

*Noble Romance Publishing*



GRACE  
MINA CARTER

—TUESDAY'S CHILD—  
FULL OF GRACE

Grace

## Noble Romance Publishing, LLC



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Grace

ISBN 978-1-60592-019-1

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### **Book Blurb**

Grace Solomon was a ballerina. Not just any ballerina, but *the* Prima Ballerina. Extraordinarily talented and as graceful as her name, she found herself catapulted to the highest levels of her art. Until the day a horrific car accident leaves her crippled, barely able to walk. Heartbroken, she accepts she'll never dance again.

When enigmatic stranger Jaron Conrad turns up talking of a cure, Grace accuses him of being a crackpot and a quack. But could there be a possibility that he's telling the truth, and if he is, does Grace have the courage to take a chance on him? The courage to pay the price, even if it costs her heart?

### **Chapter One**

One flight of stairs. Just one measly flight of stairs, but for Grace Solomon it might as well have been a mountain. Sighing to herself, she headed over to the railing. Awkwardly, she transferred her walking sticks over to her right hand. She snorted. Walk . . . what a joke; shuffle might be nearer the mark.

She cast a quick glance around to make sure she was alone in the corridor. Nothing but the empty lobby met her eyes. Swan Lake had already started and all the

patrons had already gone in to their seats. Good. Grace didn't like pity, didn't like people watching her as she made her clumsy way up the stairs. She knew Eric, the lobby host, would be watching in case she fell. But he wouldn't venture out of hiding unless she needed him, which suited her just fine.

Grace started up the stairs, one slow, painful step at a time. She had a stair lift at home, but she'd be damned if she'd act the cripple in public. Her fiercely independent nature wouldn't allow it. And that same tenacity had gotten her out of the hospital bed a year and a half ago when most people would have just given up. So she'd walk up these stairs if it killed her.

Clutching the handrail, she concentrated. Sweat broke out and trickled down her spine as she forced her damaged legs to obey her. Lift, slide and haul on the handrail until she was on the next step. Rinse and repeat. It took a while but it beat the alternative. There was no way she'd let anyone carry her; she *did* have some pride.

Pretty much *all* she had these days.

Another step and she paused, catching her breath, almost halfway to the top now. Her slender fingers curled around the handrail for balance. A little lie to conceal how much she needed the support. She had excellent balance, always had, which was one of the reasons she'd risen to ballerina. *Prima* ballerina in fact.

She'd wowed audiences with her ability, her grace and her poise. They'd flocked from the far corners of the world to attend her performances and she'd received invitations for private performances from the royal houses of Europe and beyond. Everyone had known the name Grace Solomon.

These days, because of another driver's lapse in concentration, her best performance amounted to managing a small flight of stairs. That lapse in concentration had caused a three-car pile-up only Grace had survived. She was lucky to have walked away from it at all. Her lips curved slightly, but not in amusement. Technically, she hadn't walked away from it. She'd been cut out and spent a month in intensive care. Then, when they couldn't keep the news from her any longer, she'd been shunted to counselling. They thought the news she'd probably never walk again, let alone dance, would have a negative effect on her.

*No shit Sherlock.*

Finally making the top step, Grace paused for a moment, the brief sense of triumph that ballooned in her chest quickly replaced by fatigue. She leaned on the

handrail for a moment as she waited for her legs to stop trembling. *Would it be too much to ask for these places to be built on one level?*

Shuffling along, Grace made her way toward her seat. She rented a private box so she wouldn't annoy other people when she came in late. She pushed open the door and made her way to her seat as silently as possible. Fayte was already there. Too embarrassed to let anyone, even her cousin, watch her climb the stairs, Grace always asked her to meet her at the theatre, rather than travelling together.

Fayte flicked a glance over her shoulder as Grace dropped gratefully into the seat next to her.

"Thought you'd never get here. Takes you longer and longer each week."

"I—"

"Shhh, it's about to start," Fayte said, as though talking to a sulky child rather than the fully grown woman who paid her wages.

Grace shook her head and lapsed into silence as the familiar music started. Arguing just wasn't worth the effort sometimes. She sighed and sat back in her chair, her gaze fixed on the stage as the show started.

She watched the dancers, eagerly drinking in each and every step as she noted the body lines and graceful movements. Dancing was denied to her, a bitter twist of fate which had left a knot of pain in the middle of her chest, an empty hole to match the rest of her broken body. But her injuries didn't mean she couldn't watch and appreciate others dancing and try to soothe herself with the music and ambiance of her old life.

Maybe in a few years she might start teaching, she mused, allowing herself to be drawn into the music and the magic happening on stage. She became lost in the dance and all-too-soon the first act drew to a close. Grace sighed in disappointment and allowed her gaze to stray sideways.

Just checking how many people were in tonight, she tried to kid herself. Her gaze wandered over the packed seats, then up over the boxes above them. All the time she avoided the adjacent box and the tall, lean man who sat half-hidden in the darkness.

He was the other reason she came here. The other reason she put herself through the weekly trauma of the mountaineering exercise up the stairs.

Jaron Conrad.

Everyone on the ballet circuit knew Jaron. As a patron of the arts, he'd attracted the attention of every artistic organization within a hundred-mile radius. Groups he favoured didn't hurt for money or resources and there wasn't a ballerina out there who wouldn't give a couple of body parts for him to notice her. Hell, there wasn't a *woman*

out there, ballerina or not, who didn't sit up and take notice when Jaron walked into a room.

Tall and lean, he had the face of a dark angel. Even his voice was sexy. Low and silky, it had a woman wet with need before he even finished a sentence. The deep timbre promised hot nights between cool sheets, sending any female mind off on all sorts of erotic fantasies. And that was in polite conversation; heaven knew what kind of effect he could have whispering something more erotic in a woman's ear. Probably complete ovarian meltdown.

A shiver ran down her spine; just the idea of Jaron Conrad whispering sweet nothings in her ear set a fluttering off in her stomach. She'd had fantasises about the guy for years, since the first time she'd seen him.

He turned and his pale eyes focused on her with single-minded intensity. Grace froze for a second, blindsided by the look in his eyes, a dark look that both thrilled and terrified her. She managed a smile in response and inclined her head a little before she turned away. A flush ran rampant over her cheeks.

*Oh god, the way he looked at her . . . as though he could see right into her soul.* She couldn't help the small smirk that quirked her lips. On the whole, at least her soul was fairly safe. Her head, on the other hand, was filled with erotic daydreams.

Fantasies of what it would be like to have those perfect lips pressed against hers. Or his lean, hard body wrapped around hers, looming over her as she looked up at him. His knee sliding between hers, pressing open her thighs before he took her, his body thrusting into her as he held her wrists captive above her head.

Her cheeks grew hotter at the image she'd conjured up in her mind and she turned her head, hiding her blush in the darkness as she muttered a response to something Fayette said. She wasn't listening to her cousin; all her attention was on the next box and its sexy-as-sin occupant.

Her mind started to wander back into her favorite fantasy. The two of them in a box, exploring each other everywhere with hands and lips before he pulled her onto his lap. His hands fanning over her hips as he slowly impaled her on his hard cock. A long tremble ran through her body as she imagined sliding down over his length, taking him inch by inch. Then she'd ride him, her hands resting on the front barrier of the box as the ballet continued, all those around them unaware of the erotic goings on above . . . .

A twinge of pain in the back of her calf brought grim reality crashing back. The mind might have been willing but the body wasn't. She sighed. She might have hoped to

catch his attention when she was . . . well, normal. But what hope did she have now? A man like Jaron would never want a crippled woman.

She'd looked at him. More than that, she was *thinking* of him. Thinking of him and sex in the same sentence if he wasn't much mistaken from the flush across her cheeks as she turned away.

In the next box, Jaron Conrad smiled to himself. He allowed himself the luxury of studying her, visually caressing her slender figure. A surge of possessiveness rose hot in his chest. She was his, whether she knew or not. She always had been.

He ignored the dancers as they emerged back onto the stage. He wasn't here for them. Oh, he knew they were ecstatic he attended their performances. Later, at least three of the senior dancers would send invitations, asking him to their dressing rooms. In another time, another life, he might have accepted, but not tonight. The instant he'd seen Grace all that had changed. He was only here because of her.

She bent to listen to something her companion said. The move set her earrings dancing, the small crystals winking in the light thrown up from the stage, highlighting the slender curve of her neck.

Lust slammed into Jaron's body, his fangs dropping ready into his mouth. A mouth that watered at the thought of sinking his fangs through her creamy skin at the same time he took her, fucking her as he drank from her.

*Great, nice one, Jaron, try getting rid of that sometime this century.* Shifting in his seat he tried to ease the savage ache of his erection. He really, really did not need to think of her neck, or the tender swell of her breast, or the creamy skin of her thighs. Not if he wanted to survive tonight. Because, clichéd as it sounded, tonight was *the* night.

He'd spent months watching her from afar. Watching as she grew in confidence. Waiting for her to lift her gaze from the stage and remember the rest of the world was waiting for her. He'd seen it before in accident victims. Shock forced the mind to withdraw from the world until it could cope with what had happened. Until recently she hadn't looked away from the stage, her beautiful green eyes locked on the dancers. The longing look on her face would have broken many a lesser man.

It had nearly broken Jaron, especially when he knew he could make it right. With one small bite he could erase all her problems, set the clock back and let her dance again. But he couldn't, wouldn't. She wasn't ready. He corrected himself, *hadn't* been ready.

Until tonight.

She'd never looked up from the stage before, scanned the crowds. She wasn't to know half of them came to see her. Isolated in her private box like a princess in the tower, a princess waiting for a noble prince to come and rescue her.

Jaron's lips quirked. He'd been called many things, but *noble* wasn't one of them. He'd rescue her, alright, but then he'd carry her off and lock her up in his bedchamber. A black prince claiming his bride. Yes, he liked that. Smiling, he levered himself out of the chair, his movements predatory before he checked himself. He'd always wanted Grace. Time to put his plan into action.

It didn't take Jaron long to reach the door to the next box, but the short stretch of corridor was the longest walk he'd ever taken. He paused as he reached the door, one long-fingered, pale hand resting on the wood. Closing his eyes, he breathed in something that wasn't exactly an odor. Her scent, her aura. His pale eyes snapped open, reading the nameplate on the door. *Solomon*.

Well, at least he wasn't going to stumble into the wrong box and make an idiot of himself. Jaron shook himself, trying to calm the jittery feeling in his stomach. Nerves? Since when had he been nervous about *anything*?

He was a centuries-old vampire, a creature at the top of the food chain with no natural enemies. But regardless, his stomach felt like a pit of snakes had taken residence. Hyper-active snakes. He grimaced and pushed the door open.

It took less than a second for his vision to adjust to the darkness. He kept his head turned a fraction, so the lights from the stage didn't hit him full in the face. A gesture most people would have taken to mean the lights had blinded him for a second. They'd have been wrong. Dead wrong.

Vampires were nocturnal predators. Like most creatures who hunted in the night, their eyes were reflective. His eyes lighting up like a freaking cat in front of a car on the highway would be a dead giveaway he wasn't human. The last thing he wanted was Grace running screaming from him. Like Julia . . . .

. . . . *"Monster!!" she yelled, fleeing from the room before he could say a word. Heart pounding, he raced after her but the front door slammed open before he was out of the room. "Julia!" But she didn't stop, fleeing down the steps of the fashionable London townhouse she'd insisted they buy after their marriage not so long before.*

*He saw the carriage before she did and bellowed for her to stop, fear in his voice. Too late. Her yellow silk gown billowed in a cloud under the horses' hooves, and a scream*

*tore through the air. His or hers, he couldn't tell. Scarlet spread over the silk, red on yellow. Cheery colors to herald death. Death was in the air, his preternatural senses informing him the instant her heart stopped beating . . . .*

Schooling his features, Jaron stuffed the unwanted memories back in the box from which they'd managed to escape. "Good evening, ladies. I hope you don't mind the intrusion. May I come in?"

He stepped farther into the box as he spoke, sweeping a glance over the two of them and instantly dismissing Grace's companion in favour of looking at her. He caught the movement out of the corner of his eyes as she stiffened slightly.

"Of course, Mr. Conrad, please do." Grace's voice was calm and collected as she motioned him to come in and join them. She indicated the empty chair to her left. Her companion, who occupied the chair to her right, shot Jaron a dark glance from under her lashes.

*If looks could kill . . . .* He smiled his thanks as he sat down, lethal grace in every line of his body.

"Thank you. Did you enjoy the ballet this evening?"

"Boring. The lead dancer was flat-footed and the orchestra was off-key," the other woman said, flicking her hair back over her shoulder and crossing her legs. A gesture designed to bring attention to their long, slim length. Jaron spared her a glance.

Taller than Grace, she had a slightly heavier build. Her face was familiar, her elfin features similar to Grace's. A relative, of some sort. But instead of Grace's vibrant coloring, deep red hair and emerald eyes, this woman was a faded, washed out version, and her strawberry blonde locks and brown eyes did nothing for Jaron.

"I thought it was a good performance." Jaron looked back and forth between the two women as he tried to figure out the relationship. Sister, maybe? No, their scents weren't close enough, even if you discounted the sickly perfume this one was wearing. Cousin, perhaps?

"Fayte, would you go and check whether the cars arrived for us yet, please?" Grace's voice cut between them.

"Oh I'm sure it has; John's usually early." Fayte turned a bright smile on Jaron as she leaned forward, displaying her ample cleavage. Jaron ignored her. He knew her type—all false tits and equally plastic personality. Not something that appealed to him, except maybe as a way to slake the darker needs within him for ten minutes or so. He turned back to Grace.



Grace was a different matter. She'd captured his attention from the moment he'd first seen her a couple of years ago. This close to her, within touching distance of her delicate, fragrant skin, his cock ached and hardened in his pants until it almost burst through his bloody zipper.

Grace flushed scarlet, her voice sharp as she repeated her request. "Fayte, go and check if the car has arrived, please."

Fayte huffed. Even softly spoken, Grace's words were an order. One designed to set the other woman in her place and remind her who was boss.

*He would teach Grace who was boss . . . in his bed. Bent over his bed. Tied to his bed.* Jaron shook his head to dislodge the wayward thoughts. He needed to keep sex off his mind—not an easy task when her delicate perfume, warmed by the erotic fragrance of her skin, wrapped around him in a siren's call.

Fayte stood, flicking her hair over her shoulder as she flounced out. "*Bloody pervert. Probably can't get it up for anything other than a bloody cripple!*"

She'd muttered the insulting comment, but obviously meant for both of them to hear. Jaron wasn't surprised. The woman had a spiteful aura. He'd noted the jealousy in her eyes whenever she looked at Grace.

"I'm sorry you had to hear that."

"Hear what?" He turned a blinding smile on her as he shifted closer. Closed in for the kill . . . .

*Oh lord, he's handsome.* Grace felt her traitorous body relaxing, turning to him like a flower toward the sun. His arm wrapped around her, resting across the back of her seat. Grace shivered.

"Thank you." She offered a small, grateful smile. Sometimes the things Fayte said embarrassed her but normally her cousin had the decency to keep quiet when they were in public. Her more caustic comments she kept for when they were at home. Even so, what she'd just said had gone beyond the pale; she and Fayte would be having words later.

"So what brings you to chat with me tonight, Mr. Conrad?" Grace eyed him with interest, trying not to stare as the sharp, angular lines of his shadowed face drew her attention. He'd always sent her flowers when she'd performed, the same as he'd done for the other primary dancers. He'd also sent her flowers after the accident, but those had been different. Somehow, he'd found out what her favorite flowers were. His bouquets

had changed then. Instead of white roses, he'd started sending freesias. She loved freesias, always had. They'd been her grandfather's favorite flower, as well.

"Thank you for all the flowers you sent, by the way. I would have sent a note but . . . I wasn't really myself at the time."

"It is forgotten." He waved a hand in elegant dismissal. He had a lazy, indolent manner Grace found fascinating. If she didn't know better she might almost suspect him of being a dancer himself.

He smiled, the one blue eye she could see warm with amusement. "Of course, I reserve the right to exact a forfeit at a later date."

Grace chuckled at the teasing, feeling the familiar heat building in her cheeks again. *Oh lord, don't I have enough to deal with without a tendency to blush at the drop of a hat as well?* Her colouring was so fair, her skin almost translucent, that a blush instantly transformed her into a human beetroot. *Not* an attractive look. At least in here it was too dark for him to see her clearly.

"Actually, I thought it was about time I introduced myself to the vision of loveliness who keeps bringing me back here each week . . ."

When he trailed off, looking at her expectantly, the hope that had been building in her chest fell flat.

"Oh." She managed to keep her face blank as she wondered which dancer had caught his eye. She knew most of them so she could easily arrange an introduction. But why would he need *her* help? All he had to do was walk backstage, and his identity and his heart-stopping good looks would do the rest. He'd only have to crook his finger and he could have any female dancer he wanted. Hell, probably half the guys as well! She bit her lip, waiting for him to name someone, and knowing that her name would never be on that list.

"Tonight she smiled at me, drawing me to her side. First I had to slay the dragon and now I hope to lay claim to the fair maiden's heart."

Grace blinked in surprise. "Excuse me? Dragon?"

His lips quirked, threatening to send Grace's pussy into meltdown.

"Your little fiend . . . I don't think she likes me." He winked. "But then I am a marmite sort of a person."

Grace just gaped at him, having rapidly lost track of the conversation. Had he just described himself as marmite?

Damn it, she'd started to fall under his sway! Jaron cursed under his breath, reining in his abilities just as her eyes started to glaze over. As a predator, when he saw something he wanted those instincts took over. His voice grew silky, beguiling, and his eyes hypnotising. It wouldn't take long and she'd be his for the taking.

*Yes!* His instincts all clamoured at once.

No. He wanted Grace but not because his abilities had enchanted her. Male vampires were naturally dominant. With all the abilities at his command he could snap his fingers and she'd fall at his feet. His lust-shrouded brain offered up an image—Grace on her knees in front of him, her eyes dark as her small hands crept over his thighs up toward his belt buckle. Heat and need hit him in a whirlwind but he fought the temptation down. He closed his eyes, breaking the connection he'd unwittingly forged.

That wasn't what he wanted. Well, it was. He wanted Grace naked in his arms, naked under him. Spread-eagled over his bed as he had his wicked way with her. But only if she wanted to be there. It was about choices, knowing your lover trusted you, allowed you power over them willingly.

*That* was the rush, the elation, what he wanted from Grace. He wanted her on her knees in front of him, sucking his cock, or spread under him as he took her hard and fast. But she had be there of her own free will.

If he took away her choices and used his abilities to get what he wanted he didn't have Grace. He just had a fuck toy that *looked* like Grace. He'd done that in the past, all too often, and it just didn't work. Without the spark of free will, sex became routine. Boring.

He sat back, giving the beautiful woman sitting next to him a few moments to recover. He reached out and took her hand, lacing her warm fingers with his.

“So, how are you doing now, Grace? Since the accident, I mean?”

His words ripped Grace out of her sensual daze and slammed her back into reality harder than a wrestler hitting the mats. Her own foolishness added a vicious leg drop. *Way to go, Grace. A handsome guy only has to get near enough for you to smell his aftershave and you act like a star struck teenager!*

“I *knew* it was too good to be true!” Her voice was shrill with disappointment as she launched herself to her feet. She wobbled a little as she tore her fingers from his. She was pathetic; she should have *known* he wasn't interested in her at all.

He was just like all the rest, only interested in details of the accident. What *was* it with these people? Did she have to parade around bloody naked, show off every scar, all the damage that being in a car as it rolled six times could inflict? Would they be happy then and leave her alone?

She turned away, intending to storm out of the box, but he stepped around her, blocking her path. He loomed over her, his expression intense, his hard gaze on her face. His expression should have frightened her—a man, any other man, looking at her that way would have scared her to death. But the look on Jaron’s face didn’t frighten her; it thrilled her right down to her toes.

He moved. He hauled her up against him, holding her captive against his lean, hard body. No chance to struggle, but she didn’t plan to. Her lips parted as the softest of moans escaped. As soon as he’d touched her, it was as though a switch had been flicked inside her.

“I can assure you, if you paraded around in front of me naked I wouldn’t be leaving you alone. In fact, I wouldn’t be able to keep my hands off you.” His voice was liquid temptation by her ear, his warm breath fanning over her neck and stirring the loose curls that had fallen from the elegant pleat.

Heat blossomed in the pit of her belly. Grace sucked in her breath as her body clenched with need. *Hell, if he can do that with just his voice, what would it be like if he kissed me?*

He chuckled, the sound soft and melodious in the darkness. “Why don’t we find out?”

His hand slid into her hair, strong fingers massaging the delicate bones of her neck as he bent his head to press his lips to hers. Warm and firm, they moulded to hers, brushing softly as he explored. She gasped as her lips tingled, the sensation spreading out through her whole body. He took advantage of her gasp, gathering her closer as he deepened the kiss, taking them both into the dark tumult of desire that awaited them.

## Chapter Two

“I don’t think this is such a good idea. I mean, what if he’s some lunatic axe murderer or something?” Fayette’s petulant voice broke across Grace’s contemplation as she tried to decide what to wear to dinner with Jaron. It wasn’t a date. Not yet. Not even with that kiss last night.

A kiss that had left her aching and wanting more. When he'd lifted his head, the look in his eyes had taken her breath away. Hot, possessive need, visible for a split second before the amused mask he used to keep the world at bay clicked back into place. The glimpse she'd had had been enough. Just the memory had her all hot and bothered again.

"Oh, come on Fayette! This is Jaron Conrad we're talking about. Everyone knows him."

Grace flicked through the rails in her closet as she spoke, one hand resting heavily on the cane at her side. "Anyway, you know where I'm going so if I don't come back you can raise the alarm, can't you?"

Fayette mumbled something sharp under her breath and flounced out. Used to her cousin's dramatics, Grace ignored her. Fayette's moods were getting worse. One day soon she'd have to deal with it, but not today. With Jaron's driver picking her up in—she checked the time by the clock on the bedside table—three quarters of an hour, she needed to get a wriggle on to be ready in time.

Forty-five minutes later, she slid into the back seat of the car Jaron had sent for her, a thick wrap over the turquoise evening gown she'd chosen. She shivered, chilled from the short walk, and pulled the wrap tighter around her bare shoulders as the door closed behind her. Thankfully, the car was warm and within a few minutes she released the death grip on her wrap, letting it slide back a little.

The scenery passed in a blur. Grace stared blankly out the window, nibbling at her lip as another worry occurred to her. Would she be over-dressed? The strappy gown she'd picked was suitable for a night at the ballet or a swanky reception but what if he took her somewhere informal? A shudder ran up her spine as she imagined being seated in a fast food joint dressed like this. Just as quickly, she dismissed the thought; Jaron wouldn't do anything to make her uncomfortable. Even so, the worry lingered in the back of her mind until the car slowed and turned off the road.

All thought fled as a huge gateway loomed before them. Ornate and detailed, it looked like something out of the last century pulled into the present. The car came to a stop, and the driver waited as the heavy steel gates opened.

The sense she'd been transported back in time grew stronger as the car swept up a long driveway to the house. Like the archway, the mansion was something out of another era. She caught her breath as the car pulled up in front of the huge front doors.

Any worry about being overdressed disappeared; she could arrive in a ball gown and not be out of place here.

The chauffeur walked around the front of the car to open her door but Grace barely noticed him. Normally, she made an effort to avoid being rude, but her eyes were locked onto the front of Jaron's house and speech was impossible. Dread coiled into a tight knot in her stomach as the chauffeur opened the door. Which was pretty impressive when she felt like she'd swallowed a brick.

Steps. Long, stone steps led up to the front of the house. Low and wide, they wouldn't be a problem for most people. But for her, they presented an almost insurmountable problem.

Trying to keep her panic under control, she looked for a handrail or anything else she could use to pull herself up the staircase. Nothing. The steps wrapped around the main door in an unbroken half-circle. Unless she wanted to try to crawl up the wall she was up a creek without a paddle.

Cheeks burning, Grace reached for her sticks, fumbling with them as the chauffeur waited patiently. His patience made things worse and she dropped them. Grace's eyes prickled with tears as she cursed under her breath and fumbled for purchase on her canes.

Why hadn't she thought to call ahead about this? Used to a world of lifts and elevators, Grace hadn't even thought about it. She hadn't expected Jaron to live in a cross between an old English manor and a bloody castle! She'd figured him more for a condominium or high-rise kind of man. Finally, she got herself sorted, sliding from the car with the sticks held firmly in her hand.

"Thank you," she murmured to the chauffeur.

Moving away from the car, she studied the steps in front of her, her knuckles white on her canes. The car door shut behind her, the crunch of the chauffeurs' steps over the gravel barely heard as she steeled herself for the task ahead of her. She could do this. She had to do this.

She'd taken less than a step before Jaron was in front of her. Startled, she stumbled. Strong arms closed around her and stopped her fall.

"What . . . where did you come from?"

She blinked in surprise as he steadied her. He didn't release her; instead, his large hands splayed over the small of her back as his fingers rubbed in small circles. The slight touch drove her blood pressure through the roof.

"I've been here the whole time."

“No, you weren’t; I would have seen you,” Grace said, absently smoothing her hands over his arms.

Despite his lean build, he felt solidly muscled beneath her fingertips. Much more so than she would expect for someone with his leisurely lifestyle. *He must lift weights . . .* Her thoughts trailed off as he smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling endearingly. The tiny imperfection—a small mark of age—in his otherwise-perfect face reassured her but then his look changed, became intense. Hungry. Like that of a starving man who’d just been served a fine steak.

“Let me . . . Please.” The order was softened by the plea, as though he remembered his manners at the last minute. But it *was* an order. Grace sensed Jaron Conrad was a man used to being obeyed, to getting what he wanted.

Her heart skipped a beat and then started up in earnest, hammering against her breastbone like an animal desperate to escape. Without breaking eye contact he leaned down, scooping her up in his arms as though she weighed nothing. Grace stiffened as a flush built over her cheeks. She hated to give any sign of weakness and having to be carried up a couple of steps by the guy you fancied the pants off counted as a weakness in her eyes. There was an upside, though; she got held all up close and personal to the lean male body she ached to run her hands over.

Grace shivered but held his eyes. She’d always found his eyes striking but she’d never realised ice-blue could hold so much heat. A dark heat, which held her captive as he carried her up the steps.

She was so light and perfect in his arms. With his preternatural strength, Jaron could juggle small cars if he wanted to, so her weight wasn’t an issue. But he wasn’t prepared for how light she felt or how perfect the moment was. Her arms curled around his shoulders, she fit against him as though she’d been made to be there.

Making his stride as smooth as possible, Jaron walked through the front door. Picking her up had been a bad idea. The feel of her curves against his chest, her subtle perfume and the hum of her blood under her skin all conspired to drive him mad . . . arousing the instincts of the man he’d always been, and the vampire he’d become.

His hands tightened slightly as he took another breath, isolating the scent of her skin under the perfume and lingering smell of shampoo. The perfume was nice but the smell of her skin . . . He drew the scent into his lungs. She had a sweet, addictive

smell. The olfactory version of chocolate and opium combined, perhaps . . . exotic and erotic.

His mind blanked as he walked through the front foyer. He couldn't remember one good reason why he shouldn't just carry her on up the stairs. Turn left and walk down the corridor to his bedchamber. Lay her on his bed.

He imagined her there, spread-eagled with her glorious hair spread around her like a bright halo. He'd tie her with the silken cord he'd purchased for just such an occasion. How delicious she'd look with the cord looped around her delicate wrists and ankles, pulled tight to open her body to him . . . .

He swallowed as his body tightened, his balls drawn up and aching. The need to make the fantasy a reality nearly overwhelmed him, the need to spread her soft thighs and drive his rigid cock into her, over and over, nearly undid him. He longed to pleasure her until they were both too exhausted to move.

He started to walk toward the stairs when he caught her searching gaze. The trust in her green eyes slammed a brick into his gut, and his steps faltered. He couldn't do it. Her arms tightened around his neck a little and she smiled. Just the slightest curve of her lips but Jaron felt like he was basking in a sun he hadn't seen for centuries. Changing course, he headed for the dining room.

"You have a beautiful house. Have you lived here long?" Grace asked, her voice trembling with nerves as Jaron carried her along the darkened hallway. Seriously, did the guy forget to pay his electric bill? He gave her a brief glance, and for a moment there, just a split second, the look in his eyes scared her.

No, not scared, exactly. More like excited, but frighteningly so. It was the sort of look that turned her heart over in her chest and rendered the lace between her thighs damp with need. That's what scared her. Something deep inside told her he wouldn't do anything she didn't want or ask him to do. Which was the problem. It wouldn't take much to get her to beg. Or to reveal her deepest, darkest desires, no matter how deviant they seemed.

"Seems like forever."

His lips, full and sensual in the masculine lines of his face, curved in a small smile as he shouldered his way through a door and into a large dining room. A small gasp escaped her. If she'd been awed by the outside of the house, it was nothing compared to her sense of amazement now. She felt like Alice in Wonderland, just without the whole 'falling down the rabbit hole' bit.



The room was huge, the table nearly as large. Grace started to count the chairs but gave up quickly. You could hold a banquet in there and still have room for a live band in the corner. Tonight, only two places were set, at the far end of the table nearest the fire crackling in the hearth. Jaron headed that way, his long strides eating up the room. Hooking a foot around the chair leg, he pulled it out and settled her down without effort.

“Do you work out?” she asked suddenly as he moved her chair in for her. He was stronger than she’d expected. He’d lifted her without effort and she wasn’t at her slimmest these days. Months and months with minimal exercise had seen to that.

“I’m sorry?” He blinked, those gorgeous eyes locked on hers as he leaned over. So close his breath whispered over her shoulders, leaving a trail of fire in its wake.

“Do you work out? You’re very . . . um . . . .” *Built? Ripped? What’s the right term?* He was lean but she’d felt the muscles under those clothes. *Sexy as all damn hell?* Grace swallowed, caught in his interested gaze. “You’re very strong. Carrying me like that.”

He slid into the seat next to hers, kitty-corner around the edge of the table. Amusement crossed his face as he glanced down at his plate. “A little, yes. It’s not easy maintaining a reputation as a Lothario if you’re piling on the pounds.”

Grace laughed, the sound low and musical, as he reached out to pour a glass of wine for her. She’d expected the evening to go slowly, full of awkward silences and false starts. The normal sort of thing when two people were getting to know each other.

To her surprise, dinner came and went in a blur and if she’d been asked later she wouldn’t have been able to say what they’d eaten. Jaron was witty and easy to talk to, with a dry sense of humor that had her almost crying with laughter at certain points during their conversation.

Wiping her eyes after yet another laughing fit, she glanced up to find him looking at her, a strange expression on his face. She’d caught the same look a few times—a combination of a smile and puzzlement that put a frown between his brows and a quirk on his lips.

“What? Do I have something between my teeth?”

“No, nothing in your teeth, I promise.” Jaron smiled and sipped his wine. The deep, rich fluid flowed past his lips, the strong muscles of his throat working as he swallowed. He watched her over the rim of the glass. “Why do you ask?”

“You keep looking at me oddly. As though I puzzle you.” She took a sip from her own wineglass to hide her self-consciousness.

Jason watched her. He'd made sure her glass was topped up all night but he didn't intend to get her drunk and seduce her. No, his plans were longer-reaching, and although the temptation was there, he wasn't going to take her to bed tonight. He just needed her in an amenable frame of mind for his proposal.

Besides, when he got Grace into his bed, he wanted her stone-cold sober. Aware of every wicked pleasure he led her into, every touch and caress, every lick . . . . He stopped the shiver midway up his spine, his cock jerking within the confines of his pants again. Shifting in his seat, he tried to ease the ache that had seemed to become a permanent feature around Grace.

"You don't puzzle me. You fascinate me," he said, putting his glass down next to his plate as he studied her. Her words gave him an excuse to do openly what he'd been doing covertly all night.

"I do? Why?" Grace asked in surprise, leaning forward to put her elbows on the table, her chin in one delicate hand as she waited for his answer. The firelight caressed her, highlighting the delicate collarbones revealed by her strappy dress and her porcelain skin.

"You shouldn't ask that. You don't want to know the answer." His voice was a low growl, almost lower than human hearing. Her closeness, his reaction to her, both affected him more than he realised. He held her gaze, getting himself under control with an iron will. Then he smiled, adding a little extra sparkle in his eyes to stop this line of questioning, one he didn't want her to follow.

"And if I do?" She persisted.

"You don't react as I expect you to and I admire your courage. Every week you come to the ballet, struggle up those steps alone. No, let me finish." He held his hand up as she made to interrupt him, a frown already on her face. He knew she didn't like any mention of her accident, or hint toward a physical weakness. More evidence of her strength of mind. The injuries she'd sustained were extensive and painful. The doctor he'd bribed had told him she'd be on a cocktail of drugs—mainly painkillers—for the rest of her life.

He took another sip of wine, considering his words. If this were some corny vampire flick, the glass would have been filled with blood instead of the rich, red wine Jason preferred. The plate, though, was empty, and had been all night. Grace wouldn't remember whether he'd eaten or not; he'd been using his abilities passively, letting her see what she expected to see.

He flicked a look up through his lashes. “You’re a strong woman, Grace, and that’s as sexy as hell.”

Grace sucked in a breath at his expression. His face tight, he looked as though the admission had cost him dearly. His intense blue eyes were hypnotic. The sort of blue a woman—especially a desperate-for-love former ballerina not sure of her own worth—could drown in.

But he still exuded a sense of danger. He lounged back against the ornately carved chair with one long-fingered hand curled around the stem of the delicate crystal glass. For a moment Grace felt like prey, looking into the face of the hunter. Then, in the blink of an eye, the look disappeared and he smiled again.

Sighing, she leaned her chin on her hand and wondered what she’d been asking him. For a moment, it had seemed important, but the thought slipped away from her as she looked at him.

“Do you mind if we talk about the accident?” he asked in a mellow voice. He turned the glass around by the stem, and the light from the fire reflected off the crystal.

Grace shook her head. Fortified by good food and excellent wine she relaxed and simply enjoyed the moment. The more time she spent in Jaron’s company, the more she felt she could trust him. People Grace trusted were few and far between. She’d learned the hard way not to trust too easily, to let anyone get too close.

*Prima ballerina driven mad with jealousy. Former ballet star turns to drug abuse.* She’d seen every conceivable story in the gutter press, all total fabrications sold to the tabloids by people she’d thought she could trust. Personally she’d liked the *Ballerina claims kidnap by aliens stole her ability to dance*. If it were that easy, she’d be tracking down the little green men right now. But no, it had been simple human error and impossible to reverse.

“No, I don’t mind. Most people ask. I’m getting used to it,” she replied, taking another sip of wine and wondering what he’d want to know. Most wanted the gruesome details. Were her legs really broken in so many places? How many pins had she had to have? How many stitches? How bad were the scars?

“I’m not most people, Grace,” he said. He gave her an odd look, as though he were making up his mind about something and he still wasn’t sure about it.

He stopped spinning the glass and leaned forward, the neck of his shirt falling open. She couldn’t help her quick downward glance; she was only human, after all. He

was lean, but as she suspected, packed with wiry muscle. *Was that a hint of a six pack there?*

“I’m a doctor, Grace, and I have something—a treatment—that could help you.”

She couldn’t help herself; she gawked at him. “You? A doctor? You’re shitting me!”

Wincing a little at her language, he nodded. “Not in this country, of course, but back home I was a fully qualified physician.”

Grace nodded. She knew he was from overseas. There was the faintest hint of a heavier accent when he spoke sometimes and a preciseness of speech that said English wasn’t his first language. But a doctor? She didn’t bother to conceal her surprise. “You don’t look like a doctor.”

More like a male model with his lean good looks or, heaven help her, a male stripper. He had that sort of grace and presence that would go down a bomb on a catwalk or the stage. *A very private stage, like in her bedroom . . .* Quickly, Grace pulled herself out of a daydream as her cheeks heated. Even the thought of him removing his shirt was enough to have her looking around longingly for a fan.

“Appearances can be deceptive. Actually, I specialised in your sort of injuries before I left.” He lied easily, watching her face, enraptured. The vampire, a creature of mystery and enchantment, be-spelled by his own victim. Preposterous, but nevertheless true. “I had some success with an old herbal remedy. I wondered if you’d be willing to try it?”

“What’s in it for you?” She’d played this game before, with countless ‘herbal’ healers. They all wanted one thing—her name as validation for their product.

Jaron shrugged. “Nothing, other than the pleasure of helping someone. Someone I see as a friend . . . perhaps more.”

He reached into his pocket and retrieved a small vial. She’d seen enough drugs to be able to pick out a medical vial. It looked odd, not like the ones she was used to. Made of glass, it had a glass stopper rather than the screw-on cap she was familiar with. Almost like something she’d expect to see in a museum. Instead of a clear liquid, a viscous red fluid filled the vial. An instinctive tremor of alarm raced through her.

It looked like blood.

“I know, it looks awful, doesn’t it? It’s the herbs—when they’re distilled it gives the fluid that weird look.” He held the vial out to her. “Just drop this into a drink in the morning, cranberry juice should work well.”

She reached out despite the small voice in the back of her mind that kept screaming about blood. She took the vial from him, and their fingertips brushed. A thrill

arced from his hand to hers. Startled, she looked up. Their eyes met, awareness stretching between them.

“I don’t want anything for this. Just try it. If it doesn’t work, we’ll never talk of it again. But whether you do take it or not, it doesn’t change anything. I still want to see you.”

### **Chapter Three**

“Come on lazy, you can’t lay about in bed all day.” The brisk, sharp voice and the swish of the curtains as they rattled across the rail dragged Grace out of her contented doze.

“Ugh.” She kept her eyes closed as a glass clunked down on the bedside table near her head, accompanied by the rattle of the medicine bottle. Maybe morning would go away if she pretended to be asleep.

“No sympathy for you, not with you out half the night.” Fayte’s sharp voice stabbed through Grace’s ears as she bustled around, fussing in a way she knew Grace detested. Therein lay the problem. She and Fayte had never been friends. Rivals even as kids, they’d argued in the nursery before moving on to compete in the dance studio. The rivalry had ended with Grace’s accident but Grace still had no idea why Fayte had suggested she become Grace’s primary caregiver.

Fayte had played on Grace’s sympathies, pleading her lack of job and home and Grace had given in. At the time it had solved both problems neatly and for a month or so the arrangement had worked. Then Fayte’s attitude had moved in.

Grace winced as she turned over in bed, a slow, painful movement as she eased her cramped limbs into the day. Although snug and warm under the duvet, she could already feel the bone-deep ache that heralded another cold morning.

“I’ll be up in a bit, Fayte. Would you get the coffee and toast on, please?” Grace asked, her voice still roughened from sleep.

“Yeah, whatever. Don’t forget Roger’s picking me up in an hour. You need to be up and downstairs before he gets here or you’ll have to stay up here until I get back.”

Grace held onto her temper with an effort as she pushed herself upright in the bed. Perhaps she should call the nursing agency today? Even having a stranger in her house would be better than this sort of verbal abuse before her morning coffee. Biting

her tongue, she reached for the glass of water and her painkillers, her hand brushing against the small, beaded handbag she'd placed on the side table the night before.

"Oh shit!" she hissed as the bag tipped and the contents started to roll from the open top. She made a grab for them but the lipstick and powder compact made their escape, falling to the floor. The third escapee wasn't so lucky. Grace closed her hand around a hard, glass cylinder.

The vial Jaron had given her. Curious, she held it aloft, tilting it from side-to-side as she watched the fluid inside gloop back and forth.

A puzzled smile curved her lips. Jaron was just a bundle of surprises, wasn't he? She'd seen him as the wealthy philanthropist, the sexy—and maybe a little dangerous—playboy. But as she was rapidly finding out, he was far more. But a doctor?

Unlike any other doctor she'd met, he treated her like a person. Not like a victim or the sum of her injuries. He didn't seem to be looking to make a name for himself by treating her. In fact, he hadn't mentioned anything else about it. He'd just given her the vial, said it was mostly made up of herbs and carried on to charm her.

He was sexy, if a little disturbing at times with his ice cold gaze, and he flirted with her. Usually, Grace became unnerved when men paid her too much attention. Especially these days. She knew how she looked, and in a society where appearance meant everything, a scar rendered a person less than human.

Jaron didn't make her nervous, though. He didn't look at her with the combination of pity and horror she was used to seeing. No, he didn't make her feel odd at all. Not even when he'd carried her back out to the car, something that she should have felt awkward about. Instead, she'd felt looked after, cherished.

The vial was still on her bed when Grace made it out of the shower. Eyeing it, she pulled on loose exercise pants and a skinny rib t-shirt. What harm could herbs do? She slid it into her pocket as she headed downstairs.

Sitting at the breakfast table, toast in front of her and coffee in hand, Grace sipped at the life-restoring liquid with a look of bliss on her face. The first cup of coffee in the morning was wonderful, soul-restoring. She shifted in her chair as Fayette bustled in and out.

"There's a plated salad in the fridge, left over from last night. You'll have to make do with that unless you want to stand around cooking." Again Fayette's voice rang sharply. As though she were annoyed with the world in general, and Grace, in

particular. Usually Grace ignored her sour mood, but today, with her legs already aching from the cold, it irritated her.

A car horn sounded outside. Fayte waved as a sleek, red sports car pulled up in front of the kitchen window. Roger, Fayte's boyfriend. As usual, he peered through the window. Grace hunkered down, using her coffee mug as a shield. She always felt dirty when Roger was around. The way he looked at her, as though he were mentally undressing her, made her want to take a month-long shower.

"Right, that's it, I'm out of here. *Try* not to fall over or anything and ruin my day, okay?" Fayte threw the scathing comment over her shoulder as she grabbed her bag and headed for the door.

Grace breathed a sigh of relief as the door closed behind her cousin. She took another sip of her coffee, ignoring the car and its occupant outside. She had no clue what Fayte saw in the guy. Pushing forty, his tan was too dark, his teeth too white and his peroxide blonde 'surfer' hairdo was too perfect. A living Ken doll. He loved himself, too, and never passed up an opportunity to check his reflection in a mirror, window or other shiny surface. Grace suspected he'd try to check himself out in a bucket of water given half a chance. She recalled Jaron's easy manner, the casual way he wore his clothes that said he didn't really care what they were. By contrast, Roger couldn't compare.

Idly, she played with the little bottle, spinning it around and around on the table. Herbal remedy, he'd said. Just herbs. She watched the liquid in the glass spin and splash up against the sides of the bottle.

Grace sipped her coffee as she contemplated his offer. It would certainly give her an excuse to see him again, for however long his 'treatment' lasted. What harm could it do if it was just herbs? Hell, if it meant he had to see her it was worth taking some foul-smelling plant extract for however long it took!

The car door opened outside and Fayte's voice drifted in through the open window. "Yeah, the cripple's all sorted. She'll be fine. She'll have to lie in her own piss if she falls over; I've had enough cleaning up after her!"

Grace froze as the harsh words, uttered with hatred, filtered through her brain. Tears prickled hot and insistent at the back of her eyes as she stared at the dregs of the coffee in her mug. She knew . . . well, she'd suspected, how Fayte felt. But to hear it like that was just too much.

Mechanically she poured a glass of cranberry juice, refusing to give in to tears while they were still within possible earshot. If she could act normally until they'd driven off then everything would be fine.

She moved without thinking, her hand shaking as she opened the vial. Absently, she tipped the fluid into her glass as she watched the window out of the corner of her eye. The thick, red liquid sank into the glass, dropping to the bottom before billowing out in a thick cloud and disappearing into the fruit juice.

Finally the engine revved and the sleek red car pulled out of Grace's line of sight. She sagged against the table, relief flooding her as she let go of the iron control, which had been holding the tears back. Annoyed with herself, she swiped at her cheeks with the back of her hand. She would not let Fayette's ugliness get to her; she'd been through worse. She'd call the nursing company today and get someone to replace her cousin as quickly as possible.

With a sigh, she contemplated the table in front of her. The toast . . . she wrinkled her nose at the butter and jam-saturated concoction. Her stomach rebelled at the idea of ingesting it. She pushed the toast away then picked up the cranberry juice.

The smell warned her before she took a sip, an odd metallic scent assaulting her nostrils. She held the glass up. Was it off or something? Did Cranberry juice go bad? It would be just her luck. Then her gaze fell on the emptied vial on the table.

"What the hell?" She looked at the glass again, took a sniff then shrugged. "Well, if a car can't kill me, bring on the herbs!"

She leaned forward and took a sip, holding her breath against the strong metallic scent. It didn't taste as weird as she expected but rather it had a delicate underlying flavor that complemented the sharp taste of the cranberry. *Oh wow!* A soft sound of surprise rumbled in her throat as the drink hit her tongue, tantalising and seducing her taste buds. Eagerly she gulped down the drink, draining the rest of the glass in seconds.

She closed her eyes in sheer bliss as a warm shiver ran over her entire body. Goose bumps rose across her skin. Her lips parted in a soft moan as the heat rolled inward to settle in the cradle of her pelvis. Wet heat slid from her as her pussy clenched, dampening her panties.

She placed the glass down on the table heavily, the dull clunk shocking her out of her pleasurable daze. Blinking, she stared at it in surprise. What the hell had Jaron put in the stuff? She'd almost had an orgasm on the spot! If this was his idea of treatment, she was signing up for a year. Two! Hell, she'd sign up for a lifetime!



Stretching, she arched her back and ran her hands through her hair. Movement at the corner of her eye caught her attention. She turned and caught sight of herself in the polished surface of the refrigerator. Hands buried in her hair, her stretch had forced her back into a sensuous curve, pushing her breasts out, full and aching against her thin cotton top. Secure in the knowledge she was alone, Grace slid her hands through her hair, down her throat and over the curve of her bust. Spurred on by the near-climax the drink had somehow brought on, she cupped her breasts, feeling the slight weight. Leaning forward, she pursed her lips seductively, pushing her breasts together so the cleavage in the deep V of her top increased. She laughed at the image of the femme fatale who looked back.

“Yeah right, you are *such* a man-eater. Back down to reality Gracie-girl.”

Miles away Jaron’s eyes snapped open in the forced darkness of his bedroom. The shutters were closed, the room pitch black behind them and the floor-to-ceiling blackout curtains. The windows didn’t need the curtains, the shutters were enough, but when the smallest amount of sunlight gave you a fatal case of sunburn it wasn’t worth taking chances.

Lust hit Jaron before he fully awoke. He groaned and rolled over onto his back. His cock was rigid, engorged with blood and harder than he could ever recall. Realisation filtered through the red fog behind his eyes. She’d used the vial, she’d drunk his blood. It had pulled him out of his rest.

Another wave hit and Jaron groaned. He bit his lip, lifting his arms, gripping the pillow and dragging it over his head.

In his mind’s eye he could see her, the link his blood had forged slamming into place with a strength that took his breath away. He’d known this would happen. Something about Grace called to him, told him she was made to be a vampire’s bride. More than that, *his* bride.

For all their immortal lives male vampires, whether they were bitten or born, were driven to find a mate. Some called them life mates, soul mates. Jaron didn’t believe in such things. But even he couldn’t account for the need that had hit him as soon as he’d seen Grace. The possessive need to take her and make her his.

*Oh my god, she had her hands on her body.* Jaron moaned, a mingled sound of distress and need as the link relayed what Grace was seeing. A short-term effect of her drinking his blood, one Jaron assumed he would sleep through. He hadn’t anticipated

the link's strength would wake him and certainly not with such erotic images. Images designed to drive him mad—her hands on her tight little body, her fingers running over those delicate curves.

Heat swept through him and a bead of pre-cum slid from the head of his rigid cock as he held himself perfectly still, praying the link would hold. He just needed a little longer, so he could watch her touch herself. But the vision faded into blackness, her laughter, full and rich, teasing him as he slid back down into the blackness of the daytime sleep. Desperately he tried to hold on, stay with her, but the sun was high and the familiar leadenness claimed him again.

“No . . . .”

Grace snapped her head around, convinced she'd heard a voice behind her. Her hands dropped from her body, a guilty flush covering her cheeks. For a moment, she'd thought she heard Jaron's voice. She shook her head. God, she had it bad if she was hearing his voice in an empty room. Just the thought of him was enough to make her ache with heat again.

*“I can assure you, if you paraded around in front of me naked I wouldn't be leaving you alone. In fact, I wouldn't be able to keep my hands off you.”*

Her memory supplied his voice again, taunting her with his words from the other night. He couldn't have meant what she'd thought he meant. Last night he hadn't kissed her, hadn't made a move to kiss her, much as she'd wanted him to. Anticipation had coursed through her body, right up to the point he'd slid her into the backseat of the car and bid her goodnight. No kiss. Nothing.

Rather than dwell on something she couldn't change, Grace slid her empty glass to the side and reached for the phone. The main phone for the house was cordless. She carried it around when alone in case she fell. She'd programmed Fayette's mobile and the local nursing service telephone number on the speed-dial. Usually she rang Fayette but today, and from now on, it was going to be the latter.

Her fingertips brushed against the phone but it skittered away. “Oh fuck it!”

The handset danced across the table and leapt off the edge like a lemming hell-bent on the final leap. She winced as it hit the tiles, a shattering noise telling her it was broken. Cursing under her breath she leapt from the chair and rounded the table to collect the pieces.

The back was off, the batteries out and rolling in different directions. Relief swept through her as she grabbed the wayward pieces. It didn't look too bad. Perhaps if she

put the batteries back in and the back on it would be ok. She really needed the phone, in case she fell . . . .

Only then did she realise she knelt on the cold tile floor, her once shattered legs folded easily beneath her.

“What the hell . . . .”

She looked back at the table. Her crutches were still balanced against the chair where she’d left them. Somehow, she’d managed to move at least six feet without assistance. Something she hadn’t been able to do since before the day of the accident.

“Ok, calm down Gracie-girl, it’s obviously a dream. A really fucking sick one, but a dream. There is no such thing as a miracle cure; you know that,” she told herself firmly, fighting down the wonder trying to crowd into her heart. Slowly she got to her feet, waiting for the debilitating pain to return and drive her to her knees again.

But nothing happened. Her muscles were tight, as if she’d tried to dance without warming up first. She flexed her calves, easing a little of the tightness. Again, nothing. No pain, no trembling.

Hope joined the wonder, jostling for the best view. *Could this be real? Could herbs have come through where modern medicine had failed?* Stranger things had happened. Right at this moment she wasn’t sure what, but they had.

She took a step. Then another and another. In seconds, she reached the other side of the kitchen. She clutched at the marble countertop as tears welled in her eyes. She could walk!

“It worked. It really worked. Fucking hell, it *worked!*”

She whooped in joy as she walked across the kitchen again. She grabbed the doorframe, spun around it then broke into a run down the corridor.

No careful feeling her way now for Grace. Finally, after so many long months, she could walk and the only thing she wanted to do was dance. She scrambled up the stairs, ran past her bedroom on swift feet to crash through the doors at the end of the corridor. The doors that led to her dance studio.

Grace paused in the doorway to look at the empty room. She hadn’t been here since before the accident, hadn’t been able to face the blatant reminder of all she’d lost.

Her practise shoes still sat on the bench under the window but she ignored them. She didn’t have time to mess about with shoes, not when she could be dancing. The need to move welled inside her until it was too great to resist. Adrenalin rushed through her veins as she ran lightly across the sprung floor to the barre. Her instincts all

screamed at her to dance. Now. No more wasting time. Years of training had drilled into her the need to stretch, and she started her warm-up routine.

Hours later, Grace slumped against the wall, sliding down to sit on the floor with her legs stretched out in front of her. Exhaustion raked her body, her muscles screamed, but she still grinned. Leaning her head back against the glass, she ran her hands through her hair, pushing it back off her face as her heart rate returned to normal. Elation filled her; she hadn't felt so alive in months.

"Jaron!" she gasped into the empty room. He'd want to know. Of course he'd want to know. This was amazing, beyond her wildest imaginings. She didn't even mind if he wanted to take credit publically. He could announce her recovery to the whole world for all she cared.

She'd reached the door when her muscles started to tighten. Dread hit her like a train as the familiar pain radiated up her legs. Her movements, so free a moment before, started to slow.

"No! No, not now. I was fine, it worked. This can't be happening. Please!" she said, grabbing at the banister for support as her legs cramped, the pain nearly making her pass out. Tears trickled down her face. Her pleas went unheard and within seconds she'd returned to her former shuffling movements, making her way inch-by-inch to her bedroom.

Exhausted, she flopped down onto the bed. Huge, racking sobs tore at her chest as tears ran down her face. Grace gave in and let misery envelope her.

Hours later the tears had dried up and she stared blank-eyed at the ceiling. She *had* been walking, it *had* been real. Even she couldn't dream up something like that . . . could she? Had she made the whole thing up? Jaron, his cure, the whole thing this morning? Perhaps she was sick. Not just sick in the body but sick in the head, as well.

*Could* she have made up the whole thing, though? The dinner date last night, the vial Jaron had given her? Memories of those things seemed so real. Surely she couldn't have imagined something like that, something so real and detailed . . . . Or did it go even farther back, to the night of the ballet. She winced. Had she even made up that 'knock your socks off' kiss? She snorted. Surely she wasn't that desperate?

"One way to find out." She turned over and reached for the bag on the cabinet, pulling her phone from inside. She opened it and scanned the recent contacts for Jaron's number and hit dial.

He took a while to answer, his voice rough and sleepy. “Hello Grace. You took the vial.”

Heat raced through Grace’s body again, like earlier when she drank the herbal concoction. She wriggled to sit up, pressing her thighs together as a flush covered her cheeks. *Oh my god. I really am that desperate. Just the sound of his voice turns me on.*

“I did, but it wore off. I could dance! I was stronger, better even than I was before. No pain, my muscles were loose. I could even do some moves I couldn’t do without a lot of practise leading up to—”

“Calm down Grace.” His voice was soft over the phone line. “Deep breaths.”

She gulped air, recognising the onset of a panic attack. They’d been frequent in the early days, before she’d come to terms with the fact she’d never dance again, but she hadn’t had one in months. Now, having had one perfect glimpse at the world she loved only to have it snatched away, she sensed herself on the edge of the precipice once again.

“It’s not working anymore, though. I had just finished dancing, and my legs began to cramp and I can’t walk properly!” She hated the pathetic note in her voice, but fought against her pride. She needed to dance and this man could help her.

“It will wear off, Grace. It’s not a cure. The serum . . . alleviates the symptoms, shall we say?”

Hope filled Grace like a star going super-nova.

“You mean that wasn’t it? I can take it again and dance?” she asked. Her world contracted down to two things; the phone pressed to her ear and the man on the other end of the line.

“You can, yes. But—“

“But what? No buts! I was dancing. I need to dance, Jaron, please.”

He chuckled, the sound a low rumble that reached across the phone line and sent a shiver through her body. She smothered a small gasp as her nipples peaked, rubbing against her t-shirt.

“All I was going to say is there will be a price.”

“That’s all?” Relief washed through Grace. She’d been terrified he was going to tell her she could only take the herbs once. Or that there was some other maximum dosage she had to abide by.

“I don’t care about that. Anything you want, anything! When can I get more of it—the herbal stuff?”

“It’s an infusion, not ‘herbal stuff,’” Jaron said, and she could hear the smile in his voice. Then the deep tones dropped serious. “Be careful what you promise, Grace. Something lost can be regained, but never without a price. And it’s not always monetary. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Great. Philosophy 101. Grace shrugged, brushing off the small tremor of alarm in the back of her mind.

“I don’t care, I said anything and I meant it. I have to dance, I *need* to dance. Nothing else matters.”

## Chapter Four

Silence reigned in the theatre. No random chatter or mobile phones chirping. No whispered conversations. No creaking of chairs from people shifting in their seats. All eyes were riveted on the darkened stage. The anticipation in the room was palpable, as though the entire audience held a collective breath.

Then the music started, and the haunting notes from the orchestra reached out to the corners of the crowded darkness and held those within spell-bound. On stage, the lights snapped up, a spotlight highlighting the single figure in the center. With the rest of the audience, Jaron sucked in a breath.

Grace.

Her head bowed, she started to move, and he was lost. The rest of the room fell away and ceased to exist; nothing mattered but the woman center stage. Her graceful, almost feline movements as she swayed then burst into movement. Pirouettes, turns, stances.

Jaron leaned back in his chair, elbow on the arm, his chin supported on his hand as he watched. The music slid into the introduction for the *Grand Pas* and the other dancers melted away, leaving Grace alone in the middle of the stage.

The audience cooed in excitement. This was what they’d come to see. Since she’d been ‘back’, Grace’s solo dance, the *pièce de résistance* of the entire show, had drawn media and public attention in a way no one had expected. The show’s run had been extended three times, extra dates added once the ballet company was sure Grace could handle the extra workload.

*Back and better than ever! The return of Grace! Dancer returns in blaze of glory!* The headlines had raved about Grace for weeks, reports dissected each performance and experts argued with each other over her technique. Some praising her, some looking for

a weakness they couldn't find. Other than a need to wear thick, opaque tights so no one would see the scars on her legs, there were no flaws in Grace's performance. Nothing with which to find fault.

Jaron had seen many, many ballerinas in his time. He loved to watch the ballet, and when he said he'd been a follower all his life, most people didn't realize that meant centuries. Almost from the very start, when the dance form had taken its first steps toward the art it was today. Of course, he'd changed his name and his appearance over the years, but he'd seen all the greats. And his Grace ranked right up there with the best of them.

The music rolled to a crescendo. On stage, Grace leapt into an impossible stance, holding it there with almost inhuman strength and poise, elegance in every line of her body. A study in dexterity and skill that had the audience erupting into cheers. The press at the front went wild, lighting up the auditorium with their flashbulbs as they sought to capture the perfect picture.

Jaron was already moving, the image imprinted in his photographic memory. There would be standing ovations, the crowd going mad until she gave into them, which gave him plenty of time to get backstage and wait for her.

Jaron let himself out of his box and headed down the back stairs. No one stopped him; everyone knew who he was and that he was here to see Grace. They didn't know he was her 'doctor,' though, merely thought he was her lover; the lucky bastard who'd actually succeeded in bedding her when so many others had failed. She couldn't understand why he didn't want her to tell people about his herbal remedy, why he preferred the secret of her recovery to be kept between them.

He reached the corridors backstage in minutes. He'd given her an excuse of preferring to keep his profession a secret, letting the world think he was a rich philanthropist playboy type. He'd told her the herbal remedy he gave her was made from a plant so rare that, if the news leaked out, the source would be compromised. Something he couldn't risk until he'd managed to synthesize it in a lab. A touch of light misdirection, a nudge of compulsion, and she'd swallowed the lies.

He hated to lie to her, but he had no choice. After all, he couldn't admit what was really happening. He couldn't tell her the vials' contents weren't herbal in origin at all.

No. They contained blood. His blood. The blood of a powerful, centuries-old vampire. A vampire lord, should Jaron have bothered with vampire society. He saw others of his kind around occasionally, but they kept their distance. Even the local High

Lord had sensibly left Jaron alone when he'd refused an invitation to attend the city's vampire court.

He nodded to Harold, one of the backstage hands. A smile broke out across his lined face as he caught sight of Jaron. "Evening, Guv'nor. Off to see the lady?"

"Yes, Harold. Do you know if my rose arrived yet?" Jaron asked, stopping to chat a while with the older human. Jaron liked the man. With Harold, what you saw was what you got. No hidden agenda behind his open, dark eyes. And he clearly held Grace in awe; the stunned look on his face whenever she talked to him gave him away.

"Aye sir, put it in there myself. At the front, so the lady sees it first." He added with a conspiratorial wink.

Jaron laughed as he clapped Harold on the arm. "Good man, good man. Right, I'd best get gone. Don't want to keep the lady waiting, do I?"

He left Harold to go about his work and strode down the corridor to Grace's dressing room. He pushed open the door, the floral scent hitting him straight away. *It's like a bloody florist shop in here.* His lip curled as he took in the bouquets lined up for her; bouquets from admirers, most of them men.

Jealously rose sharp and strong. Grace was *his*. She belonged to him and no other. He closed his eyes, a tremor running through him as he got himself under control. This was getting harder and harder.

She'd taken his blood, and the powerful elixir wove its own magic and temporarily healed the horrendous injuries she'd sustained in the crash. It was his blood that allowed her to dance, granting her an ethereal grace, which when added to her own natural elegance, was breathtaking. Her movements hypnotized, drew the audience in—drew *him* in—and held them spellbound.

He'd seen the same thing happen before; she affected people the same way female vampires did when they hunted. They lured their victims with the promise of sex. A taste of heaven no mortal man could pass up. Hell, even *he'd* been falling under her sway earlier, and he hadn't been mortal for centuries.

He opened his eyes and looked in the mirror. His reflection looked back at him. A tall, fairly normal-looking man. His dark hair was cut short these days, no longer the loose, shoulder-length locks he'd preferred when he was alive. Ice blue eyes looked back at him, their dazzling, almost luminescent color richer than any mortal eye.

He concentrated and the intense color faded. There, he could just about pass for human now. If you knew what you were looking for, though, you would know him to be an immortal. The pale colour of his skin and the way he held himself would give him



away. The elegance Grace displayed as she danced, and Jaron's more masculine version of that same elegance, was indicative of vampire blood.

Another quick glance in the mirror reassured him he was fit for company, and a shudder of relief shook his shoulders. He needed to be careful of his reactions, especially around Grace. With his blood already swirling through her veins and his control on a knife edge with her, she was doubly dangerous to him. All it would take to start the conversion would be his bite. For him to take her blood. She'd taken his willingly, albeit unknowingly, and the tiniest nip from him would seal her fate.

*Red on yellow. The smell of blood in the air. Screaming. His screams as Julia died under the wheels of a carriage rather than face what he was. Face being married to a monster . . . .*

"You're letting me go? You can't do that!"

Grace sighed, her arms folded over her chest as she looked at her cousin. Fayte's colour was up, her eyes flashing in anger. Never a good sign.

"Actually, I can, Fayte." Grace kept her cool. She didn't want to get into this argument right now but as Fayte had just handed her an expenses form for the last month then she figured it was overdue. Especially since she hadn't needed a caregiver for months and from the form in her hands, Fayte was using the time to indulge herself, at Grace's expense.

She nodded toward the stage. "As you can see, I don't need you to care for me anymore—"

"But you can't *do* this, I'm family! After all I've done for you these last couple of years . . . you-you can't treat me like this!" Fayte's eyes widened, tears shimmering in them as the *corps de ballet* trooped past.

Grace gritted her teeth at Fayte's dramatics. Great, now the gossip mongers would go nuts about her mistreating the cousin who'd looked after her. Never mind dancing, Fayte should have gone on the stage. She was a natural.

"Can the tears, Fayte. You were in it for the money and you damn well know it," Grace snapped, her patience giving out. She grabbed her cousin's arm and hauled her bodily into one of the empty dressing rooms.

"Now you're welcome to live with me as long as you like, there's plenty enough room. All I'm saying is you need to get another job," she said as the door closed behind them, giving them a modicum of privacy.

Fayte snatched her arm out of Grace's grip.

"Right. Fine. I'll be out of your hair as soon as I can, don't worry about that. Don't want to be around with you and your pervert of a boyfriend anyway." She stormed past Grace to the door. Once there, she threw a look back over her shoulder, malevolence in her eyes. "Just how long do you think you'll keep him now you're fit and well? He obviously has a thing for cripples and helpless women. Probably won't be able to get it up now you can walk. You'll regret this Grace, I promise."

Grace jumped as the door slammed, the sheer hatred in her cousin's eyes shocking her to the core. In a daze she followed, closing the door with a gentle click behind her before walking to her dressing room.

"You ok?" Jaron's deep voice greeted her as she stepped through the door. She nodded and turned to him, her heart skipping a beat. He was lounging on the couch at the back of her dressing room, legs spread. Impossibly handsome, irresistibly sexy. Irresistible for *her*, anyway. He seemed to be doing a damn good job of resisting her. He hadn't touched her since that first night and it was driving her out of her mind.

"Just a run in with Fayte. She wasn't happy when I told her she had to get a new job. I think . . . . You know I think she tried to threaten me."

Grace headed behind the screen to change out of her stage costume. She slipped on a fitted blouse and a knee-length skirt. Since starting on Jaron's treatments and returning to dance she'd regained her confidence in leaps and bounds. She was still a little self-conscious of the scars on her calves. Smoothing thigh-high stockings over her legs, she adjusted the deep lace at the top. Slightly thicker than normal, the opaque nylons hid the marks on her legs nicely.

"Threaten you in what way?"

"I'm not sure; it was weird." Grace laughed a little uneasily as she stepped from behind the screen and headed over to the mirror. Her hands moved automatically as she started to remove the heavy make-up she wore on stage. There had been something about the look in Fayte's eyes that bothered her, but she couldn't quite put her finger on why. Whatever it was, it made a shiver crawl up her spine, and a niggle of worry settled at the base of her skull, hammering away like a woodpecker.

"She's harmless." Jaron's voice was distracted.

Grace flicked a glance at him over her shoulder. He was watching her from the darkness; she could feel his eyes on her, wandering over body. Her heart faltered again, then slammed against her breastbone as manic butterflies took up residence in the pit of her stomach.

“Are you ok?” she asked, swiping at her face with a lotion-loaded cotton ball until her skin was clear. Something to keep her hands busy. She dropped the dirty ball into the waste bin, glancing away from the mirror for a moment. Before she could take another breath, his hands clamped down on her shoulders.

“Jaron!” She squeaked in shock, her gaze shooting to his in the mirror. The dangerous expression on his face made her voice trail off. How the hell had he moved so fast?

His thumbs stroked across the skin of her captive shoulders, skin that felt far more sensitive than a second ago. Her whole body came alive at his touch. Slowly he bent down, his gaze never leaving hers as he pressed a kiss into the side of her neck.

A dark thrill shot through Grace at the sudden change in his manner. Commanding, sure of himself. Dominant. There was something about Jaron that said he knew exactly where the line was. And now he'd decided to cross it.

She bit her lip, still watching him as he straightened up. His hand slid up over her shoulder, across the top to curl around her neck. She suppressed a shiver as his fingers fanned out, tilting her chin up.

“Grace, do you remember what I said the day after I gave you the first vial?” His voice was low, a mere whisper in her ear as he pulled her against him. Her back met the hard planes of his chest as his other hand spread over her stomach. He pulled her hips back against his, letting her feel the hard, swollen shaft of his erection pressing into her. She gasped, heat spreading like wildfire through her body. She'd been worried he didn't find her attractive, but the rigid erection against her ass said otherwise.

“Uh-huh. I think . . . I don't re—” She shook her head. It was impossible to think when he looked at her like that. As though she were a delectable morsel on a buffet he wanted to sample—over and over again.

The warmth of his hand over her stomach burned through her clothes and made its way inward, through to her womb. Her hips jerked instinctively, pushing back against his hard cock. She stifled a moan. She needed more, needed to feel him thrusting inside her as he filled her completely.

“You don't remember?” His lips quirked as he rotated his hips. His eyes darkened another notch, as though he'd heard her thoughts, felt her need as clearly as if she'd spoken aloud.

A flush covered her cheeks. She rarely even admit to herself what she wanted, what she truly craved, so how the hell was she supposed to tell someone else? It wasn't

the sort of request you could just drop into polite conversation, was it? That you wanted to be held down, or tied up . . . wanted to give up control to someone else and be screwed insensible. *Forced* to live out your wildest fantasies.

His fingers moved on her throat. Strong, powerful fingers. How had she ever thought him weak, a playboy with nothing better to do with his time than lounge about and look good? Held against him, she could feel the strength in his body, the latent power. Something deep inside told her he could snap her like a twig if he wanted to. Far from scaring her, that knowledge burned through her veins straight to her loins. Her pussy clenched.

His eyes blazed in the mirror. "I said there would be a price, Grace."

Memory and realisation jostled for space. He had, she remembered now. At the time, she'd told him she'd give anything, but she'd assumed he wanted money. Not payment of a different kind.

"Uh-huh," was all she could manage as he kissed along the curve of her neck again. He paused for a moment, running his lips against her, back and forth over her skin. Not a kiss, not precisely. Almost as though he was . . . smelling her? A deep breath filled the chest behind her and he shivered, his eyes fluttering closed. When they snapped open again a second later, the blue was almost swallowed by the darkness. Something else looked out of Jaron's eyes. Something that both scared and thrilled her.

"You said anything."

"Uh-huh." Christ, couldn't she say anything more intelligent? Her senses and her responses had gone AWOL as he held her in front of the mirror. His hands were firm, allowing no escape, not that she planned any.

"Do you know what I want, Grace?" His voice was temptation itself, beautiful and terrible at the same time.

"Wh-what do you want?" There. Finally, a response other than 'uh-huh'.

"You said anything."

He seemed to be waiting for a response, or an agreement. Grace gave a mental shrug. What could she say? She had promised, had agreed to pay the price, whatever the cost. Apparently, the time had come to pay up.

*Bollocks, Grace. Admit it; you're hoping he wants sex. You want him to follow up on that sexy look, on that hard-on you can feel.*

"Yes . . . ."

"I want you, Grace. That's my 'anything'."

## Chapter Five

Hearing the words, seeing the expression on his face as he stared at her in the mirror, made Grace pause. She wanted him; desire swirled in her veins until there was no room for anything else.

She swallowed, needing to play this game more than she needed her next breath. “Just sex? Nothing . . . kinky?”

He smiled a slow, sexy smile that stopped her heart in her chest. “Maybe. But nothing you won’t agree to. Nothing painful or degrading, I promise. Trust me, Grace. You’ll be safe, I swear.”

“And if I refuse?”

He misread her hesitation, his face growing hard. “Your call, Grace. I can leave tonight and you’ll never see me again . . . .”

He didn’t say the words but Grace knew what he meant. The treatments would stop. Her cheeks burned as she dropped her gaze. Her decision had been made weeks ago. All she’d been waiting for was the smallest sign he might be interested. His fingers stroked her throat, a reminder. Maybe. He’d answered *maybe* to anything kinky. Perhaps . . . .

Her gaze lifted to his. Perhaps he wouldn’t be adverse to her most secret desires. The strange need inside her she’d always hidden. The need to be dominated, held down and loved completely.

“Not adverse at all,” he whispered, as though she’d spoken aloud.

*Or read my mind.* She pushed the weird thought out of her head as he spoke again.

“I’m going to kiss every part of your body. Touch, caress, lick you until you come and then I’ll hold you down. Pin you under me as I take you. Love you until you come screaming my name.” He nipped her ear as color rose in her cheeks.

He spun her around. The force of his eyes, the heat in them, burned her as he looked down at her. His hand fanned out and cupped her nape to hold her in place.

“Oh God, yes, please.” She lifted her hands, curving them around his neck to draw him down so she could kiss him.

His lips took hers, warm and firm. Two feather-light brushes that made her mouth tingle. She arched against him, silently demanding more. He moved, his arms tightening

around her as he gathered her closer and deepened the kiss. A harsh, passionate kiss as his tongue swept out to demand entrance. Demand her surrender.

A surrender Grace was happy to give. Her fingers curled into the short hair at the nape of his neck as she yielded to him. Her knees turned to jelly as his tongue thrust into her mouth, twining along hers, mimicking the possession she knew, hoped and prayed, was to come.

He broke away to kiss her jaw. One large hand smoothed along her leg, hooking behind the knee to hitch it over his hip. Grace whimpered as the hardness at his groin, still confined by the fabric of his pants, pressed against her feminine core. He rolled his hips again, only a few layers of cloth between them stopping him from doing what they both wanted and thrusting into her.

Grace bit her lip, worry and arousal battling in her chest. Someone could walk in at any moment and catch them like this. Find them almost having sex up against her mirror. Despite the fact they were both clothed there was no question what was going on.

“I want you.” His lips explored the curve of her throat and found the spot under her ear that made her squirm. “I’m going to make you scream with pleasure as I fuck you.”

Her pussy ached with need. A moan escaped her as he pressed into her, the scent of aftershave and pure, warm man making her heady with desire.

His hands moulded her body feverishly, pulling at the hem of her skirt so he could smooth his palms over her thighs. His lips blazed a trail down her throat and she dropped her head back to allow him better access.

Her scent drifted up to Jaron. He could smell her arousal mingled with her perfume and the scent of her skin. Sheer ambrosia. The temptation to shove her skirt up around her waist and bury his cock in her luscious pussy nearly got the better of him.

He drove his hands into her hair, scattering pins with abandon. With devastating finesse he deepened the kiss, holding her head in his hands to plunder her lips as he pinned her against the counter, her back against the mirror. Her blood hummed under her skin, so close he could almost taste it.

He growled, the beast inside too close to the surface to be totally denied. “God, you smell fantastic,” he murmured against her skin, his hands sliding along her thigh. He hooked his fingers into the lace of her panties, pulling them down inch by inch. The lace reached mid-thigh and stopped. Grace opened her eyes in confusion.

“I’m going to strip you and fuck your brains out,” he said. The dark threat in his voice flooded Grace’s pussy with heat, making her instantly wet and ready. He yanked on the panties again. The scrap of fabric slid to the floor. Locked in his embrace Grace couldn’t look away from his heated gaze.

“But first, I’m going to taste you.” He pulled her skirt up as he sank to his knees in front of her, urging her up onto the slight ledge in front of the mirror.

*Is he going to—? Oh god, he is . . . .*

Hard hands supported her as he opened her thighs until her legs were spread wide. She moaned as her pussy was exposed, the cooler air in the room whispering over the heated flesh.

“Perfect.”

Grace didn’t get time to reply to his comment before he leaned in, his tongue stabbing deep into her pussy without warning. She cried out as her body melted. She must be literally dripping by now, needing him to fuck her. Embarrassed at her body’s reaction, she tried to squirm away, convinced he couldn’t find her pleasant. His hands clamped over her hips.

“No, I’m not done with you yet,” he whispered, the hot puff of his breath against her clit almost driving her out of her mind. “I’ve not even started yet.”

His tongue slid along her folds from slit to clit, his fingers parting her wider. Grace collapsed back against the cool mirror as his clever tongue danced over the sensitive nub of flesh. He circled and licked, flicking it with his tongue and sliding back down to thrust into her needy body until she was ready to scream. But he didn’t let her come. Every time she approached her release, he moved away from her clit. Deep rumbles of appreciation sounded in his chest as he dropped back to deliver long, slow strokes with his tongue, letting her calm down and drop away from the peak.

“Jaron, please . . . I can’t take much more,” she muttered after the third or fourth time, her body pulled tighter than a violin string. She’d lost track of everything apart from the need to come.

Without warning he stood up, pulling her to her feet and whirling her around. He bent her over, scattering her cosmetics to the floor.

“You can and you will, sweetheart.” He grabbed her wrists, pinning them above her head on the cool glass, holding them there with one hand. His chest pressed against her back. She squeaked in surprise at the sudden change.

“You wanted to be taken, Grace. Forced, owned . . . so that’s what you’re going to get,” he said, pressing his stiff cock hard against her ass.

“By the end of the night, I’ll have taken you every way possible and you’ll be begging me not to stop.” He taunted as he started to strip her. His hand reached around to the front of her shirt, curling into the neckline and pulling. Buttons tore and popped, scattering over the carpeted floor. A chill rushed over her exposed skin and her breasts tightened in her black lace bra.

“By the time I’m done you’ll be begging me to fuck you . . . .”

Her nipples peaked, pressing against the fabric, begging for his touch. He didn’t keep her waiting long; his large hand cupped her, fondling her through the thin material. Whimpering, she arched her back to press harder into his hands, the words he was whispering in her ear sending fire racing through her veins.

“You’ll be begging for my cock in your tight little pussy.” Fireworks exploded behind her eyes as he rolled one hard nipple between his fingers.

His hand moved down her body, and his fingers slid between the wet folds of her sex. He drove two fingers deep inside her and she moaned. Wet heat gushed around his fingers as she clamped down. She moved her hips, seeking the release he kept denying her, but he was already sliding from her. His fingers blazed a damp trail across her hip and over her butt cheek.

“You’ll beg for me to take your pussy. You’ll even beg for me to take you here.” He shifted behind her, parted her ass cheeks to slide his fingers down the crease. She flinched as he teased the puckered rose of her anus, her eyes opening in shock as her body clenched even harder at the thought. She’d never done that before, never even thought of it before. *What the hell is wrong with me?*

He moved his hand away, fingers firm as he massaged her ass cheek. His breath was hot on her neck as he kissed the tender skin, nudging her head to one side to nibble at the sensitive spot under her ear. The one that always made her melt. Her eyes fluttered closed, her knees threatening to buckle, but he caught her.

“Oh no, sweetheart, you stand there, exactly like that, until I tell you otherwise,” he said, a hard note in his voice. Soundlessly, she nodded. He lifted his hand from her wrists. She stayed stock still, her body trembling in anticipation.

“Good girl.”

His hands skimmed down her arms and slid around her body. Slowly, watching her in the mirror, he unclipped her bra. Her breasts sprang free. She wasn’t overly-



endowed but she was curvy enough. His breath escaped his lungs in a sigh as he cupped her tits.

Grace bit her lip, forcing her knees to lock despite the pleasure flooding through her body. Her breasts tightened in his hands, and a soft cry escaped her lips. Pleasure arched through her body as though an invisible line ran between her nipples and her aching pussy. A pussy she needed filled and the sooner the better. She shifted restlessly, grinding her ass back onto his erection in silent encouragement.

In her distraction she moved her hands slightly and his voice was like a whip. “Stand still!”

She thrust her ass back again, inviting his retaliation. *Oh God, I hope he retaliates.* She’d never wanted a man to fuck her more in her whole life.

“That’s it; you asked for it.” He growled, kicking her feet farther apart and opening her legs wide. One hand smoothed down over her stomach, heading south toward her pussy. She bit her already mangled lower lip as he parted her folds, running a finger along her slick flesh.

“You’re wet, Grace. You’re a bad girl, aren’t you? All this is getting you hot, isn’t it?” His voice was a dark temptation in her ear and he lifted his hand, running the wet tip along her lips. “See for yourself. Open your mouth, Grace.”

She hesitated then parted her lips, accepting his fingertips and suckling them deeply. The earthy taste took her by surprise but it wasn’t unpleasant. She flicked her tongue over the end of his finger, teasing him. Turnabout was fair play.

“Fuck! Grace, you’d tempt a saint!” he growled over the sound of rustling fabric behind her. She didn’t need to look in the mirror to know he was shedding his clothes as fast as he could.

The touch of his lips at the back of her thigh, just above the lace stocking top, took her by surprise. He caressed her other leg, his fingers gentle as he stroked upward.

“God, these are so sexy,” he murmured, kissing along the lace as his fingers crept higher. “Remind me to get you more.”

Then his fingers reached their destination, sought out her clit and circled it. Trembling, she locked her knees as he teased her with little nibbling kisses along the stocking top, teased her clit with little circling strokes of his fingers. Her eyes rolled back in her head as the pleasure mounted again. Perhaps this time, finally, he would let her come . . . she needed to come. The need had become more necessary than breathing.

Then his fingers slid inside her again and Grace nearly blacked out.

“Oh God . . . you’re a bad man. A very bad man!” She managed in a shaky voice as he scissored his fingers inside her. Her hands slid down the glass until they rested on the dresser top. She couldn’t think, couldn’t talk, all that mattered was his fingers in her body, sliding in and out as he fucked her with them. Moving them apart, twisting them inside her as he stretched her and prepared her body for his possession.

His fingers slid from her and she moaned her frustration, but a moment later the blunt, swollen head of his cock replaced them. Desperate, she pushed back, her breath catching as the tip started to penetrate her body. *Would it fit? He’s huge!*

“Oh, it’ll fit alright, sweetheart; you were made for this. Made to take cock. Made to be fucked good and hard,” he told her, pushing forward and forcing her to accept him. She gasped as her body stretched, hovering on the edge of pleasure and pain as he worked himself deeper into her pussy with tiny see-saw motions of his hips. Then he buried himself in her to the hilt, his hand on the back of her neck, holding and caressing her.

“Breathe, Grace,” he murmured, his voice kind as he paused and waited for her body to adjust to him. He leaned over her, his larger body covering hers as his hand slid between her legs again. The instant he touched her clit she forgot all her discomfort as her denied climax built up again. He spread her juices over the tiny bud of pleasure, circling and flicking it as he started to move. His hips set up a solid rhythm, and he fucked her hard as his fingers drove her over the edge.

In the pit of her stomach, the familiar tightness wound tighter, curling in and around on itself, forming a hard knot of pleasure. She opened her thighs more and pressed back against him to rock against his fingers, needing more sensation. Just a little more, to tip her into the abyss.

Then she was there, poised on the edge for a moment before sensation swept her away in a storm of white-hot pleasure. She cried out, thrusting her hips back as her body clamped around his, her internal muscles milking his cock as her climax took over.

Jaron gritted his teeth, the feeling of her body around his more than heavenly. As soon as he’d slid inside her tight sheath, he felt as if he’d come home. He shuddered, gently stroking his hand down her back. Despite all his crude words, he wouldn’t hurt her for the world. The trust she’d placed in him had totally humbled him. As his own climax took him, he realised he’d do just about anything for her.

## Chapter Six

Life was good. Grace could hardly believe her own luck. A knight in shining armor had rescued her from the pit of despair. Well, okay, maybe that was stretching the truth a bit. But she'd certainly been rescued by her own Prince Charming. She sighed and stretched in bed, reaching out for Jaron. But the bed next to her was empty, the cold sheets telling her he was long gone.

Disappointment made her throat tight. She lay back on the expensive sheets and sighed; she'd missed him again. She never managed to wake up in time. He was always gone before sunrise, headed down to his lab in the basement before she could entice him to spend an extra half hour or maybe even the morning in bed with her.

Rubbing at her face, she banished the sleep that still lingered. She had a long day ahead of her and thanks to someone keeping her up all night with his kisses and wickedly hot body she hadn't gotten much sleep. Pulling herself up to a sitting position Grace took a moment to get herself oriented.

She needed coffee and her medication, in that order. Honestly, she had no clue how Jaron did it. He kept her up half the night but then was gone before she awoke. She knew he'd spend all day locked down in the lab, but he'd be fresh as a daisy by the time evening came.

Perhaps he caught a few winks down there during the day? He didn't strike her as the napping kind but didn't a lot of high-powered execs take power naps? Yeah, Grace did power naps, too. The eight-hours-a-night kind!

The bedroom door opened and one of Jaron's soft-footed staff came in carrying a breakfast tray.

"Morning, Ma'am, how are you feeling this morning?" the girl asked in a chirpy, bright voice quite at odds with the tired look on her face and the bags under her eyes.

Grace stretched, her arms raised over her head. "I feel fantastic, thank you. Helen isn't it?"

"Yes, Ma'am. Just coffee and toast again this morning?" The girl beamed, obviously pleased Grace remembered her name. It wasn't a hardship. Grace had no idea where Jaron got his staff, but they had a polish that bespoke of good training and good breeding. Grace had remembered Helen's name because the girl was a delight, always eager to please.

But Helen, like the rest of Jaron's staff, was extremely tight-lipped and seemingly protective of her employer. Honorable, but a bit frustrating when one wished to learn

more of one's paramour's past. All of Jaron's employees seemed to think he walked on water. The butler had even gone as far as to refer to Jaron as 'his lordship'. The title seemed a bit over-dramatic, and Grace had had to stifle a giggle. She wouldn't have been surprised to see an Igor-like creature shuffling around in the corridors mumbling about serving the 'master'.

"Yes, please; just the coffee and toast." Grace sat back in bed as Helen placed the tray on her lap. As expected, a coffee mug sat on the tray. She'd managed to convince the kitchen staff that a fancy, porcelain coffee cup just didn't contain enough caffeine to render her human each day. That first morning, she'd had to 'make do' with the butler's holiday-themed coffee mug, with its cheery, cavorting Santas. But by the next day, she'd been given her own—no doubt very expensive—white mug to match the rest of the crockery. Grace missed the Santas; they'd been cute.

She drew a deep breath in, savouring the coffee's rich aroma. Alongside the mug sat a small mountain of toast, half of which she already knew she wouldn't eat. Grace wasn't a morning person—coffee and one slice of burnt toast was her perfect breakfast. But alongside the toast was something else. Something she'd come to rely on. Something she couldn't do without now. She reached out and picked up the small vial. Funny . . . to her, it still looked like blood.

As she took the vial, Helen's hands shook and the toast and mug slid toward the edge of the tray and Grace's lap. Acting without thinking, Grace reached out, covering the maid's hands and steadying the tray. A lapful of hot coffee was the last thing she wanted.

"Oh my God! I'm so sorry, Ma'am," Helen said. Using a towel she'd had draped over her arm, she quickly dabbed at the coffee that had spilled over Grace's hands and the tray. "I don't know what came over me; I'm not normally this clumsy!"

"No worries hun, accidents happen." Grace smiled, reassuring the younger woman.

Helen continued to fuss, rearranging the tray and removing the coffee-sodden toast. As she leaned over, Grace noticed the dark mark on her neck.

A love bite, no doubt. It looked nasty, though. Purple bruising spread up over her high-collared shirt.

"Might want to get that looked at. Looks nasty." Grace nodded toward the mark, wondering if she should have a quick word with Jaron. Perhaps Helen was having trouble with her boyfriend or something. Although they called them 'love' bites, surely no loving act had caused such a painful looking mark?

She was starting the first part of the conversion. Slowly, so slowly he hadn't seen it until now. But each day she was getting faster, stronger, and the scars on her legs were fading. Without his bite, though, the full conversion would take longer than her human lifespan.

Jaron watched the scene by the bed from the corner of the room. He often lingered there, hidden in the half shadows, his body scattered to nothingness, watching Grace as she woke. He was fortunate she was an early riser. Once the sun started to rise in earnest, he would be forced back under the earth to the sleeping chamber in the house's expansive cellars.

He hadn't used the chamber in years. As an elder vampire, he wasn't crippled by the sun-paranoia of the newly converted that drove them beneath the earth to escape it. But with Grace staying over and sleeping in his bed, he needed an alternative resting place. She still thought he was human; the possibility that he wasn't had never crossed her mind.

So if she found him dead to the world, his heart and lungs shut down by the presence of the sun in the sky . . . Well, *freak out* would be an understatement. The last thing he wanted to do was land in the human medical system. Sure, a post mortem wasn't going to kill him, but it was going to be damned uncomfortable and a hell of a shock for the coroner when his 'patient' woke up. Coroners weren't known for their bedside manner, even under the best of circumstances.

He watched as Helen left the room, her gaze flickering toward the corner where he was hiding. All the staff were sensitive to his presence. They weren't just servants, they were all seneschals, his eyes and ears in the day, his protectors should the need arise. They were all drawn from families who knew what he was and had served him for generations. And when necessary, they provided him with sustenance.

Like last night. He had taken blood from Helen, maybe a little too much if her lack of co-ordination this morning was an indication. He didn't have time to hunt, not with Grace around. He didn't want to waste any of the time he had with her. Human lives were so short.

Pain flared through him. He loved her. Somewhere along the way he'd done the unthinkable and fallen in love with a human. A human he had no intention of converting. He'd damned himself enough already with Julia. He wasn't going to repeat

the mistake with Grace. Not when what he felt for her was a hundred times stronger than anything he'd felt for his wife.

He watched her pour the contents of the vial into the coffee mug and lift it to her lips. A delicious shiver of pleasure shot through him as she drank. She closed her eyes in bliss, reacting to the taste of his blood. When he was still practising medicine he'd noted that some humans found the taste of vampire blood pleasant, even addictive. Those test subjects had always converted well.

He shook himself, disappearing from the room and arrowing through the ether to reappear down in his sleeping chamber far below the earth. As soon as he reappeared he lashed out, his fists connecting with the heavy steel door, denting it in his rage.

It was over.

Tonight, as soon as the sun was down, he would have to leave. Before he lost control and pierced her skin with his teeth. Completed the process she'd already begun by taking her blood within him to create an unbreakable bond between them.

One that would damn her forever.

## Chapter Seven

Jaron didn't leave. He couldn't. As soon as he looked at her, saw the anticipation and happiness in her eyes about the evening ahead, he couldn't bring himself to end their affair. Not yet; he would wait until the night ended and then he'd fade away with the dawn.

Jaron smiled in reply to something Grace said as he settled her into her chair. Tonight, they were guests of the ballet, viewing a special performance of *The Nutcracker*. His hand trailed over her shoulder, which earned him a smile as he took his own seat.

He watched her as the show started. Watching the interplay of emotions over her face, the concentration as she watched the dancers, the delight when one performed a move flawlessly. She had an astounding grasp and understanding of ballet. Jaron had followed the art almost since it had *become* an art and he had never met a performer with the sheer knowledge and ability Grace had. She had been well named, indeed.

A battle warred within him. How could he even contemplate taking that talent away from the world? If he converted her—and he admitted that the temptation was hovering on the edges of his brain—then he would be. But that 'what if' tormented him by offering visions of a future where he could have it all. Grace's presence in his life, her love for the rest of his days . . . or rather, his nights. If he converted her then she'd

belong to the night, her talent hidden from the rest of the world. And he knew without thinking it would kill her; Grace was born to perform, born to be on the stage.

Knowing he had to leave her at the end of the night, Jaron lifted his hand and stroked a finger down her delicate cheekbone. He didn't care where they were, he just wanted one last time with her, something to imprint on his memory for the long years ahead.

Grace felt the touch and cast him a brief smile. She started to turn her attention back to the stage, but the look in his eyes stopped her dead. She'd seen him hungry, passionate, filled with desire . . . but nothing pierced her heart as much as the look that he gave her now.

Longing, bittersweet need and something else swirled in his mercurial eyes. She'd once thought they were cold but that was before she'd gotten to know him. They said the eyes are the windows to the soul. If they were, then there were things in Jaron's soul no sane woman would go near. But that was the thing about Grace. She'd always been one to venture where angels feared to tread.

His hand changed tack, sliding to the nape of her neck. His signature move as he leaned in to press a kiss to her lips. Unlike his other kisses, which tended toward the dominant—demanding kisses that she couldn't help but respond to—this one was different. Almost as though he were requesting permission to carry on, asking whether she wanted this.

The ballet forgotten, she turned in her seat, sliding her arms around his neck as she kissed him back. The kiss got hot quickly, and their tongues danced in an age-old rhythm that seemed as fresh as the new dawn. Without prompting, Grace climbed into his lap, straddling his hips as his hands shaped her waist. She giggled as her skirts bunched around her thighs.

"Good thing it's dark up here," she whispered, her hands on his shoulders. She traced her fingers along the seam of his shirt, feeling the solid muscle underneath.

His palm skimmed up her thigh, playing with the lace at the edge of her stocking. She'd taken to wearing thinner and thinner stockings as Jaron's potions had achieved the impossible. The scars on her legs were lightening, fading more and more, the longer she took the medication. When she'd asked if it was normal, he'd just shrugged and said it was one of the possible side effects. It didn't happen with everyone so she must be one of the lucky ones.

She wriggled in his lap, feeling wanton as she kissed him. Hot, open-mouthed and passionate kisses. Kisses that reminded her of how long it had been since they'd last made love. Right at this moment, last night seemed a lifetime ago.

Her fantasy of making love in a box whilst everyone around them was unawares came back to tempt her, playing over and over in her mind. She nibbled along his jaw, her eyes closed. A rumble of pleasure came from deep in the back of her throat as his hands smoothed up under her skirt. Just the touch of his skin against her bare legs, his fingers stroking up over her ass, bared by her thong underwear, was enough to set her off. The deep need she couldn't seem to control when he was around came to the fore.

Pulling at his shirt, she tried to undo the buttons and kiss him at the same time. He laughed, stilling her hands.

"Whoa there, Gracie. Anticipation . . . ," he told her, reaching up lazily to undo the buttons along his shirt.

"Screw anticipation," she whispered against his lips, desperate to get her hands on him. "In fact, screw screwing anticipation, I want to screw *you*."

He shuddered and his eyes closed for a moment. When they opened, the longing look was gone, replaced by pure heat. He smiled, opening the last button, the fabric of his shirt falling open and revealing his smooth chest and washboard stomach.

"If you want me, Gracie, take me."

She didn't need his soft order. She pushed his shirt over his shoulders and halfway down his arms. With a wicked grin, she left it there, the fabric pinning his arms in place. It was a trick he'd pulled on her the other night, pinning her arms with her own top. Then he'd spread her legs and used his delightfully talented tongue on her until she'd screamed his name in pleasure, her climax so intense she nearly passed out.

"Grace." Her name came out sounding more like a warning. She grinned unrepentantly as she slid from his lap, her hands going for his belt buckle.

"Payback's a bitch, isn't it?" She replied with a wink.

Jaron's mind still reeled as he slid behind the wheel to drive them home. Home. He almost smiled at the thought. He'd not considered any place home for years. He moved around a lot, a new city every ten or so years, to stop people from realising he wasn't actually ageing. Eventually, he'd even had to go through the elaborate charade and pretend he was his own son. He already had the paperwork in his safe for his next identity, Dragomir Conrad.



His lips quirked slightly as he twisted the key and the engine roared to life. Yet another change Grace had wrought in him. Along with his indecisiveness. Normally he made a decision and stuck to it. Normally he would have already left. But Grace kept throwing him curveballs, things like the little scene in the box earlier, and he was sticking around like a bad penny.

Next to him, Grace strapped herself in. Dragomir. He hadn't used that one in a while. It was, in fact, his name. Jaron Conrad Dragomir. Very dark and Carpathian-sounding. Which was exactly why he hadn't used it for centuries. But people these days were less suspicious of eastern European-sounding names, their fear of vampires and werewolves replaced by a fear of serial killers and a spot-inspection by the tax office.

Whilst it gave his kind a bit of a break, the change was sad to see. Along with their fear, humanity had lost something else. A sense of the wondrous, the belief that sometimes magic could happen. Like tonight.

Magic had happened tonight, clichéd as that sounded. When he'd drawn Grace into his lap he'd intended to seduce her, take the fantasy on the surface of her mind and make it real. However, Grace had had other ideas. She'd taken over and seduced *him*.

He pulled out into traffic, the powerful car responding to his every movement. Deep in thought, he focused on driving and getting them home safely. He was used to being the aggressor, the one in charge. So when Grace had pinned his arms in the shirt, he'd been surprised, then aroused.

*Fuck yeah, that had been a turn on.* His cock sprang to life in his pants again at the memory. He planted his foot on the accelerator, desperate to get home and finish what they'd started. Next to him, Grace squeaked as he wove in and out of the traffic, driving at breakneck speed until they left the city lights behind them.

"Jaron! You'll get us killed!" She protested, one white-knuckled hand gripping her seat belt, her other hand scrabbling for purchase on the door as he threw the car into another bend.

Jaron laughed but took pity on her. She wasn't to know that his reactions were razor sharp, he could drive the car at top speed and it still felt like a Sunday afternoon stroll to him. He slowed the car to a more reasonable speed, one that wouldn't attract the attention of the local cops, and smiled across at her.

"There, that better?"

She swallowed and nodded, looking less green now. "Much, thank you. What got into you? In a hurry to get back or something?" She gave a little, nervous laugh.

He looked at her, dropping his amiable mask and letting her see the need and desire inside. Deliberately, he sent her a scene from earlier. She wouldn't know where the image had come from. Thanks to their link, forged by her taking of his blood, it was easier for him to slip in and out, inserting the image directly in her mind.

Her on her knees, reaching for his belt buckle and releasing his straining cock . . . her small, pink tongue as it flicked out and swept over the sensitive head.

He smelled her arousal the instant her body softened. The sweet scent flooded the cramped confines of the car to drive him mad. His hands clenched on the steering wheel again. Desire hit him broadside. His nostrils flared as he tried to get himself under control. He stifled the groan that came to his lips and tried to act normal.

She rolled her head back against the headrest and looked at him. It was all Jaron could do to keep the car on the road rather than pull over, throw the seat back and take her right there in the damn passenger seat. He flicked a glance at the back seat in the rear view mirror. Perhaps . . . . No, he was *not* taking her in the bloody car like some hormone-driven teenager.

He kept his eyes on the road, feeling her interested gaze on him. She reached out, smoothed her hand down his shoulder. He slid her a sideways glance, pretending he had no clue what was on her mind.

"Hey babe," he murmured, the easy modern phrase sounding a bit odd as his accent thickened.

Her smile broadened as her hand crept downward. She'd made the connection between his accent and his state of arousal. *Damn it!* She stroked down his stomach, and his muscles contracted automatically. In his pants his cock strained, as if trying to get closer to her hand.

And then—*Oh God*—her hand reached his cock. He tightened his grip on the steering wheel as she stroked him through the fabric, examined the length and breadth of him, as if gauging the strength of his arousal. He was hard, so fucking hard he felt like he was going to burst any minute.

"Gracie . . . ." He warned, having trouble concentrating on the road ahead with her hand in his lap. Especially when she started to play with his belt buckle. She wouldn't go down on him, not in the car . . . would she? His cock pulsed, desperate to feel her mouth on him again. He'd had blowjobs before, of course, but rarely, and none had ever seemed to enjoy it as much as Grace did. *That* was the real turn on. The pleasure she took in giving him pleasure.

“So, pleased to see me, I take it?” She purred in his ear, out of her seatbelt and moving closer. Distracted by her, Jaron slowed the car down as a van pulled onto the road ahead of them.

“You know I am,” he said as she kissed his jaw and along the side of his neck. Her hand whispered over his straining erection, stroking but not fulfilling. “You keep this up and you’re going to find out exactly how pleased I am to see you.”

“Oooh, tough talk. You man enough to back up your words?”

“You want me to stop this car and bend you over the hood to fuck you?” he asked, slowing the car to a crawl as the van in front slowed.

“Great,” he muttered, “Some people should really learn how to damn drive.”

“Rawr. Scary Jaron.” Grace giggled, still curled up around him as she kissed along his neck. Kisses interspersed with little nips from her blunt human teeth. His eyes rolled back in his head, pleasure exploding through him at the sensation.

“Harder.” His demand was a ragged whisper filled with dark need. Not until she complied with his request did he realise how dangerous a game they’d begun. Just one proper bite and he’d lose control. He slammed his foot on the brake and grabbed her hand.

“Holy shit, Grace; you’ll be the death of me!”

He locked gazes with her, her hand caught in his between them. His body was rigid as he fought for control. All he wanted to do was drag her into his arms, press her lips to his throat and make her bite him again. Damn it, why shouldn't he? Hadn't he spent enough time alone?

But before he could move a muscle the door was wrenched open and a harsh voice said, “We can do this the easy way or the painful way. Personally, I prefer the second but it’s your call.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Grace trembled and fought back the terror, the hysteria that had closed off her throat, making it almost impossible to breathe, to speak.

Before either could react, she and Jaron had been dragged from the car. Jaron had tried to fight but there had been too many of them and there wasn't much arguing anyone could do against a crowbar. Her initial thought—that they were being car-jacked

—faded into fearful confusion when they'd been tied up and bundled into one of the vans.

Grace flicked Jaron a worried glance. Slumped next to her with his head back against the wall, he seemed barely conscious. They'd hit him hard. Heavy purple bruising was already spreading along his temple and the side of his face. Grace winced just to look at it. It had to be painful.

Jaron felt like a damn fraud, leaning against the wall doing a dying duck act. Sure his head ached; it took a hell of a blow to bruise a vampire. A blow like that would have crushed a human's skull. Luckily, the thugs that had picked them up and brought them to this place—an abandoned warehouse, by the looks of it—were none too bright. At least two of them were high on something; he could smell the chemical sweetness in their sweat.

He groaned and opened his eyes, meeting Grace's worried gaze and feeling more of a fraud. He could end this in around ten seconds flat. The ropes around his wrists wouldn't hold the weakest youngling, not even a new convert, never mind a five-hundred-year-old vampire. But despite the fact he could shred them like paper, something far stronger held him captive.

Fear.

No human could rip ropes like paper. No human would be able to take on seven heavily armed thugs. Hell, no human should have survived that blow with the crowbar but, thankfully, Grace didn't know how hard he'd been hit. And the thug who'd hit him was one of the users. He'd just looked at the crowbar and shrugged. It had taken all Jaron's control not to just rip his throat out and end it there and then.

But then Grace would know what he was; or at least she'd know what he *wasn't*. Jaron smiled at her, a weak smile to go along with his play-acting. She was so worried about him; concern and something else shone in her eyes. Something he didn't want to recognise, but he did, the emotions in the forefront of her mind.

Love. She loved him.

Guilt twisted in his gut like a knife. She loved him, she was worried about him. And he was lying to her about who he was. What he was. But he couldn't do a damn thing about it. Once she knew he was a monster, her love would die. She would run. Leave him as Julia had.

“Are you ok?” she whispered, casting a nervous glance about to see if any of the goons were close by. Jaron had caught the way they were looking at her, the way the biggest of them looked at her, in particular, and his rage simmered.

“Yeah, I think so.” He added a groan for effect as he blinked, faking the effects of a concussion.

“Shut it you two!” The smallest of the thugs, a weasely looking guy, snarled from his perch on some crates nearby. Try as he might, Jaron couldn’t pick up any clues from any of them as to what this was about. The two high on whatever cocktail of chemicals they preferred were in their happy places so he ignored them. The others had just been told to pick them up and bring them here. He couldn’t get any other details from them, not even from the leader. They simply didn’t know. Their orders had come by phone from an unknown source. They’d been paid in advance with the promise of more if they delivered.

“I still say we should do the girl.”

A large man lurched in front of them, glaring down at Grace with undisguised lust in his eyes. Jaron felt sick at the images going through the thug’s mind. He’d thought *he* was a sick bunny because of some of the things he wanted to do to Grace. Things that involved silk bonds and soft whips, things he planned to introduce her to when she was ready. But the fantasies running through this guy’s head made Jaron’s blood freeze in his veins.

Jaron’s lip curled, just the tiniest hint of a snarl as he locked eyes with the thug.

“Don’t even think about it.” His voice was soft. He was tied up against a wall. To all intents and purposes there was no way he should be issuing threats.

The man stared at Jaron for a moment then his eyes widened in fear. Jaron relaxed a little against his bonds. No matter how good a vampire was at concealment, humans were smart. The instincts that had dragged them out of the caves, although dulled by civilisation, were still sharp enough to recognise death when it looked them in the face.

The goon swallowed, his gaze flicking from Jaron to Grace and back again.

“You can ‘do’ what you like to her when I’m done. Not before.” The voice came from the shadows.

Grace’s head snapped up in recognition. Her head still reeling at the savage threat in Jaron’s quiet voice, she didn’t have time to collect herself for this new shock. She

knew that voice. Or she thought she did. Usually it was a whining, complaining voice directing snide comments at her. Now it was filled with hatred and purpose.

“Fayte?”

Her cousin’s tinkling laugh filled the cavernous room as bully boy stepped out of the way. Her heels rapped against the concrete as she walked across to stand over Grace, her features twisted and ugly.

“Surprised to see me, cousin dear?” She taunted.

Grace struggled to breathe as she realised what had happened, as she realised the truth. Fayte had organised this. She’d actually organised for Grace and Jaron to be kidnapped. Christ, they could have been killed. Jaron nearly had!

“Why?” Grace asked. She knew Fayte didn’t like her, but surely this was taking things a little too far? “Why would you do something like this?”

Fayte laughed, a bitter sound that echoed around the large room. The sound fell flat but she didn’t seem to notice, amusement in her eyes as she looked at Grace.

“Oh, come on, you can’t be that bloody dense, surely? You’ve been the bane of my existence from the moment you were born. So pretty, so delicate. So fucking perfect!” She spat. “I thought I’d dealt with you but you even screwed that up for me. Do you have any *clue* how expensive it is to arrange a car accident these days?”

Grace’s jaw dropped. Her car accident. The terrible, tragic *accident* which had stolen her life, stolen her dancing—at least until Jaron had come along—hadn’t been an accident at all?

Fayte’s face screwed up as she snarled. “I go to all that expense and planning to get you out of the way and you bloody survive.” She sighed heavily then grinned. “But that was cool; I could live with that if you couldn’t dance. Knowing I took away the one thing that meant more than life itself to you gave me pleasure.”

She leaned down, her breath hot against Grace’s face.

“But you couldn’t even stay the pathetic cripple, could you? You had to go and recover somehow. Then you fucking *sack me*. Me! Who are you to sack *me*?” she asked, her eyes wild, the rage in them visible for the world to see. Spittle flecked the corner of her mouth. Grace couldn’t stop looking at it. Fayte was always so perfectly made up, always fretting and checking her makeup to make sure it was perfect, so the tiny slip made things seem worse. Fayte would never allow such a slip, not without being out of her mind with rage, anyway.

Fayte’s eyes gleamed with malevolence. “This time it’ll be different. Last time, I let you live. But not this time. Oh, no. This time the job gets done right and you’ll be out of

my hair for good.” She straightened up and looked around at the thugs who had brought them here.

“Have your fun, and then kill them both. Dump the bodies as we discussed.”

## Chapter Eight

Silence blanketed the warehouse after Fayette walked out. Shocked into silence by the sheer lack of expression in her cousin’s last statement, Grace sat staring at her retreating back. She might have well have said ‘take the trash out when you’re done’. It chilled Grace to the bone. But not as much as the slow grins spreading over the faces of the thugs as they looked at her and Jaron.

Correction. At her. They weren’t looking at Jaron at all. A cold shiver of dread wormed its way up her spine. Without a doubt she knew they weren’t getting out of here alive. Earlier, death had seemed the worst thing that could happen, but now she realised otherwise. She shrank closer to Jaron as if he could protect her. There were worse things than death, all of them shining back at her from lust or drug-crazed eyes. By the end of the night, Grace knew she’d welcome death.

Jaron shifted beside her, agony in his face. “I’m sorry, love,” he whispered, “I’m sorry it had to come to this . . . .”

Grace shook her head. A sad smile curved her lips as she looked at him, memorised every line of his face. She had her memories; whatever they did to her she would try to escape to them. Go to a happier place to escape what was happening to her.

“It’s not your fault,” she told him. “This was nothing to do with you. You were just in the wrong place at the wrong time, that’s all. I’m sorry you had to be involved.” Why couldn’t they have picked another night, a night when she was alone? Why did Jaron have to die with her? But perhaps . . . perhaps he didn’t?

She lifted her head and located the leader of the little thug gang. She looked him straight in the eye and tried to find something human in there. Something decent. It was a struggle but there was a flicker. Maybe? She carried on, hoping there was something she could reach.

“Please,” she said, “he doesn’t have anything to do with this. You can let him go; you don’t have to kill him. He can walk away and you never need to see him again.”

Jaron froze as he listened to Grace pleading. Grace. Begging for his life. *His* life, not her own. Time slowed, shrank to this one moment for Jaron as his guilt

overwhelmed him. He could stop this, save her, but fear crawled up his spine and held him immobile.

Regardless of what happened, he would survive this. Unless they dragged him out into the sun or chopped his head off they couldn't do anything that wouldn't heal and he wasn't planning on making it that easy for them. He was in no danger but she was *begging* for his life.

He felt a sharp crack in the middle of his chest. His heart, an organ he'd thought long dead, broke in two. He had no choice and he knew it. Either way he looked at it, he lost Grace. If he did nothing, his secret was safe. She died, but he'd live—a long, dismal life without the other half of his soul. But if he saved them, if he revealed what he was, she'd run from him in fear.

But she'd live.

He sighed as he looked up, his decision made. He would die, of course. Oh, not at the hands of these thugs but the instant Grace looked at him with terror in her eyes his life would be over. He would seek the dawn at the next sunrise.

"Forgive me," he whispered and stood.

Grace frowned at his words, not quite sure why he was apologising. This wasn't his fault, unless she'd slipped into some weird alternate reality and he was in league with Fayte. But if he was, then he wasn't likely to be tied up. So why did he need her forgiveness?

*She* should be asking *his* forgiveness for dragging him into this situation with her insane cousin. And Fayte *had* to be insane; no normal person would try to kill a member of their family . . . twice. Laughter, totally inappropriate laughter, started to bubble over from Grace's lips, the hot prickle of tears behind it.

Grace tried to struggle to her feet. The gang of men had pulled their weapons—guns, knives, sticks—and Jaron was tied, unarmed. They'd kill him. "Jaron, no!"

He looked over his shoulder, his ice blue eyes sad. Sorrow, fear and longing all mixed into one. But not for himself. For her. Grace bit her lip, her tears welling over and silently flowing down her cheeks. He was going to die protecting her and there was nothing she could do about it.

"I'm sorry, love," he said again and turned back to the gang closing in on them, bloodlust shining in their eyes.

Then everything went freaky.

She watched in stunned silence as Jaron ripped the ropes from his wrists. The tattered remains dropped to his feet, shredded. Grace's mouth dropped open at the



casual display of strength. He hadn't even broken a sweat, and his pale wrists were unmarked from even the slightest rope burn. How had he done that? Impossible.

"What the fu—?"

Any thought he'd been working on his bonds with a hidden nail file or something was blown out of the water as he rounded on the gang with a feral snarl. He dropped to a defensive crouch, keeping himself between Grace and the thugs.

Grace gasped, her eyes widening. The sound, the way he moved . . . it was like something out of a film. One of those sci-fi or horror films with special effects. He moved, sidling to the side as one of them tried to creep around to get to her. He glided, as if he were boneless.

Grace brought her bound hands to her throat. No human moved that way. No human *could* move that way. She watched as he launched himself at his attackers. Shrieks of terror echoed around the huge room but there was no escape from the whirlwind Jaron had become. He ducked and wove between the thugs, avoiding their weapons with ease. His low laughter underscored their shrieks, a symphony of death, as though he was mocking them. And he was. As Grace watched, he reached out negligently, catching one of the thugs, the big one who had threatened her.

Easily, as though he were dealing with a recalcitrant child, he pulled the man into his arms, whirling him to face Grace. For a split second, Jaron looked directly into her face, into her eyes. His face creased in pain for a moment before it smoothed out. The beautiful and blank face of a dark angel again. Grace sucked in her breath, knowing somehow that what happened next would change her life forever.

He didn't look at her again, seemed to not *want* to look at her, his gaze fixed to a spot just above her right shoulder. Then he leaned down, his eyes closing as his hands tightened on the man struggling in his grip. One hand clamped across his forehead as Jaron pulled his head back, exposing the line of his throat.

Jaron bared his teeth.

Bared his . . . *fangs*?

"Ohmigod!" Grace had seen enough vampire films to know what she was looking at. The impossible. Vampires didn't . . . couldn't exist. Even as she thought it, things started to click into place. His absences during the day. He wasn't dedicated to his work; he'd been avoiding the damn sun!

Jaron bit down. His teeth sliced through the skin of his victim's throat like a knife through hot butter. The guy jerked and twitched as Grace watched in stunned silence.

Jaron didn't open his eyes as he drank. She could almost hear the muscles of his throat working as he swallowed.

A moment later, Jaron released the man and the corpse slid to the floor, like a puppet with its strings cut. Jaron looked up at her, flinching as he almost met her eyes, as though he was afraid to look at her. He looked away at the last minute. Then he was moving again and the rest of their captors didn't stand a chance.

Grace looked away from the carnage. She curled into a ball against the wall, as Jaron tore through their abductors. Literally. Strangled screams of pain were followed by wet splashes and dull thuds as bodies hit the floor. She tried to keep her gaze averted, tried to make sense of what was happening around her.

Blood sprayed up the wall next to her, a hot, wet, vivid scarlet spray. It slid down onto the floor next to her in heavy drops. *Drip . . . drip . . . drip*. Like a leaky faucet. The tap in her bathroom had dripped like that until Jaron had called someone in to fix it. Fayette had never bothered. Grace snorted; well she wouldn't have, would she, if she was planning to kill Grace anyway? Grimly she clung to that thought, ignoring the fact that not ten feet away her lover was tearing people apart with his bare hands.

Was she going to be next?

Silence fell over the warehouse. Only two sets of breathing. Hers and Jaron's. His wasn't even labored; she suspected he didn't need to breathe, that he was only breathing as part of his human disguise.

"People tend to notice if I don't."

Grace flinched as he spoke, his voice far closer than she expected. His feet came into her field of vision, expensive Italian leather shoes. A speck of blood marred his toe. Grace couldn't help but stare at it. He'd ruined his shoes; that stain would never come out.

"You ruined your shoes."

"What?" His voice held confusion as he squatted beside her, his knees coming into view now. Grace felt rather than heard him move. He extended his hand toward her and she flinched, expecting him to grab her at any moment, sink his teeth into her neck and kill her.

"Grace, please, I wouldn't *do* that!" His voice was agonised, as though . . . as though he could see the image in her head. Startled, Grace looked up, directly into his blazing blue eyes. "You can read my mind." Not a question, but a statement. Another realisation as things made more sense now.

Jaron nodded, his hand falling away. “Just the surface thoughts; I don’t go any deeper.”

“God, no wonder you were so perfect! You knew exactly what I wanted because you could see it in my mind!” Grace slammed her head back against the wall, irritation and embarrassment surging through her. No wonder he’d been able to seduce her so easily, been able to get around her normal reserve. She’d wondered at that. Wondered what it was about him that allowed him to judge her responses and know when to push and when to back off. He’d been reading her bloody mind!

The little part of her mind that was prone to hysteria yammered that there was a vampire crouched not three feet away but she ignored it. If Jaron wanted to kill her, there wasn’t anything she could do to stop him.

“Please, Gracie, look at me. Despite what you’re thinking, I’m not going to hurt you. I-I love you.”

Jaron had lived centuries but he’d never been this frightened. He sat, crouched in front of the woman he loved—the *human* woman he loved—who’d just found out he was a blood sucking fiend from beyond the grave.

She wouldn’t look at him as he untied her and her flinch cut him to the bone. If he’d been capable of bleeding, he’d have bled out onto the floor there and then. “I’m sorry you had to find out this way. Believe me; I didn’t want it to end like this.”

He risked a glance back at her to find her looking at him, her green eyes confused. “What did you just say?”

“I said I didn’t want it to end this way.” He rose to his feet, not bothering to conceal the fluid grace in his movements anymore. A small smile touched his lips. She’d have made a wonderful vampire, so beautiful and elegant. Pain raked through his chest, like someone had dumped a bucket of hot coals onto his dead skin. It hurt to even look at her.

He turned to go. Dawn would be there soon; he’d just go and wait for it. That way he wouldn’t have to move once the sorrow that yawned like a chasm in his chest claimed him. He started to walk away, his footsteps measured. Dead man walking. He finally knew how that felt.

“Jaron, stop. I didn’t mean that part.”

There was a scuffling behind him but he didn’t turn around, just stopped and turned his head to indicate he was listening.

“What did you say before that?”

“What? That I love you? Pathetic, isn’t it? The hunter in love with his prey. You can scream now; I won’t hold it against you.”

“Why would I scream?”

Her small hand touched his shoulder, surprising him. He hadn’t heard her move. With his blood in her, she was almost vampire silent. “If you’d wanted to kill me, wanted to drink my blood, you’ve had plenty of opportunity before now. But you haven’t. I figure I’m probably safe.”

Jaron laughed, the harsh sound reverberating around the empty space. “Oh sweetheart, you’re *far* from safe with me.”

“I don’t believe you.”

He shook his head.

“Why today? Why today of all days are you being so damn stubborn?” he asked, every line of his body rigid with tension. All he wanted to do was haul her into his arms and kiss her senseless, claim her as his own. Bury his fangs in the soft skin of her neck and wash away the taste of the thugs blood with the sweet ambrosia he knew flowed through her veins. Hold her close to him as she drank directly from him, not from a vial.

“Coward,” she taunted softly. “Face me and tell me you’ll hurt me. Look me in the eye before you bite me.”

Jaron’s control snapped. A low growl rumbled in his throat as he rounded on her. His hand lashed out and caught in her hair, wrapping the flame red curls around his hand as he dragged her flush against his hard body. He yanked her head back, his lips hovering over the creamy flesh of her throat as he crouched over her.

“And now, Gracie?” he asked, grinding his pelvis against hers. He was already rock hard, just the thought of sinking fang had him rigid. Ready to fuck her. Fuck and suck, the preferred method of lovemaking for a vampire. “Sure I won’t hurt you now?”

Her hands were on his shoulders but to Jaron’s surprise they weren’t pushing him away. Instead she was . . . stroking him? She ran her palms over the muscles of his upper arms and shoulders as if she couldn’t get enough of him. She couldn’t look at him, not with the way he had her hair wrapped in his fist, the way he held her body rigid. Her back was as taut as a bow between his hands. It wouldn’t take much to snap her spine; human bones were so fragile.

He released the pressure on her hair bit by bit, keeping his hand in the silken curls but easing up so she could look at him. Her eyes were dark as they met his, her hands still soft and relaxed on his chest.

She smiled a soft, mysterious and feminine smile that did things to Jaron on a primal level. Woman, the eternal mystery. She was in his clutches, a vampire she'd just seen ripping five men apart and she was *smiling*?

"I'm sure. You won't hurt me, you won't bite me. You're just a big teddy bear."

Jaron bared his fangs and snarled a little but it was all bluff. She was scared; he could see that, sense that. But behind it all was the unshakeable belief that he wouldn't hurt her. She trusted him. Humbled, he closed his mouth and his fangs receded to little more than points. The urge to bite her, just a little nip, a tiny taste, still remained, but he was in control.

"Me big scary vampire, of *course* I want to bite you," he told her, sliding his hand around and lightly tickling along her ribcage. Ticklish as all hell, Grace squirmed against him and giggled.

It broke the mood, as he'd intended, so he stopped and gathered her to him. His eyes were serious as he sought hers.

"Grace, I want very much to bite you. I want to lay you down and make love to you; I want to feel you tight around me as I slide my fangs into your throat. I want to feel you come as I drink from you. Then I want you to ride me, and do the same to me. Drink from me." He drew in a shuddering breath at the thought. "I want you to drink from me, not a bloody vial anymore."

Grace's breath caught, surprise evident on her face. "The herbs . . . not herbs at all? Am I a vampire or something? Bride of Frankenstein or something?"

Jaron chuckled, but desire clouded Grace's eyes as she lifted her hand and smoothed a gentle finger over his lip. He caught it as she pushed the lip back to get a look at his fangs, curiosity and wonder on her face.

"Careful, just one cut is enough." He warned her. "No, you're not a vampire yet. You've taken my blood, which is the first part of the conversion. For you to be fully turned I have to take yours." Another shudder racked his body, his cock pulsing in the confines of his pants.

"You want to." Grace guessed the truth. Everything had taken on a somewhat surreal quality. She stood here in a vampire's arms, blood marring the walls around them and they were calmly discussing how much he wanted her to drink his blood. Shouldn't that be the other way around, him bending her over and muttering 'I want to suck your blood'?

Jaron bit his lip, the sharp fang pushing down on the full flesh. He looked down at her with a combination of need and longing, the fine tremble in his body evidence of his iron control.

“Yeah, I want to. I want you, Grace, forever.”

She nodded slowly, realising she had the real power here.

“Always,” he murmured, obviously picking thoughts out of her head again.

“Oi you, stop that!” She slapped him on the arm, giving him a look of mock fury. She knew what she wanted, the yammering in the back of her head silent under the force of her will.

He grinned. “What’s it worth?”

“Pevert. You have a one track mind. Or is it two tracks for a vampire. Sex and blood?”

He pulled her closer, his hand gently running up the length of her spine. “With you, both. Blood exchange is part of lovemaking for us.”

Grace nodded. She looked deeply into his eyes so he could read and see her decision. “Then do it; bite me, Dracula!” she said, tilting her head to the side and baring her neck.

“Grace, you don’t know what you’re saying. If I do this, you’ll become like me—a creature of the night. You’ll be giving up everything. Your dancing. Everything.”

“I can still dance. We’ll find a way, Jaron. I want to be with you. Always. Please. Do it.”

Jaron shuddered and closed his eyes as she offered him everything he’d ever wanted. All the arguments about why he shouldn’t swirled in his brain and disappeared under one startling truth. She knew he was a vampire and she wasn’t bothered. There was no fear in her eyes . . . apprehension, yes, but not fear. And she didn’t look at him as though he was a monster.

As he smiled, the wounds Julia had left on his soul disappeared. He leaned down and licked her neck. A quick brush of his tongue against her silken skin over the pulsing vein. He pulled back with regret and looked around. “Not here, though, you deserve better.”

He bent down and the next second she was in his arms, cradled against his chest as he strode from the place of carnage and death. “I’m going to take you home. Then make you mine. Forever.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The park was dark, some of the lamps that usually lit the path out for some reason. Probably vandals, Fayte thought to herself, gathering her coat closer around her slender frame. She'd grown skinnier over the course of the last few months. Since she'd tried and failed to kill her famous cousin for a second time. Since she'd been forced to go into hiding.

Bloody Grace! How had she done it again? That woman had more lives than a fucking cat. And those thugs she'd hired. Bloody useless!

In the darkness, Fayte narrowed her eyes as hate consumed her again. She'd manage it, one day. She just had to get herself settled again, make some money, and then she'd try again. She'd try harder next time, plan better. Get better people for the job.

“Hello, Fayte.”

Fayte whirled at the voice. A low, sultry, vaguely familiar voice. There was no one behind her. She shook her head. Must be hearing things, or maybe it had been the wind in the trees. Then a figure stepped from the shadows. No, a figure formed *out* of the shadows.

“What the f—?” She back-pedalled, her eyes wide, not sure she was seeing what she was seeing.

The woman stepped into the light, illuminating her familiar features. She smiled, but her teeth were wrong. Too sharp at the corners. “Time to pay for your sins, Fayte . . .”

Fayte screamed. It was the last sound she ever made.

**~The End~**

### **About the Author**

Mina Carter is short, dark haired and British. The rest is kind of subject to change without notice. She's quite possibly nutty (insane) and a bit of a control freak when it comes to organization. Although this doesn't mean she can keep a room tidy, it does mean she knows where just about everything is in it!

She loves to write—always has. She writes primarily romance, which can span over paranormal, urban fantasy, contemporary and even sci-fi but always it's about a romance. You'll always find a healthy dose of the alpha male in her stories—whether they

be brooding bad-boy vamps or handsome starship captains—and women strong enough to tame them.

When she's not writing she's addicted to Photoshop and online RPGs. Usually you'll find her combining all three of her loves (writing, images and RPGs) in a simmering group someplace. She virtually lives online so the chances of catching her lurking around a forum or two are good as well.

To find more books by Ms. Carter, visit her Web site at <http://mina-carter.com/>

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If you liked Grace, you might also enjoy the following books from Noble Romance Publishing:

Callie's Shadow, by Wendy Stone