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Romance

Naughty Nibble



DARKSOLACE

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www.nobleromance.com

Dark Solace

ISBN 978-1-60592-219-5

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Book Blurb

Three hundred years can change many things, but love is not among them.

Forbidden to claim the woman he loves as his mate, Gabriel established a yearly meet with Jael to satisfy their hunger for one another. Time has not weathered their need, or made the pain of every other day more bearable. Christmas Eve together might not be much, but pretending for one night that they can belong together is the only way either knows how to survive.

Except this Christmas, Gabriel can't go on pretending. Living for one night is no way to live, and he is determined that he and Jael will see the new day together. The only question is, after all this time, is she prepared for the consequences of saying yes?

Dark Solace

By Rosalie Stanton

It was almost a testament to time how much the same tavern could flash a thousand different faces over the course of three hundred years. While the drunken barflies never seemed to leave, the atmosphere itself was on a nonstop course to full evolution. It had been a pub for half a century before it was bought and turned into a diner. There was a six month stint in which it was a ladies hat store, but the lingering scent of alcohol could not help but reemerge every three years or so.

Despite whatever facelift the tavern undertook, it was the place Jael visited every December. Every December since 1697.

Here she would wait, as she did every year on the night known commonly as Christmas Eve. She would wait until he came in, and her year met fruition.

Even in the life prior to her nocturnal rebirth, Jael could not fathom living without the thrill of the winter season pushing her through the common, twelve-month cycle of every insufferable year. Gabriel met her here every December 24, just as the old grandfather clock that had somehow survived the years struck the hour of midnight. They would spend the holiday in each other's arms, and wake up in separate beds in the morning.

As walkers of the night, they could chance nothing more. Such was the way of things between all vampire lovers. One night of the year, maybe two. No connection beyond that. Nothing that anyone in their dark existence, or the other world bathed in sunlight, would ever call a relationship.

Vampires couldn't have relationships. It was as simple as that.

Gabriel was her maker. He had been in her corner from the very beginning. Her protector since childhood. In the absence of vampiric relations, most vampires turned to humans to satisfy carnal desires. Claiming humans as

mates for eternity was not taboo, not like turning to other vampires. Human mates would live for eternity, tied to the lifeline of their mate. Even still, the connection did not run as deeply. When a human female was sad, her vampire mate did not cry. When a human male was cut, his vampire mate did not bleed. They were different. Separate. One could die and the other would live.

It was not like that among connections made between walkers of the night.

Among vampires, those tied together beyond the blood of sires felt everything. Shared everything. Their fate was the same. Always the same.

Every society had their great tragedies. Romeo and Juliet. Napoleon and Josephine. Vampires had a tragedy, as well. Well known to them, a well-kept secret among the humans they protected. Unlike the tale of Dracula, the one among them that had gone bad and henceforth established the grizzly stereotype of their kind, the story of Lazarus and Anna remained shrouded from the world of humans. Remained shrouded, and a cautionary tale that kept all those who belonged to the night in line. For the sake of a species. For the sake of an entire way of life.

As with many cautionary tales, Lazarus and Anna's story had several assumed points of origin. In some tellings, they lived in Ancient Rome. Others had their first meeting documented in Greece. Jerusalem, India, even parts of North and Central America all claimed to being the homeland of vampire kind's most infamous lovers, as well as the most boasted tragedians of a culture. In any regard, wherever Lazarus and Anna had first met remained unimportant compared to their impact on their kind. The story told of a passionate love affair, during which, overcome with zeal, Lazarus and Anna sealed their lifelines together in blood. Once mated, they had but a few weeks together before angry villagers fingered Anna for the death of a beloved elderly man in their village. This was, of course, back in the day when vampires and humans lived side-by-side, when vampires were accepted as the guardians of the human race. In that

time, vampires were more likely to feed from cattle to acquire what they needed, and they did so while humans rested. When the monstrosity of their dependence on blood could be hidden in the shadow of night.

They were careful, but ultimately, accidents did happen. One cow would die. Then another, then another. Respect for the Nightly Ones turned into fear. Fear turned into blame. And when the elderly man died of anemia, fear manifested fully into violence. Anna was seized from Lazarus's loving arms, imprisoned in a local church, and tortured.

At night, she was beaten for information. On occasion, she was bled and burned, and every time her skin was marred, inhuman howls ripped through the ground, shattering the quiet of night as her mate endured the agony of her pain. Some said he died crawling in the sunlight to reach his beloved, others said the pain he suffered was too much, and he drew his last breath the second the villagers burned Anna at the stake. Others said his moniker of Lazarus guaranteed that he would return, and those who still lived in the village swore he haunted the grounds he died upon.

Granted, the tale had suffered severe revisions over the last several centuries.

The tragedy of Lazarus and Anna had established the law. Never could vampires mate. Never could vampires claim each other, if only to become subject to that sort of torment. If vampires mated, they became liabilities, even to each other. Such had been the law for centuries. Such was the reason Jael came to the same tavern every year and waited for Gabriel to arrive. Tonight was the only night they had, because they were both vampires, and that was simply the way of things.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. Her death had been sudden, at a time when her town was overwhelmed by an epidemic of scarlet fever. She and Gabriel had been planning to mate for two years when she became ill, and as he

sobbed over her on what she was sure would have been her last day, she had begged him to turn her.

He had. Through his tears, he had given her new life.

She hadn't known becoming what he was meant that she couldn't have the life they'd planned together. She hadn't known until she breathed life for the first time as something other than human.

Jael shuddered, her eyes falling shut. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't repress the memory of the night she had clawed to freedom. The first night she had opened her eyes and swimming in the soft glow of starlight. Gabriel was waiting for her, his eyes heavy with sorrow, his skin bathed in the scent of tears. His soft blue eyes had found hers, and he had taken her into his arms, murmured his love, and begged her forgiveness.

Then he had told her the story. The reason vampires couldn't be together, even as casual lovers. The urge to claim one another, he said, would grow unbearable. There were several who succumbed to the temptation, and they were expelled from the vampire Order. And expulsion wasn't as nice as it sounded.

Expulsion pretty much guaranteed a death certificate. The Order would track down dissenters and destroy them. They tolerated no weakness among their kind – the survival of the race came above earthly concerns or desires. Above love altogether.

Gabriel had taught her everything about being a vampire before setting her loose into the world. They had attempted to stop seeing each other all together, but that proved disastrous. If she didn't follow him, he followed her. They would meet in a tearful passion and make love until the sun came up. Ultimately, Gabriel suggested that this place – this tavern – would mark their reunion every Christmas Eve. They could be together the one night of the year that the world had decided loved ones should spend with each other.

One night, though. Only one.

It always ate her up. More than three hundred years, she had survived simply to get to Christmas Eve. She went to movies; she occasionally worked with authorities on cases as a visiting detective with forged credentials, and she read more books than writers could produce in a year. She adapted the last name *Winter* in silent homage to the single night for which she spent the entire year waiting. She did anything she could think of to lose herself to time, to ignore the nagging in her gut that Gabriel wasn't with her; that he didn't belong to her for three hundred and sixty-four days. That for every night of the year, save one, he could find solace in the arms of any woman who crossed his path. That he was not hers. He could never be hers, because they were both vampires, and they could not mate.

Tonight, that didn't matter. Tonight, he belonged to her.

The door to the pub swung open, and a familiar scent washed over her. Instantly, her body softened into warm compliance. It was okay again. For a few hours, everything would be okay. Gabriel was here now.

Her body positively hummed.

Gabriel.

He took a seat next to her, looking very much the same as always. Shaggy brown hair, warm eyes, strong shoulders that accompanied strong arms and hands. He shrugged off his leather duster—a new addition to his wardrobe. It was longer than the coats he'd previously worn, more becoming. Almost royal. It was worthy of her Gabriel.

"Whisky," he told the bar hand, lighting a cigarette. There was a thick silence as his glass slid across the bar. Auburn liquid pooled in a clear tumbler. It was a vile drink, but it similarly suited Gabriel. Vampire drunkenness wasn't unheard of, but it took well more than a few drinks to get a nightwalker inebriated. He took a long sip of his drink, exhaled a puff of smoke, then turned to her with a small smile. "You wouldn't happen to be a Kenite, would you?"

Jael shifted slightly, a grin tugging at her lips. "Worthy of recognition, even though I am no woman of Israel?"

His arm curled around her, and he nuzzled her blonde hair with familiar affection that made her heart flutter and ache in the same instance. "God, I've missed you."

"It's only been a year."

"Longest year yet."

"You say that every year."

"And every year I mean it more." Gabriel shuddered violently and downed the rest of his drink. "You look gorgeous."

She flushed. "Thank you."

"How has your year been?"

Terrible. "Fabulous."

"Really?"

"Oh yeah."

A long pause. "Any new men in your life?"

"I keep my eyes open."

Lie. She shunned every man who attempted to touch her. Her body — heart and soul included — belonged solely to Gabriel.

Her eyes fluttered shut as he edged closer, his lips finding her throat. "You smell divine."

"Gabe"

"Need you now." He reeled back, his eyes flashing apologetically. "I'm sorry, sweetling. I just . . . can we go now?"

That lent her pause. He was acting strange. Gabriel always enjoyed the pretense that they were strangers instead of what they were. She supposed it was easier for him if it seemed like a chance encounter instead of the most important date of the year. If they pretended they didn't mean what they did to each other.

If they pretended it was random, so as not to stir trouble in the Order.

"Gabriel?"

His lips swept over hers. "Please."

She needed no persuasion. No reason. The less time they spent here, the more time they had together. All she needed was him.

"All right," she whispered.

"Your place still – "

"Around the corner."

Gabriel tossed a few bills onto the counter and nodded to the bartender, tugging her to her feet. "Never change, do you?"

"You want me to?"

"Not in a million years."

She smiled sadly. A million years. Would they still be playing this game a million years from now? Three hundred had been unbearable; she didn't know if she could suffer through a million of them.

But she supposed that didn't matter. Gabriel was with her now.

And until the sun came up, that was all that mattered.

* * * * *

Tonight was going to be different. He felt it.

Hell, he'd known it the second he stepped into the pub. Seeing her under the soft glow of lights much too cheap to capture her glory. The woman he loved. The woman he lived to see for just a few hours. Every second apart from her constructed another level in his personal hell. He felt cheap for being so easily defined, for being strung along for so many years for the promise of the one woman he could never have; but love knew no reasoning. No boundaries. The rules of the Order didn't apply, and love certainly didn't listen to them.

Time had not healed him. Time had only made his feelings grow almost unbearable. And being so close to her now . . . something was going to change. Something tonight was going to change.

They were at the door now. Her apartment. Her bedroom. Her refuge. The place where he was welcomed once every year to forget his loneliness in the sanctuary of her body. Her body flush against his. His cock so hard he was sure the flimsy zipper on his slacks would pop. Had it been anyone else, he would have been surprised at the depth of his reaction. But it wasn't anyone else; it was her. Jael. His golden goddess. She could smite him with a look if she wanted. So much power in her small, capable hands. It unnerved him to think himself so easily rattled.

There had been no such thing as love in his life before he met her. Before he found her three hundred years ago and was forced to let her go. Forced to forfeit their promised eternity because she could no longer be human. It had been no fault of hers. No fault of anyone's, really, though he would have loved to lay blame on someone's shoulders. Illness was a culprit without a body, and hers had nearly killed her. He'd had no choice if he wanted to keep her in this world, regardless of the consequences. His act of saving her, turning her into a nightwalker, had taken away the only woman to whom he could see himself mated for the rest of time.

A bittersweet pang struck his heart at that. He thought of it sometimes still. Of losing himself and claiming her, to hell with the rest. He longed for the taste of her blood, the feel of her fangs, the promise of her arms. The thought alone was enough to inspire anyone to tears. Anyone who knew the agony of what he felt. Of having everything he had ever wanted right beneath his fingertips and forcing himself to let her go. Every year, he let her go all over again. Every year, he relived that horrible night when she had died in his arms. And every year, he fought the temptation to claim her. To make her his forever.

Of course, any sort of ceremony was impossible, and he felt like a fool for even entertaining the notion. Still, the thought of spending eternity with her was too rich to cast aside, even if such aspirations only filled him with sorrow. He was still so terrified of scaring her off with the intensity of his regard. He felt if she ever knew just how much he loved her, there would be no more of this. No more tempting fate, no more tempting desire, no more challenging the decree of the Order to have their night together. No more sharing this stolen holiday with her. No more tasting each other for hours and pretending it was enough for a year. No more pretending his heart didn't break when he left her before the sun rose and returned to his cold, empty existence.

No more of her guiding him into their bedroom and closing the door behind them.

"Jael . . ."

Her hands were already busy at her top, revealing the satin of her black bra to his hungry eyes. The cream of her skin against the contrast of the material was surprising in its effect. Gabriel liked fancy lingerie and scantily clad women as well as the next hormone-infused male, but he had never truly envisioned himself being so turned on by something that simple. Logically, he knew Jael wore bras. Hell, he had snapped her out of practically every style the past generations had fed to impressionable women, always eager to feel the weight of her breasts in his hands. He had never known her to wear black. Never known her to go out of her way to look so delectable in her undergarments. She had a rather adorable fixation on her assumption that her panties and other unmentionables were, as she called them, *plain and boring*. She assumed this despite the fact that seeing her so bare fogged his eyes with lust to the point that she could be wearing a doormat and he wouldn't notice.

His thoughts must have run away with him, for when he blinked, Jael was wearing nothing but that black bra and a pair of matching panties. And he was still fully clothed, unable to do anything but gawk at how gorgeous she was.

Jael shifted uncomfortably. "I . . . I wanted to try something new . . . for us tonight."

"You're beautiful."

Her blush enchanted him. She was his seductress, his only temptation, and she somehow didn't know it. "I was hoping you'd like."

Gabriel released a deep breath, fighting his desire to growl something primitive and throw her on the bed. Instead, his eyes glazed over, and he stepped toward her predatorily, a lump forming in his throat. "Beautiful," he murmured again, fingers entertaining themselves at her left strap. Then his mouth couldn't stand the torment of being parted from her flesh, and his lips descended once more upon her neck, tasting her sweet skin as his arms curled under her shoulders and pulled her against him. "You're killing me."

"I didn't—"

A heady gasp tumbled through her throat as his nimble fingers worked the front clasp of her bra, trembling with the knowledge that she wouldn't like it if he ripped something she had just bought. Then he was tugging at her nipples, mouth sweeping her mouth as he explored her face with soft, sweet kisses. "I wasn't doing anything."

"You unmake me with a look," he growled, encouraging her hands to the buttons of his top. He hadn't gone with a suit, rather a dressier shirt and dark slacks. They had looked tonight, in his opinion, as though they were fashioned for the purpose of being together. More poetic whims that brought out the traditionalist in him, but the notion was warming, nonetheless.

Gabriel seized her mouth in another kiss as his shirt fell to the floor. He turned her in his arms so that her back was facing the bed and walked her to it slowly, his hands massaging circles into her hips. She sat when her legs met the mattress, looking up at him as he gazed down at her, his touch moving to her hair as she lifted nervous fingers to the clasp of his trousers and slowly drew him out.

God, he nearly melted then. Her small hand cradled his cock with veneration, stroking him to further hardness as his pants pooled at his ankles before joining his shoes on the floor.

"Jael," he gasped, releasing her hair. With as much as he wanted to hold her in place, there was something about the gesture that struck him as wrong, wholly disrespectful, and miles apart from the place that his love for her began. He had told her lifetimes ago that he never expected anything, and it remained true. Whatever she gave him was enough. "God."

Her other hand dropped to his balls and squeezed him lightly. "You like?"

Did she actually expect him to talk?

Her tongue flicked over the head of his cock, and a small murmur of approval rumbled through her throat. As though she actually enjoyed this. The few girls who shared his bed when the nights without her grew unbearable had done this for him based on principle alone; he gave, so they gave. None of them had enjoyed it, and several had taken it upon themselves to tell him so with a few choice words. The notion that Jael did — *could* — enjoy the act was touching but impossible. He never wanted her to feel she had to do this for him . . . though he was not such a putz that he would tell her to stop if she didn't want to.

"J-Jael —"

Her tongue took to the underside of his cock, laving him in long, wet laps. She lifted her hand just slightly so she could taste his sac with her tongue. Suckled gently and just barely teased him with her teeth.

"God!" Gabriel snarled something unintelligible and shoved her back on the bed. "Drive me outta my mind, you know that?"

"Well, you drive me out of mine more."

"Don't think so, sweetheart." His mouth surrounded one rosy nipple, his right hand caressing her neglected breast as his other skated down the length of her. Stroking her gently through the satin of her sodden panties. "So wet."

"Uhh . . ."

"So sweet."

"Gabriel, please."

He scraped the tip of her nipple with his teeth before pulling back to draw her panties down her legs. His eyes transfixed on her dewy center that glistened at him even through the darkness. "So fucking gorgeous," he murmured reverently, a hand skimming up her leg to tease her soft curls. "You have any idea how delicious you are?"

"You have any idea how often you've asked me that over the years?"

A smirk quirked his lips. "Sassy."

"No." She lifted her hips in offering, eyes wide with need. "Horny."

"Well, at least you're honest." He edged a finger into her slowly, eyes twinkling when her own went wide, her pelvis leaping into his touch. He carefully avoided her clit, even as his other fingers took to exploring her, rubbing her folds, edging into her warmth, feeling her warm juices run onto his skin. Tempting him with her taste. "Honesty's a quality I love in a woman."

"Gah."

"You disagree?"

"No—other women. Can we pretend there are no other women in your life?"

Gabriel's brow perked teasingly. He read her so well. "Well, I'm sure you're not the *only* woman who exhibits honesty."

"Gabriel!"

He smiled, his eyes lowering with remorse as a shudder raced through his body. "Baby, I promise you. You're the only one I see here. You have nothing to worry about."

Nothing?

He heard the question as plainly as if she'd spoken it aloud. The indecision in her eyes, the uncertainty and revulsion at the thought she couldn't keep him from sampling other women in their time apart. Just as surely as he

couldn't keep her from seeking her pleasures elsewhere when he wasn't there to proclaim her his. No, he wasn't that dense. Jael was gorgeous, and he only had her for one night. The rest of the year belonged to her other lovers. He couldn't believe, or even expect, her to remain celibate when they were apart, even if his love for her prevented him from doing anything but, regardless of what she thought or what he let her think. The lie was cruel, but the truth was crueler, and he'd never wanted her to picture him as bitter and lonely, craving what he couldn't have. Knowledge couldn't change the truth of what reality had given them.

Gabriel withdrew his fingers from her carefully, ignoring her answering whimper of complaint. He licked her taste off his skin, then lowered his hand to her mouth so she might have a sample herself.

"Samson spoke of the honey in the lion," he told her softly. "Think he had it wrong, though."

"Oh?"

He couldn't tell if she was just dizzy with lust or oblivious as to the reference. By the look in her gaze, hazed with desire though clouded by confusion, he decided it was a combination of both.

"You're the bloody honey, honey," he replied, prowling up her body slowly. "Thank God I'm not a Nazirite. Can drink you all I like without fear of punishment?"

Her eyes flickered as though inspired by some distant memory, and her cheeks flushed. "*Ah . . .* Gabe."

The head of his cock teased her folds, slipping over her wet skin. He shivered with the promise of the haven that awaited him. He loved looking at her like this. Loved watching her pant with need, aroused beyond words at the touch of his hand. Sweat rolled down her forehead. Her warm, pliant body welcomed his. Needed his. Her nails dug into his forearms, her head lifting to steal a kiss from his lips. He grasped his cock, rubbed himself against her until

the sensations were too much for both of them, and he sank into her with a blissful groan.

"Shit," he gasped. "Feels so good."

Jael whimpered, her eyes falling shut. "I've missed this," she said softly, her muscles clenching around him. "It's been too long."

Gabriel smiled tenderly as he began to move within her, eyes on her face. Drowning in the feel of her around him. The warmth she offered scorched him alive and quenched his thirst for her in the same beat.

"Too long," he agreed, pebbling a nipple between his fingers, watching her hungrily as she panted and squeezed him again. "God, I've missed this, too. Every second apart. Been starved for you."

"I've . . . *ah*"

His thrusts were gaining momentum; her hands were at his shoulders, nails embedding in his skin as he moved to strike that perfect angle within her.

"Gabriel . . . God, I"

He chuckled, dropping kisses along her throat as he edged a hand between their entangled bodies. His fingers danced over her slippery skin, fingering her teasingly before capturing her clit. He loved the way her expression melted into a pleased, throaty gasp. Her nails dug into his skin. Hurting him sweetly. Propelling his cock deeper within her. He needed as much as she would give, gave as much as he could despite his knowledge that it would never be enough.

"*Oh God!*" she screamed, her muscles clenching him so tight he was genuinely surprised when he didn't pop. "So good."

"Fuck yeah." The feel of the air was too familiar, too bittersweet. The atmosphere of the night was too restrained, too heavy with the weight of what could come crashing down around them at any moment. They had evaded fate for years now. Had captured brief moments of intimacy, stolen hours of what had once been so close to being theirs. He needed her so much. Was so

entrenched in his love for her that the hint this small haven, this period of stolen hours, could be taken away from him sent his urgency to catastrophic levels. This connection, feeling her beneath him, losing himself inside her . . . it was all too much. Too much for just one night, wherein the rest were left empty.

And Christ, he needed to send her over that edge before he found his release. His body warred as he forced himself to pull out of her, ignoring the sharp gasp of complaint that tumbled through her lips. He pressed a quick kiss to the corner of her mouth, then slid down her body, lips caressing her sweat-laced skin until his mouth was level with her sopping pussy. Her scent flooded his senses.

"Gabriel!" Her hips arched off the bed. "Stop torturing me!"

"You first," he growled, plunging his tongue into her. Jael slapped her palm across her mouth and arched back, a muffled scream tearing through her throat. He smiled against her skin, one hand lingering at her breasts to tug at her nipples, his other joining his voracious mouth to caress her clit deferentially.

"God, your taste drives me wild."

"Uh"

His tongue delved deeper inside, his fingers massaging her nubbin as her body trembled around him. He thrust his erection against the mattress, desperately needing friction. "So good."

"Gabriel!"

"You taste so good. My honey in the lion."

"Oh God. *Oh God!*"

He gave her one last lick before pulling away and crawling back up her body, capturing her mouth with his as his cock teased her folds before thrusting again into her depths. He swallowed her whimper and muffled his own. His fingers massaged her clit, quicker now. She grew tighter and wetter with each plunge. The slippery slide of his flesh from hers drove him mad, as did the noisy slaps of their bodies dancing together. A long shudder ran down his spine as he

shoved off the immediacy of his orgasm. He used the hand between them to push her closer to that edge. He watched as her eyes went bright, then finally she cried out and went over, sinking her teeth into his shoulder to stifle her scream of completion.

That was it. Her body spasmed under his, clenching the life out of him. The feel of her biting into his skin was more erotic than he could ever have dreamed. And he couldn't help himself – he was lost. He thrust his hips madly against hers as her pussy swallowed him whole, her walls tightening around him, milking him for everything he had to give. As he came, he touched the heavens. Within his lion, he found ecstasy, drank it full until honey dribbled down his chin. Jael's body opened, welcomed him, her arms clutching him to her as she held him in his fall. He lay cradled there until he saw they were in her room again. Alone. The lights still out. Her chest heaving against his, her skin damp with sweat. Her eyes wide and looking at him in awe. The air around them was thick with the scent of their lovemaking. Her hands tunneled reverently through his hair, her lips caressing his brow as his eyes found hers. Found pools of reflected love shining back at him. Felt his heart expand until he didn't know if he could take it. The power of what they had shared. Something manifested beyond himself. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry. The gorgeous creature in his arms was really his. Jael was really his. And for the first time, he truly understood that.

Truly believed that he could be so lucky. That she would choose a wreck like him. Order or no Order, rule or no rule. There was no cosmic map in the eyes of actual love. Words on an aged page knew nothing of emotion. Knew nothing of the wealth he felt for her. Knew nothing of the power of what they had just shared.

God, she was really his. He felt it. She loved him. Really.

Jael encouraged his head to her chest, his arms around her. He hugged her to him as the night settled around them. Still inside her, still clinging to that intimate connection. Listening to the gentle hum of whatever kept them alive after death. Relishing in the power of such intimacy.

"Jael," he whispered into her hair. Words were there that she already knew, burning within him. Needing to find release. He would tell her every day — every time he could. Whenever he could. For the rest of their lives, however long. "I love you."

Her eyes flooded with tears. "You do?"

"God, yes." He pressed his lips to her throat, purring. "I love you so much, and I can't take it anymore."

"Take it?"

He raised his head, his eyes boring into hers. "I'm gonna claim you," he growled. "Now. Tonight. I've waited too long already. I should have never let three hundred years pass before making you mine."

Her heart soared with fear-clouded hope. She didn't know whether it was more appropriate to be elated or terrified. "Gabe —"

"I love you."

She felt his fangs pressed against her skin, and a violent shudder shook her insides. "I've waited too long," he whispered. "And I've been so stupid. No Order keeps me away from the woman I love."

"But —"

Gabriel pulled away just slightly, his gaze finding hers again. "Do you love me?"

"What?"

"Tell me."

Was he seriously asking her this?

"Yes." She tightened her arms around him as the wealth of her feelings threatened to erupt completely. "I love you. I never stopped."

"Me, neither. And I'm gonna take you now."

"But Gabe—"

"No buts. We'll cross those bridges when we get to them, right? Now, I just need you. Please, baby." He pressed his brow to hers. "I can't take it anymore. Being without you . . . living to see the holidays, just to pretend that . . . I can't do it. I won't do it anymore. There's nothing worse than this. I'd rather be mated and die tomorrow than go on like this."

Hot tears scalded her cheeks. "Me, too."

"You're sure?"

She smiled. This was Gabriel. He had his answer—the answer he wanted—and suddenly he was concerned that she was giving in simply because he had asked it of her.

Her Gabriel. Hers now. Truly hers.

"God, yes."

"I don't ever want you to doubt—"

Her fangs burst through her gums, and she jerked him down to her and sank her teeth into his throat. Gabriel moaned, his hands going to her shoulders, holding her to him as she suckled at his blood. As she drew his essence into her.

As she pulled back, Jael lapped at the wound she had opened and murmured, "I claim thee as mine."

It was a strange, wondrous sensation. As though, at that second, the fabric holding the universe together suddenly fit, and there were no more questions. No more doubt. Nothing but this phenomenal sentiment of belonging. Her blood rejoiced, her body hummed in pleasure, and she was complete. One little phrase brought her the magnitude of the cosmos. All hints of pain residing within her body vanished. The wail of her torment cooed into a gentle purr, and the agony she had suffered for three centuries suddenly ceased to exist.

She felt rather than heard Gabriel's moan of surrender. His hands were on her, and she was against him. He began peppering kisses across her face. She tasted tears, but didn't know who owned them. They were one. In that instant, they were one.

"Yours." He sighed the word into her hair, and the fabric of her existence fastened together and held. She had just claimed him, and he had accepted. Gabriel was hers. He was all around her. Pressing kisses against her skin. She felt thoroughly enveloped in him. Felt his blood rush through her, melding into her own.

Pleasure burst through her. His fangs were in her throat, his arms holding her to him, and heat spread through her veins. It was unlike anything she had ever felt, any level of ecstasy she had ever experienced. A shrill gasp touched the air as her body exploded in rapture, and his tongue traced the bite mark he had given her, holding her to him in her fall.

All this before the words were even whispered.

"I claim thee as mine."

"Oh . . . yours."

That was it. She was complete. There was only Gabriel and the birth of this sacred union between them. She was linked to him now in a bond that flooded her being with strength and love, filled the holes in her heart and made the rest of her burst into exultation.

"Gabriel—"

"Mine," he growled again. "God, Jael"

"Yours."

Tears stung her eyes. She had spent so much time over the years crying. Crying for loss, crying for life, crying for death, crying for everything that had been taken away. Crying for the existence Gabriel had resurrected within her, and taken away all over again.

She was home now. In his arms. His blood in her blood, tied together by forces beyond imagination. Tied with words of promise, but held with love.

One little phrase. Even when he had told her, she had never imagined it possible.

The world outside didn't matter now. Nothing did. She would not fear the punishment of the Order. They could conquer nations if they wanted.

Gabriel had not only given her new life; he had given her all of himself.

Releasing a trembling breath, Gabriel brushed a tender kiss across her forehead and rolled them to their sides. Still within her, cradled in her wet warmth. As close as he could be. Needing this tonight.

Needing her as long as the world would let him keep her.

Some part of him knew he could not fall asleep in her arms. Tonight was tonight; if they meant to keep the haven they'd stolen, if he meant to get away with this, if he meant to steal her for the hope of tomorrow, they had to leave now.

Now, or soon. Before the effects of their union shifted through the Order, and they were taught the cruelty of expulsion. For a few minutes, though, he would cast concerns aside and simply hold her in the silence.

All this on a glorious winter's night. They would never again know loneliness.

A new world.

He would risk fire and brimstone to keep this. He would risk everything.

For this sanctuary. This bliss.

This honey in the lion.

She would give anything for this to never end. It was such an odd moment—a rarity handed down by the universe—and she knew that once it was over, there would be none like it. Gabriel was in her bed. He was lying on his

side, his head resting against her pillow. And even though he wasn't touching her, it was surprisingly the most intimate moment of her life.

And likewise, the most intensely frightening. The thrill of their defiance was damn addictive, and while her skin hummed and her heart thundered with the high her newfound freedom provided, the underlying sense of dread was impossible to ignore.

"The Order will be coming," Jael observed, turning on her side. "They will have felt it."

"You have a comfy bed," Gabriel replied noncommittally, stretching those gorgeous muscles of his and flashing a grin. "Fella could get used to this."

"I've grown rather fond of it."

"The bed or the fella?"

"I'll just say yes and hope that clarifies things."

"Mmm." He mused. "Pity. You'll have to give it up, I'm afraid. The bed, that is. The fella's here to stay." Gabriel smirked and raised his arm, and then she was lying against his chest, his hand wrapped around her waist. The world felt open and new, then. A thousand possibilities unfolded as soon as their feet touched the floor.

Jael wouldn't pretend she hadn't entertained this particular fantasy, but she had never expected it to become reality. On occasion, she would visit the vamp forums online, though most of the active participants were nothing more than human Goths who didn't know the creatures they idolized existed outside their own, strange fetishes. Every now and then, however, Jael stumbled across a posted topic that held actual substance, but none of them inspired confidence.

The one thing she knew for certain was they would have to stay on the move. The Order had ways of locating those vampires who dared dissent. How was anyone's guess.

"What happens now?"

Gabriel met her eyes, his fingers stroking her skin. "I'm not sure," he said. "You're not having second thoughts, are you?"

"No," she replied honestly. "God no."

"I'd understand if you did. I just . . . I meant what I said, Jael. I couldn't face an eternity of being miserable, even if it means our time together is cut short." He pressed his lips to her brow, trembling. "Living like this has all but broken me."

The notion startled her so much she nearly laughed. Everything about the night, starting with Gabriel's urgency at the pub to the desperate frenzy of their lovemaking, to the wonder of lying in his arms, felt surreal, almost impossible. She'd spent three centuries living and thinking something he'd effectively proven wasn't true, and the effect had her bubbling with nervous energy that kept wanting to manifest in hysterical giggles.

But Jael didn't giggle. Instead, she smiled and dropped a soft kiss across his lips. "I'm only living for one night as it is."

"There hasn't been anyone else, then?"

"No." She swallowed. "I tried once . . . it was such a long time ago, but I don't remember when. You and I had parted ways that December, and you'd gotten angry with me —"

Gabriel's eyes fluttered shut. "I remember this."

"Because I spent most of the night crying."

"It killed me watching you cry."

"Well, that hadn't been a very good year, if memory serves." She pursed her lips. "None of them were."

Gabriel reached up and brushed a lock of hair from her face. "I screamed at you," he said softly, his voice distorted with shame. "You kept crying, and I didn't know what to do . . . I just needed you to stop."

She nodded. "I tried after that. To be with someone else. The thought of facing you again, even with a year between us . . . I couldn't stomach it. But

when I tried to get close to another man, my gut ached, and I saw you, and I couldn't do it." She released a trembling sigh and worried her bottom lip between her teeth. "It's always been you, Gabe. Ever since I can remember."

"Fuck me if I know why."

"Like you have to ask."

"If I'd been a little braver over the years . . . "

"Claimed me sooner?"

Gabriel trembled. "I was convinced living was better than dying, no matter the condition. As long as I could see the finish line, with you at the end of the tunnel, I believed anything was worth it."

Jael licked her lips. "What changed? You were different tonight."

"I was?"

"You usually like to . . . I don't know, pretend you're picking up a stranger. Pretend I'm someone else."

He looked horrified. "No, sweetling. God, no. I can't pretend you're someone else. I could never."

"It doesn't bother me," she replied sincerely. "I know it's just —"

"No, you have it wrong. You always have to be you. Always." Gabriel sighed raggedly. "*I'm* the one I see as someone else."

"You?"

"Anyone else. Someone who could stay with you through the night and kiss you when we wake up. Tonight, I couldn't do that." He looked away. "I don't know why. I just couldn't. And when I thought about what was supposed to happen tomorrow —"

"I understand."

Gabriel nodded. "You were always meant to be mine. Always. From the moment I saw you . . . and I couldn't go through eternity pretending otherwise anymore."

"Do you think we have a chance? Do you think we really can —?"

"Yes."

Jael smiled softly, though she didn't know whether or not he was speaking truthfully or doing his best to placate her concerns. She didn't care, either way. While dread for the morning remained, while she knew that they would have little time to rest, the monotony of every day had split with the words they shared. At last, after living so long, she finally felt alive.

"Where do you want to go?" Gabriel murmured.

"I don't care so long as we're together."

"We'll have to run every few days, understand."

"I know."

"You'll get tired of it."

Jael shook her head. "I've stood still too long."

"Yes, but this'll be every other day."

"That's fine. I don't care." And she really didn't. For what lay ahead was worth the joy of knowing her future wouldn't be walked alone. "I do think we should establish a few rules."

Gabriel arched a brow. "Rules?"

"Like . . . not staying at the same place twice in one year."

"Seems fair."

"And not staying at the same place within a place. If we're in New Orleans, we can't stay at the same B&B or whatever next time we decide to go."

He nodded.

"If we hear something fishy, we run. If we feel something's off, we run."

"Even if we're approaching a particularly crucial moment?"

Jael looked at him askance and he just smiled devilishly.

"We've got a lot of time to make up for, you and I," Gabriel continued. "I want to explore you like I never have before."

She warmed all over. "This might've been a mistake. We could realize we were all wrong for each other."

"Somehow, I doubt it."

He shot her a grin, his hand slipping over her thigh, a look she knew well—one she had memorized over three hundred years ago—darkening his eyes. At once, her nipples ached, and her pussy throbbed, a fresh surge of arousal tingling through her body.

"We, uh, better get moving now," Jael said.

"Now?"

"Yes. As much of a head start as we can manage."

Gabriel nodded. "So we're enacting the rules now?"

"Yes."

"This is really happening, isn't it?"

A rush of ecstasy bubbled her insides. "Yes. It's happening."

"Tell me again. Just once more before we leave. Tell me you love me."

"I love you." The words fell effortlessly off her lips. She'd held them in so long. She'd ached at their truth every day until now, and though tomorrow loomed with uncertainty, she had the moment, and the moment was what mattered.

Gabriel smiled as though she'd given him the world, and before she could stop him, his lips were on hers. And God, she melted on the spot. She moaned and whimpered and threw her arms around his neck. This was a bad start. This was a very bad start. Gabriel was kissing her. She lived for his kisses, but she knew where they led, and the result would get them nowhere near the door.

"Unh"

Before she could blink, he'd rolled her beneath him, his cock teasing her sopping flesh as his mouth worshipped hers.

"You're breaking the rules." She complained half-heartedly once their lips parted. Gabriel began showering her face with kisses, his hand sliding between them to caress her clit. "This is breaking the rules."

"Rules don't begin until tomorrow," he replied. "Lemme have you one more time before we run?"

"Oh"

"Just once more before it's against the rules."

She knew she should say no. She knew it. She knew she should push him off her and send him packing for being so presumptive. But he was doting kisses onto her skin, his fingers were massaging her clit, and the head of his cock was pressing into her slit. And damned if she didn't want one more time.

"Please, Jael" Gabriel's head dipped, and he licked sensually at her neck. "One more time?"

"Yes." She agreed breathlessly, a moan tearing through her lips as he sank inside her. "Oh, yes."

Just once more. Once more.

Daylight would keep the Order away. Until then, they had the night.

~The End~

About the Author

A lifelong enthusiast of larger than life characters, Rosalie Stanton's muse is fueled by alpha males – from badass bikers to scruffy-looking Nerf herders – and the intelligent, strong, and independent women who actually do the driving. She loves interweaving the lives of people who appear to be polar opposites and delving beneath the surface to see how well one actually complements the other.

Rosalie lives in southwest Missouri with her husband and two dachshunds, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. At an early age, she discovered a talent for creating worlds into which she could escape. Over the years, her vivid imagination evolved into a love of words and storytelling. Rosalie graduated from Missouri State University with a degree in English. When her attention is not employed by writing, she enjoys spending time with close friends and family. You can learn more about Rosalie online, at <http://www.rosalie-stanton.com/>

