



DEE CARNEY

HUNGER  
*Revealed*

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### **Hunger Revealed**

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## Prologue

*Sijourn leaned toward Corin. “I know of an executioner wanted by the Council for failing to complete a kill order. I know of a woman, still in heat by the scent of her, who is the object of that kill order. I know of no authorization for a newly created vampire in this portion of the state... I know of many things.”*

*“I’d have to disagree. Otherwise you wouldn’t have brought her here. If the Council’s after me, they’re surely after her as well.”*

*“She might be the hope for a new breed of vamp—”*

*“She,” Jasmine announced, “isn’t amused by this conversation. Hello? I’m right here.”*

*Corin’s heart kicked against his ribs like it was trying to get out. A new breed of vampire. Is that what Sijourn really thought?*

[\*Hunger Aroused\*](#)

## Chapter One

Jasmine turned to the side, visually tracing the way the sheer material billowed out and fell into graceful layers against her hips. The overhead lighting did nothing for her complexion, but overall, the effect of the clothing wasn't too shabby. The mirror didn't do her any favors, but it hadn't cracked either.

Her gaze drifted a little bit lower, following the lines and slopes of her body, but nope, no problems identified. Light blue babydoll lingerie would knock Corin off his feet for sure. In a few weeks, on the night of their one-year wedding anniversary, she'd pick something even skimpier to show off.

“Do it now while you can,” she muttered beneath her breath. Immediately, a sense of giddiness and overwhelming joy made a smile push at her cheeks.

“Do what?”

She whirled, startled—yet, not really—to find her husband now standing behind her in the small dressing room. Ducking to see around his hulking body, she searched for irate saleswomen who might be storming their way in order to toss them from the boutique. “You're going to get us kicked out!”

Corin paid no attention to her protest. His dark eyes had grown stormy and studied her with sexual blatancy. “Gods,” he whispered.

Jasmine leaned back, letting the cool wall support her as he visually undressed her, inch by inch. Her skin warmed beneath the scrutiny, which sent delightful shivers through her thighs, belly, and breasts. “I guess I should buy this one, huh?” she asked in a husky voice meant to transfer some of those same shivers to him.

How crazy and amazing that a single look from this man aroused her to dripping need. Is this what the next hundred years would be like? A century of loving the man, a vampire executioner, who'd saved her from death and from a fate even worse than that.

Maybe now would be a good time to tell him their news...

“*Mellita*,” he said softly, “you amaze me.”

His words were so similar to the thought she'd had a moment ago, her smile widened. They'd grown even closer during their brief marriage. He'd taught her how to be a member of the vampire nation. Their laws. Their covenants. How to survive.

Used to his occasional brusqueness and frustratingly overprotective nature, she could no longer imagine a world without him.

Her smile became an outright grin when her gaze happened to drop and encountered just how “amazed” her man had become. “Is that for me?” she asked, a brief nod pointing to the thick outline in his trousers.

“Always.” His expression morphed into something a little mischievous. It was a look she knew well.

“Oh no, mister. Not here.” She giggled. “I am so not going to jail because you want to be a little kinky.”

He moved in close before she could break out of the dressing room. “Shh. We'll be quiet,” he whispered before sweeping his lips across her jaw.

As she knew she would at his touch, Jasmine melted. Tilting her head, she met his seeking kisses, heat swirling in her belly.

This was so bad. So bad. They'd never been quiet during sex. Even now, a small whimper of need bubbled from her throat. Corin responded by pushing a hand into her curls and deepened their kiss, his tongue thrusting into her mouth. Weak-kneed, Jasmine fought down the rising passion and tried to sway her husband once again to take this to a less-exotic location. “Let's finish this at home, sugar,” she murmured against his lips.

He responded by pulling on the ribbon of satin tied right above her cleavage with slow and deliberate intent. He looked into her eyes while his fingers continued their decadent work, revealing more of her bare skin with each tug. Jasmine's nipples tightened, heaviness filling her breasts at the thought of those same fingers brushing against them.

“Corin—” The admonishment died, a desperate need to feel her husband intimately overriding common sense.

Dark eyes flicked up. “You can't go home dressed in this. Consider this my way of helping you out.”

Her steady breathing grew more labored as he unveiled her near nudity. Another shiver crossed her as he pushed the soft straps from her shoulders, letting the entire garment flutter to the floor. Left standing in her own panties, growing wetter while her husband filled her mind with fantasies, she could barely get the next sentence out. “Eleven minutes to get home...six, if you floor it. We don't even have to go to the bedroom.”

“Such an awful long time to wait.” Corin dipped his head low, kissing a trail of heat down the sensitive curve of her neck. He cupped her breasts, lifting them to meet his questing mouth. When his lips circled the delicate tip of her nipple, she forgot what she'd been protesting. He crossed to the other breast, his hot tongue laving a path of sensuality she felt straight through her toes.

She walked her fingers over his strong shoulders, reveling the way in which his movements made the muscles flex. “We're going to get caught,” she murmured, no longer sure who she was trying to convince.

The angelic part of her brain reminded her of the other shoppers and salespeople milling around the store. The little devil, however, the one enjoying the way Corin alternately licked her nipples to heated points, strongly implied the risk would be worth it.

The sound of women's laughter drifting into the dressing room a moment later snagged and held Jasmine's attention. She patted Corin's back, a signal he understood based on the way his shoulders slumped with resignation. “Eleven minutes,” he whispered. “You have an additional four to get dressed. Otherwise I'm dragging you out in whatever you're wearing.” His eyes twinkled with humor.

“No worries there. I can envision me in a fireman's carry as you hustle us through the mall.” He'd do it. No doubt.

“At least you know enough to take me seriously,” he said. A quick kiss swiped over her lips. “Move it.”

“You move it,” she called to his back. Corin went to the door, cracking it open a sliver. He peered into the gap. Jasmine smirked and said, “Go get the car. Let me just pay for this, and I'll be out in a sec.”

With the grace of a warrior, he slipped out of the dressing room, then pulled the door closed behind him. Breath held, face scrunched, Jasmine waited for the sounds of women's shrieking or someone in a chest-pain panic as a brute of a man strolled out of the area. When no general mayhem became apparent, Jasmine scooped the discarded lingerie from the carpeted floor. It only took a moment to then quickly dress in her print top and knit pants.

If Corin said he'd be back in four minutes, he meant exactly that. After their brush with death because of the imaginings of a billionaire vampire with dominance on his mind, Corin had tightened his protective circle around Jasmine. Finally, months later—after a lot of work and a

relatively quiet existence—she'd gotten him to relax his stranglehold. No way was she giving him a reason to start going all He-Man again. But just because he allowed her a little breathing room didn't mean she didn't relish more. Some days, she missed being a single woman, if only it meant not having Corin worry and hover. Some days, his attention threatened to drown her.

She hated that he remained constantly at vigil, always looking at everyone and everything around them with suspicion. He didn't trust her to be near strangers and trusted no one who came close. Made making friends difficult. Making friends among vampires, even more impossible. She loved her husband dearly, but for once, she wanted just a little space!

Jasmine released an audible sigh, blowing away the frustration. It didn't matter. Corin could be nothing other than her big, strong protector, and she'd simply have to let him.

After a final glance around the dressing room, she grabbed the babydoll and her purse. The door swung away easily, and when Jasmine stepped outside, a woman hustling down the little corridor almost collided into her. "Sorry," Jasmine muttered.

"No, I'm—*wait*. Are you Jasmine Gerulaitis?" The woman's green eyes widened in recognition.

Frowning, confused, Jasmine nodded. "Do I know you?"

She didn't recognize the woman who wore an expensive silk shirt and ankle-length skirt. Her blonde hair had been pulled back, a tightly braided ponytail slung over her shoulder. The brilliant diamond ring on her finger suggested wealth while the blunt roundness of her fingernails spoke to a hard-working life. "My name is Evelyn Mitchell. It took us a little time, but I'm so glad we found you."

"Us?"

The woman grinned, showing off vampiric teeth. "The members of the House of Cruor. We weren't certain it was you, but I volunteered to come ask. To find out if you are really the woman who transformed without a sire."

*Not this again.* Evelyn thought Jasmine was some sort of miracle. That she'd somehow become a vampire without the blood of a sire.

It wasn't true.

Jasmine blew out a frustrated breath. She and Corin had gone over this and over this, again and again, yet a lot of people still refused to believe that she'd *had* a vampire sire. Just not in the

usual, traditional sense. It was quite possibly the only reason Corin had spared her life when they'd first met.

Whatever. People who didn't know her could believe what they wanted. "Evelyn, was it?" She kept her voice low, hoping no human around them would eavesdrop on what must have been a bizarre conversation. After the woman nodded, Jasmine said, "It's nice meeting you, but my husband's waiting outside. I have to go."

Evelyn moved closer to Jasmine, coming at her with that creepy grin showing off the sharp edges of her pointed teeth. "We just want to talk to you for a little while. To discover and understand."

Jasmine's jaw tightened. "There's nothing to discover or understand." She tried to sidestep the woman. "Now, if you'll excuse me."

"Only a few minutes," Evelyn replied sweetly. She reached for Jasmine's arm, her powerful grip betraying her vampire heritage.

Stepping into the hold as Corin had taught her, about to twist away in a calculated move, Jasmine cried out instead when something sharp pricked her skin. "Hey!"

"My lady, I am so sorry. So sorry."

Her vision immediately grew hazy, but Jasmine recognized the little syringe in the woman's hand. Not more than two seconds passed before her mouth fell slack, feeling as if filled with cotton and sand. Her arms wrapped around her stomach as the muscles in her legs gave way. Evelyn caught her before she hit the ground completely, however, and Jasmine's eyes rolled, unwilling to focus long enough to capture an image of the woman's face again.

Jasmine tried to say Corin's name. Nothing came out. She wanted to yell *stop*. Or *help*.

She wanted to beg Evelyn not to do this because she was pregnant and needed to protect the baby.

Instead, the world went black.



## Chapter Two

Corin stormed through the racks of clothing, shoving them out of the way with brute force. He'd let seven minutes pass with no sign of Jasmine. And that simply wasn't like her.

His first thought had been that the line to make her purchase held her up. When he strolled back to the entrance of the lingerie store and didn't spot her, though, his concern spiked. Without pause, he hurried in the direction of the dressing room, the pitting feeling in his stomach growing with every step.

"Sir? Sir, you can't go back there!"

The lanky saleswoman rushing to meet him before he barreled down the corridor almost met his full wrath. Only the whispered warning of his conscience kept him from ripping her throat out just to get to his wife. He'd never harmed an innocent human before, but rational thought was becoming more and more difficult to come by. "My wife," he growled as he brusquely brushed by her body. "Have you seen her? Petite. Blue eyes. Curly brown hair."

"If you'll let me..." She struggled to make it around him and into the corridor first. "I'll look, if you'll wait out here."

"Not a chance," he said. Not after their dealings with Sijourn Vartan, the billionaire vampire who'd tortured Jasmine. Not after the Council, the vampire nation's ruling body, had once ordered Corin to kill her.

Resigned, she called, "Ladies, please stay inside your rooms for just a moment. We have an emergency."

At the same time, Corin yelled out, "Jasmine!"

Inevitably, doors began to creak open at the sound of his voice. So long as one of the women peering out was his wife, it didn't much matter to him what the other women thought.

"Jasmine!"

The area was too small for her not to have heard him bellow both times. His heart kicked hard, fear and adrenaline surging through his veins like molten fire.

If the Council had reneged and finally come after her, there wouldn't be shelter enough for any of them to hide. He *would* find and slaughter them all. It's what executioners did.

Curling his hands into fists, desperately fighting to regain some measure of calm, he moved to the dressing room where he'd last seen her. Only two steps outside of its doors, he paused.

Tilting his head, he inhaled deeply, the subtle crisp scent of blood greeting him. It was such a small amount, he might have missed it. But a vampire who knew the taste of his wife as well as Corin did honed in on it.

Based on the miniscule quantity he scented, no real harm had probably come to her. Perhaps a nick of skin. A slight scratch.

For each one visited upon her, he'd return the wound a thousandfold.

“Take me to your security feed,” he said to the saleswoman.

She folded her arms across her chest, lifting her chin into the air. She seemed frozen with indecision. “I don't know who you are, and—”

“I don't have time for this shit,” Corin grumbled. He pushed past her, ignoring her squeak of surprise. His sleeve snagged on something, a momentary pause allowing him to realize he'd tangled somehow on her nametag. “Look, *Moira*, some very bad men have my wife. And I'm best equipped to get her back safe and sound. I will do it with or without your help.”

She blinked up at him with those wide eyes but said nothing. Disgusted by her unwillingness to assist him, Corin made a low sound of dismissal. He stomped away, intent on finding the back office where a security system with camera monitoring must have been erected.

*Fuck.* Where would they have taken her? Back to the Council? He couldn't believe he'd allowed another executioner to get so close to her, for surely only an executioner would have been so brazen as to snatch her in broad daylight.

Broad daylight...

A thought struck him, and Corin slowly turned to face *Moira* again. She hadn't moved from the spot, but the way she looked at him now made him pause. Sketched onto her face was a mixture of fear and...guilt. “How did they get her through the front without others seeing?” he asked softly.

Corin began to walk toward her again.

“A grown woman, probably unconscious, wouldn't be missed by lots of shoppers.”

*Moira* began to back away slowly, fear creeping up and overriding the guilt of her expression.

“Did he have help from the inside?”

She began to search around her, looking for somewhere to run presumably, but only doors to dressing rooms surrounded them.

All of these things he said while stalking her, the saleswoman whose eyes had grown as big as saucers. Who looked like a trapped creature with no place to turn. Whose fluttering heartbeat raced like a hummingbird's.

He wasn't for sure she was involved—not yet—but when the first beads of sweat dotted along her upper lip, Corin *knew*.

“Where is she?” he barked.

Moira jumped, then swallowed hard. The guilt—a dead giveaway—intensified. She'd paled, and her lips all but disappeared as she bit down on them. Shaking had already started to take over her hands, and he'd bet money she was moments away from peeing herself.

If she'd helped to kidnap Jasmine, then she knew what he was. For her sake, he hoped she also knew *who* he was also.

A shudder rippled through her. “She's safe,” she said barely above a whisper.

Corin's lip lifted, revealing teeth growing larger with his agitation. An intimidation act he had no problem utilizing. “You realize that *you're* not safe 'til I see that for myself?”

Moira was human, and he didn't carry a gun, but an ash stake through her heart would kill her just the same. He'd face any judgment for murder necessary to get Jasmine back.

Extenuating circumstances. Any judge, human or vampire, would rule in his favor.

She must have decided to take his malice seriously. Moira's hands shot into the air, signaling surrender. “I'll take you to her, and you'll see that she's fine. The Reverent Father wouldn't see her harmed for all the world.”

Corin couldn't stop a frown from forming.

Fuck, he did not need this shit. Did not want this shit. His wife had been through so much already. They hadn't made it a year. One year of not having to deal with someone coming after either of them, looking for blood and death.

“You take me to her,” he said, a snarl rumbling through his words. “And you do it now.”

~ \* ~

No one said a word to them as Moira led the way through a ranch-style house not far from the shopping plaza where Corin had last seen Jasmine. The place wasn't fancy and thank the gods, not creepy either. If his wife had come here to hang with friends, he wouldn't have given it a second thought.

But the fact at least half a dozen people milled around, looking a little too mellow to be anything but riding chemicals set his nerves on edge. As it was, the twenty minutes to get here had his teeth grinding.

“You'd better not be fucking with me.” The hand holding Moira's upper arm as she led him toward a closed door tightened. Didn't matter much that she winced at the pressure.

Edgy, he waited for someone to accost them. To talk some bullshit. To do *something*. The closer they got to a black door at the end of a long hallway though, the more he realized that danger didn't wander in a drugged daze on this side of the door. His gut instinct, the one that kept him alive for hundreds of years, screamed that the other side would be where he'd need to keep his wits.

“She's in there,” Moira whispered. “Go in.”

His fingers dug in deeper. “You first.”

“Not allowed,” she said, shaking her head.

“You first.”

“I-I can't.”

“You. First.”

A sigh of utter exasperation and weariness escaped his human guide. “I'm not allowed without permission, and nothing you say is going to get me to break that rule. Nothing, get it?”

He searched her eyes and found the resolution in them. Yeah, whatever awaited on the other side of the door made her more fearful than Corin ever could.

And that concerned the shit out of him.

She held the force of his stare for a few seconds while Corin decided on the best way to proceed. Only when she inclined her face away did he notice telltale bruising along the line of her neck. Dots of twin scars in multiple places near the rapidly beating pulse tattled on her activities when not kidnapping unsuspecting women. “Who you feeding?”

“What?” Moira looked startled.

“You don't get marks like those from just one bite. Those took time. Multiple feedings, coming close together.”

She had the decency to glance at him before dropping her gaze. “Reverent Father. He...”

“He what?” Corin thought he already knew the answer, but wanted to hear her say it, if she would.

Moira shook her head.

He filled in the blanks for her. “Makes you promises. Says he'll give you everlasting life. Promises to make you a vampire one day.” A day that would never come. Never. Not if the Council had anything to do about it.

*Gods.* A cult. He was dealing with some sort of cult that worshiped vampires. Preyed on humans. Preyed on the desperate. She probably had some sort of story, some life she wanted to escape from, and whoever this vampire—the Reverent Father—was, took advantage of every little bit of it.

And now this fuckhead had Jasmine.

Without another second spent on speculating about the headstrong human in front of him, Corin curled his hand around the doorknob. It twisted smoothly, and he pushed open the door, eyes scanning the interior of the room before the door had even swung completely open.

The vision before him stole his next thoughts.

Jasmine lay stretched out in the center of the room, piles upon piles of pillows surrounding and supporting her. His dick hardened while he scanned her for any marks or bruises. Any sign of injury at all.

His physical response in this insane moment couldn't be helped. The little purple thing they'd put her in would hide *nothing*. It was the skimpiest, thinnest, and most see-through garment he'd ever had the pleasure of seeing her in. And those little panties? Damn. They were the things wet dreams were made of.

Tearing his gaze away took an act of strength he didn't know he possessed. If he didn't fear for her immediate welfare, things might have gone down differently. “Jasmine...*mellita*...”

She didn't respond.

Corin edged closer, very aware of the open door behind him. He remained tense, expecting someone to come barreling through at any moment to attack them both. His nerves scrambled while he willed them to calm so that he could scope out the large room and take inventory.

Whatever they used this place for, it obviously ensured the people inside remained comfortable. It was a sensual feast. The walls were covered in gauzy material, cascading down in waves that left the impression of a breeze at constant play. Although he couldn't see any lit candles, the room smelled soft and delicate. Very feminine. The scent, one he couldn't place, reminded him of flowers yet seemed very homey.

The same kinds of pillows piled high in the center also framed the room's perimeter. They served as seating places, as well as places where people could lie comfortably. In four corners, shelving units painted to match the reds and purples of the drapers stood watch. There were velvet blankets, folded silken sheets, plush towels placed in each one and it didn't take Corin long to figure out their purpose.

Whatever this room, it ensured its users would be extremely comfortable while they fucked and cavorted.

He couldn't hear or sense anyone else in the room, so Corin moved to Jasmine. By the time he reached her, the soft *click* of the door closing behind him sounded. A lock engaged a moment later, but distracted, Corin ignored it.

“Jasmine?” he repeated.

## Chapter Three

Jasmine vaguely heard Corin. Her man. Her husband and lover.

God, how she loved him.

Her lids fluttered, but didn't open. They felt so heavy. And she was tired. And craving something.

Not something.

Him.

His taste. His kiss. His blood.

“Talk to me.” His voice came low, concern twined through it. “Are you hurt?”

She licked dry lips. “No.” Memories assaulted her, every one of them fuzzy. She'd been shopping. A woman took her. Then a man talked to her. He'd called her...*something*...something nice. Reverent. “I'm hungry,” she murmured.

His voice whispered across her skin as he leaned in close. “What have they done to you? Anyone touch you? Make threats?”

He sounded wounded, and for this reason, Jasmine pushed her eyelids open, though it took effort.

A surge of ripe lust bolted through her as her gaze swept over his face. Intense, dark eyes. Roman nose. Boxer's jaw. Full, sensual lips.

She swallowed hard as hunger and need intensified. Her vampire instincts demanded she feed; the feminine part of her psyche insisted on sexual satisfaction. Something whispered of caution, of the necessity for waiting, but the soft sounds drifted away before they could fully form and Jasmine could clasp onto them.

Lifting her hands to his neck, she stroked over the pulsing skin that signaled a heartbeat moving rapidly. Corin bore her scrutiny without comment, but she knew the tension holding him hostage. “Feed me, Corin,” she said softly.

He'd never before denied her when her hunger rose. He'd been the one to help her through transition from human to vampire, when her bloodlust rivaled an erotic lust. Although reluctant at first, he'd eventually given in. Now, more than a year later, feeding and sex went hand-in-hand. Here in this place, as she subtly writhed, twining her legs together to alleviate some of the ache in her swollen clit, she felt the decadent touch like a live wire through her teeth.

His face darkened, awash with memories. They'd been here, in a situation almost identical to this.

“We need to get you out of here,” he said resolutely.

“Yes, but later.” She stretched arms overhead, the filmy material brushing over heavy breasts and plumped nipples.

“C'mon.” Corin climbed onto the pillows and grasped her hand when she made no attempt to move. “What have they done to you?”

“I assure you that she's fine,” said a familiar voice.

Corin whipped around to face the large man entering through a door she'd failed to notice. The man was caramel colored. Large, in a still-eating-two-large-pizzas-by-himself kind of way. Black hair lined with streaks of gray led to confusion about his possible age. He exuded confidence, yet possessed a serenity that Corin could have learned from just about now.

She remembered him. The Reverent Father.

He continued speaking to Corin. “What you see is some of the aftereffects of the drugs my acolyte was a little too eager to institute. It won't stay in her system much longer, be assured.”

“What do you want with us?” Corin turned to face the Reverent head on, keeping Jasmine at his back.

He dipped in semi-bow. “Only to serve the lady and goddess Jasmine.”

“See? I'm fine, sugar.” Her gaze continued to slide up and down Corin's back, wanting with everything in her to feel his strength blanketing her right now. She needed to feel him inside her. To touch and kiss him. A smile broadened her face. “He wants to worship me. I want to worship you.” The smile turned into a giggle. “We can all worship each other.”

Corin shot a glance at Jasmine over his shoulder, his brow furrowed. “You're *drunk*.”

“Am not.”

“You are. Flying high, drunk.” He shook his head. “Later, Jas. You, the Reverent Father, I presume, need to point the way to the nearest exit. I am Corin Gerulaitis. An executioner of the Council, wholly authorized to legally kill any vampire deemed a threat to the nation. You will not keep me nor my wife here without consequence.”

“Hold, executioner. We're a peaceful family. No harm has come to the goddess.”

“Peaceful? Then why did you take her?”



He shrugged, a slight did-what-we-had-to-do smirk quirking his lips. “The goddess was never in any danger by my acolyte. Still isn't. They are here to serve her. If it helps, consider what we offer as no more than a spa day for the goddess. We would pamper her as fitting her status.”

Although Jasmine listened to their conversation, the meaning of their words drifted out of her grasp. The sounds hovered at the periphery of her consciousness before dissipating.

She loved this sensation flowing through her now. Fuzzy. Warm. Sexual.

Okay, so maybe she was a *little* drunk.

Falling back against the pillows, so soft and comforting, she settled in to stay a little while longer. “I like being a goddess.”

“You are not a goddess. Wait...shit. You are *my* goddess, but you are not the type of goddess these people are referring to.”

Corin's frustration made her smile. “Feed me?” she asked sweetly.

“After we leave.”

She sighed. There was also something she was supposed to tell him, but damn if she could remember now...

“You are in no danger here. If the goddess's consort would care to feed her in private, I will withdraw. I only ask that you do not attempt to leave until we can celebrate her miraculous transformation in a ceremony this evening. Only two hours away,” the Reverent Father said.

“Until then, please, enjoy our hospitality.”

“How much longer before she's lucid?”

“Not much longer. It was a small amount. Meant to keep her calm so that she did not harm herself.”

“Hello!” Jasmine called from her pillow pile. “She is right here and not amused by this conversation.” God, did that sound oddly familiar. “I'm perfectly lucid. And hungry. And I know what I want. We've been crazy stressed this past year, and there are some people who want to pamper me for a little while. And silly, selfish me wants to be pampered. And I want to enjoy it with my husband. You. Does that make sense?”

Corin's arms folded across his chest. “No.”

“Just join me. Two more hours here with people wanting to do my every whim. What really could go wrong?”

~ \* ~

Everything in him said this was a bad idea, but she would never forgive him if he dragged her away from this type of indulgence...if the Reverent Father could be held to his word. Warrior's instincts fought to believe it, but the compassion of loving husband wanted to believe. It hurt to admit, but he had been a little rough around the edges about the way he treated his wife lately.

Too many questions scrambled for dominance in his mind, and without answers, they all seemed too important to ignore. When the Reverent Father exited the room almost as quietly as he'd slipped in, Corin found the voice to ask one of Jasmine. "Has the past year with me really been so bad?"

He'd thought they'd be together for hundreds of years more. Hundreds. Had a gap already started to form in their relationship? Looking back, he recognized how they'd been almost forced together, with little room to negotiate or compromise on a lifetime of being committed to one another. Although he'd fought it initially, he'd fallen in love with a speed that shocked everyone and he'd done it hard. He'd thought she'd done the same.

"I love you, Corin," Jasmine said. Her eyes were glassy, but he recognized the effort to unfog her thoughts. "But I think sometimes you're afraid I'll disappear. I won't walk out on you or our marriage. When I bonded with you, you warned me that it meant forever. And it still does mean forever to me. But honey, you've got to give me some space sometimes."

His gut churned, the force of her softly spoken words ricocheting through his insides and leaving behind a bruise everywhere they touched. She'd wanted to go shopping for lingerie by herself today, but he'd insisted on coming with her. When she wanted to do anything at all, he stood by her side. Protests that she could never surprise him with gifts because he remained hitched like a tick were laughed off. He'd go through the motions of acting like he understood but hadn't truly listened.

He'd never before thought he had to explain the reason for it. Not until now.

"I still hear your screams, sometimes," he said, unable to look her in the eyes any longer. "The night Sijourn had you, and I couldn't get to you, you screamed, Jas. You screamed, and I couldn't do a thing to help you. I had to stay there and listen. And I can still hear you at night. In my dreams."

A long moment of silence passed where he felt the weight of her scrutiny. Still, it wasn't cause enough to look up.

“Why didn't you tell me about your dreams before?” Her hushed voice made the quiet room seem even more stark.

Corin uncurled his fist and pushed through the tightness in his throat to respond. “So that you could have done what? Hold me? Tell me it's okay? Woman, I am an executioner and before that I was a gladiator. I have killed hundreds and heard the screams of hundreds. This...this shouldn't affect me like it has.”

Jasmine pushed her hand into his, threading her fingers in between his. Together they watched the contrast. Her shorter fingers intimately placed next to his strong, rougher ones. When she tightened her grip, he automatically did the same.

“Have you never dreamed of the people you've killed?”

He gave it a thoughtful reflection before answering. “In the beginning, I had nightmares.”

“And now?”

“Nothing. I remember their faces, but I'm no longer haunted as I once was.”

“How long did it take for the nightmares to stop?”

“Years, I think.”

“Did you love any of them, the people you've killed?”

With a sharp glance, he finally met the force of concern on her face. “No, of course not.”

The corners of her mouth tipped in an indulgent smile. “Do you love me?”

Corin would not look away for this. “With everything that I am.”

“Then accept the fact that it will be years before you no longer hear me when you sleep. I wish there was something I could say or do to make it stop happening, but I don't think there is. You smothering me every second of the day certainly isn't going to help. And I wish I could say that I wish I never went through being tortured by Sijourn, but I can't—”

“Jasmine!”

She squeezed his hand. “I can't wish it never happened because without him, we might not be where we are today. We might not have survived the hard roads laid before us. We might not have fallen in love. And Corin, those things in the end, are worth any amount of pain I might have gone through. *Any* amount.”

Corin tilted his head back, eyes squeezed shut, as he digested her words. After a moment, he squinted at her through one eye. “At least you seem to be a little more sober. And I suppose hearing you tell me that you love me is worth allowing this crazy situation to run its course for a while longer.”

Jasmine grinned.

“But at the first sign that something's not right, we're gone.”

She grinned wider.

“I mean it.” Hard to be stern when she looked so damned happy.

His attention swung to the opposite side of the room where the entrance the Reverent Father had used quietly opened. Muscles tight and ready for anything, Corin still didn't let down his guard when Moira, the saleswoman from the lingerie shop, strode into the room. Her chin was elevated, but he detected a subtle undercurrent of fear rifling through her. “Yes?” he barked a little sterner than he'd intended.

“The Reverent Father said the goddess was hungry and needed to be fed.” Her voice wavered with the same worried wariness trembling her hands. “I'm here to offer myself for her needs.”

“Wish they'd stop calling you a goddess,” he grumbled to Jasmine, almost beneath his breath—except he didn't breathe. “Shit's gonna go to your head.”

His wife laughed. “Then perhaps you might want to be a little more worshipful in your manner. You see how easily you can be replaced,” she said, a smile in her tone. Turning to Moira, she said, “Thank you, but I have never fed from anyone other than my husband.”

Until she said it out loud, Corin hadn't recognized that fact. It made something inside him grow warm, and it inflated his pride to know that Jasmine reserved that intimate act for him and him alone. Dismissing Moira with a small wave, he slowly took in the vision of Jasmine in that little purple getup—so very see-through where it pressed against pink nipples and the dark V between her legs. Suddenly, she wasn't the only hungry one.

## Chapter Four

The Reverent Father hadn't lied. The fuzzy, slightly inebriated feeling seemed to have passed. Now that her common sense rushed back, Jasmine second-guessed staying in this potentially dangerous situation, regardless of how nice everyone seemed.

Besides, what the hell was she wearing?

More importantly, what was that look in her husband's eyes?

"If you're thinking what I think you're thinking, I think you've got another think coming," she said, still wondering what could have possibly have made Corin decide to stay here in the first place. Turning to the woman watching them with wide-eyed curiosity, Jasmine added, "I'm starting to get the big picture here and not much liking it. What's supposed to happen at this celebration? Because so far, not seeing much in the way of spa treatment."

"My lady, it's a simple celebration in honor of your mirac—"

"Miraculous transformation. Yeah, I get that." Jasmine's mind cleared more and more with each passing second. "What exactly do you plan on doing at this shindig? Details."

The woman's gaze kept bouncing between Jasmine and Corin, though Jasmine swore it might have lingered a little longer on her husband. "It really isn't for me to say."

"Moirra, I need to know that my wife isn't in danger."

She twisted her hands together as she looked up at Corin. Just as Jasmine suspected, starry adoration beamed from her eyes. "The Reverent Father wouldn't ever hurt her. Not ever. He's said as much to all of us. I think maybe he's going to partake of a very, very small amount so that he can share it with the others who have been deemed worthy."

Jasmine's brow furrowed at the same time Corin's expression straightened. "What do you mean by 'partake'? As in feed from me?"

"Just a little, my lady. So that your blood will flow in him. So that he can count himself as one divinely related to you."

Her spine chilled at the prospect. When Sijourn Vartan had taken her hostage, he'd swore he'd only needed a little of her blood too...right before the torture started.

"For fuck's sake," Corin grumbled.

"My husband has been the only one to ever feed me, and he is the only one I'll ever allow to feed *from* me." Her voice remained level, despite the shivers threatening to tumble through her

body. She sent Corin a curt nod that he quickly understood. He rose to his feet, holding out a hand to assist her to standing. Still feeling the lingering effects of whatever drug cocktail they'd used on her, Jasmine swayed a little, and she sent a mental word of gratitude to Corin. She said to Moira, "Tell him thanks but no thanks."

"We're gone."

They held hands as Corin led the way to yet another door she hadn't noticed. She took comfort in threading her fingers around his, in basking in his quiet strength. They were a united front and had been from the very beginning. Whatever awaited them on the other side of the door had better be prepared. Or praying.

The sound of harried footsteps hustled toward them. "My lady, please. You can't leave because the Reverent—"

Corin whirled, keeping Jasmine at his back. "Knows better than to get in my way. If he doesn't yet, he'll learn." He faced forward before the final words rumbled out of his mouth.

She reached for the knob, turned it, and pulled. Whether by reflex or design, Corin's hand tightened on Jasmine's.

It wasn't much of a surprise to find two men standing there. Whatever topic of conversation they'd been engaged in came to a jarring halt. Jasmine scanned their slacked jaws and widening eyes. After the shock wore off, each man's expression hardened. Surprised, yet determined faces. Thank God, they both appeared human, ensuring some ease in either talking them down or taking them out.

Hunger came rushing back, a forgotten urge, but Jasmine tamped it down with swift fury. A few minutes ago, the urge to feed seemed paramount. It would wait.

The first man dropped a hand to his hip, but he held it there as if torn on his next actions while staring at Jasmine. She chanced a glimpse of what he reached for, heart thundering when she realized a gun dangled from a sling and now was within reach. "We don't want any trouble," Jasmine said in a low voice. "We just want to walk out of here, intact."

Corin couldn't be bothered with words. He released his hold on Jasmine, barreling toward the second man with murder spelled on his face. A flare of emotion rushed through Jasmine, unwanted arousal at seeing stark masculinity at play.

The second man threw up his arms, trying to block Corin's attack, but the vampire kept going. They both stumbled, the human driven against the wall as Corin brought a knee into his stomach while slamming double fists into his back.

That seemed to shock the man with the gun into action at last. Before he could swing it around though, Jasmine charged him. His head punched the wall as she brought her forearm to his throat, holding him down with more pressure than necessary. Enough to make a point. "I will rip out your throat and leave you here to bleed. Don't make me do that," she said in what she hoped was a calm voice. The more reasonable she appeared, the more likely they'd do what she commanded without putting up a fuss.

"Please...please, my lady." Moira hurried to Jasmine's side, putting trembling fingers on her shoulder. "Just let the Reverent Father come and talk to you, and you'll change your mind. I know you will."

They wouldn't kill anyone unnecessarily—it went completely against Jasmine's instincts as a nurse—but Moira didn't need to know that. "You give him our regrets. We're walking out of here. And we're doing it now."

Jasmine snatched the gun from the man's hip, yanking hard on the strap until it snapped free. He wheezed noisily when she dropped the arm previously resting on his Adam's apple, but at least he still breathed. The man next to Corin stood bent at the waist, doubled-over and moaning in pain.

Two down. How many more to go?

"To me before someone else comes," Corin called. He swept a dangerously slanted gaze around the room. When he stiffened, Jasmine's attention followed his.

"Oh shit," she muttered, then slowly raised her hands in the air.

~ \* ~

Corin flexed his fingers, keeping the circulation flowing. Dampness from the walls seeped into his skin and bones, but he ignored the chill in favor of focusing on more important matters. He peered down at his wife, still wearing that purple piece that threatened to stop his heart every time he studied it. "I never got the chance to tell you that I *really* like that outfit you're in now."

Jasmine barked out a laugh. "Better than the blue piece from the store?"

He hummed a low noise. "Something about the purple excites me."

A slow smile curved her lips while she winked. “I’ll keep that in mind. When we get out of here—” another tug on the chains wrapped around her wrists proved they hadn’t miraculously slackened “—I’ll get an identical outfit.”

They hadn’t bothered to struggle when the Reverent Father showed up with a dozen men, all armed to the teeth. Had it been his life alone on the line, he might have fought back, but he would not risk hers unnecessarily. So far, they’d stuck to their word of not harming her; the most heinous act being to tie her arms behind her back with chains. He’d been shackled against a cold wall, bound at the neck, wrists, and ankles. They’d been taken from the house to a cement walled shed of sorts, which couldn’t have been any more opposite the sensual room they’d first been first housed.

They’d been an almost identical situation like this before, one that seemed an impossibility to escape from. Yet they had. And would do so again. Corin only had to bide some time.

The Reverent Father ignored their banter back and forth, although Corin hoped their lack of concern shook him a little. He went about his preparations as if in no great hurry. Matchsticks were used to light tall, elegant candles surrounding a table draped in purple and gold velvet. Wax dripped down the sides of the golden candles, sometimes splashing on the cascading flowers also decorating the surface and floor next to the table. No—not a table. An altar.

Corin’s concern ratcheted up.

“I was worried you’d prefer me in red or maybe black,” Jasmine said. She lifted a dark brow as she spoke, and Corin caught her message. He physically blew out a breath to try and shake off his own worry. If she could see the anxiety making him tense, then so would the Reverent Father. He would not tip their hand in any way.

“Vampires in black? A bit clichéd, don’t you think?” Corin returned. Forcing his gaze away from the man at the center of the room, he searched through the throng of acolytes. Although many wore cowled hoods, others had chosen to leave their heads uncovered. Most of the crowd was human from what he could tell. Vampires lined the first row, their unnatural stillness giving them away. “Besides, you’ve got great taste in clothes. You know what looks good on you.”

“You really think so?”

The wonder in her voice brought Corin’s gaze back to his wife. “Yeah, I do,” he said softly. She smiled bright, enough to make his heart trip. “When this is over, we need to talk.”

“I’m always at your disposal, *mellita*.”



Emotion flickered across her face when the Reverent Father stepped in between them. Jasmine drew back as far as the chains would allow, but he gripped her by the jaw, twisting her face away from him. In his struggle to get to her, Corin's bones almost snapped through his muscles when the man began to drag something down her neck. Corin bellowed, "You fucker, leave her alone. Come to me! To...*me!*"

Both the Reverent Father and the congregation ignored him. The others moved in closer, crowding around Jasmine as the vampire leader used a marker to draw a red line down both sides of her neck. Jasmine's lips lifted away from her teeth as he continued the lines over both arms. He even shoved aside the lingerie and starting at her crotch, drew similar parallel lines down her thighs and calves.

What the hell?

They unshackled her without ceremony, and led a struggling Jasmine to the table where she was forced to lie. Half a dozen hands held her in place while she kicked and scratched until she could be secured by leather ties.

"Whatever you're going to do, please don't," Jasmine whispered. Each word filled Corin with torment because he heard the undertone of something desperate in them.

The Reverent Father stood at her head. "Today, we welcome the goddess Jasmine. Ushered to us when the vampire nation is at a crux. When the oldest of our kind has weakened, and the newly created have become lost and in need of guidance. She is mother..."

The acolytes began to chant with him now. Their combined voices making Corin's hair stand on end.

"...Creator. Origin for us all. She sustains us with her blood and offering."

Corin strained against his chains when the vampires began to lower their mouths toward Jasmine, teeth bared.

"...She is our mother..."

The lines. He recognized them now. Blood lines. Arterial lines. Markers for the vampires to use when they began to bite her. She'd bleed out in minutes.

It didn't matter how hard the chains dug into his wrists and legs. Corin began to choke against the tether around his neck, but he struggled against it anyway. If he didn't get to Jasmine first, it wouldn't matter what happened to him.

"...Origin for us all..."

His vision blurred when the first vampire latched onto her arm, fingertips digging into her flesh until it blanched white. His stomach heaved, but Corin yelled above their chanting. Yelled to get their attention because it would be him—not her. They would take him. Please gods. Him.

“No! Jas! *Jas...*” His head whipped around as someone touched his cheek. It was a slight caress, and in his frantic struggling, he should have missed it.

“If you can help her, go. This wasn’t what was supposed to happen.”

One of the acolytes stood dangerously close, a cowled hood blocking her identity, but he heard and recognized her voice. Only as he looked into Moira’s frightened eyes did he realize that he could move his neck freely, as well as his feet. A soft *snick* later, and the chains at his wrists went slack.

“Thank you,” he rasped before launching himself toward the men holding his wife.

## Chapter Five

Corin would have paid good money to have his ash stakes in hand, ready to plunge them into the hearts of the men intent on bleeding out his wife, but there were other ways to kill a vampire. Just took a little longer.

He grabbed the closest vampire by the head, wrenching until something popped. There hadn't been enough time for the man to fight back. Before his body hit the floor, Corin slammed an elbow into the next guy's face. When he dropped, a gap formed between bodies, big enough to wedge himself into. Corin grunted as he yanked on a tie, the sudden snap a moment later sending a wave of hope through him.

“Jasmine—*move!*”

Her blue eyes were round with pain and fear, but she followed through. Jasmine lifted her free hand and pushed it into the hair of the blonde whose lips were latched onto her wrist. Jasmine squeezed her eyes shut, but pulled hard, releasing a soft cry of triumph when the woman yelped. Ignoring the bleeding wound, Jasmine worked on freeing her hand.

Satisfied that she could work on getting out of the ties, Corin barreled into two more men, lifting them off the ground to slam their bodies against the concrete floor. He whirled, incisors bared, a growl rumbling from his throat ready to face any more attackers. “Mate?” he called. A red haze covered his vision as he scanned their surroundings.

There were so many people in the room. Too many. He could continue to take down the vampires, but he wasn't stupid enough not to realize that the humans could overrun him if they wanted.

“Almost done!”

The Reverent Father stood ramrod still at the end of the table, farthest away from Corin. They locked stares, and in that moment, Corin knew the face of a zealot, determined to let his faith guide all of his actions, even if any of those actions drove him straight down the road to hell. He glared back at Corin. “She is a miracle to be shared with the world!”

“You idiot,” Corin growled back. “The only miracle is that she agreed to be my wife. Her transformation was as mundane and common as dust.”

Jasmine's head snapped up. “Hey!”

Her indignation snagged the Reverent's attention. He grabbed her from behind, beneath her chin, fingers curling into the skin of her neck. Her hands scrabbled against his, futilely trying to get him to release her. One leg remained tethered to the altar, and there was no way she could obtain the leverage she needed to get away from the madman.

Paralyzed with indecision and fear for her safety, Corin stood at the opposite end of the altar, trying to sort the best way to get to her. The Reverent Father's supernatural strength could easily snap her neck should he so desire.

In a nauseous wave of feeling, Corin was transported back to the last time Jasmine's life had been in danger. The complete feeling of helplessness that overwhelmed him at hearing the woman he loved cry out in pain and terror. As if thrown back to a year ago, he heard her screams echo in his ears, louder than the rush of blood going through them now.

He looked into her face...and she was smiling at him.

Smiling.

"Jas?" Confusion wrapped around his brain.

Her blue eyes held none of the doubt and worry assaulting him now. She'd stopped struggling, keeping her hands gripped on the Reverent Father's wrists. A petite woman, she'd never before seemed as fragile to Corin as she did in that moment, but there was an inner strength in her that shone like a beacon. It wasn't just strength, he realized. She radiated *trust*. Trust in him.

By the gods, he would not lose that trust.

"You and me," he said in a low voice to the Reverent Father. "Let's you and me dance and put an end to this."

"I have no quarrel with you, executioner. Allow us to revel in who she is and to share her miracle."

Corin almost shook his head in disbelief. The asshole just didn't get it. And probably never would.

Without another word, Corin vaulted on top of the altar. He deliberately landed on top of his wife, knocking her from the Reverent's grip. She fell back against the table, but immediately curled in, staying out of his way and away from the Reverent as much as possible.

The vampire took too long to recover, and Corin struck with a right hook. When it connected with the Reverent's jaw, Corin felt the tremor vibrate down through his toes. Sharp

pain flared in his knuckles, but he mentally tamped down the discomfort to something he could tolerate it without distraction.

He didn't want to leave Jasmine unprotected on the table, but he had to take care of the immediate threat. This had to end once and for all.

Launching himself at the fallen vampire, Corin grabbed him the lapel of his shirt, dragging him up from the floor. He brought their faces to within an inch of each other. "Yield," he snarled at the man. "Call this off and yield."

The Reverent Father bared incisors dripping with saliva and blood. "She is a...*miracle*..."

Corin's stomach curled with realization. So long as the Reverent Father lived, he would continue this quest.

Therefore, he could not live.

The invisible mask of stoicism that Corin wore when ordered to execute a vampire slid into place, and Corin brought his mouth to the other man's throat. Without a second thought or reservation, he bit into the center of his neck and yanked his head back. He pulled while the Reverent Father flailed wildly, trying to free himself, without success. Eyes closed, Corin held on as the man thrashed, his life's blood pouring out of the new wound. Moments later when the struggle ceased, he dropped the body without looking at it again. Exsanguination of a vampire was lethal and permanent...

"Hey," a soft voice said.

Startled, he whirled to find Jasmine standing at his side. "Christ," he murmured, pulling her into his arms. Apparently, she'd used the time to free herself of the last restraint.

He was tired. So goddamned tired, but he knew a roomful of humans and a few remaining vampires separated them from the exit. Their fight wasn't over yet.

"This wasn't supposed to happen," a woman's voice said. "This was supposed to be a celebration of life. Not...not *this*." Corin watched Moira push through the crowd, which hovered only a few feet from where the Reverent Father and the other vampire's bodies lay. "We weren't supposed to hurt her. And we were never to touch her consort. What happened? Why did this happen?"

There were the shuffling sounds of feet, but no one answered her questions.

"I swear to you, she is no more miraculous than you and I," Corin said, hugging Jasmine closer. "Let us go in peace to live our lives. Find your miracles elsewhere."

Moira nodded, and the tension still holding Corin hostage released as, one by one, the others in the room began to nod and back away too.

~\*~

Jasmine held Corin's hand as they slowly ambled down the long driveway leading to their home. He was covered in blood—none of it his, thankfully—and she still wore the purple negligee the cult had provided. Fatigue washed over her, but with every step closer to the house, a little more of it dissipated. “You could have let Moira drive us up here,” she admonished, not looking forward to another quarter mile of the trek. They lived in the middle of practically nowhere, just the way they both liked it. No neighbors. Just them and nature.

“It's bad enough she knows where we live. Wasn't going to take her right to the front door.”

“She wasn't part of the problem. I think she just wanted something to believe in.”

“Yeah, well, she's the Council's problem now. There are consequences for knowing about the existence of vampires. She's probably going to find out the hard way that knowing is not necessarily a good thing.” He'd reported the cult's activities to his superiors, leaving it up to them as to what happened to the remaining vampires and humans.

Jasmine took simple pleasure in the way the damp earth felt beneath her feet. With the moon glowing down on them, it seemed they were being highlighted in the most ethereal way. Cicadas sung into the night, their voices echoing in the trees. “There's nothing wrong with wanting something better for yourself.”

Corin paused, then twirled her into his arms. “Do you need something better?”

She looked into his eyes, finding comfort in his warm hold, pausing to think over the best answer.

That moment at the ranch when she'd seen Corin falter, hopelessness casting a shadow over him, she recalled his earlier confession about his dreams, and it made an important decision for Jasmine. She couldn't allow him to continue to feel as if he couldn't be there for her when she most needed it. Especially when his very presence in her life drove every heartbeat. He'd given her the gift of deciding the fate of her other attacker, Sijourn Vartan; the Reverent Father's demise was something he'd needed.

“I have almost everything I need,” she responded at last.

A dark eyebrow lifted. “Almost?”

She shrugged. “I'm still hungry. Never did feed me.”

Corin chuckled before stepping away. With a slow, deliberate playfulness, he stripped off the bloody shirt and chucked it into some bushes a few feet away. He went to one knee, tilting his head back to expose the line of his neck. “Come here, mate of mine, lest I accidentally starve you.”

Seeing him make himself so vulnerable for her brought the arousal Jasmine previously ignored roaring back with a furious rush. There didn’t seem to be an inch of her husband that wasn’t solid muscle and placing her hands on his pecs for balance only reinforced that belief. She dragged her mouth over his neck, inhaling the coppery scent coating his skin. When her tongue darted out to taste him in glorious decadence, she shuddered in bliss. “I thought you were hungry,” Corin said in a low voice. Intensely hoarse.

“Very,” she whispered.

Corin reached up and cupped Jasmine’s head, bringing it closer to his. Their lips came together in a kiss that rocked through her being. She moaned a wanton sound, and Corin reacted to her signal by scooping her body into his arms. He gently laid her down on a carpet of grass, his strong arms a safe haven.

Jasmine arched beneath him, needing to connect to him physically. Hardened nipples brushed against his bare chest, sending sparks of pleasure bolting through her. He continued to plunder her mouth, kissing her thoroughly, each erotic brush of lips deepening her want for him.

Her pussy was hot and swollen, and Corin rolled between her thighs, his leg brushing against her center. Separated by the thinnest, barest material, she felt the touch as if it was skin against skin. She writhed, encountering the stiff outline of his erection tightening the front of his trousers. He wrenched his mouth away from hers, and slid his hand to her drenched panties. A sound of supreme satisfaction spilled from him, and he left her throbbing center long enough to release his cock.

She took advantage of the way his neck slid close to her lips and kissed the thumping pulse. The rhythmic beat seduced her with its simple beauty and erotic lure. Her incisors throbbed almost painfully so close to what she needed. Corin lined his cock up with her slick center and at the same moment he thrust forward, Jasmine pierced his flesh with her teeth.

“Gods,” he moaned, roughly.

The sweet, sweet taste of blood flooded her mouth, and overwrought nerves laid claim to her senses as her husband’s thrusts filled her completely. Jasmine’s eyes slammed shut, extreme

ecstasy flooding her veins. She clung to Corin, riding out the luscious torture until at last she'd drunk her full and licked over the small bite to seal it closed. Better to focus on the other thrill of him.

His hands stroked over her breasts, pinching the tight tips of her nipples. She cried out softly, encouragement for his actions. His mouth met hers, capturing the sound. When his pelvis brushed over her swollen clit, rocking against it as his thrusts grew more forceful, her small moans lifted into the air. His teeth nicked the skin of her shoulder, and it was all Jasmine needed to be shoved to a place where starbursts exploded inside of her.

She trembled as orgasm swept her under, her body bowing and no longer beneath her command. Dimly, she heard Corin's groan of utter satisfaction as he spilled inside her. Her arms remained wrapped around his back, holding him close, feeling the kick of his heartbeat against her own stuttering beat.

Jasmine kissed his neck. His chin. His lips. "I love you, Corin."

"And I you."

Above Corin, stars twinkled in the early night, the large moon watching over them in the field of grass. She swung her gaze back to his face, his dark eyes expressive in their tenderness. Jasmine memorized his features all over again, pride swelling inside of her to know she'd committed the rest of her life with this man. "Will you still love me a hundred years from now?" she asked, already anticipating his reply.

"And a hundred years after that. I will love you until my body is no more than a memory."

"Even after I've born you children and am tired and cranky?"

He chuckled. "Even then."

"Good," Jasmine said with a smile. "Because I'm pregnant."

The smile faltered, his eyes widening. For a split second, there was a moment of doubt that perhaps this wasn't something he'd wanted. That maybe he wanted her to himself for another year or two before starting a family. But then that smile began to grow, widening until it was all she could see through swimming vision. His cock, still semihard inside of her, stirred, and after a glacially slow thrust forward, Corin swept his lips across hers. "*Mellita*," he whispered before beginning to make love to her again. The word one spoke a thousand, declaring his love, pride and wonder.

And all Jasmine's doubt vanished.



*The End...for now*

### **Author Bio**

Dee Carney is an award-winning, best-selling author of paranormal and contemporary romances. She lives at home in Florida, surrounded by four-legged writing partners. To learn more about all of Dee's books, please visit her on the web at <http://www.deecarney.com>, [http://www.twitter.com/dee\\_carney](http://www.twitter.com/dee_carney), or <http://www.facebook.com/deecarneywrites.com>.

### **Hunger Awakened** (March 2013)

For more sexy vampires in dire situations, keep reading for an excerpt from *Hunger Awakened* by Dee Carney.

### Prologue

*"He'll know of you sooner or later. He might come looking for you."*

*"Who?"*

*"What happened to the left-for-dead? He wouldn't have allowed himself to be taken."*

*"Who? Oh, him." John Doe. She shrugged. "Taken away in an ambulance not too long after the incident. What do you mean he'll know of me?"*

*"You're his kindred now. You carry something like a genetic marker that will make him aware of you."*

*What did it matter? "So?"*

*Corin walked to the accent chair by her vanity and sat. "We live a very, very long time. Not a life of immortality as fiction would have you believe, but long enough to grow bored and restless. If he's mature, he might not care. Maybe he'll come after you just to satisfy some curiosity and merely watch from afar."*

*"Or he'll come after you because he's angry. Intentional or not, he's broken a law and there will be consequences for that. He might take that anger out on you."*

Chapter One

The only reason he noticed her was because of the depth of despair shining from deep-set blue eyes. Hunched against the side of a red brick wall, she looked a little too thin. Hungry in a way that didn't remind him of food. The poor woman might have been attractive in her day, but her pale skin seemed to have lost a little of its luster. Just like those horribly sad eyes.

Something about her intrigued him though. Almost enough to make him forget about going inside, where already the scent of the nightlife called to him. The smell of densely packed bodies. Lust. Sin. As he waffled, those enticements made up his mind for him.

He'd come to the nightclub to get laid. Period.

Bast Kent strode inside without bothering to look back, the woman and her haunted eyes forgotten within seconds.

Ignoring the seductive looks a few women gave him on the way in, he went straight to the bar, twisting in between bodies that bumped and gyrated. Touched and fondled. Danced, so they called it.

Laying a crisp hundred on the spit-shined wooden surface drew the attention of a bartender without having to open his mouth to back it up. Benjamin was always a good friend to have in a place like this. A place he didn't frequent often. There were better venues for finding willing booty. But he had his pick of slurries in a club. And slurries were so much easier to bleed...  
"Armada. Neat."

The blonde woman tilted her chin and filled the drink order without saying a word to him. At the same time she stopped pouring with her right hand, she used her left to palm the c-note.

He slammed down the vodka, savoring the smooth burn of alcohol sliding down his throat and heating his belly. If he needed another, he'd return, but with as much adrenaline pulsing through him tonight, he wanted to get sexed up sooner rather than later. No pretending he was interested in buying anyone a drink of any kind, especially not a Goddamned cosmopolitan. Definitely no small talk about what she did for a living or what she liked to do for fun. Just one good, long fuck. In the club's restroom, in her car, her place. Whatever.

Bast searched through the writhing bodies of people on the dance floor, looking for just the right woman to bed that night. A human, preferably.

His teeth pulsed with a familiar ache, and his favorite appendage thickened at the impatient prospect of a long night of sweaty sex and decadent feeding. For whatever reason, his libido had kicked into high gear over the past couple of weeks and in this past week particularly. No matter how many times he alleviated the problem himself, he never felt relieved. So, if his own hand wasn't going to solve the problem, he might as well let a woman with legs from here to eternity solve it for him.

No, this place wasn't his scene, but it would serve the purpose. Undulating bodies moved like liquid to the beat of the blaring music. He scented their perspiration and a heady mix of alcohol and sex on the dance floor. A subtle haze of fresh blood drifted to him from time to time and he knew he wasn't the only vampire on the hunt here. A lot of the humans were already so high or inebriated with alcohol, they were ripe for picking. Low-lying fruit on a tree.

And Bast was so hungry.

Yeah, he should give a fuck about using them, but it's why their kind existed. To keep him and his kind fed and sated. In exchange, they were kept very unaware of the turmoil that raged on around them. Bast and warriors like him kept the danger of other creatures of the night far away from their doors.

He signaled to the bartender. "Another."

The vampire nodded and went to work pouring the next one. Had to be another vampire simply because the place was too noisy for people to hear themselves think above the din, much less a few feet away.

"Hey, sweetheart. You buying?"

Bast turned to the exotic woman at his elbow. She pressed a finger into one ear and leaned close enough that he was afforded a healthy blast of her warm breath when she shouted. Some Asian ancestry ran through her genes. Bone-straight hair and distinctive eyes declared it for her. The makeup around her eyes had been plastered on, the lipstick she wore too bright, but she was pretty. And based on the way she ogled him, about to become the next notch in his bed post.

"Just out playin' the game," Bast replied. No sense in getting her hopes up for anything more. She'd either stick around or head for deeper pockets. He swallowed down the vodka chaser, already scanning the crowd for another woman in case this one didn't pan out.

“Yeah?” She edged closer, allowing her breasts to brush his torso. “What are you packing?”  
Bast’s lips twitched with amusement. “Enough. You interested?”

She peered past him, and her moment’s inattention gave him the opportunity to notice too-large pupils. The chick was high and whatever she floated on was taking her for a nice ride. When he fed from her later, it should give him a nice momentary buzz too. The prospect of fucking her became that much sweeter.

A few weeks ago he might have felt like a shit for taking advantage of her state, but lately, he couldn’t stop the craving. It had become almost unbearable. He needed to feed, and she’d do nicely.

“Today’s my birthday,” she said with a smile. “Why the hell not? What’s your name?”

The polite thing to do would have been to at least offer a “happy birthday.” At the very least, toss her a fake name to call him by. Instead, Bast took her by the hand and wound them through the throng of bodies and into the back. His gift to her would be allowing her some dignity by staying out of the restrooms, but against the wall in a dark corner proved an appealing idea.

“Always had a thing for the strong, silent type,” she muttered. Sensitive hearing picked up every syllable over the rhythmic beat of music. Bast grinned to himself. He didn’t have the abilities of full-born vampires, but his lineage offered him enough bennies.

The smugness faltered for a moment when he thought of what he was doing—what he was about to do.

He was going to feed, yes. But while he drank from her, another need, some primal call, demanded to be sated. The urge taunted him, and he felt an addiction to something he’d not yet partaken of. Something in the back of his mind tugged at him, whispered of caution. Ravenous Bast ignored it.

By the time they’d crossed the room, he couldn’t get them away from the crowd fast enough. He swore he felt the blood race through every vein. Inside of him swelled with life, as if something within was trying like hell to get out. The urge, the gnawing in his belly, the *craving* became almost unbearable. He staggered as a wave crashed into him. Heat flared like summer in the air-conditioned room.

“Hey, you okay?”

Bast nodded, hiding a grimace behind tightened lips. “Fine. One shot too many.”

Vampires didn't get inebriated off two shots of booze, and they sure as shittin' didn't get sick. Whatever this was almost had the ability to frighten him. Almost.

The woman's grip on his hand tightened, but she kept pace with his long stride, winding with him through bodies and toward their ultimate destination. He knew once he got them there, he would feel better. He would feed, and the sensation would die away.

He'd been training too hard. Ignoring his basic needs for too long. That his body finally retaliated made sense.

"Are you sure?" His companion might have been tipping toward oblivion a few minutes ago, but a new edge to her voice at once made her seem sober. "You're kind of warm."

"Warm?"

She tugged on his hand, forcing him to slow. He caught the concern on her face when he glanced at her over his shoulder. "You might be coming down with something, sweetie. Maybe tonight's not your night for this."

Bast's eyelids felt heavy, his body sluggish. "I'm...fine," he mumbled.

*Vampires don't get sick*, he tried to tell himself. Then his stomach lurched, an immediate reminder that as often as he passed himself off as a full-born vampire, he was anything but.

Putting one foot in front of the other took all of his strength, but somehow he managed to stagger forward. To the dark corner. To a door. Through it.

The cool night air blasted his face, and he almost moaned in pleasure. It felt so good against his skin. He'd begun to burn up, and the night kissed away some of the hurt.

The scent of a nearby garbage bin made his stomach roll again, and this time when his stomach heaved, everything he'd consumed lately spewed forth, covering the ground until it shone crimson. All that blood, gone to waste.

The woman screamed—he still held her hand, needing it like a lifeline—before blazing heat swallowed him whole.

Alice looked toward the commotion coming not far from where she crouched. She'd been peering into a crumpled white sack, hoping the grease stains on the outside meant still-edible fried food on the inside. She'd stopped near the parking lot between the two buildings in case she had to try again, if the bag's contents were rancid. In three days, she could afford to shop in a

grocery store, buying manager's specials on things past their expiration date or anything a dollar or less, but until then she had to eat. No matter where it came from.

With a mystery illness running its course, she didn't make the assumption she'd live to see sunrise. Each day was a gift. Seeing a new one was all she could ask for.

She almost squealed in delight when she saw the doughnut inside a wax paper holder only had a single bite taken from it. Two gifts for the day!

A woman screamed, and there was more noise. The sounds of someone retching. Once upon a time she might have thrown up herself just from the gagging sounds, but after spending so many months tending to Richard it took a lot to faze her now. One of the many things she'd learned while living with a junkie brother was how to clean up shit and vomit. Instead, Alice clutched the bag tighter, intent on keeping her newfound delight.

But the scream caught her attention. The curiosity of a woman's terror urged her feet forward.

Alice followed the source, intent on just seeing from a distance why someone needed help. The staccato clicks of heels on pavement echoed into the lot, past cars she couldn't have afforded even in her employed days. It was the sound of uncertain running, and she recognized a woman's tiptoe dance in shoes meant for little more than looking pretty.

The woman had stopped screaming and decided to get the heck out of Dodge, it seemed. She'd left behind someone still moaning and coughing though.

Alice edged closer.

A man elevated himself on hands and knees, swaying like a drunkard. Apropos, seeing how they were just outside the doors of a nightclub. Alice almost turned back to more important matters, but a glint of light reflecting off something on the ground beneath him made her gasp.

"Mister?" she called softly. "You okay?"

There was no way he was okay. Even at her distance she recognized the blood pooled around him. The man tried to rise, stumbled, almost slipped in the blood. He lifted his head, looked at Alice then began to shake.

God, she didn't want to go to him. She didn't want to know if he'd been knifed or shot. It was none of her business. But then she thought of Richard, of the times he'd been brought home simply because of the kindness of strangers. This could have easily been him. Richard might have forced her out onto the streets with his backsliding ways, but he was still her brother.

Whether she wanted to get involved or not, if this had been him, she would have wanted a stranger to help.

With a sigh, Alice ventured closer. “Hey, where are you hurt?”

He made a noise then dry-heaved. His mouth opened, and she grimaced, ready to watch him vomit. She tightened her stomach, mentally preparing herself for not getting sick with him. Nothing came out of either of them though, and she exhaled, relieved.

“Hey...do you have a phone? So I can call nine-one-one?”

His head lifted again, his attention coming to focus on her. Alice caught sight of his dark eyes and immediately thought it a trick of the light. They were eyes capable of seeing into tomorrow, she was sure of it.

“What’s wrong with your eyes?” he asked, his voice croaking.

“*My eyes?*” Under other circumstances she might have laughed. Maybe even thought he was flirting with her.

Beads of perspiration raced down the sides of his face, the crown of his dark hair almost black in color. If she hadn’t seen the clear sweat, she might have considered his head the source of all that blood.

“They’re...*wrong*,” he replied.

Ignoring their ridiculous conversation, she crouched right next to him. The scent of copper rushed at her, almost triggering her gag reflex. “My eyes aren’t at issue here. I need to get an ambulance or the police for you. Can you wait here alone for a minute? Do you know how to press on the wound?”

“Wound?”

“Where you’re bleeding from.”

“I’m not bleeding.” He attempted to rise again, but he’d managed to put his hand at the edge of the blood, where it slipped. “I don’t think.”

How much had he been drinking? He was too stoned to know he’d been shot or worse?

“Why don’t you tell me your name?”

“Sebastian—Bast.”

Who took a perfectly good name like that and shortened it into something so ugly? Bast, indeed. “Look, Sebastian, I’m going for help.” If he was talking, he seemed okay enough to

leave for a minute. “Stay here.” As if that might be a problem. He looked weaker than a wet kitten.

Sebastian’s hand, the same one that had just been slicked down with blood, shot out and caught her arm. Alice cried out at the grip, which would surely leave behind a bruise. “No!” he said.

“No?” She tried to wrench her arm away to no avail. “You need some help. I don’t think—”

Sebastian glanced up into the night sky. He scanned the stars, as if searching for something. “My car. Just to my car. I can’t stay out here like this.”

His paranoia catching, Alice couldn’t help but look around them. “Dude, I’m not trying to get in the middle—”

“My car. That’s all.”

For the first time, she noticed the way her skin heated beneath his hold. “I’m going to get you there,” she said slowly. “But then you need to do something about that fever and wherever you’re bleeding from.” No doubt his injuries explained his behavior. The blood was a mystery he was content to leave alone, and so was she. Good Samaritan duties only went so far.

If he heard her, or if he cared, she couldn’t tell. Sebastian wrapped his arms around her neck and used her as leverage. Alice almost toppled over as he rose, the solid weight of him enough to drag her back down to the ground. By the time he stood, he towered over her.

Wanting to weep for her meager clothes, Alice pressed herself against him, into the wall of muscle and heft and simultaneously into his own bloodstained clothing. Beneath the overpowering scent of blood, she smelled some cross between clean linen and coconut coming directly from him. Had they been at the beach, slathered beneath sunscreen, she could understand the memories of summers by the waves he conjured, but this man was sinfully sexy and erotically dark. Nothing summery or beachy about him.

She recognized him now. The man from not even twenty minutes ago who’d stopped to look at her while on the way into the club. Now that she knew he was in serious shit or at least seriously sick, she pushed aside stirrings of attraction and focused on getting one foot in front of the other without allowing him to bring them both down.

Sebastian reached into his back pocket and retrieved a key fob. He pressed it in the general direction of a row of cars, and they made their way forward to the one that chirruped back at



them. Richard's old toy collection, and the unforgettable prancing horse medallion, were the reasons she recognized the Ferrari Sebastian leaned against when they stopped.

"Help me. Inside." His voice sounded shaky again.

She realized she'd been gawking at the silver vehicle worth more than she used to make in five years combined. Maybe more than five.

Between the blood, the shakes and the car, he had to be a drug dealer or something close. *Had to be.* "I'll get you inside and then I'm gone." Her damned conscience pinged. "And you need to get on a phone. Get to a hospital."

Sebastian unfolded into the passenger's side he opened. "No hospital. Just...inside..."

"Hey Sebastian?" She shook his shoulder and unresponsive, he slumped forward. "Bast?"  
Shit.

Alice looked around. Despite being outside a crowded nightclub, no one else loitered in the parking lot. An unconscious man slouched inside an insanely expensive car next to her. They were alone at night in what wouldn't be classified as the best part of town. She could leave him and hope to heaven someone with a kind heart found him before he died. Maybe he wouldn't even die; his car might be stolen with him left on the cold ground in nothing more than his shirt, but that was okay, right? He'd be alive at least.

The night had begun to chill noticeably, and she still hadn't picked a place to sleep until morning. She couldn't stay here and wait for him. Her own survival took precedence.

Alice scanned the lot again, let out a breath and studied Sebastian's profile.

Double shit.

~\*~

For more information about Hunger Awakened, please visit [Dee's web site](#).