a bottle of gin and sat anxiously bouncing his leg until the server returned. He filled up the highball glass and downed it in three swallows, followed by another.

After the two full glasses, Roman poured a third and leaned back against the couch, finally able to feel some craziness leave his body. He closed his eyes, but Jessica’s face monopolized his imagination.

“Would you like some company?” Roman made slits with his eyes to see a tall woman with champagne-colored hair pulled back into a high and long ponytail wearing a tight, black jumpsuit.

“It’s a free country. Well, for some of you. Do whatever the fuck you want.” He threw back the glass, finishing the drink and poured another.

The woman was undaunted by his rudeness and laughed a bit as she took a seat.

“You seem to be having the opposite of a good time. What could be so terrible in a place so deliciously sinful?”

Roman just harrumphed and took another drink.

“Perhaps it’s your amazing conversational skills that have all the women lined up, ready for a turn,” she practically purred, and Roman thought he was going to vomit.

“I don’t care if you sit there. I don’t want to talk.”

“How about I buy us some drinks? I’m not much of a gin drinker myself.” She motioned to the bar with a little nod and circled her finger in the air for another round of whatever she was drinking. When the drinks arrived, Roman took his in one shot, barely tasting whatever the hell it was.

“See, that wasn’t so bad. I’m not so terrible when you get to know me.” She moved a little closer to Roman who decided he was actually starting to feel even worse than before if that was possible.

“Yeah, I’m sure you’re a real gem. Look, thanks for the drink. I’m heading out.” Roman shook his head a little, realizing he might have pushed the limits of his tolerance.

“But we’re having such a nice time,” she said as she placed a hand on his knee.

Now Roman was sure he was going to retch and preferred the bathroom for that event. He went to stand up but couldn’t feel his hands as he tried to push off the couch.

“What?” he said to himself. When he tried to get up again, his body would not comply with the commands from his brain. “Whattthefucckk,” he slurred as he made a last effort to hurl himself off the couch, but succeeded in falling flat on the table, breaking his glass, immobile but still conscious.

The woman, who didn’t seem surprised in the least, stood up without the languid motion she had been carrying herself in since approaching Roman. Her demeanor snapped from sultry temptress to high-powered boss bitch within moments.

She touched her finger to her ear and said, “The package is ready for shipment.”

From behind the bar, a team of human soldiers came quietly out, attracting very little attention, and moved Roman’s

body to the ground behind the couch. They secured Roman's hands and feet while fastening a leather and metal mask around his face.

One of the soldiers gave him a hard kick in the ribs and then injected him with some kind of serum before dragging him out of the bar through an unmarked, hidden door... and everything went black.

CHAPTER 8



The end of a session was always bittersweet for Xavier. On one hand, he'd effectively exorcised some demons. On the other, as soon as it was over, it was like everything that had left his mind for a few hours came rushing back, ready to start squeezing him all over again.

When he needed to shut off the world for a while, being strapped into an X-cross—one equipped to actually restrain him—was his go-to. The dominatrix Xavier had this time didn't hold back; he'd said, "Don't stop until you draw blood... and then keep going," and she listened.

One of the highlights of this visit was the dominatrix's use of the whips; she'd crack it and hit or not hit him at random, so he'd hear the sound and wouldn't know if it was going to land or not. It was a detail he'd be requesting from now on. When she had realized that her normal whip wasn't going to have the desired effect, she switched to something with spiked tails, and Xavier's pain and subsequent pleasure were intensified.

Xavier was holding onto the session in his mind for as long as possible as he let the hot water of his shower run over him. His wounds had closed and healed, but his backside was still tender enough that that water slightly stung for just a little longer. He cursed his body for the quick healing as the sting faded away.

And here it all comes, he thought as the unwanted shit filtered back into the forefront of his mind. He sighed and sat down on the shower bench, holding his head in his hands, his brown hair hanging around in clumpy, wet chunks. Xavier was

constantly watching, assessing, and analyzing everyone's behavior. Lucem Diem was getting increasingly stronger and at any moment, it felt like a trusted fighter could become a liability.

But he'd never thought that could end up being Roman. *The fuck is up with that guy lately? That shit with Vance over a human—careful Xavier, vamps in glass houses and all that shit—the scene with Arabella?* Xavier knew there was no love lost between them, but Roman's typical aloof and indifferent behavior toward her had evaporated.

After the uncharacteristic scenes he'd witnessed, he had decided to follow Roman. Something was off with that guy. He'd been acting strange since the mission, and Xavier was like a dog with a bone. As much as he wanted to just leave everyone to their own devices, it was impossible for him to ignore, especially when he had a bad feeling about something.

Xavier had been standing across the street from some apartment building he followed Roman too, smoking a joint while leaning against a wall. He had always been comfortable in the shadows and even with his six-foot-five jacked frame, if he wanted to disappear he could. Except that Roman should have spotted him. Roman should have noticed he was being followed. Roman was becoming a liability.

It was maybe 20 minutes later when Roman came back out—cozied up with some human, probably the one Roman lost his shit over, looking quite a bit more than some random fuck situation. Xavier was about to secure a car and continue following them, but decided Roman could just go ahead and blow up his life. He was a grown-ass vampire and free to fuck his life up as he chose. But he had a sinking feeling in his stomach.

“Fuck this shit,” he said, finishing the joint, and headed to the place where they knew him and his preferences.

Xavier finished his shower with a growing sense of unease. *Fuckin' Roman, I need another session with Mistress Belladonna, and he's gonna pay for it.*

When he finished dressing in his standard uniform of tight jeans, black T-Shirt, and black, leather jacket with studs and buckles, he went down to the breakfast buffet at Muse to let Roman know what he owed him and share a meal with the other dickheads—albeit dickheads who were also his closest brothers.

“Hey, Xavier, you made it. We thought maybe you and Roman were suckin’ each other off somewhere,” Vance said and then stuffed his mouth full of scrambled eggs.

Xavier surveyed the table, everyone was present except Roman.

“Roman’s not here yet? Anyone text him?”

“Yeah, I sent him a reminder about thirty minutes ago, same one I sent you,” Ashford said.

Xavier didn’t like this. Roman was the king of punctuality and frequently scolded anyone who was late; usually, that was Vance. Xavier pulled out his phone and called Roman, turning away from the table. When he didn’t answer, he stared at his phone for a moment and pulled up the location-sharing app they each had which showed Roman, or his phone at least, was still in his suite.

“Looks like the fucker overslept,” Xavier mumbled although that idea didn’t sit right with him, not at all.

“Overslept?” Ashford said with the same disbelief Xavier was feeling.

“I’ll go get him.” Xavier took off without waiting for further commentary. He arrived within a few minutes outside Roman’s suite, banging on the door.

“Roman? Hey! Roman! Open this fucking door!” Xavier was pounding on the door and received some strange looks from guests peeking out their doors. “Are you fucks Roman? No? Then mind your own goddamn business!” Everyone quickly popped their heads back into their rooms to do just that.

Xavier did a little more pounding and yelling before he decided to take it up a notch. “Fuck this,” he said as he kicked

the door in.

Immediately, Xavier realized something was wrong. He saw the broken glass scattered around the room and the chair that looked like someone tried to break the window with it. The wine that was flung around the kitchen area looked like blood splatter, and even though Xavier knew it wasn't, it still provided an unsettling atmosphere in the room.

“Roman!” Xavier called again as he checked the bathroom, finding the broken mirror. When he came closer to the couch, he got an intense whiff of a human woman. “Gotcha, bitch,” he said, feeling as though he located the evidence he needed to put all the pieces together. Whatever happened to Roman, this woman was the key to finding him.

He whipped his phone out. “Ash, is everyone still there? Great. Roman’s missing, but I know where to find him. I’m sending the address. Meet me there.” He hung up the phone and stormed out of the room, pushing through a small, gathering crowd. “Get the fuck outta my way!”

Xavier was seething and seeing red. *Fuckin’ Roman! How did you get into this shit? I’ll kill you myself when I find you, brother, right after I rip this bitch’s head off.*

CHAPTER 9



“Hey, Sean, I don’t think I can make it in today. I’m really not feeling well, and I don’t want to get anyone sick.”

“No problem, Jessica. We’ve got you covered. Please take whatever time you need.”

“Thanks so much. I feel terrible short-staffing the team.”

“Jessica, you haven’t missed a day of work. We’ve got this. Just feel better, okay?”

“Okay, thank you, Sean. See you later.” Jessica hung up, actually feeling a little sick to her stomach from lying to her boss about being ill, but she really wasn’t up for working today. The lack of sleep and whirlwind romance with Roman had kicked her ass—and heart.

She shuffled into the kitchen to make some breakfast, nothing really sounding good. She settled for making some coffee that would either satiate or stimulate the need for food. Jessica yawned, pulling her hair up into a messy bun, red waves poking out everywhere. She settled into her cozy, pillowy loveseat, tucking the quilt from her gran around her leggings and T-shirt.

“What were you thinking, Jessica? What? Like he was seriously into you? Like he could change your life from shades of gray to a spectrum of bright colors? So stupid.” She had a habit of talking to herself, especially when she felt she needed a reprimand. “Oh yes, it makes perfect sense—the man of your dreams sweeps you off your feet and into the sunset, or sunrise, whatever, just shut up.” She was trying like hell to

shift into angry mode, but all she could muster was petulance; her heart was just too broken.

As Jessica sank into the sorrowful frustration she was feeling, she knew she'd be getting a call sooner than later. How did her gran always know? *Yep, there she is*, she thought as the phone rang.

“Hey, Gran.”

“Hey, sweet pea, sorry to bother you while you're getting ready for work, but I couldn't let it go.”

“I know. And I'm not actually going into work today, taking a mental health day.”

“Oh? Just feeling a little burned out? You're not sick are you, hun?”

Jessica sighed. Her grandmother was anything but subtle in her attempts to get to the bottom of whatever Jessica was feeling. By this point in her life, her gran was an expert on all things Jessica, especially her feelings.

“No, I'm not sick. I just... I sort of... I feel like a moron.”

“I don't think that's quite the whole of it, my dear.”

“No, no it's not. There's a guy or rather, there *was* a guy, but that's over now.” Jessica laughed humorlessly. “Not like it was anything really that started... but something about it was just... different, Gran, you know?”

“Ah, honey, I understand. I know I'm an old lady in your eyes, but that doesn't mean I didn't hang in there with the best of them when I was younger. Broke a few hearts of my own before your grandad.”

“Yeah, I bet.” Jessica genuinely smiled to herself. “It all just happened so fast. It was literally like I was being swept off my feet. And the crazy part is that we met when I showed up to give a massage.”

“Well, as much as I don't love that detail, sweetheart, you're young and should be living your life! You work too much—you *worry* too much. Especially about me, and you

know I can take care of myself. Don't be so hard on yourself. Was it at least fun?"

"Fun? Yeah, it was fuc—freaking fantastic! He may have turned out to be a prick, but he was definitely a rich prick and spared no expense while setting me up for his ridiculous game. And the uh... uh, intimate moments, really were incredible."

"See? I bet maybe the time was worth a little bit of heartbreak. Makes a person feel alive."

"Yeah, I guess it will be a great story someday, 'Hey, this one time, I massaged a weirdo, got his blood on my fingers, thought I was going to get fired, and then he swept me off my feet for a couple days before trying to initiate either some weird-ass role play or getting off on a humiliation kink.' I mean, the nerve!"

"Wait, hun, back it up a minute—"

"I mean, come on! What did he really think would happen with, 'Oh hey, I'm an old-ass vampire'? Are there actually women who fall for that shit?"

"Jessica, slow down, we need to—"

"What was he expecting from me? Was it because of the blood incident that first night? Some sort of fetish? I don't know. I wasn't going to stick around and find—"

"Jessica Anne Roberts! You shush and listen to me right this instant!"

"Geez, sorry, Gran, I—"

"No, no, I don't like this one bit. I thought, of all the places to live, the fucking desert would be the best bet. And now, here we are. I can't believe... fucking vampires!" Jessica didn't interrupt her gran again; she was stunned by her tone as well her words. They were very rare moments indeed where she'd heard the F-word fly out of her grandmother's mouth.

"Jessica, listen. I think you might be in trouble. I'm on my way—"

The door to Jessica's apartment split into a million splintery shards as a bunch of men came bursting into her

apartment. One of them grabbed her phone from her hand and threw it at the wall, shattering that as well.

A large man wearing a leather jacket and a menacing-looking expression, grabbed Jessica off the couch, pinning her arms behind her back, and her face against the wall.

“Where the fuck is he?” He didn’t yell, but his tone was scarier to Jessica. Like, if she didn’t have the answer, things were going to get way worse.

“I... I don’t know who you mean,” she choked out.

“Don’t play with me, bitch. I know you were with him; your smell is all over his room. What did you do with Roman?”

“What? My smell... What the fuck? Roman? How should I know?”

“Look, I’m all for doing this the hard way. You feel me, princess?” And the man pressed against Jessica’s back, pushing her harder into the wall, almost to the point of not being able to breath.

“I don’t understand,” she breathed out, “I don’t know where Roman is.”

“Okay. The hard way then. Fine with me. Vance! Tie this bitch up. We’ll bring her with us.” Another man, this one still tall and muscular, but about half the actual size as the first, zip-tied Jessica’s hands and feet then placed some duct tape over her mouth.

“You really should have talked when you had the chance.” The man, presumably Vance, hoisted Jessica up over his shoulder and they left her apartment.

Everything was a blur to Jessica. They moved incredibly quickly from her apartment to waiting SUVs on the curb, making odd hissing noises between the building and the cars. Vance threw Jessica into the backseat in a laying down position. She couldn’t see where they were going and was elated when it seemed like they weren’t going too far. Or should she have been more terrified that the ride was over and

whatever reckoning they thought they were doing was closer to beginning?

When they pulled her back up, they were in a parking garage. From the car, they carried Jessica to some elevators. No one was speaking, but every so often she would meet someone's eyes and receive a sneer. When the elevator opened, she immediately recognized the interior of Muse. *What the fuck is going on?* In her hysteria, she imagined Sean sending goons after her for not coming into work, and she almost started laughing.

They entered a suite where more people were waiting and dropped Jessica onto the couch. A woman with long, straight, glossy, jet-black hair and ice-blue eyes walked up and ripped the tape off Jessica's face. She didn't have a chance to yowl from the sting before the woman slapped her.

"Where is he, you piece of trash?" Jessica just stretched and moved her jaw, blinking back tears. Her brain was going into overdrive trying to compartmentalize her trauma as she again almost burst into laughter thinking she was getting bitch-slapped by Snow White.

"Arabella. We'll handle this," one of the men said, then looked at Jessica.

"I realize Xavier there," the man motioned to who Jessica had referred to in her head as the kidnapping gorilla, "already asked you, but let's see if we can start over, shall we?" This man had kinder eyes and didn't seem as worked up as the rest of the crew. She nodded.

"Great. I'm Ashford. And you are?"

"Seems like you should fucking know who I am since you kidnapped me." Xavier made a move toward her, but Ashford put his hand up, and he paused.

"Let's say we'd like some confirmation. What's your name? Please don't make me ask again or we'll have to let Xavier finish the interrogation." Whatever was going on, Jessica was sure she didn't want that.

"Jessica."

“Jessica! See, that wasn’t so hard. Now, Jessica. We have a bit of a problem here. You see, we need to get in touch with our colleague, Roman, who we believe you are acquainted with.”

Jessica hesitated. Although she was super pissed with him, she didn’t really want anything bad to happen to Roman. She wasn’t sure where these people fell on that spectrum. Did he owe them money? Was Roman part of something criminal and these thugs were looking for him to exact some kind of revenge or message or payback?

“I haven’t seen Roman since yesterday,” she decided on.

“We’re wasting time! She’s admitted to being with him! I’m not going to stand around while my mate is missing. Let’s torture this bitch and get the information we need,” Snow White—Arabella—said.

“I hate to agree with Arabella,” Xavier started, “but—”

“You know what? Wait a minute. Mate?” Now Jessica was laughing hysterically. “Well of course! Mr. I’m a Vampire Rich Dick has a girlfriend or is it wife?” She looked at Arabella, still laughing, becoming a tad unhinged. “Un-fucking-believable.” She wondered why she was trying to protect him at all.

Xavier, Arabella, and Ashford were all speaking at once, arguing with each other, while Jessica muttered to herself, intermixing scoffs, and random noises.

There was a loud sound, three hard bangs of a cane hitting the ground. The room went still. Everyone seemed to defer to the gentleman who looked like he was the oldest of the bunch by about 30 years. His eyes were black and matched his hair except for gray streaks at his temples.

“Jessica,” his voice was just loud enough for her to barely hear, “did you harm Roman?”

“No.”

“Do you know where he is?”

“No.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“Last night, or I guess that would be this morning. Maybe around one-thirty or two?”

“I believe this human is speaking truthfully.”

Jessica expected someone to argue with him, Xavier or Arabella for sure, but no one said a goddamn word.

“Would someone please untie me and tell me what the fuck is going on?”

Ashford looked to the man for confirmation and received a slight nod. He moved toward Jessica and simply pulled the ties off with his hands. Jessica absently rubbed her wrist where she had been bound, already feeling better.

“Well, it would seem something has happened to Roman. He never showed up for our breakfast meeting this morning, and no one can locate him. His phone was found in his room, which was also a little trashed. We thought there was a struggle, and your scent was found in his room. Also, well, sounds like Roman already may have mentioned it...” Ashford paused for a moment, again seeking permission from Gray Wings, as Jessica was calling him, which he received. “Roman *is* a vampire; we all are. And he could be in real danger.”

Jessica’s first instinct was to reject what Ashford had just said, but the feeling in the room gave her skepticism pause.

“And I believe, my dear,” Gray wings was speaking again, “that you are the key to bringing him home safely.”

CHAPTER 10



“Oh, you’d like my help now? Well I guess you should have thought about that before busting into my house, kidnapping, threatening, and berating me.” Jessica got up to move toward the door, but Xavier was quickly blocking her.

“You’re not going anywhere. Sit your ass back down.”

“I can’t believe we’re just going to trust her; no way this pitiful human bitch could have seduced Roman.” Arabella looked like she was going to keep talking, but a scathing look from Gray Wings seemed to shut her down. Jessica wanted to punch that woman in the face and was seriously considering such an uncharacteristic act, but he met her eyes next, and Jessica had the sense that he knew what she was thinking. He raised an eyebrow at her, and she could have sworn she saw the beginnings of a smirk, but it vanished quickly.

“Everyone’s on edge, so I’ll excuse your outburst, Arabella. Once.” He motioned to Vance who brought Jessica a bottle of water. The tension in the room was starting to break, and she felt like her senses were returning to her.

They seemed to be waiting for her to say something, but Jessica had no idea what to say. She had clearly stepped into some shit here that was way over her head. Her emotions were in turmoil: she was crazy angry, but her convictions were losing steam. Vampires? Should she even still be mad at Roman? He wasn’t actually lying to her, and if she replayed the scene through a lens of honesty, she realized that he wasn’t trying to blow her off, he was trying to be honest with her.

And she was definitely pissed with the whole kidnapping and hostage situation, but taking another look around the room and opening herself up instead of remaining closed down, she saw a group of people—er, vampires—who were actually terrified for their friend. Above everything, there was deep fear and concern for Roman as they clearly loved him too.

Wait, too?! What the fuck are you saying, Jessica? This is getting out of hand.

Gray Wings was intently focused on her, seemingly watching every thought that passed across her face, waiting for her to catch up. She drank some more water before finally speaking.

“If Roman is in trouble, I’ll help in any way I can.” Every pair of eyes in the room bored into her. “I mean, I’m not sure what I can do that you all can’t. I’m not really a fighter.” She heard Arabella harumph and almost decided to prove that last statement wrong.

Before anyone could say anything, there was a banging on the door and a distinct voice to Jessica yelling something about “where the hell is her granddaughter!” Gray Wings actually looked intrigued at this turn of events and motioned for Xavier to get the door.

When he opened it, an irate Maureen came storming into the room, pushing past Xavier, looking much larger than her five-foot-four stature. She immediately spotted Jessica and went quickly to her.

“Jessica! Baby girl, are you okay?” She was patting Jessica down from head to toe, taking in her disheveled look of pajamas and slipper socks. “What did they do to you? Are you hurt?”

Vance snickered and said, “Calm down, Grandma. We barely touched her.”

Maureen turned to him. “You shut your mouth, bloodsucker, or I’ll rip those lips right off your face.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Vance said, sitting at attention, and catching some chuckles from around the room.

“That goes for all of you sons of bitches!” Maureen said, fixing each one of them with a glare, effectively shutting them all up. “I swear to God, if anyone has hurt my Jessica, I will disembowel you where you stand.”

Jessica was overjoyed, if not a bit confused, to see her gran. But this was an interesting side of her; she had the distinct impression that her grandmother could do exactly what she just threatened.

“How did you find me?” Jessica asked, pulling Gran into a hug. “It doesn’t matter. I’m glad you’re here. And listen, it’s okay. They’re not... there was a misunderstanding.”

“Misunderstanding my ass!” Maureen said. “We’re leaving.”

“Gran, someone they care about is missing and possibly in danger. Someone I care about, too.” She met her gran’s eyes and saw some understanding start to blossom.

“I see,” she said, taking in the room again. Maureen took a step back, eyeing Jessica very closely with a once-over. She then noticed the quiet gentleman who seemed to be watching everything with growing amusement. He nodded at Maureen who closed her eyes, sighed deeply, and nodded back, the two of them appearing to share some sort of knowledge lost on the young ones in the room.

She turned her attention back to Jessica. “Alright, hun. I think I’d like a moment alone with you. If you’ll excuse us for a few minutes, I’d like a word with my granddaughter.” Maureen was only speaking to Gray Wings, who nodded, and anyone in their way moved to the side to let them pass.

“Let’s take a little walk and get you something more appropriate to wear, plus, we need some distance so the vamps can’t hear us.”

Jessica was frankly too tired, confused, and worried to question her gran. They took a winding pathway to the elevators, rode down through the building in silence, and then navigated the casino’s main floor to a gift shop. Jessica just stood there while her gran put articles of clothing into her

arms: a pair of jeans, a black T-shirt with the least amount of rhinestones they could find, a matching underwear and bra set, fancier than any of Jessica's existing lingerie, a wacky pair of socks, zip up hoodie, and slip on sneakers.

Jessica went and changed in the bathroom, then she and her gran found a table in the food court. Maureen went and bought them some coffees, then settled in across from Jessica, taking her hands into her own.

“Why don't you start at the beginning, sweet pea.”

Jessica recounted the events of the last couple of days in detail, starting with the massage moment, all the way up till present. Everything that had been swimming around in Jessica's mind came pouring out, just like when she was a teenager, confessing everything she was thinking and feeling to her gran. She did leave some of the more intimate details out as they weren't pertinent.

Maureen listened intently and was silent for a moment after Jessica had finished speaking.

“Jessica, it sounds like your healing powers have been unlocked and awakened by this whole ordeal.”

“Gran, can we maybe not get too into that right now. There's sort of a lot going on, and I'm overwhelmed as it is. I promise, I'm ready to listen but some other time.”

“Baby girl, there is no other time. I wanted you to face this long ago, to be ready when you needed your powers the most. But there is no more time; you need to face this. And you need to do so quickly if you want to help Roman.”

“I don't understand what the two things have to do with one another,” Jessica said.

Maureen looked at her for a long moment before touching Jessica's arm.

“Honey, you guys are bonded mates. This is a for-life kind of deal, sweet pea.”

Jessica felt her heart leap in her chest. She knew she should have denied something so ridiculous instantly, but

somewhere deep down, she knew that her grandma was telling the truth. It explained so much. Why Roman consumed every waking thought Jessica had? Why she felt so alive and free when she was with him? Why she craved his touch even though she had only known him for so little time? He really, truly was her soul mate.

But what the hell had she done if vampires and soul mates were real?

CHAPTER 11



Roman slowly came to with a groan. He felt like trash. Or, more accurately, he felt like trash that had been vomited back up by a raccoon. Whatever drug he had been slipped left him with a pounding headache and a foul aftertaste in the back of his mouth.

Creaking one eye open, he winced at the harsh bright light that greeted him. When he managed to force his eyes open, he could tell he was a far cry away from the bar. As best as he could tell, he seemed to be in a cell made from thick, hard plastic. Craning his neck to look at the ceiling, he saw several round holes. *Couldn't spring for a five-star hotel?*

The woman from the bar was sitting across from him, casually flipping through a weathered-looking novel. She blinked up at him and grinned viciously.

“Finally awake, I see. Hope you got some good shut-eye.” She placed the book on the floor next to the chair.

“I’ve had better nights’ sleep,” Roman retorted.

The woman smirked at him. She uncrossed her legs and strode over to him, like a cat who was more than pleased she found a mouse in distress. *Well, just be glad there’s a plastic dome in front of you; otherwise, that smile would be ripped right off your face.*

“I don’t have to make this any more unpleasant on you than necessary. All my colleagues and I want is for you to answer a few questions. If you’re a good boy, we may consider letting you off easy.”

Roman couldn't help but snort. *Yeah, sure. You'll just let me go, and we'll all sit in a circle and sing fucking campfire songs together.* He wondered if there were any vampires who actually fell for that speech. He knew this group long enough to know that mercy was the last thing they were known for when it came to captured vampires.

The woman tapped against the plastic wall and eyed him curiously. She was studying him with a particular interest. As if he, in particular, was something that held a great importance to her that was different than any of the other vampires they probably had here.

“You know, I remember seeing you and your fellow bloodsuckers going after our caravan. Normal thing, getting raided by vampires. I'll admit, for leeches, you're all quite loyal to your kind. But I don't understand how you survived our little tête-à-tête

,” she glanced down at him curiously. Roman shrugged nonchalantly, and he could have sworn he saw the edge of her mouth twitch.

“See, we have been experimenting with new toys to take you and your little friends down. And that particular soldier you fought while raiding our caravan cut you with something *extra* special.

“Do go on,” Roman smirked.

“Oh, please. I'm not going to share an important secret like that. All you need to know is that before you, no other vampire has survived being cut by that blade. I want to know why.”

Roman had no clue what she was talking about either. All he knew was that after Jessica had touched the blood, the wound had closed up as though it had never been there in the first place. And like hell was he going to implicate her in this bullshit.

“Guess on top of being sexy, I'm also special,” he said.

The woman rolled her eyes, no longer pretending to be amused.

“The thing is, everything would go a lot better for you if you just gave us something to work with here.”

Roman shrugged once again and glared at her. He didn't know what she would do if he didn't give her the answers she wanted, but he knew by that glint in her eyes, it wouldn't be pleasant.

“Then how about something simpler for your thick skull to grasp? Tell me a few things about your friends in the Knights of Darkness. Anything at all, like where you meet, who the leader is. Just give me one teensy tidbit, and I promise we'll let you go.”

“You aren't nearly hot enough for me to converse with. So, why don't you cut out this ‘we have ways of making you talk’ crap and let me out of this cell. Then we can tango, though I guarantee you won't enjoy it.”

To Roman's surprise, the woman only began laughing.

“I was hoping you would say something like that,” she snapped her fingers sharply.

The air holes at the top of his cell shut with a surprisingly soft “thump.” A hissing sound tickled Roman's ears, and the air grew thick with a sickly-sweet scent. Roman gagged and instinctively clutched at his throat. A heaviness washed over his body, and his vision swam. He fought to stay conscious, but whatever the gas was, it was strong.

“Don't expect to wake up quite as nicely this time,” the woman said. The sneer on her face was the last thing Roman saw before the gas knocked him out completely.



When consciousness came again, Roman woke up in even less comfortable circumstances. From what he could tell, he was strapped to a hard, X-shaped table, his wrists and legs restrained with a hard metal that pulsed with UV light that slightly stung against his skin. *Well, Xavier might get a kick out of this, but I certainly don't.*

He looked up, and his captor, along with a few other humans, loomed over him. The way they looked down at him made Roman feel almost like he was the main course in some demented feast.

“You really should have been a little more forthcoming with us. Now we have to do things the unpleasant way.” The woman glowered.

Roman was about to retort when one of the humans pulled out a long, thin needle. Before Roman could even suck in a breath, the instrument was jammed violently underneath his fingernail. A sharp jolt went through his body, but he forced himself not to wince, even as they stuck even more needles underneath his nails. Even when they asked him questions, he kept his face stoic and mouth shut.

“I don’t think he needs those fingernails, do you?” someone said. One by one, they painfully jammed the needles harder and used them as leverage, ripping the nails entirely off. The skin stung as it was exposed to air. He gasped involuntarily.

“Let’s turn up the heat a bit.”

Roman could hear something like a dial being turned. The next thing he knew, the skin underneath his restraints was burning as the UV grew even brighter. The smell of his flesh bubbling churned his stomach, and he was certain the skin would melt down to the bone.

Despite himself, Roman screamed. More questions were thrown his way, but all Roman could focus on was the searing pain in his wrists.

“We don’t want him to strain against the restraints too badly. Let’s give the little leech a treat now, why don’t we,” one of the voices said.

A sharp prickling sensation tickled his arm, and before Roman knew it, ice was flooding his veins. But with it did not come relief. Instead, his limbs locked up rigidly and his stomach churned violently. *Don’t throw up. Don’t you dare*

throw up in front of them! He forced the stomach acid creeping up his throat back down.

He would have let loose a string of curses in English and the old tongue of his home, but the words wouldn't escape Roman's lips. His tongue felt heavy and slow as if it had been entirely coated in Novocain.

A metallic glint caught his attention from the corner of his eye. One of the humans was waving a scalpel over him menacingly.

"I wanna watch you bleed, leech" he spat at Roman. The blade was dragged viciously from his elbow down to his wrist. Roman winced at the sting. For a brief moment, he almost laughed madly—why did they go from burning to cutting? Did they think that was going to do it? It didn't take long for Roman to realize that the length of the cut on his arm must have nicked a vein. He felt the blood pool thick and sticky underneath him.

"Not too fast now. I want to enjoy this. And make sure you collect some of the blood," a fading voice said.

Roman felt cold all over. Despite himself, he couldn't stop himself from shivering, which his human captors seemed to take great delight in. Through the din in his ears, he could hear them cackle. Everything after that was a blur of nausea, dizziness, and flashes of pain as they continued to burn, shock, and cut. But the longer the torture continued, the more numb Roman became. He shivered from the shock and found his eyes failing to stay open.

The cruel irony of it all was not lost on Roman. After hundreds of years, he finally found a woman worthy of being his mate. But instead of spending a life together in complete and utter bliss, he had already lost her. Even if she did want to talk to him again, there was no point. There was no getting out of this. He was going to die here.

At least Jessica is safe. He didn't think he could live with himself if it were her strapped to the table being bled like a pig for slaughter. He would rip everyone in this room's throats out if they hurt her. If this was the end of the line for him, they

would never have to find out about her. They'd never lay a finger on her. That was more than enough for him.

The blackness at the edge of his sight widened and soon, Roman was swallowed up by the darkness.

CHAPTER 12



To say that Jessica was overwhelmed was beyond an understatement. Finding out vampires were real was a big enough shock to last most people a lifetime. *I still don't know if I believe I'm in a room full of vampires.* But then her grandmother drops the bomb on her that Jessica and Roman were a “mated pair” and “bonded for life”?

“This is so fucking insane,” Jessica said. For once, Maureen did not tell her off for swearing.

“I know, sweet pea. It's a lot to take in.”

“I mean, how did that mating thing even happen? I didn't do anything! At least I don't think I did anything.”

“Your powers aren't just healing things physically. It's more like complete physical and emotional empathy. You know exactly what other people truly need. Because you two were bonded when you touched his blood, well, your powers must have gotten a jump start from the physical and emotional reaction.”

Maureen might as well have been talking advanced calculus for all Jessica understood. A tremor of regret fluttered in her chest. If she had only been open to learning more of this from her grandmother, maybe she wouldn't have chased Roman off when he was only trying to explain himself. Perhaps he wouldn't be missing right now if she had just known how to tune in to what he was feeling.

“We need to find Roman before he's... before they—”

“I know. And I know how to help you find him.” Maureen took Jessica by the arm and dragged her further away from the cluster of vampires. Jessica didn’t pay attention to where she was getting dragged. All she knew was that Roman was missing.

“Look, your powers allow you to connect to people in a completely empathic way. It’s why you are so in tune with how they are feeling and know exactly what they need. But there’s more than one way your powers can be used,” Maureen said. She guided Jessica to sit down on the floor. She made Jessica take several deep breaths before continuing with her instructions.

“You need to take a deep look inside yourself. Find the core of your power in your heart. It’s there, and it’s awakening. All you have to do is call it forward, and it will answer for you.

Look inside my heart? She has to be joking. But at this point, Jessica didn’t have a choice. Roman needed her to find him.

At her grandma’s direction, she allowed her breathing to be slow and even. Focusing on the center of her chest, she repeatedly called her power forward. Begging, asking for it to come to her aid. *Please. I need you now more than ever.*

A deep discomfort settled in Jessica’s chest. It felt like a boulder had been strapped to her, and she had just been told to go run a marathon. She resisted the instinct to flee from the discomfort and let her grandma’s words guide her through it. Once again, she called for it.

And there it was. Inside her, there was a hum, the current of energy made of warmth and light. It coursed through her veins, filling her with an energy and a vitality she had never felt before. It was like she had just chugged three energy drinks with none of the heart palpitations.

“Good, very good. Now we can put it to work,” Maureen said. Without warning, Maureen pulled a small knife from her pocket and cut her own arm.

“Jesus Christ, Grandma!” Jessica swore.

Maureen didn't seem to heed her granddaughter's alarm. Instead, she looked at Jessica and expectantly held her bleeding arm.

“Try healing the cut by touching my arm,” Maureen instructed. Jessica tentatively touched the arm. She felt the sting of the cut as if her own body was injured. She focused on the warm, glowing sensations she felt at her center. As the blood coagulated and the skin fused, she felt almost giddy. Why had she been so afraid of this power for so long? The more she used it, the lighter and happier she felt.

“Good, now try without touching me,” Maureen said as she made another cut along her arm.

“How?” Jessica asked.

“Imagine that your power is a beam of energy leaving your body, then project that beam at me.”

Jessica did as instructed. She imagined the light leaving her body and washing over her grandmother. Guiding her body to heal as if she was directly touching her. Soon the second cut began to heal.

Jessica couldn't believe how light she felt. It was as if she could soar away from this bleak desert and go anywhere in the world. She was free, and she was changed.

“Excellent! I knew that your powers would be strong! Keep going, find the center of it,” Maureen cried. Jessica frowned. She thought she had found it.

“I don't understand,” she said.

“You need to look deeper. Right inside your heart, the very core of your power.”

So once again, Jessica closed her eyes. It wasn't as easy as before. When she tried, she felt like she was just slamming into a brick wall. The more she tried, the harder it felt, like she kept hitting the wall harder and harder.

“I can't do it,” Jessica groaned, her concentration evaporating like mist.

“Yes, you can. At this point, the only thing that’s blocking you is yourself, sweet pea.”

Jessica groaned, but she shut her eyes and tried again. *The only thing blocking me is myself. So what exactly am I blocking?* Maybe, if she tried to understand herself like she understood the pain of others, she could find the answer.

So she searched. Whatever was blocking her had to be there for a reason. If she could find the reason, she could find a way around the blockage.

The more she searched, the more she could see it. There were a lot of barriers that were around her heart. Some she was surprised to find that she had put there herself. Ever since she lost her mom, there were many things she had repressed. She wanted nothing to do with the power that seemingly took her mother away from her.

In an ironic twist, she thought it was her power that was reinforcing the barrier, as if it was there to protect her from all the pain of dealing with her unresolved feelings or her fear of connecting closely with people. She had even put up a new barrier right when Roman was starting to make her believe that being in love with someone might not be a bad idea.

But Roman wasn’t her mother. He hadn’t left her. She had left him because she was afraid of getting hurt. But now Roman needed her.

She pushed past the discomfort. She put the wall there, she could get over it. Opening herself up to the love she had for Roman, the confidence she felt mere moments ago using her powers more intently than ever before.

A rush of warmth flooded her skin. She found the center of her heart. There it was, a pure radiant energy that cackled like a fire. She *was* filled with warmth and light. It was there for her to control and mold as she saw fit. She opened her eyes and was surprised that the glow wasn’t just symbolic. Her skin absolutely shimmered.

Maureen’s eyes glistened with tears as she met Jessica’s gaze. Without words, she got up and embraced Jessica in a

tight hug.

“You’re ready,” she said. There was so much Jessica wanted to say to Maureen, but the lump in her throat wouldn’t let the words flow.

“I need to get back in there and find Roman,” Jessica said. Maureen nodded, and the two made their way back to the room. Most of the group turned their heads curiously, but there was no hostility in the room. Well, except for Arabella.

“Oh look, the useless human is back,” Arabella sneered. Before Jessica could make any kind of comeback, Maureen crossed over the room and stood before Arabella, shoulders squared, and chin held up.

“Don’t talk about my granddaughter that way unless you want to see the back end of a cane. Vampire or human, I’ll give you the worst beatdown of your lifetime.”

Jessica could hardly believe the words that came out of Maureen’s mouth. Arabella bared her fangs at Maureen, but a cough silenced her.

“Ahem. If you are both quite finished, we have some news that might lead to answers about Roman’s whereabouts.” The older vampire snapped his fingers, and someone brought in a laptop.

“Turns out they had little spies here at Muse. But they were sloppy and got caught trying to erase the security footage,” Xavier said as he set down the laptop. He pulled up a video and the room watched in silence.

Roman had stormed out of his room in a rage, cursing and punching the wall. Sometime after Jessica yelled at him, Roman had apparently gone to a nearby hotel with which Muse shared a parking garage. While inside the hotel, he had somehow been ambushed by the humans and dragged unconscious into a vehicle waiting in the parking garage. Then the video screeched off into the unknown.

Jessica couldn’t bear to look at the whole video. If she had never yelled at Roman, he wouldn’t have been ambushed. He would still be there, safe and sound. This was all her fault.

“Good news, that exonerates you, human. The bad news is that we are back to square one,” Xavier pinched the bridge of his nose. Jessica avoided looking at him. Looking at how much they were worried about Roman made her feel even worse.

“Not necessarily. My granddaughter and I can help you find him,” Maureen said, squaring her chin. A murmur went around the room, and many vampires wore doubtful expressions. Maureen ignored them and turned her focus to Jessica.

“Ignore everyone else in the room. Focus on Roman. How you feel for him. That will connect you to him no matter how far away he is” Maureen instructed.

Once again, they sat cross-legged on the floor. Unlike last time, when Maureen let Jessica figure it out on her own, this time, Maureen guided every small step. How Jessica breathed, how to draw her focus outside her own body.

For a moment, Jessica felt as if she was floating far away. Until someone had the nerve to cough, and she came crashing back down. She tried again but even without interruption, she found it difficult to hone in on Roman. No matter how much she tried to leave her own body, it fought against her.

“Don’t panic when you feel yourself flowing. Let it carry you like a current,” Maureen said as Jessica tried one more time.

She felt herself floating off again and surrendered to the feeling. Soon, she was soaring far beyond Muse and the room full of vampires. For a second, she thought she would fly endlessly until she forced herself to focus on Roman.

The moment she felt a flash of pain, she knew it was him. But the shock of the agony she felt pulled her right back, gasping for air.

Maureen made her take several deep breaths. It took a moment before Jessica could speak, but she confirmed she saw Roman.

“Good. Now slowly keep going in and out of feeling for his body and his heart. It will give you an idea of where he is and what condition he is in.”

Jessica went back in and searched for Roman once more. She found him much faster this time, but she was still overwhelmed by the sheer intensity of his pain. It was so intense, she thought she might get swept away by it.

When she had to open her eyes to catch her breath, she noticed that the vampires were hovering around them. No, not just hovering. They were staring at her and Maureen. Their expressions were a mix of awe and a little bit of fear. In particular, a lot of them seemed to be staring at Maureen.

“Everything okay?” Jessica asked uncertainly.

“Yes, they’ve just probably never seen anything quite like us,” Maureen said gesturing down at both their bodies. It was only then that Jessica realized she was glowing again.

“But if they want us to find their friend, maybe they should find their manners,” Maureen said pointedly. Most of the vampires looked away awkwardly, but Xavier laughed.

“You’re not so bad. For an old human at any rate,” Xavier grinned.

Jessica ignored him. She had to give this one more shot. This time, she paid as much attention as she could to any landmarks that would help her figure out where Roman might be. To her surprise, she found an area nearby that was familiar to her.

“He’s near Area 51,” she said. It sounded ridiculous to her. Why would he be near one of the most secretive military bases and tourist attractions for conspiracy theory weirdos? However, the vampires wasted no time arguing with her. Before she knew it, weapons were being handed out, and everyone was moving.

“You’re riding with me, humans,” Xavier said, taking both Maureen and Jessica firmly by the arm. Before she could protest, they were herded into a vehicle. Xavier practically floored the gas, and soon they were zooming into the desert.

“Whatever you were doing, do it again and try to get us closer,” he instructed from the driver’s seat. Concentrating in a noisy, speeding vehicle was a little harder, but Jessica forced herself to focus on Roman again. As they drove, she gave Xavier instructions on where to turn.

She focused more intently on Roman to check how he was holding up. When she felt it, her heart dropped. Jessica swallowed the bile climbing up her throat. The pain was still there but wasn’t as strong as before. Instead, all she felt was a cold, numbing sensation.

Roman was fading away, and they didn’t have much time.

CHAPTER 13



“Xavier, speed up!” Jessica cried. Xavier didn’t need much prompting. If Jessica thought he was going fast before, they were flying down the road now. The force of the speed pressed Jessica against her seat.

Before long, they came skidding to a halt. In a matter of minutes, more cars came pulling in. They were close enough to Area 51 to see it but far enough away that hopefully they wouldn’t get caught.

“Did you call in the air squad, Ashford?” Xavier said to a vampire after opening the door.

“Already on their way,” Ashford said. Xavier nodded.

“Good, I’ll call in the bomb threats.”

Xavier called, and his threat sounded so realistic Jessica shivered. She made a mental note not to get back on Xavier’s bad side. Within a matter of 10 minutes, cars were peeling out of the area.

“Not to be that guy but won’t this just tip off the humans?”

Jessica hated to agree, but the possibility of the military, police, or the group that took Roman raining hellfire down on them did not sound remotely safe.

“Nah, don’t worry about it, Jax. That place gets kooky fake bomb threats all the time.” Ashford said. He looked pointedly at Jessica.

“Still, you better work that magic and find exactly where in this wasteland Roman is.”

Jessica nodded and forced herself to focus. She reached out once again to Roman. She could feel him, but it was hard to maintain her connection. Everyone around her was a sea of anxiety that threatened to drag her down with them.

“Everything is so loud,” Jessica said, rubbing her temples.

It would be a miracle if she could sense Roman through all of this. Every vampire around her was in a heightened state of emotion, coiled and ready to explode at the drop of a pin. Then there were echoes of pain others in Roman’s location were feeling. If Jessica was right, she could only assume that he wasn’t the only vampire being captured by these people. Roman in comparison, was barely an echo in the cacophony Jessica was surrounded by.

Maureen took Jessica’s arm and closed her eyes.

“I can help you drown them out if you let me lend you my strength.”

Jessica felt the reassuring clasp of Maureen’s fingers on her arm. Her grandmother’s warmth flowed into her, and with it came a jolt of energy. Her body and mind felt sharper and re-energized. Soon the din of everyone’s emotions faded away. She closed her eyes and honed in on Roman.

He wasn’t that far. She just had to pinpoint exactly where he was. The desert rolled underneath her. Suddenly it seemed as though she was sucked down into the earth. But instead of darkness, there was a dim light. Rows upon rows of plastic-looking cells surrounded her, and among the collective groans and wails of agony, she felt the quiet flutter of Roman’s spirit, still miraculously hanging on.

“He’s underground!” she cried out. She described the rough approximation of the location. Without a word, they rolled back out. Jessica kept herself lightly attuned to Roman, afraid that if she stopped, she would lose the location. It didn’t take long before they found a collection of buildings that just seemed... off somehow. They clearly didn’t seem to be research labs, and yet they weren’t precisely what Jessica would call tourist attractions.

Before long the van screeched to a halt. Before Jessica could ask, the vampires burst from the vehicles. Only Xavier paused to glance back at Maureen and Jessica.

“Stay here,” he ordered before jumping out of the van. With an almost collective roar, the vampires ascended upon the location. The serenity of the desert soon imploded by the sounds of small-grade explosives, making the pitch black of the night come alive in fiery shades of orange and red. Jessica could hear a whir of helicopters above her. The explosives lasted a few more seconds, and then for a brief moment the only sound in the entire desert was the whir of the blades and the collective bated breath of the Knights of Darkness as they waited.

The desert seemed to split open. Before Jessica could get a better look, a Jeep-like vehicle came barreling out of nowhere. Before long an avalanche of soldiers was making a beeline toward the van.

A strangled cry escaped Jessica’s throat as she saw them approach. Maureen, however, just looked at the man running at the van with an eerily calm expression.

“I don’t think so.” The words barely escaped Maureen’s mouth before their opponent immediately stiffened.

Without warning, the human soldier dropped before her feet as if he was a felled tree. She held him there on the ground and kept him immobilized until one of the vampires could get on top of him. Maureen took her eyes off that soldier and immediately moved on to immobilizing another to give the vampires an advantage.

Jessica had never seen her grandmother like this. Her whole life, Maureen had only ever been a sweet, loving grandmother, a healer who tended to the ill and broken. But the old woman standing before her wasn’t just some kindly granny. There was a fierceness to her that shook Jessica to her core. She had an inner strength that boldened Jessica even as she watched her work.

Without saying anything, Jessica put her hand on Maureen’s arm. She focused all her energy on becoming her

grandmother's strength, just like she had done for Jessica earlier. As her glow flickered ever so slightly, her grandmother's only shone brighter. Maureen shared a grateful look with Jessica. With a fierce stare, she glanced toward the assailants coming at them. In an instant, three or four more human soldiers dropped.

Suddenly, Jessica felt a blinding, stabbing pain ripple through her. She dropped Maureen's arm and clutched her chest. *Something is wrong.* Maureen was calling her name but she didn't respond. Instead, she scrambled out of the van, and despite the cries behind her, she broke into a run.

She couldn't tell if Maureen or the Knights of Darkness were clearing a path for her and she didn't care. All she knew was that she had to hurry.

She didn't have to focus too hard to know this pain. She knew who it came from as sure as if it came from her own body. It was Roman, and he wasn't just growing weaker. Roman was dying.

No, no, no, please, no!

CHAPTER 14



Everything was so noisy. If it was possible, it was making him feel even dizzier than he already felt. Roman blinked his eyes open, but everything was blurry. From what little he could make out, there was chaos in this makeshift prison. Maybe the Knights of Darkness had figured out where he was.

Too bad they're too late. All Roman could feel now was the cold. Each breath came out more shaky and painful than the last. And yet, despite it all, he didn't feel afraid. An eerie calm had settled over him. There was no getting out of this. He was dying, and there was nothing anyone could do.

I have lived for 300 years, and this is how I go out. If he could have, he would have laughed. Oh, his parents would have been so disappointed that their great son had died at the hands of a few feeble humans. Cut and bled like a pig at the butchers.

But he didn't feel pathetic. The only thing he could think of was Jessica. He thought of her as he felt the blood pooling underneath him. Roman knew that everything that had happened the past few days was crazy. Hell, it was fucking outright insane.

Despite it all, if he could go back, he would do it all again. The only thing he regretted was that he had lost her in more ways than one. Even if it meant dying a thousand painful deaths over and over again. He wouldn't trade a single second with Jessica for the last breath in his body.

Which, unfortunately, was probably soon. He blinked his eyes open one more time. Roman could see a blurry figure standing above him through the haze. In the back of his mind he recalled old stories of angels—mere existential bedtime stories from humans born of their fears of their incredibly short lifespans. And yet even back then, there was always a part of him that hoped that something so pure and magical as that existed.

He squinted, and for a brief moment, he was so sure that the angel looked exactly like Jessica. The same vibrant red hair added to the glowing halo effect around its face, and the jewel-like green eyes bore right into his very center.

Of course, the angel would look like Jessica. What cruel twist is this? Yet at the same time, a feeling of peace washed over him. Everything was going to be okay. He was ready.



“Oh, no you fucking don’t!” Jessica cried. She didn’t know by what miracle she had made it inside. All she knew was that whenever an enemy tried to swarm her, all she thought was that she wanted them to drop, not to move another inch. As soon as she thought it, they would simply fall over.

Roman had been laid across an X-shaped table. He was unconscious and barely breathing when she reached him. Blood had pooled underneath him and spilled out over the table’s edge. One of the vampires she didn’t see had paused their assault to help her get the restraints off and helped her get him to the floor. Before she could thank them, they had already rejoined the fight.

She clung tightly to the fabric of Roman’s shirt. The rest of the battle didn’t matter. His spirit was so faint and weak, but she could still feel a glimmer of it. And what she felt there scared her. It was bad enough that he was wounded, but no matter how hard she forced the magic into his body, he would not heal.

She felt for his spirit again to see what was causing this. With a shudder, she realized almost immediately what the problem was. Whatever was left of his soul was at peace,

completely ready to let go. Roman was dying right there in her arms.

Her hands pressed harder against Roman's chest as if the force of her touch would be enough alone. But no matter how hard she held her hands against him, the blood continued to pool out from underneath him.

Think, Jessica, think. Why does he keep slipping further and further away? She paid attention to how her powers felt. She let out a sharp gasp. This whole time she thought she was healing him, but her powers were just bringing enough relief to bring a sense of calm. As if she was reinforcing that he was dying and should let go.

Of course. Her powers responded to what the body wanted. When people were in pain, the body wanted to be healed. Roman's body, however, was far past healing. Any fight he had left to cling to life was gone. Instead of healing him, her powers would push him closer and closer to the end. She had to convince him that he wanted—no needed—to hang on. That there was still something worth living for and that he had to fight for it.

“I'm right here, Roman. You aren't dead yet, and I'm *here*. Your mate still needs you. So you have to stay alive, damn it!” she yelled.

Roman gave a shuddering gasp, and Jessica panicked, thinking he was taking his final breath. But, after a moment, she noticed that his face had regained some color and that his breathing was stronger than before. She looked down at the cut on his arm and saw that the edges of the wound were fusing back together ever so slowly. It was working.

Don't stop! Focus. I have to focus on telling my powers what to do. She thought about everything she had felt since meeting Roman. The way he excited her in ways that nobody else ever did. How he just *knew* her so intimately without time or words on his side.

She knew what she wanted. All Jessica wanted or cared about was Roman. She wanted to be by his side forever. She wanted to get to know him better and share laughter and good

food and feel like she was floating every waking moment with him.

Jessica drew every iota of strength from deep within herself and a final burst of light and energy poured from her into Roman. She filled it with all her love, all her desire for him to live.

Wake up. You need to wake up.

Every ounce of strength left in her body flowed into her hands. For a brief moment, nothing happened. Roman was eerily still. Jessica's limbs were heavy, and she didn't know if she had anything left to give. But then, after that brief moment, Roman finally opened his eyes.

He looked up at her, and God the expression on his face made her want to sob. His eyes locked with hers and he held her gaze as if she was the gravity holding him to the planet. Jessica opened her mouth to say something, but before she could get the words out, Roman caressed the back of her neck and pulled her to his lips.

Any lingering fear and panic were swept away. The only thing that existed to Jessica was Roman's lips and his sweet taste. He was alive. He was alive and he was hers forever. She was never going to let him go again.

They stayed like that for what felt like hours. Just kissing, just knowing each other was alive and alright. They broke apart only to take a breath and Roman looked up at her in wonder.

"How?" he asked still breathless.

"Long story. I'm so sorry" she sobbed. In response, Roman pulled her in for another kiss.

"Ahem," Maureen's voice rang out. Jessica and Roman peeled away from each other sheepishly.

Somehow, while Jessica had been healing Roman, the fighting had come to a close. There were no signs of the humans anywhere that Jessica could see. Standing around them was a room full of bewildered and varyingly injured vampires.

“Well, fuck me. That was—” Xavier trailed off.

Someone made a wet, sputtering cough that snapped Jessica’s attention away from the peering audience. In the back of the group, a vampire was slumped near the ground, blood dripping down his chin. Jessica scrambled off of Roman and made her way across the room. The Knights of Darkness parted ways as she moved, their expressions full of awe and wonder.

She knelt next to the injured vampire. Saving Roman had renewed her strength enough that she was able to heal the vampire before her. Looking around the room there were a lot of horrifically injured vampires.

Someone had brought Maureen into the room as well. Jessica shared a look with her grandmother and the two of them made their way around the room mending all the injured they could find.

Jessica looked at Roman and smiled. She had done it. She had saved him. It was all over.

CHAPTER 15



When it didn't look like more humans were going to ambush them, the Knights of Darkness made their way back to Muse. In one of the private dining rooms, everyone ordered a ridiculous amount of food. Roman wolfed it down gratefully. One would think being tortured would ruin an appetite, but he couldn't stop himself from filling his plate with an assortment of the gourmet goodies that the Knights and Jessica kept forcing in front of him.

"So, in summary, they have some kind of chemical weapon they laced their weapons with," Roman said as he finished debriefing the Knights on what little information he managed to gather while captured.

"But how? I mean there isn't a chemical alive that should hurt a vampire?" Xavier asked.

"If I had to guess, maybe they did something with vampire blood. But I'm shooting in the dark on that one." It only made sense. If they wanted him to last long enough to give them information, they wouldn't have cut him so badly. There had to be some reason why they bled him so much. Granted everything at that point had been a bit of a blur. All he knew was he was lucky to be alive.

He pulled Jessica closer to him. It had been nothing short of a miracle that she had saved him. From what she had briefly told him, she had incredible healing powers. While more than grateful and in awe of her, Roman had to admit, that was a little unexpected.

But the biggest shock to his system was actually how well Jessica was fitting in. Roman was surprised at how quickly the Knights of Darkness seemed to have warmed up to Jessica. Honestly, he had expected a lot of hell to be raised if it came out that his mate was a human. But Xavier had explained to him that it was pretty hard to not earn their respect when she had done so much to help them rescue him.

“Well, whatever they’re planning now, we got a real ace up our sleeve. You should really thank your little girlfriend. I’ve never seen anyone do anything like that. It was amazing,” Xavier said.

“Yes, she is.”

He clasped her hand even tighter. While it had been quite a shock exactly how much he wanted her, after what they had just been through, he was more confident than ever. He needed Jessica in his life. She was his savior, his angel, his everything.

“Of course, that doesn’t necessarily mean that you’re entirely out of shit to worry about. I mean, getting humans involved is going get us even more on Lucem Diem’s shitlist,” Xavier said.

Roman scowled. This was the last thing he wanted to think about. But deep down he knew Xavier was right. The humans weren’t just going to give up on whatever their plans were. Now that Jessica was in the mix, she was likely going to be a target as well.

Then there was the matter of vampire society at large, not to mention Roman’s parents. Considering his now-broken engagement with Arabella was not going to go well. Given the fact she was nowhere to be found, it was likely they were going to find out soon. *She’s probably already on the phone crying to mommy and daddy like a spoiled princess.*

Jessica leaned her head against his shoulder and all thoughts on the future melted away. The only thing that mattered was at they were both here and they were together. Nothing was going to get in the way of that again. He would make sure of it.

He leaned back into her and took a deep breath savoring her scent. *God, she makes me feel more alive than I have ever.* If there weren't a bunch of people in this room, he would have taken her right at this table until she screamed his name.

"Well, I think it's about time that I head out. I'm not as young as I used to be after all," Maureen said. She looked over at Roman.

"I don't think I need to mention that if anything happens to Jessica, that you'll have to deal with me, do I?" Maureen asked. Despite the seriousness of her tone, Roman could see a glint of humor in her eyes.

"Nothing in this life or the next is going to get their hands on her."

Maureen nodded thoughtfully, glancing down at Roman and Jessica's intertwined fingers. He had refused to let go of her ever since they had left his prison. She smiled at the two of them.

"I know."



"Are you sure you have to leave, Grandma?" Jessica asked. Maureen nodded her head.

"Yes. After all, someone has to fix your door and clean up."

Xavier coughed sheepishly and very pointedly avoided looking at either Maureen or Jessica. It surprised Jessica that he looked so embarrassed. After all, he did recently threaten to rip her throat out. Maybe he wasn't such a bad guy after all.

"I trust this gentleman to see you cared for until it's ready," Maureen said with a wink. Jessica blushed, but she didn't pull away from Roman. She had to admit, she didn't want to leave his side for a second.

The dinner eventually died down, and the Knights made their way out of the dining room. Soon, only Jessica and Roman remained.

"Well, I guess that's that," Roman said, getting up.

“And are you sure you feel alright?” Jessica fussed. She knew she had healed him with her powers, but she couldn’t help but feel anxious.

He tilted her chin and looked at her.

“Never better, my love.”

For a moment, they just stood there, gazing at each other, as if taking everything that had happened in. There was so much that Jessica wanted to say, but the words died quickly in her throat. There didn’t need to be a lot said. As Roman wrapped her hair around his fingers, she knew what they were. How could she possibly have any doubts left? After what they had been through, it was clear that they genuinely were bonded together.

Roman brushed her cheek tenderly as if he was trying to prove to himself that Jessica was still there. She leaned into his touch and let out a contented sigh.

“So, what exactly happens now?” Jessica asked.

“Xavier isn’t wrong. There’s always going to be another problem. Human and vampire relationships aren’t exactly common.”

“To be fair, I haven’t heard of that many humans dating vampires,” Jessica said with a smile.

“Same,” he chuckled. Despite Jessica’s use of the word “dating,” she knew that what they were was so much more than that.

“Whatever happens. I love you, Roman” she said, her heart swelling. He brushed her lips with a gentle kiss.

“I love you, too,” he said. He twirled her red hair in his fingers and looked at her longingly.

“Why don’t we go back to my suite? I don’t know about you, but I can think of a few ways to decompress,” he purred.

Jessica felt a shiver creep up her spine. He didn’t have to elaborate. She knew exactly what he wanted. *Good God, even just talking like that makes me want him so bad.*

She nibbled teasingly at his ear. He didn't need much more encouragement than that. Barely able to contain themselves, they made their way to Roman's room. The second the door was shut, he ripped her shirt clean off her body. She gasped, feeling the cooler air against her skin, a jolt rippling through her.

Grazing her neck deliciously with his teeth, he unclasped her jeans and bra, throwing them unceremoniously to the floor.

"I want you so badly," he groaned against her skin. Her whole body was on fire.

"Then take me," she said boldly. With a wild, lustful strength swept her up and threw her on the bed. He strummed her sex with his fingers, making her moan.

"Say my name, my love," he said as he suckled at her breast. She obeyed without question. The more he played with her, the louder she said his name.

"Oh, Roman, please. Please, I need you right now," she begged. He thrust himself inside her, and she thought she would come undone right then and there. She felt him throb against her insides, and the heat of their bodies merged together.

With every thrust, they grew closer and closer as if they were going to become a single person. *I don't think I could ever get tired of this.* Jessica didn't know if it came with being bonded, but every time they had sex, she couldn't get enough of Roman. She wanted all of him. For him to be hers and only hers forever.

"I'm coming!" Jessica cried. With a shudder, they both came. For a moment they lay there, still connected and in a delicious haze.

Jessica leaned against Roman and thought about everything that had happened in silence. Even though there were still so many unknowns, Roman was her home now. This was the only place she wanted to be.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Viktoria was born and raised in the beautiful mountains of Southwest Montana where she still lives today. When she isn't writing, she loves reading, eating, thinking about doing yoga (occasionally even going to a class!), and spending time with her children, husband, and goldendoodle.