



Rescued By the Vampire Assassin

Author: *Jamie K. Schmidt*

Category: Romance, Paranormal, Vampires

Description: Sometimes, the most dangerous creature in the shadows might just be your soulmate.

Investigative reporter Keri Ryder thought she was on the verge of exposing a dangerous crime syndicate. Instead, she finds herself thrust into a world she never knew existed—a world of ancient vampire clans, dark magic, and deadly politics.

Captured by the ruthless Vasile cabal, Keri is thrown into a cell with Joshua Nicolau, a legendary vampire assassin feared throughout the supernatural world. Weakened and trapped, Joshua becomes her unlikely ally in a desperate bid for survival. But as they plot their escape, Keri and Joshua uncover a horrifying truth: the Vasiles are perfecting a drug that can enslave humans and drive vampires to madness.

As if that weren't enough, Keri herself has become an unwitting test subject in their twisted experiments. Now, she and Joshua are bound by a connection they never asked for and an attraction they can't deny. Together, they must navigate a labyrinth of betrayal and centuries-old vampire feuds to stop the Vasiles' insidious plan before it's too late.

Rescued by the Vampire Assassin is a sizzling paranormal romance that blends heart-pounding action with scorching passion.

Total Pages (Source): 30

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:23 am

Chapter 1

CONSCIOUSNESS RETURNED to Keri in agonizing fragments. Her eyelids fluttered, struggling against the weight of drugged exhaustion. A searing pain throbbed behind her eyes, pulsing in time with her racing heartbeat. She tried to lift a hand to her aching head, but her arm refused to cooperate.

Panic flared as her sluggish mind registered the cold metal biting into her wrists and ankles. She was restrained. Bound. Trapped.

Keri forced her eyes open, blinking rapidly to clear her blurred vision. Darkness pressed in around her, broken only by thin slivers of sickly light from a naked bulb swaying from the ceiling. As her pupils adjusted, the outlines of her prison came into focus — a small, dank cell with walls of rough-hewn stone. She was in a dungeon.

A dungeon?

A wave of nausea rolled through her as she tried to lift her head. The metallic tang of blood coated her tongue, mingling with the bitter aftertaste of whatever drug they'd used to subdue her. Keri swallowed hard, fighting back the urge to retch.

She inhaled deeply, immediately regretting it as the musty, damp air filled her lungs. The cell reeked of mold and decay, with an underlying coppery scent that made her stomach churn. Water dripped somewhere in the darkness, a steady plink-plink-plink that seemed to echo Keri's mounting dread.

Fragments of memory flashed through her mind.

"The latest batch is nearly ready. The concentration is higher than ever before."

"Excellent. And the human test subjects?"

"Responding as expected. The mating drive is almost impossible to resist."

The sudden ambush. Rough hands grabbing her. A sharp prick in her neck. Then... nothing.

"Shit," Keri muttered, her voice a hoarse rasp. How long had she been unconscious? Hours? Days?

She tugged at her restraints, wincing as the metal cuffs dug into her flesh. No give. Whoever had taken her wasn't taking any chances. At least she wasn't bolted to the wall.

As the fog of unconsciousness receded, Keri tried to fight off shock, but she was shaky. This couldn't be real, could it?

"Chrissy?" she called out, not recognizing her own voice. Her throat felt like she had been screaming. And maybe she had been.

When was the last time you saw Chrissy alive?

Alive? About a week before her death.

When was the last time you saw Chrissy?

Last night? When Chrissy rapped on the window of Keri's eighth-floor apartment.

She hadn't been an angel. Not with those fangs. But she had been her friend, so of

course, Keri let her in.

That had been her first mistake.

“You have to help me. I was murdered,” Chrissy had said.

Disbelief warred with confusion. Keri looked down into the street. No ladder. No fire escape.

“They made me a vampire.”

That was impossible. But it hadn’t been.

“It was the Vasile family.”

At that, Keri knew that she had to be still asleep. She'd been investigating the Vasile family for months, certain they were behind a string of bizarre deaths and disappearances plaguing the city.

“This is a real vivid dream,” she had said.

And then Chrissy slapped her, and it had fucking hurt. When she went to hit her back, Chrissy blinked away, turned into mist, and then a bat.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:23 am

Keri had sat down hard on the bed.

“Okay, tell me about the Vasiles,” she said.

Keri had always prided herself on her instincts and ability to ferret out the truth no matter how deeply it was buried. It was what made her one of the best investigative reporters in the city. But this time, she'd been in over her head from the start.

The signs had been there if only she'd been willing to see them. Victims drained of blood. Eyewitness accounts of shadowy figures with inhuman speed and strength. And always, always, the bodies disappeared from the morgue before any official investigation could begin. Chrissy's body had been one of them.

Keri had dismissed the whispered rumors of vampires as superstitious nonsense. A cover-up for a more mundane — if no less deadly — criminal enterprise. She'd been so sure, so cocky in her assumptions. But she'd underestimated the Vasiles.

“They're behind the murders. I can get you proof,” Chrissy had said. “But you have to come with me. Now. Before dawn.”

So Keri went with her friend. Except Chrissy disappeared after leading her into the warehouse. Had Chrissy set her up? Were they going to turn Keri into a vampire, too? Doubt gnawed at her. Did she really even believe all this nonsense? She had to because she sure as hell wasn't still dreaming. She was in a dungeon. That had to be some kind of proof. Who had a dungeon on their property, if not vampires?

A chill ran down Keri's spine that had nothing to do with the damp cold seeping into

her bones. She stood up and pulled on the cell door, but it was locked. Irritably, she kicked it and, when that didn't do anything, redoubled her efforts to free herself from her manacles, straining against the unyielding metal until her wrists were slick with blood.

A low growl rumbled from the shadowy corner of the cell, froze Keri in place. Her breath caught in her throat as her eyes darted to the source of the sound. How had she not realized she wasn't alone?

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," a gravelly voice rasped. "It's not wise to tempt a starving vampire with the smell of blood."

A figure stirred in the shadows, and Keri's heart thundered in her chest. Every instinct screamed at her to run, to fight, to do something. But she could only watch, paralyzed, as her cellmate emerged into the meager light.

He moved with an unnatural fluidity, each motion precise and predatory despite an obvious weakness. Broad shoulders sagged with exhaustion. Muscular arms hung limply at his sides. But it was his face that sent ice through Keri's veins.

Pale skin, almost translucent in the gloom. Sharp, aristocratic features gaunt with hunger. And his eyes... dear God, his eyes. They glowed with an unholy blue light, boring into Keri with an intensity that stole her breath.

But it was his smile that truly terrified her. Recognition slammed into Keri like a freight train. She knew that face — she had seen it in grainy surveillance photos and hastily sketched wanted posters. Joshua Nicolau. The most feared assassin in the underworld. And now, apparently, her cellmate and ... a vampire?

"Welcome to our humble abode," Joshua said, his voice dripping with dark humor. "I'd offer you the grand tour, but as you can see, accommodations are somewhat

limited."

Keri's mind raced, searching desperately for some rational explanation other than vampires were real. Chrissy was playing an elaborate prank. Someone must have slipped Keri hallucinogenic drugs. Anything but the impossible truth that she was locked in with a hungry vampire assassin who looked at her as if she was something delicious.

Joshua took a faltering step closer, nostrils flaring at her scent. "Mmmm. Fear smells delicious on you, little mouse. It's been so long since I've had fresh prey."

His gaze raked over her body, lingering on the pulse pounding in her throat. Keri suppressed a shudder, painfully aware of how vulnerable she was. Shackled. Helpless. At the mercy of a predator who saw her as nothing more than a potential meal.

But she'd be damned if she'd give this monster the satisfaction of seeing her cower. "Where's Chrissy?"

"Who?" He quirked an eyebrow.

"Are you a Vasile stooge?"

He snorted. "Hardly."

Then, softer, she said, "Are you really a vampire?"

He bared his fangs at her in a mockery of a smile.

"Shit."

“Indeed, but if I wanted you dead, you'd be drained dry already. You were dumped in here with me a few hours ago. I watched you sleep. You looked like an angel.”

“Like that’s not creepy as hell.” If he wasn't going to kill her, then what?

Joshua's eyes glittered with a mixture of amusement and something darker. “What did you do to piss off the Vasiles?” he mused.

“I’m a reporter.”

“That would do it. But I wonder, what secrets that pretty little head of yours holds? What did you learn about the Vasiles that warranted being thrown in here with me?”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:23 am

Keri remained silent, mind whirling. She couldn't afford to reveal how little she actually knew. Information was power, and right now, it might be the only advantage she had. But then she remembered that snippet of conversation she had overheard in the warehouse before she was ambushed. Maybe it would make sense to another vampire.

"Not feeling talkative?" Joshua tsked. "We have all the time in the world down here. And I can be very persuasive."

The threat in his words was unmistakable. And yet, there was something off about it. A hollowness behind the bravado. Keri's keen investigator instincts kicked in, studying Joshua more closely.

Dark circles shadowed his eyes, giving him a haunted look. And there was a tremor in his hands that spoke of more than just hunger. He was injured. Weakened.

"Why are you being punished? Did you not kill your target?"

A flicker of surprise crossed Joshua's face before he schooled his features back into a mask of sardonic amusement. "So you recognize me," he murmured. "Perhaps there's more to you than meets the eye." He leaned back against the wall, regarding her with newfound interest. "Let's just say the Vasiles and my clan had a disagreement. And now, well..." He gestured to their dismal surroundings. "...here we are."

"Clan? There are vampire clans?" Despite her situation, Keri was intrigued and excited by that. "We should work together. Get out of here. Then you can have your revenge." And I could have my story.

Joshua's lips curled into a predatory grin. "What could you possibly offer me, except blood?"

Yeah, that was a good point. She needed him to stop thinking of her like she was a snack. "You don't want to drink my blood."

"I assure you that I do."

"I don't think you should."

"That's understandable." It was galling that he could sound sensible and condescending at the same time.

"No, listen. I overheard something before I was knocked out. Chrissy led me to a warehouse where the Vasiles were working on packing something up. I didn't hear much before they got me. But they did say something about a batch being ready with a high concentration of something given to humans."

"Hmmm," Jonathan said. "And you think you have been given this batch?"

"I don't know. But why would they give you blood?" she said, quickly thinking about all the vampire legends she'd ever heard of. "Wouldn't you be weakened if I had a drug in my system and you bit me?"

He tilted his head. "Possibly."

"I have to be a trap. You can't afford to bite me." She was actually proud of how she came up with that on the fly. Hopefully, he bought it.

"Devious," he conceded. "Just like the Vasiles. They can't kill me — not without causing a war. But if I died by drinking tainted blood, then their hands are clean."

Bravo. You've stopped me from exsanguinating you."

"Well, thank heavens for small favors."

A surprised laugh huffed out of him.

"How do we use that information?"

"We let them think their plan has worked."

Keri didn't quite like the look in his eye when he said it. And when he rushed her, she couldn't help but let out a terrified scream.

Chapter 2

"KEEP SCREAMING." JOSHUA'S voice was barely audible. "Then slowly stop."

Keri's heart thundered in her chest, but she complied. She let out a series of blood-curdling shrieks that gradually faded to whimpers, then silence. The sound echoed off the dank stone walls, amplifying her very real terror. As her voice died away, Joshua pressed a finger to his lips, mouthing the words "Play dead."

She sank to the disgusting floor and watched Joshua do the same. For several agonizing minutes, they remained motionless. Keri's muscles screamed in protest as she lay awkwardly against her restraints, but she willed herself to stay still. She was acutely aware of Joshua's presence mere feet away. His stillness was unnatural, predatory. Even weakened, he radiated danger. He was fascinating, and it took every bit of her self-control not to pepper him with questions. If she survived this, it would make a great story — assuming she didn't get thrown into the looney bin for reporting that vampires were real.

Finally, the sound of approaching footsteps broke the silence. Keri's breath caught in her throat, and she closed her eyes and forced herself to appear limp and lifeless.

"I'm tired of all these experiments. You'd think we'd have perfected the serum by now," a gruff voice said.

"Don't let Anatole hear you say that," a second voice warned. "Besides, it's a good way to get rid of our enemies, like Nicolau here. I can't wait to see him turned inside out."

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:24 am

A dark chuckle. "And if the experiment fails, we can still turn the human and try again with her. It's a win-win."

Was that what had happened to Chrissy? Had she been a willing part of this, or was she one of the humans that they turned in order to "try again" with?

"Think it worked?" the gruff voice asked from just outside the cell.

"Should have," the other replied. "Boss said the drug was potent stuff, and Nicolau was starving for blood."

Keri's mind raced. What kind of drug had they pumped her up with, and what were they expecting it to do to Joshua?

She expected to hear the cell door opening, but instead, there was only the sound of shuffling feet. They were being observed, she realized with a chill.

"Looks like it did the trick," the first guard observed. "Nicolau is out like a light, and the girl's catatonic and paralyzed."

I was? Keri resisted the urge to wiggle her fingers and toes just in case.

"Good," his companion replied. "Now for the next step."

Their footsteps receded down the hallway, leaving Keri and Joshua alone once more. Keri counted to sixty in her head before daring to open her eyes.

Joshua was already alert, his unnaturally bright eyes scanning the hallway. A smile played at his lips, revealing the barest hint of fang. "Well done," he murmured. "You might have missed your calling as an actress."

"So what's the plan?" Keri whispered, her voice hoarse from the screaming. "Get me out of these cuffs, and then you can bend the bars and we can make a break for it?"

Joshua's laugh was low and devoid of humor. "Easier said than done. This entire cell is built to contain my kind."

Keri felt a flicker of fear at the implications of his words. If vampires found it difficult to escape, what chance did she have?

"We could try to trick them into opening the door and then overpower them," she suggested halfheartedly, knowing it was a desperate long shot.

"Even if we could, it wouldn't matter. The cell is warded against vampires. I couldn't leave even if the door was wide open."

"Warded?" Keri repeated. "Like... magic?"

A humorless chuckle escaped Joshua's lips. "Is that really so hard to believe?"

Keri opened her mouth to argue, then closed it again. He had a point. If vampires were real, why not magic?

"So we can't break out. But there has to be some way to signal for help, right? Don't you have friends or allies who might come looking for you?"

A shadow passed over Joshua's face, his expression darkening. For a moment, Keri glimpsed the ruthless killer beneath the veneer of civility. "The Vasiles have powerful

enemies, yes. But I doubt any of them would risk open war to save one imprisoned assassin."

"What about your family?" Keri pressed.

"Enough," Joshua snapped, his eyes flashing dangerously. The sudden surge of power in his voice made Keri flinch. "My past is none of your concern. Focus on the present."

Keri slumped. She was trapped in a den of vampires, imprisoned with one of the deadliest assassins in the underworld—who couldn't do a damned thing to save them.

"I don't suppose you have any vampire superpowers that could get us out of here?" she asked, only half-joking.

Joshua's lips quirked in a humorless smile. "I'm afraid Hollywood has greatly exaggerated our abilities. And whatever strength I had has been diminished by my time here. Until I feed again."

She shuddered as she remembered his earlier words about "fresh prey." How long before his hunger overcame whatever tenuous alliance they had formed? "Can you feed on a vampire? Maybe I can trick them into coming in here, and you can...you know." She gnashed her teeth at him.

"I could, but how would you get them to cross the vampire ward and be trapped in the cell with us?"

"Right." Keri scowled at him. "I don't see you coming up with any ideas. Do you smell that?"

It smelled like freshly baked cookies, a summer breeze, and then her favorite men's

cologne. “That’s weird, isn’t it?”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:24 am

Joshua stiffened. His nostrils flared as he scented the air like a predator.

“I’m not sure whether to be hungry or horny?” she said. “What’s that smell?”

“That, it seems, is the next step.”

“Death by air freshener? Why wouldn’t they use sewage or old fish instead?”

"It's not air freshener," he murmured, a look of realization slowly dawning on his face. "They're pumping pheromones into the cell."

"Pheromones?" Keri repeated, confusion giving way to alarm. "Why?"

But even as she asked, she felt it — a warm, unfamiliar sensation washing over her. She shifted uncomfortably, suddenly hyper-aware of Joshua's presence. She remembered part of what she had overheard.

“And the human test subjects?”

"Responding as expected. The mating drive is almost impossible to resist."

Their eyes met, and she was struck by how utterly captivating he looked in the dim light, his chiseled features almost glowing with preternatural beauty. Had he always been this handsome?

Joshua's gaze smoldered with barely restrained hunger as he drank in the sight of her. Keri's skin prickled with goosebumps, her body responding to his intensity even as

her mind screamed danger.

“Uh oh,” she said.

“What?” he snapped.

“Horny is winning out over hungry.”

Then she told him about the snippet of conversation she had heard before she had been knocked out.

“Breeding stock,” he muttered. “Mating drive.”

"I don't like this," Keri managed, even as her body betrayed her with a rush of unwanted desire.

"Agreed," Joshua said, his voice strained. "They're trying to manipulate us, push us together."

Keri nodded, trying to focus on the implications rather than the way Joshua's lips moved as he spoke. "But why? What do they gain by this?"

"I have a theory," Joshua admitted. "But it's evil, even for the Vasiles. We're only this clear-headed because I didn't drink from you."

Keri nodded again, but it was becoming increasingly difficult to concentrate. The pheromones seemed to be growing stronger, clouding her mind with a haze of desire.

She tugged at her restraints, desperate for some kind of distraction. "These cuffs," she said. "There has to be a way to get them off."

Joshua's eyes flickered to her wrists, then quickly away. When he spoke, his voice was tight with barely contained emotion — hunger? Desire? Rage? Keri couldn't tell, and that terrified her even more.

“We need a distraction. Tell me about yourself,” she said desperately.

“No.”

Keri flinched at the venom in his voice but pressed on. "Look, we're trapped in a cell with no way out, being drugged with... lust pheromones or whatever these are. If we're going to survive this, we need information. I need information."

“I’m not the subject of an article you are writing,” he gritted out.

“Work with me here. I’m just trying not to jump your bones right now.” The itchy neediness was embarrassing as well as uncomfortable.

For a long moment, Joshua simply stared at her, his expression unreadable. Keri held her breath, acutely aware of how easily he could hurt her, pheromones or no.

“I’m an assassin.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:24 am

“I know. I’ve seen surveillance photos of you. I thought vampires couldn’t be recorded.” Her nipples tightened and she was getting uncomfortably wet, especially when his eyes dropped to her chest.

“I wanted to be seen.”

“Why?”

“I like to feed off of terror as well as blood.”

“Charming.”

He gave a half shrug. “You asked.”

“What did you do to piss off the Vasiles?”

“How did you come to be here?” he countered.

She guessed two could play at that game, but he seemed to be managing his arousal better than she was.

“My friend Chrissy. She was attacked. Murdered. Drained dry. And then her body disappeared from the morgue.” It was hard to talk. All she wanted to do was rub up against him like a cat in heat.

“She wasn’t the first,” he said, rubbing his hand over his jaw and looking away from her.

“Did you kill them?” she asked meekly.

His head whipped back to her. “Of course not. I’m not that sloppy.”

“Of course not,” she repeated, staring at his mouth. She wanted to kiss him. Shaking her head to clear it, she realized that the pheromone scent was getting more intense. “Chrissy came to me as a vampire and told me that the Vasile family was behind her murder. She couldn’t go to the cops because, well, she was dead, and she was afraid of what they would do to her. She said she had proof, but I had to go with her to the warehouse on Eighth Street to see it for myself.”

“So you went with a newly turned vampire, alone?”

She shuddered. His voice felt like a caress against her skin. “Hindsight being twenty-twenty, not my brightest move. Anyway, Chrissy disappeared, but I did get to hear that small conversation I told you about before I was knocked out.”

The mating drive is almost impossible to resist.

Oh shit.

“She did her job like a good little thrall,” he said.

“We were friends. Why would she set me up?”

“She might not have had a choice. Newly created vampires are susceptible to mind control from the family line that turned them.”

A wave of dizziness washed over her. The pheromones were growing stronger, more insistent. She could feel her resolve weakening, her body crying out for... something. Someone.

“What about you? Why are you here?” Keri forced herself to concentrate.

“I was sent to kill Anatole Vasile.”

He was the head of the crime family. Or, she guessed, vampire clan.

“Why?”

“He was sloppy in obtaining new vampires.”

The murders.

“When I failed, my clan couldn’t acknowledge my mission or there would be war. Vasile missed his chance to kill me when I was captured. If he had killed me in battle, it would have been justified. If he kills me as his prisoner, it’s war.”

"Why didn't he kill you?"

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:24 am

"I would imagine because he needed someone like me as a lab rat," Joshua said grimly.

That explained where the bloodless bodies might have gone to. They weren't just stolen out of the morgue. They were new vampires that the Vasile could use to experiment on.

A chill ran down Keri's spine. "So Chrissy is an experiment, too?"

"It certainly sounds like it."

"What are they creating here?"

Joshua shook his head. "I don't know. But I imagine it's got something to do with..." He gestured vaguely at the air around them. "...this. And now, it seems, we've become their latest test subjects."

"We have to stop them," she said.

"We've already thrown a wrench into their plans by not cooperating."

Her gaze locked with Joshua's, and she saw the same hunger she felt reflected in his eyes.

"We need a plan," Keri managed, her voice husky with unwanted desire. "Before we lose control."

Joshua nodded, his jaw clenched tight. "We need to understand what they're doing to us. Why do they want us to fuck so badly."

Keri flinched at the word fuck and grew impossibly wetter. "Internet porn?" she joked weakly.

He snorted. "This is hardly the ideal setting for it."

"I wouldn't know. I'm not a connoisseur of those things." Keri asked, trying desperately to focus on the conversation and not how Joshua's muscles rippled as he shifted position.

"Oh, the things I could teach you," he purred, tracing a finger down her cheek.

Her eyes half closed, and she shuddered.

A dangerous glint entered Joshua's eyes. "We could give them what they want. Let them think their experiment is working."

She swallowed hard. "It's just sex, right?"

"As long as I don't bite you, I'll be safe from the drug's effects."

She trembled.

"But as tempting as ravishing you would be, that's not what I'm offering."

Disappointment flashed through her, which was ridiculous. She was being compelled, having basically been given a vampire roofie. She should be grateful that Joshua wasn't using this as an opportunity to bang her like a bongo drum. But damn, she could imagine how good that would feel. It had been a while since she had anything

between her legs that didn't run on batteries.

"What then?" she breathed, licking her dry lips.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. Keri's heart pounded in her chest, equal parts fear and residual desire coursing through her veins. The intensity of his gaze made her skin prickle. She was acutely aware of every inch between them, of the raw power coiled in his frame. Ally or not, she was trapped in a cell with a predator who saw her as potential prey.

"We make them believe we succumbed. And when they let their guard down..."

"We get our answers," Keri finished.

Joshua nodded, a grim smile playing at his lips. "Precisely."

As if on cue, the scent of pheromones intensified, flooding the cell with a heady, intoxicating aroma. Keri's body betrayed her with a rush of desire, even as her mind screamed danger. She watched Joshua's nostrils flare, his pupils dilating as he drank in the scent of her growing arousal.

"How do we do that?"

"We wait it out," he growled, his voice rough with barely contained hunger.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:24 am

“I’m not sure I can do that,” she said.

He moved so fast she didn’t have time to gasp. Grabbing the chain between her manacled wrists, he put her hands over her head and held them in place.

“You don’t have a choice, now.”

Chapter 3

KERI'S BODY TREMBLED, her breath coming in ragged pants as the pheromones overpowered her senses. The intensity of lust surged through her like molten lava, obliterating every thought and instinct save one: she needed Joshua with a ferocity that bordered on madness.

She moaned, straining against the cold iron manacles and his unmovable strength. Her eyes burned into his, a desperate plea for release—from both the chains that held her captive and the insatiable hunger consuming her from within.

“Can you at least talk dirty to me?” she panted.

"Are you fucking serious?" Joshua growled, his eyes dark with lust.

Keri nodded, her eyes half-lidded and dominated by the pulsating lust that clawed at her. "Yes," she gasped, her voice hoarse with need. "Please."

His expression was a mix of hunger and frustration, and he leaned in close to her ear.

"Imagine what I could do to you, love," he whispered hoarsely, his voice like gravel in her ear. "Imagine the wicked, dark pleasure I could give you, only if you let me. The things I could do to your body, the places I could touch, the ways I could make you scream my name." He paused, allowing the words to sink in.

Keri's breath hitched, her body shaking with unrelenting need. She could feel the heat of his body against her, the hardness of his erection pressed against her leg. Her heart pounded, her mind spiraling in the haze of their mutual desire.

"Imagine me running my hands up and down your body, exploring every inch, every curve. My fingers tracing the line of your jaw, your neck, your collarbone. Can you feel it?"

Keri's breath hitched, her body reacting to his words with a helpless shudder. "Yes," she moaned, her voice a ragged plea. "I can feel it."

"Now, imagine me kissing you, tasting you, worshipping your body with my mouth. Nibbling and sucking on your sweet spots, making you writhe with desire. Can you feel that, love?"

Keri's breath hitched, her eyes widening as the images he painted came to life in her mind. "Yes," she cried out. He was going to make her come just by talking. "Kiss me. Please, just one kiss."

He tensed for a moment, then leaned in and pressed his lips against hers, his tongue slipping between her parted lips. His touch was tantalizingly slow and deliberate, each movement sending shivers of pleasure through her veins. Their tongues danced together. His taste filled Keri's senses as their mouths clashed in a desperate dance of desire.

A low, feral growl rumbled in his chest, and his fangs grazed her tongue. She gasped

and arched against the hard planes of his body. He pulled his mouth from hers.

"We have to stop," Joshua murmured, his voice strained. "If we don't, I'm going to bite and fuck you."

Keri's heart clenched at his words, but there was no denying the truth in them. As much as she wanted him – needed him – she knew that they were walking a razor's edge between passion and peril. The lines between reality and fantasy had become blurred, leaving her uncertain of what was genuine and what was a product of the drug coursing through her veins. That's what her mind said. However, her body had other thoughts.

"Please," she whispered. "I need you. I can't breathe without you."

"No. This is giving them what they want." He abruptly let go and stepped back.

As soon as he stopped touching her, though, Keri's vision blurred as a wave of pain slammed into her.

"Something's wrong." She doubled over, feeling a torturous burn spread across her body. "It hurts." It felt like lightning had struck her heart.

Joshua winced and held his head. "I know what this is. Anatole Vasile has damned us both."

Keri screamed and curled into a fetal position as another arc of lightning lit up her nerves in agony.

"The drug is eating you up from the inside," he muttered. "Those Vasile bastards have created a chemical mating bond. You need me, or you'll die... And so will I. Fuck!" He clenched his fists.

“I don’t know what that means,” she sobbed. “It hurts. It hurts so bad.”

“It will get worse. We’ll die in agony, and it will take a long fucking time.” He barked out a humorless laugh. “And again, the Vasiles will be blameless to my clan if I die as a rejected mate.”

“I don’t want to die,” she gritted out.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:24 am

“It’s not on my list of things to do together either.”

"Don't let them win," Keri urged through clenched teeth, her body wracked by spasms. "Kiss me. Mate me. Fuck me. I don't care. Just make it stop."

“If they’re forcing the mating bond, there’s a reason for it. Somehow, they’re looking to gain power by having us join as soul mates.”

“It must be...” She forced out in between waves of excruciating agony. “Something to do with the drug in my system."

He thought about it for a moment. “If I don’t bite you, don’t drink your blood, we could still foil their plans, but we’d be mated. You would be mine, and I would be yours for eternity.”

"Do it. Take me," Keri moaned, desperation coloring her voice. "Please, Joshua." In that moment, she didn’t care about vampire politics. She just wanted to stop the pain.

"Are you sure you want this? Once we cross this line, there's no going back."

“Fucking you or death? I choose you, Pikachu.”

“What the fuck is going through your mind?” he said.

“I’m delirious with pain and lust. Give me a break.” But he was touching her again, and she could breathe.

As Joshua's hands roamed her body with an expertise that left her trembling in anticipation, Keri couldn't help but wonder if they were making a mistake. Would they really die if they didn't do this chemical mating?

Joshua seemed to think so. But her body seemed to be on board with everything. And there were worse ways to spend an afternoon.

His eyes flashed with a predatory gleam as he claimed her mouth once again, his tongue delving deep to taste her wanton need. Keri's manacled hands pulled at his hair, urging him closer, while her hips arched against his hardness in silent demand.

"I want you," Keri whispered against his lips, her fingers tangling in the thick, dark strands of his hair as she sought to draw him even closer.

"Fuck it," he muttered, his lips trailing a searing path of fire down the curve of her neck and across her collarbone. "If this is what you want, then I will give it to you."

"Touch me, Joshua," she begged, her voice a shaky whisper. "Make me come."

He unbuttoned her pants and slid them down her legs. She kicked off her shoes and stepped out of them. He wasted no time parting her thighs. "You're so wet," he groaned, his fingers sliding easily through the slick heat of her arousal. "You feel so fucking good. I can barely control myself."

His fangs lengthened as he watched her writhe beneath him when he tickled her clit.

"Then don't," she urged as she fought to maintain her sanity amidst the storm of sensations threatening to overwhelm her. All that mattered was the raw, unbridled passion they shared, forged together by circumstance and ignited by desire.

"All right," he said. "We'll use this to our advantage. As a mated pair, we'll be

powerful enough to escape this hellhole. I'll make them pay for this."

"We'll make them pay. Now, fuck me hard."

That seemed to be all the confirmation Joshua needed, for he wasted no time in driving his cock deep inside her, causing her to cry out in a mixture of shock and ecstasy. There was no gentleness in his touch, only a dark, carnal hunger that threatened to consume them both.

She wrapped her legs around his waist as he pressed her back against the cell wall.

"Let me take care of you," he whispered against her mouth, his voice rough with desire. He began to move within her, each thrust slow and deliberate, building a fire that burned away the agony they'd both been feeling.

Keri's body shuddered as she clung to him, her only anchor in the storm of sensations threatening to sweep her away. Her hands longed to trace the contours of his muscles.

"Faster," she gasped, her body quivering beneath his as she clung to him. "Harder."

He set a punishing rhythm that drove her higher. "Don't stop." She clamped down on his cock hard, loving the sweet friction as her climax approached like a tidal wave of sensation.

His movements became more insistent, driving her closer to the edge of bliss. And then, just as the pleasure threatened to overtake her, an unexpected surge of power ran through them both.

The manacles binding Keri's wrists shattered, freeing her hands to clutch Joshua's broad shoulders. Startled, they paused for a moment, eyes locked in shared awe at the newfound magic flowing between them.

"Is this what they wanted?" Keri managed to ask, her voice trembling with uncertainty as much as passion.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:24 am

"Maybe," Joshua replied, his dark eyes glittering with something akin to hope. "But we'll use it against them."

The compulsion that had been driving them both began to fade, replaced by a raw, primal need for each other that went beyond any chemical bond. Keri felt alive and powerful in Joshua's arms. She no longer felt the desperate craving. It seemed false now. This new feeling. This was real. She wanted him again – this time for herself, not because some twisted fate dictated it.

"Kiss me again," she demanded.

Joshua wasted no time, his lips crashing down on hers in a fierce, hot kiss that left her breathless.

"I love the taste of you," he growled, nipping at her lip before moving down her neck to claim the sensitive skin beneath her ear.

"I can't get enough of you," she confessed, her voice shaking with need. As his mouth moved lower, tracing the curve of her collarbone, she felt a surge of power coursing through her veins.

"Together, we will be unstoppable," Joshua promised. He unbuttoned her blouse and kissed a path down her chest, trailing open-mouthed kisses over her bra before finally pulling it up to reveal her breasts.

Keri moaned her approval, her fingers wrapping in his hair as he took one of her nipples into his mouth, sucking and tugging until it was hard and aching.

"Yes," she hissed, arching into his touch. "More."

He obliged, his fingers replacing his mouth as he rolled her nipple between them, eliciting a soft gasp from her.

"You're so perfect," he murmured, his voice thick with desire as he continued to tease her sensitive flesh.

"Joshua," she breathed, her body tensing with anticipation. "You're driving me mad."

He chuckled darkly, the vibrations sending shivers down her spine. "Then let's see where this madness takes us."

And this time, it felt like a key was turning in a lock. The intensity of their coupling was a revelation, and Keri reveled in every second of it.

"Harder, Joshua," she demanded, breathless. He thrust deeper into her, eliciting a gasp that morphed into a moan. As wave after wave of ecstasy washed over her, Keri spiraled towards a pinnacle she'd never reached before – a summit of pure, unadulterated bliss.

"I'm so close," she choked out, feeling the world shift beneath her as her climax approached.

"Come for me, Mate," he urged, his voice hoarse and ragged. "Let go."

And she did, surrendering herself to the current of pure, untempered pleasure. Joshua followed her over the edge, their bodies shuddering in tandem as they reached the apex of their passion.

As they stood there, still entwined against the cell wall, reality began to reassert itself

with cruel clarity. The swirling storm of emotions within Keri began to settle, leaving a tangled mess of exhilaration, confusion, and dread in its wake.

"Fuck," she whispered, her voice trembling. "What have we done?"

"Something neither of us expected," Joshua murmured against her skin, his breath warm and comforting even as the dawning realization of their new bond sent tendrils of unease through her.

"Are we truly bound together now?"

"Oh yes."

"Well, this is going to be interesting."

He snorted. "You have a talent for understating."

"I should put my pants on."

"You should, but if circumstances were different, you'd be naked in my bed for quite some time."

She shivered, wondering how she could want him again. "Then let's get out of here sooner rather than later."

Chapter 4

SHE TRIED TO STAY AWAKE, but the stress of the past day and the colossal rush of endorphins hit her like a brick to the face. She had climbed into Joshua's lap and fell asleep, cradled in his strong arms.

Her life was so fucking weird.

Hours later? Days later? Who the hell knew at this point? She woke up, disoriented in the dingy cell. Her head throbbed, an aftereffect of the pheromones used by the Vasile vampires to manipulate her. She shifted, wincing as Joshua's arms tightened around her. As her eyes adjusted, confusion set in. The cell was as bright as day. Squinting up at the light bulb, it looked like the sun.

The outline of iron bars, the curve of the far wall, even the faint glimmer of moisture on the stones was crystal clear. What the hell was going on? A low groan in her ear made her squirm in Joshua's lap. The memory of their frantic coupling sent a flush of heat through her body.

"I want to fuck you again," he said.

She was down for that, too, but first, she needed some answers. "Did it get brighter in here?"

"Are you speaking metaphorically or realistically?"

"It's no longer pitch black. Did they change the lighting in here while I slept?"

Joshua made a thoughtful huff. "No. It must be how you're reacting to our mating bond. Between vampires, it enhances each other's powers. I've never heard of a vampire and a human being bonded together. You'll probably gain some vampiric senses."

Keri swallowed hard. Bond. Such an inadequate word for the primal, earth-shattering connection that had formed between them. “Do I have to drink blood?”

“No.”

“That’s good.”

“At least, we’ll surprise the Vasiles as well with what we can do.”

"How are you feeling?"

Joshua flexed his hands. "My strength is returning. The wards on this cell have been dampening my abilities, but now..." He reached over and lightly punched the wall. The stone cracked. "I feel almost myself again."

Alarm flared through her. "Did you hurt yourself?"

He showed her his knuckles, not even an abrasion.

"We should test your abilities," he said. "You have improved sight. What about the other senses? Listen and tell me what you can hear."

Keri frowned, concentrating. At first, there was nothing but the drip of water and her own breathing. Then, faint but steady, she heard conversations buzzing like insects above them, filtering through the stone.

“I can’t make out words,” she said, “But I hear voices, and they are coming closer. How long will these enhanced senses last?” she asked.

“If it works like a vampire bond, as long as we live.”

“That’s a long time.”

“For one of us anyways,” he said.

“Yeah.” That wasn’t very comforting. “So I’ve got superpowers, and you’ve got your vampire mojo back. Please tell me we can use this to get out of here.”

Joshua's expression turned grim. "The wards are still in place. I cannot pass through the bars, no matter my strength. You, however...."

She followed his gaze to the cell door. "You think I could still get through, even after the mate bond has changed me?"

"The wards are designed to contain vampires. You're human, mostly." There was a hint of distaste in his voice that made Keri bristle.

"Mostly? What's that supposed to mean?"

"You’re not entirely human anymore."

Not entirely human. What did that make her, then?

She scurried to her feet and ran over to the door. She tried to bend the bars. Surprisingly, she felt them give slightly, but not enough for her to squeeze through. She punched them. “Ow, shit. So much for super strength.”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:24 am

“Pity,” Joshua said, but he didn’t sound concerned.

"Now what?" she asked, exasperated.

"We wait for our captors to return. They'll be eager to see the results of their little experiment."

“Yeah, me too,” she muttered. “I’m surprised they don’t have cameras set up to watch us.”

“The wards interfere with electronics. They could either have cameras or they could have protection. Sadly, they chose protection.”

“Speaking of protection...we didn’t use any.”

“You’re not on the pill?” At her expression, he grinned. “You have no need to worry about disease or pregnancy. I cannot give you either.”

She probably could have come up with a smart-ass answer to that, but she heard two sets of footsteps approaching the dungeon’s entrance. Meeting Joshua’s eyes, she realized he heard them as well.

“We need to act as though we're under the influence of their drug,” he said in her ear. His low voice caused her to shiver.

“Problem,” she whispered. “We don’t know what outcome they’re expecting.”

“Let’s go with compliant and docile and play it by ear. Can you do that?” he asked.

"Sure, what about you?"

"I'll take my cues from them, but if you see an opportunity to strike, take it."

Strike what?

Before she could respond, the door to the dungeon opened. Keri turned to Joshua and clung to him as if she needed him to stand up straight.

Two vampires — a man and a woman, both pale and sharp-featured smirked at them as they stopped outside the cell.

"Looks like our little lovebirds survived." The woman unlocked the cell door and stepped back. She beckoned to Keri. "Come here, sweetness. Let's have a look at you."

Keri hesitated, then tried to shuffle forward, but Joshua didn’t let her go.

The female vampire frowned. “Tell him to let you go.”

“Let me go,” Keri said.

Reluctantly, he opened his arms. She kept her eyes downcast. Every instinct screamed at her to fight, to run, but she forced herself to remain passive. She crossed the threshold of the cell, and her eyes darted to find a way to escape. The female vampire circled her, inhaling deeply.

"Mmm. You do smell divine. I can see why our guest couldn't resist." She jerked her head towards Joshua. "And how are you feeling, assassin? Ready to play nice?"

Joshua's voice was a low growl. "What do you want from me?"

The male vampire laughed. "What you do best. The Vasile family has big plans, and you're going to help us realize them. Whether you like it or not." He reached out, gripping Keri's arm. She fought not to flinch at his cold touch. "After all, we wouldn't want anything to happen to your pretty little mate, would we?"

A snarl ripped from Joshua's throat. For a moment, Keri thought he would lunge at them, wards be damned. But he mastered himself, shoulders slumping in apparent defeat.

"Fine," he spat. "I'll cooperate. Just don't hurt her."

The female vampire clapped her hands in delight. "Wonderful! I do love it when a plan comes together. Sweetness, tell your mate not to attack us."

"Mate, don't attack us," she said.

"I will not attack," Joshua said bitterly.

"You fell right into our hands, Nicolau. Now, Sweetness, tell your mate to obey us."

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:24 am

“Mate, obey us,” she said, resisting the urge to roll her eyes. Keri couldn’t believe the vampires were buying this, but they didn’t even question it.

“I will obey,” he intoned.

“The fun part of all this is you both are aware of everything we’re doing, but the human is powerless to go against our orders, and you’re powerless to go against your mate’s orders.”

Boy, was this bitch in for a surprise.

Keri hoped that the vampire would monologue a little more so she could understand just what the heck they were doing to vampires and humans, but no luck. She would have to find that out on her own once they escaped from this hell hole.

The female vampire gestured to her companion. "Lower the wards. Our new friend won't be needing them anymore."

The male vampire frowned. “Are you sure?” He pulled a device out of his pocket that pulsed with a strange energy. “He’s dangerous.”

“Of course, I’m sure. They’re bound by so many ties, they should be a shoelace.”

Keri didn’t even know what the hell that meant. She kept her gaze wide-eyed and innocent, acutely aware of Joshua's tension.

“We need to send him back to his clan so he can eliminate them.”

The male vampire fiddled with the device. A faint shimmer in the air went out, and the energy was gone. Did that mean the wards had dropped?

Time seemed to slow. In the space of a heartbeat, several things happened at once. The male vampire's grip on Keri's arm loosened as he turned towards Joshua. Joshua exploded into motion, a blur of speed and fury. Operating on pure instinct, she drove her elbow into the vampire's solar plexus. He crumbled in surprise. She might not have been able to bend bars, but she could tell she had put extra oomph into that shot.

Chaos erupted. Keri's new senses struggled to keep up with the whirlwind of movement around her. She caught flashes of Joshua grappling with the female guard, fangs bared. The male vampire recovered quickly, lunging at Keri with inhuman speed. But she twisted, narrowly avoiding razor-sharp claws.

Whoot! She was fast!

A primal, animal part of her brain took over. She ducked and weaved, her body responding with a grace and speed she'd never possessed before. The vampire snarled in frustration, his attacks growing wilder. But then he got in a lucky shot, and his punch snapped her head around.

Ow, that fucking hurt.

The next thing she knew, Joshua had the male guard pinned against the wall, fangs sunk deep into his throat. The sight should have horrified her. Instead, a thrill ran through her body. Joshua's eyes met hers over the guard's shoulder, blazing with a predatory hunger that made her breath catch.

"Tell him to stop," the female vampire said.

"Kill them," Keri said instead. "Kill them both."

Where had that bloodthirsty command come from? Keri put a hand to her lips in shock. Her moment of distraction cost her, though. The female vampire's hand closed around Keri's throat, slamming her against the dungeon wall. Spots danced in her vision as she struggled for air.

"Stupid little bitch," the vampire hissed. "Did you really think you could fight us? You're nothing but a snack."

Keri clawed at the hand around her neck, panic rising. Her lungs burned. She couldn't breathe. Couldn't think.

And then, suddenly, she could.

The pressure on her throat vanished. Keri collapsed to the ground, gasping. Through watering eyes, she saw Joshua standing over the female vampire's crumpled form. Blood — so much blood — stained his mouth and chin. He looked savage. Terrifying.

Beautiful.

"Are you all right?" His voice was rough.

She nodded, unable to speak just yet. Joshua crouched beside her, his cool hands gentle as they examined her throat. The contrast between his tenderness now and the violence of moments before made her head spin.

"We need to move," he said. "More guards will be coming soon."

Keri found her voice. "What about them?" She nodded towards the unconscious vampires.

Joshua's expression hardened. "What about them?"

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:24 am

"We can't just leave them here. They'll raise the alarm as soon as they wake up."

"They won't wake up." The flat finality in his voice sent a chill through her.

"You mean..." Keri swallowed hard. "You're going to kill them?"

Joshua met her gaze steadily. "I already have."

Keri knew she should be horrified, but she wasn't. In fact, she was a little turned on. She chalked that up to the lingering pheromones in the air. "But they're still there. Their bodies haven't turned to ash. Don't we have to stake them or shove garlic in their mouths?"

"You've watched a lot of movies, haven't you?"

"Well, excuse me for not having primary sources for my information. How do you kill a vampire?"

"I kill them very easily."

"Do you want to share that knowledge?" she asked tartly.

"Not at the present time. We need to get out of this dungeon. Then you need to go home, and I need to complete my mission."

"To kill Anatole Vasile?"

“Yes.”

“I can’t leave without Chrissy.”

“She betrayed you. Why do you care?”

It was a good question, and she hesitated to tell him the real reason. But there was this connection that she felt. The bond between them made her feel safe with him. It was ridiculous. He was a violent assassin and a stranger, but somehow, she knew he would understand.

“I don’t have anyone else,” she admitted.

“How is that possible?” he asked. “You are young, beautiful, and full of life.”

Keri snorted. “I think the pheromones are still messing with your head. My family has different views of the world than I do. They aren’t who I want in my life. On the rare occasion when we’re together, we argue and it turns out ugly. I don’t want to be like them, and they think I’m an idealistic fool who doesn’t see the real world.” She gave a half laugh. “Even without vampires and magic.”

“Family is difficult,” Joshua said kindly.

“I suppose your clan is very close-knit?”

“I would die for them and vice versa.”

Keri shook her head. “With my clan, it’s every man for himself, and women don’t really matter much unless there’s cooking or cleaning to be done. I was born female, and that was my first mistake. The second mistake was I wasn’t very obedient.”

Joshua nodded. “There are some older vampires that have those same ideas as well.”

“Well, at least they have the excuse of being born in a time when that was the norm,” she said, wiping her eyes that had suspiciously started to leak. “They tried to beat it out of me.”

Joshua scowled.

“And when that didn’t work, they all but disowned me. I left as soon as I could and never looked back. Chrissy was in a similar situation. We met on the train coming into the city and were friends ever since. She must have been forced to trap me. She had to have been mind-controlled like they thought we were.”

“If she’s a Vasile vampire, then she’s a puppet to Anatole. There’s nothing we can do to save her short of killing him.”

“Then that’s what we do.”

He acknowledged her words with a tilt of his head. He listened with his head still cocked. "No immediate pursuit, but that won't last. Can you walk?"

Keri pushed herself to her feet, surprised to find her legs steady beneath her. More than steady — she felt energized, almost euphoric. Whether from their escape or some lingering effect of their bond, she couldn't say.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:24 am

"I can do better than walk," she said. "I can run. I've got super speed."

A ghost of a smile touched Joshua's lips. "Good. You may need to make a hasty retreat." He moved to the open door of the dungeon, peering out into the corridor. "Stay close to me. If I tell you to run, you run. Understood?"

Keri nodded. "Understood. But there might be other prisoners down here. We can't just leave them."

Joshua's jaw tightened. "We don't have time for a rescue mission."

"But—"

"No." His tone brooked no argument. "I know you want to help them. But think. Even if we could free them, how would we get a group of terrified, possibly injured humans out of a vampire stronghold? We'd be putting them and ourselves at risk, especially if they can be mind-controlled by the Vasiles."

Keri wanted to argue, but she knew he was right. The thought of abandoning innocent people to suffer at the hands of the Vasiles made her stomach churn. But the cold logic of Joshua's words was undeniable.

"Fine," she said, hating herself a little for agreeing. "But we come back for them. As soon as we can. Promise me."

Joshua's expression softened just a fraction. "We'll do what we can. But..." He took her hand, his touch sending a jolt through her. "You need to understand. There may

not be anything to come back for."

"What do you mean?"

"There might not be a cure for whatever the Vasiles have done. When I destroy their masters, they may perish as well."

"Chrissy, too?"

"I don't know." Joshua's voice was gentle, but his words cut deep. "The Vasiles' experiments seem to be pushing the boundaries of what's possible." His lip curled in disgust.

Keri's mind reeled. She thought of the other prisoners locked away in dark cells. Were they going through the same thing she and Joshua had experienced? The forced bonding, the overwhelming desire? And if so, what did that mean for their future? For her future?

"In any event, we need to know more about their experiments and the mind control stuff," she said. "I'm not leaving until I have that information."

"Have it your way," he said with a resigned sigh.

They slipped out of the cell, and Keri marveled at how silently they moved. She did her best to mimic his stealthy tread, grateful for her enhanced senses as they navigated the dim corridors. The lower part of the Vasile stronghold was a maze of twisting passages and heavy doors. More than once, Joshua pulled her into shadowy alcoves to listen for pursuit or any alarms that had been raised.

Each time, Keri was acutely aware of his body pressed against hers — the solid planes of his chest, the coiled strength in his arms. Heat pooled low in her belly, and

she cursed silently. Now is not the time.

They had just rounded another corner when Joshua suddenly stiffened. Keri opened her mouth to ask what was wrong, but he pressed a finger to her lips, shaking his head. She strained her ears, and then she heard it too — voices approaching, far too close for comfort.

Joshua's eyes darted around, searching for an escape route, but the corridor stretched empty in both directions, with no convenient hiding spots in sight. Keri's heart raced. They were going to be caught, so close to freedom.

Then Joshua's gaze locked onto something above them. He looked back at Keri, a question in his eyes. She followed his line of sight and saw what he had spotted — a narrow ledge running along the top of the wall, shrouded in shadow. It was their only chance.

Keri nodded. Do it.

In one fluid motion, Joshua wrapped an arm around her waist and leapt. Keri bit back a yelp as they soared upwards, defying gravity. They landed on the ledge with barely a sound, Joshua's body curved protectively around hers.

The voices grew louder. Two vampires rounded the corner, deep in conversation. From her perch, Keri could make out every word.

“We need to send the assassin after his own clan. He should have already left on his mission.”

Joshua's grip around her tightened painfully.

The other vampire chuckled. "We'll order him to assassinate every last one of them.

They'll never see it coming."

"And the reporter will go back to her miserable existence and help conceal what Anatole is doing from the media until it's way too late for the other cattle."

"They need to be kept apart, though. She's our key to keeping him in line. We want them half-crazed with lust and thinking only of the next time they can mate. They'll follow orders better that way."

Keri's breath caught. She glanced at Joshua, but his face was an impassive mask as he listened. She was hyperaware of every point of contact between their bodies. His arm around her waist, the solid warmth of his chest against her back. His breath stirred the hair at the nape of her neck, sending shivers down her spine. She craved his bite, wanted him to cup her breasts and ease himself inside her again. It was hard to think of anything but the heat of Joshua's body and his intoxicating scent surrounding her. Her enhanced senses seemed to zero in on him, blocking out everything else.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:24 am

The guards' voices faded as they moved directly below them. Still, Joshua didn't move. Keri understood why — any motion now might alert keener vampire senses to their presence. But the prolonged contact was doing dangerous things to her self-control.

She shifted, trying to ease the ache building inside her. Joshua's arm tightened around her waist in silent warning. The movement brought her hips flush against his, and — oh.

He was hard.

The realization sent a jolt through her. She bit her lip, fighting the urge to press back against him. This was madness. They were in danger, on the run, and all she could think about was fucking him again. This time, she didn't have the pheromone compulsion to explain the feelings away.

The vampires passed directly beneath them, oblivious to their presence. Keri hardly dared to breathe. One wrong move, one tiny sound, and they would be discovered.

Timing it perfectly, Joshua dropped down on top of them. In a matter of seconds, he snapped their necks and reached into their chests to rip out their hearts. Their bodies twitched and then lay still. So... that was how you killed a vampire.

“That's so gross,” Keri said.

“But necessary.” He sounded unconcerned. “Can you jump down, or do you need me to come and get you?”

“I’ll give it a shot.” And with a literal leap of faith, she dropped down as easily as if she were hopping off a bar stool. “I could get used to this.”

“You’re going to have to,” he said dryly.

Chapter 5

“IT’S ONLY A MATTER of time before they realize we’ve escaped,” Joshua said as they slipped through an ornate doorway into the main part of the vampire stronghold. The transition was jarring — from dank, utilitarian dungeons to corridors that wouldn’t have looked out of place in a gothic castle. Gilt-framed portraits lined the walls, their subjects’ eyes seeming to follow their progress. Thick carpets muffled their footsteps, and crystal chandeliers cast dancing shadows.

She could hear other people or vampires moving around on the floors above her. A lot of people. Maybe twenty. How would they fight them all?

“If I get you to the front door, can you find your way home from here?”

“I’m not sure where here is,” she said.

“You’ll figure it out. I can’t go with you. I need to stay here and finish my mission.”

To kill all the Vasiles.

“I need to finish my mission, too,” she said.

“You don’t have a mission,” he said irritably.

“I have to find Chrissy and rescue her. I need to find out what the Vasiles shot me up with and if there’s a cure. And I have a story to finish about these assholes.”

“You can’t write about vampires. No one will take you seriously, and one of the clans will send someone like me to kill you.”

“Would you kill me if they asked you to?” Keri wasn’t sure why she blurted that out. She most certainly didn’t want to hear him say yes.

“I could not. If you die, I die. That’s part of the mating bond we share.”

“Are you sure we’re mated?”

"Oh yes," Joshua murmured, his cool fingers encircling her wrist.

The touch sent a jolt through her body, and Keri had to stifle a gasp. Ever since their escape, her senses had been in overdrive. Every brush of fabric against her skin felt electric. Every scent was intoxicating. And just being near him made her pulse race.

“Does it work the other way too? If you die, I die?”

He nodded.

"Then I’m staying with you.”

"You’d make a good vampire." Joshua's lips curved in a predatory smile that made Keri's heart skip.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:24 am

As they continued to skulk in the shadows, Keri was hyper-aware of Joshua's presence beside her. Their mating bond was playing havoc with her self-control. More than once, she caught herself staring at the strong line of his jaw and the elegant curve of his neck. It was hard to ignore the growing ache of desire, the way her body seemed to gravitate towards his.

They ducked into an alcove as a pair of guards passed. In the close confines, Joshua's scent overwhelmed her. Spice and musk and something uniquely him. She bit her lip, fighting the urge to lean in closer. But before she could act on it, Joshua ambushed the vampires and dispatched them without making a sound.

He dragged the bodies into their alcove. The more he killed the Vasiles, the greater the chance of them getting caught.

“We need to keep at least one of them alive to get answers,” she said.

“I don’t need answers. I just need to kill them.”

“You weren’t the one injected with their drug. I need to know what it’s done to me. Is it going to kill me? Us? If another vampire bites me...”

“That won’t happen,” he snarled.

“But if it does, can they now control me and that vampire?”

Joshua shook his head. “This experiment of theirs has to do with the mate bond. And you’re already mated to me. It won’t work with another vampire.”

“But you don’t know if they’ve done something chemically to alter that.”

Joshua’s expression told her how much he didn’t like that theory.

“Listen, up ahead.” Keri pointed to the door at the far end of the corridor. She heard a conversation but not enough to make out the individual words. “Let’s bust our way in and get details on what’s going on. Then you can kill them.”

“Fine,” he said. “Let’s keep pretending we’re under their mind control. It may get us in the room and behind a closed door. That will buy us some time.”

They walked up to the door side by side and knocked.

“Come in,” a voice inside said.

Joshua shook his head, probably in disbelief that he didn’t have to kick the door down, and they walked in. Keri closed the door behind them. There was a tense pause as three vampires stared at them in alarm.

“Reporting as ordered,” Joshua said.

The three vampires relaxed.

“What’s she doing here? She’s supposed to be with the other cattle,” a vampire in a brown suit said.

“Is that really Joshua Nicolau?” a vampire in a black suit asked and then laughed. “He doesn’t look like much.”

The vampire in a beige suit frowned and pulled out his cellphone. “Nicolau should be on his way to his clan right now. I’m not sure why they sent him to us.”

Joshua went after that one. His movement was a blur, almost too fast for her enhanced senses to follow. One moment, he was standing beside her, and the next, he had the vampire in the beige suit by the throat, phone clattering to the floor.

“Don’t kill all of them.” Keri pressed herself against the wall.

The vampire in the brown suit lunged at Joshua, fangs bared. Joshua pivoted, using the beige-suited vampire as a shield. Brown Suit clawed his buddy instead.

“Stop this,” Beige Suit said. “Tell him to stand down.”

Keri didn’t know who the hell he was talking to because no one said anything. Her eyes darted around the room, looking for anything she could use as a weapon. Her gaze landed on a heavy crystal decanter on a nearby sideboard. She inched towards it, trying to stay out of the fray.

Joshua broke the neck of the beige-suited vampire and threw him aside, the force of impact leaving a dent in the ornate wooden paneling. He turned to face the other two, a predatory grin on his face that sent a shiver down Keri's spine.

"Is that the best you can do?" Joshua taunted.

The vampire in the black suit snarled and charged. Joshua met him halfway, their bodies colliding with a sound like thunder. They grappled, a tangle of limbs and fangs, each seeking the advantage.

Brown Suit, seeing an opening, tried to flank Joshua. Keri saw the danger and acted on instinct. She grabbed the decanter and hurled it with all her strength. It shattered against Brown Suit's head, staggering him.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:24 am

Joshua used the momentary distraction to gain the upper hand. With a move too quick for Keri to chart, he had Black Suit in a headlock. There was a sickening crack, and Black Suit went limp.

"Leave one alive!" Keri cried out.

Joshua turned to Brown Suit, who was shaking off the effects of Keri's improvised attack. "I'll kill you if you don't talk."

Brown Suit raised his hands in surrender. "I'll tell you what you want to know as long as you promise to let me go."

"We promise," Keri said.

"Sit," Joshua commanded, gesturing to a chair. Then he made sure Beige Suit and Black Suit were truly dead.

Brown Suit flinched when Joshua tore out their hearts, but Keri didn't even bat an eye. She was getting used to the violence, and that was weird because, normally, she was a pacifist.

"Where's Chrissy?" she demanded.

"Who?"

She closed her eyes in frustration. Right, why would a vampire deign to lower himself to know a human's name or a recently turned vampire? "Where do you keep

the cattle you drugged as vampire bait?”

“They’re in Anatole’s harem.”

Great. Just great. “And that is?” she prompted.

“Upstairs. Next to his bedroom. There’s a suite of rooms.”

“Who are you?” she asked.

“Who cares?” Joshua snorted.

“My name is Mihai Vasile,” he said with a fearful glance at Joshua.

“What does the drug that you gave me and the other humans actually do?”

Mihai licked his lips.

“Don’t lie or I’ll rip your heart out and find someone else to answer my mate’s questions.” Joshua’s voice was matter-of-fact.

Mihai wasted no time in coughing up the goods. “Anatol created a serum that worked like our gaze when we compel prey.”

“Mind control,” Keri said in distaste.

“Why bother with a serum when you can simply charm a human by looking at them?” Joshua asked, crossing his arms.

“It lasts longer. We don’t have to be in proximity of them. Once the human is injected, they are susceptible to Anatol’s suggestions. We send them out to seduce

vampires of rival clans, and once they bite our drugged humans, they are compelled to mate with them. And once the mating bond clicks, Anatol can control both the human and their mated vampire.”

“So Anatol can tell me to do something, and I’d have to do it?” Keri said, wondering how she would stop him from gaining control over her again.

Mihai nodded.

“Another reason for him to die,” Joshua said.

“But it’s not working like it should because you didn’t tell Nicolau to stop when Radut told you to command him,” Mihai said.

“Why would Joshua feel compelled to follow my orders, though?” Keri asked.

“It’s got something to do with the mate bond and you being human. Between vampires, the power exchange from mating is equal. Because humans are so inferior, there is something in the mate bond that overcompensates, and the human can control the vampire.”

“How is that even possible?” Joshua asked.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:24 am

Mihai shrugged. “Anatol’s the mad scientist, not me.”

“Why would he think giving a human that much power over a vampire is a good idea?”

Keri shivered at the violence in Joshua’s voice.

“As long as the human is controlled by a Vasile, it’s fine.”

“And this has worked before?” Joshua asked incredulously.

Mihai moved his palm from side-to-side. “It hasn’t been perfected. The humans are fragile and they die. The vampires go insane. It’s a work in progress. We thought we nailed it with the two of you.”

“Why?” Keri asked.

“Because Nicolau is an older vampire and very strong. And you were very responsive to all of Anatol’s commands.”

“I’ve never met Anatol.”

Mihai laughed.

Joshua cuffed him.

“What? She’s been walking around this mansion for a week.”

No, that was impossible. Panic welled up inside her. “That’s not true,” Keri said, shaking her head. “What day is it?”

“Friday,” Mihai said.

She slumped in relief. She had talked to Chrissy on Thursday. “He’s lying,” she told Joshua. “Rip his heart out.”

Joshua paused and looked at her thoughtfully.

“No, I swear it. It’s Friday the 13th,” Mihai said.

Keri staggered back. The last day she remembered was Thursday the 5th. She knew it was the fifth because she had just submitted an article that had been due that day right under the deadline.

She had been Anatol’s pawn for a week? What else had she done that she couldn’t recall? What had they done to her?

She didn’t remember making a sound or falling, but she suddenly felt the rug under her cheek, and those mewling sounds were coming from her throat. Joshua dispatched Mihai in his usual bloody fashion, and then he scooped her up in his arms and brought her over to the couch. He held her while she shook and cried.

Keri leaned into his touch, drawing comfort from the simple contact. “I was his pawn. I still am. It feels like I’m breaking apart inside.”

“If you can still cry, you haven’t broken.” Joshua’s thumb traced her cheekbone, sending a shiver through her. “You’re stronger than you know,” he said softly. “I’ve seen countless humans break under far less pressure than you’ve endured.”

Nestling deeper into Joshua's embrace, she curled up in his lap. His strong arms encircled her, providing a strange comfort that belied their dire circumstances. She inhaled Joshua's unique scent – a mix of sandalwood and winter air that calmed her racing thoughts.

"I left my family because I didn't want to be controlled," Keri murmured, her voice muffled against Joshua's chest. "And now look? I'm cattle."

Joshua's hand moved in soothing circles on her back. "No, you're not," he said, his deep voice rumbling through her. "I will annihilate this entire clan, and that will be the end of Anatol Vasile and his serum. And if you want, I will do the same to your family as well."

It was tempting, but her family had no means to harm her. The Vasiles, on the other hand... "What if he sent me to trap other humans like Chrissy did with me? What if I hurt someone?"

"Then it wasn't you. Any blame is all on him. He made you a weapon, and I'll make him pay," Joshua said, rubbing her back.

"What if he tells me to hurt you?"

"You can't."

"What if he captures me and threatens to kill me if you don't kill your whole family like he planned?"

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:24 am

Joshua brushed a kiss against her forehead. "Mate, he will be dead before that command ever leaves his mouth."

Mate. Keri closed her eyes and wondered how a drug and magic could create this feeling of belonging and being cherished by a stranger. It felt like love. And that was the most frightening part of this whole situation.

Chapter 6

KERI UNTANGLED HERSELF from his embrace and stood, nervous energy not allowing her to sit still any longer. "We need to free the humans and vampires that are trapped in his harem right now."

Joshua rose from the couch, his movements fluid despite the tension evident in his shoulders. "I can't lose focus on my mission. I'm here to kill Anatol. Cut off the head of the snake, and the body dies."

"If we take away his minions, though, we can weaken him," Keri argued, trying to think strategically like a vampire. "It could make your job easier."

Joshua shook his head, his expression conflicted. "My clan sent me here for one reason: to eliminate Anatol. Every moment we delay puts more lives at risk."

"Those people are suffering right now," Keri pressed, her guilt threatening to overwhelm her. "Who knows what I did to them when I was under Anatol's control? Or what he's making them do against their will. We have to make this right."

"This is war," Joshua said stonily. "And in war, sometimes difficult choices must be made for the greater good. My clan is counting on me to end this threat."

"Easy for you to say when you're not the one still being held captive," Keri shot back, immediately regretting her words as she saw rage cross Joshua's face.

A muscle ticked in Joshua's jaw. "You think I don't understand the weight of this mission? The lives at stake? Don't presume to lecture me on the cost of this war."

The raw emotion in his voice made Keri pause. She took a deep breath, trying to rein in her own feelings. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

Joshua's expression softened slightly. "Of course you didn't." He ran a hand through his hair, a surprisingly human gesture for a vampire. "It's not something I talk about ever. But maybe you need to understand."

Keri moved closer to him, drawn by the vulnerability she sensed beneath his tough exterior. "Tell me," she said softly. "Help me understand."

Joshua was silent for a long moment, his gaze fixed on some distant point. When he finally spoke, his voice was low, almost a whisper. "I was born in 1914 in a New York slum that makes modern ghettos look like paradise."

Keri's eyes widened. "You're over a hundred years old?"

A wry smile tugged at Joshua's lips. "Give or take a few years. When you've lived as long as I have, you stop counting."

He moved to the window, staring out at the night sky. "I was just a kid when my parents died of influenza. One day they were there, the next..." He shrugged, the gesture failing to hide the pain in his eyes. "I was alone. I survived on the streets,

stealing, begging, doing whatever it took. And then, one night in 1930, I thought my luck had finally run out. I was cornered by a gang, sure they were going to kill me. Instead, I met Victor Nicolau."

"Was he the head of the clan?"

"Still is," Joshua said, a hint of warmth entering his voice. "He saw something in me that night – potential, he called it. He offered me a choice – stay in the human world that had done nothing but take from me, or join his family and gain the power never to be helpless again."

"And you chose to join them," Keri said

"Wouldn't you?"

She thought about it and slowly nodded. "Yeah."

"The transformation was difficult, but what came after changed everything. For the first time in my life, I had a family."

Keri swallowed hard. She would become a vampire for that, too.

"Victor became the father I'd lost. Elena, his mate, showed me kindness I'd never known, and their son Markus became the brother I'd always wanted."

His eyes took on a distant look, filled with a mix of emotions. "They trained me, honed my skills, gave me purpose. And now, they've entrusted me with this crucial mission."

"To kill Anatol," Keri said, understanding dawning.

Joshua nodded, his expression grave. "The Vasiles have been a thorn in our side for decades. Their experiments, their disregard for both human and vampire life – it threatens the delicate balance we've worked so hard to maintain. Anatol is the worst of them all."

He turned to face Keri, his eyes intense. "This isn't just about following orders. My clan saved me. They gave me a home, a purpose. I owe them everything. And now, they're counting on me to end this threat once and for all."

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:24 am

Keri felt torn, understanding his loyalty but unable to ignore the plight of Anatol's captives. She wanted to argue further, but she knew he had a point. "All right," she conceded. "We'll do it your way."

"We'll free them," Joshua assured her. "But we have to be strategic about it. Come on, let's start with the harem and see if they can lead us to Anatol."

They slipped out of the sitting room and into the mansion proper. Keri's enhanced senses picked up the faint scent of blood and fear underlying the expensive perfumes and polished wood.

They moved silently, ducking into alcoves and behind heavy curtains whenever footsteps approached. In one heart-stopping moment, they pressed themselves into a narrow space between a bookcase and the wall as a pair of vampires passed by, discussing guard rotations. Keri held her breath, acutely aware of Joshua's body against hers, his superfluous breath tickling her ear.

Each time, Joshua would ambush the guards and silently kill them. He was a vicious assassin who killed quickly and without mercy. Why wasn't she terrified of him? Why did she want to join him in snapping necks and ripping out hearts? She'd probably barf.

But as they navigated the mansion, fragmented memories began to surface in Keri's mind – disjointed flashes that left her dizzy and disoriented. She saw herself walking these same halls with a strange vampire's hand possessively on her lower back. In another flash, she was in a laboratory, watching impassively as a human writhed in agony on an examination table.

The most disturbing vision came as they climbed a sweeping staircase. For a moment, Keri saw herself standing over Joshua's unconscious form, a triumphant smile on her face as Anatol praised her for luring the assassin into their trap. The image was gone as quickly as it appeared, leaving Keri shaken and nauseous.

"What is it?" Joshua asked, his hand on her arm steadying her.

Keri swallowed hard. "I think I might have helped Anatol capture you," she whispered, unable to meet his eyes. "I saw... God, what if I'm the reason you were trapped here?"

Joshua was silent for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Then, to Keri's surprise, he squeezed her arm gently. "Whatever you did, it wasn't you. Anatol was controlling you."

"But —"

"No," Joshua cut her off firmly. "We can't change the past. All that matters now is stopping Anatol. Understood?"

Keri nodded, grateful for his understanding even as guilt gnawed at her. They pressed on.

Finally, they reached a set of ornate double doors. Even from outside, Keri could hear the soft murmur of voices and the shuffling of many bodies. Her heart raced as Joshua carefully eased one door open, revealing the harem beyond.

The room was vast, easily the size of a ballroom. Plush divans and silk cushions were scattered throughout, occupied by glassy-eyed humans and vampires in various stages of undress. The air was thick with the cloying scent of incense and something darker, more chemical.

Keri's gaze darted from face to face, searching for Chrissy. She spotted her friend near the back of the room, slumped against a marble column. Chrissy's usually vibrant features were slack, and her eyes were unfocused.

"Chrissy," Keri breathed, taking a step forward.

Joshua's hand shot out, grabbing her wrist. "Wait," he hissed. "Guards approaching."

Sure enough, Keri's enhanced hearing picked up the sound of heavy footsteps heading their way. Joshua ducked behind a large potted plant as two burly vampires entered the harem.

"Time for another dose," one guard announced, pulling out a case filled with syringes.

No one reacted when Joshua killed the guards in front of them. While he bent down to examine the case, she ran over to Chrissy and gently shook her shoulder.

"Chrissy, can you hear me?"

Chrissy's eyes fluttered, a faint spark of recognition lighting up her face. "Keri?" she mumbled. "Is it... are the devices set?"

Keri frowned, confused. "What devices? What are you talking about?"

"The trackers," Chrissy slurred. "And the... the listening things. Did you plant them like Anatol said?"

Before Keri could respond, the doors burst open. A group of guards flooded in, fangs bared and eyes gleaming with bloodlust.

"There you are. Now you'll die, Nicolau."

Keri sprang to her feet, falling into a defensive stance without conscious thought. Joshua was already in motion, a blur of deadly grace as he engaged the first wave of attackers.

To Keri's shock, her body seemed to move of its own accord. She ducked under a guard's wild swing, retaliating with a precise strike to his solar plexus that left him gasping. As another vampire lunged for her, Keri executed a complex maneuver that sent him flying into his comrades.

The fight was a chaotic dance of violence, Keri and Joshua moving in perfect synchronization. She found herself anticipating his moves, covering his blind spots as if they'd trained together for years. It was exhilarating and terrifying in equal measure.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:24 am

When the last guard fell, Keri stood panting, adrenaline coursing through her veins. She turned to Joshua, a question in her eyes.

"How did I do that?" she asked, voice shaking. "I've never fought like that in my life."

Joshua studied her intently. "It must be the mate bond," he said after a moment. "You're drawing on my knowledge and abilities."

Before Keri could process this, Chrissy's voice cut through the haze of confusion. "Keri, you have to run," she said urgently, struggling to sit up. "Anatol will kill us both for failing to trap the assassin."

Keri knelt beside her friend. "It's okay, Chrissy. Joshua is my mate now. We're not what the Vasiles were expecting."

Chrissy's eyes widened in shock, darting between Keri and Joshua. "It worked."

"It's a long story," Keri said, helping Chrissy to her feet. "Listen, we need you to get everyone out of here. Joshua, is there somewhere safe they can go?"

Joshua nodded, quickly giving Chrissy the address of a Nicolau family safehouse. "They'll provide sanctuary until this is over," he assured her.

As Chrissy began rousing the other occupants of the harem, she turned back to Keri, tears in her eyes. "I'm so sorry," she whispered. "I never meant for you to get caught up in all this. I couldn't help myself."

Keri squeezed her hand. "It's not your fault. We're going to stop Anatol and make sure he can't do this to anyone else."

"Stop him how? He'll never stop."

"He will if he's dead," Joshua said.

Chrissy's expression grew grave. "When Anatol dies, the power of his serum dies with him. You'll no longer be mates. Keri, Nicolau will kill you for helping Anatol capture him. He'll kill us all."

A chill ran down Keri's spine at the words. She glanced at Joshua, seeing the tension in his jaw and the conflict in his eyes. "That will not happen," Joshua said firmly, meeting Keri's gaze. The intensity of his stare made her breath catch. "I swear it."

Chapter 7

CHRISSY'S EYES DARTED nervously between Keri and Joshua. "Anatol's rooms are through that door," she whispered, pointing to an ornate entryway in the corner of the harem. "But it's warded and locked. You can't just walk in."

Joshua's lips curled into a predatory smile, his fangs glinting in the dim light. "Then we won't use the door," he said, his voice a low rumble that sent shivers down Keri's spine. There was something both terrifying and thrilling about the casual way he approached their seemingly impossible task.

Keri squeezed Chrissy's hand, feeling the tremors that ran through her friend's body. "Get everyone out of here," she said. "As soon as we break into Anatol's sanctum, gather the others and run. Don't look back, no matter what you hear."

Chrissy nodded, her eyes wide with fear and a flicker of hope. "What about you?" she

asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"We'll be right behind you," Keri assured her, though she wasn't entirely convinced of that.

As if sensing her uncertainty, Joshua placed a hand on Keri's shoulder. The touch was brief, but it sent a jolt of electricity through her body, reminding her of the bond they now shared. "We finish this," he said simply, his dark eyes meeting hers with an intensity that left no room for argument.

Back in the hallway, Joshua eyed the wall separating them from Anatol's chambers. The wallpaper was a rich burgundy, adorned with intricate gold patterns that seemed to shift and dance in the flickering candlelight. "Ready to make some noise?" he asked Keri, his voice low and dangerous, a predator ready to pounce.

Keri flexed her fingers, marveling at the strength coursing through her veins. It was still strange to her, this newfound power that hummed just beneath her skin. "Let's bring this place down," she replied, a fierce grin spreading across her face.

They attacked the wall with inhuman force, their fists moving in perfect synchronization. Plaster cracked and splintered beneath their onslaught, wood beams groaning in protest. The sound of their destruction seemed to shake the very foundation of the Vasile stronghold.

As they continued their assault, she felt in tune with Joshua. Every move, every breath was perfectly coordinated, as if they were two parts of a single, unstoppable force. It was exhilarating and terrifying in equal measure.

The wall began to give way, chunks of plaster and wood falling around them in a dusty avalanche. Through the growing hole, Keri caught glimpses of Anatol's chambers—a riot of luxury that made the harem look austere by comparison.

Just as they broke through, the thunder of footsteps announced the arrival of the Vasiles' remaining soldiers. They poured up the stairs, a tide of snarling vampires with eyes gleaming with bloodlust and fangs bared.

"Let's get to Anatol," Joshua said.

They dove through the hole together into Anatol's chambers.

Once inside, Joshua launched himself at the oncoming horde. He moved like a blur, his movements so fast that Keri's enhanced vision could barely keep up. The first vampire to reach him went down in a spray of blood, Joshua's hand punching clean through its chest.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:24 am

Two more rushed him from either side, but Joshua was ready. He grabbed one by the throat, using the vampire's momentum to swing him into his companion. The impact sent both smashing into the wall with bone-crushing force.

“Bravo.” A vampire reclined on a velvet chaise, looking for all the world, like a bored monarch observing a mildly interesting play. His casual posture was at odds with the opulence surrounding him—priceless artworks adorned the walls, and a chandelier dripping with diamonds cast prismatic light across the room. “Keri, tell your mate to cease fighting my guards.”

It was as if she had no control over her voice. “Mate, cease fighting the guards.”

Luckily, Joshua wasn’t compelled to listen to her and continued whittling down any of the guards before they could get to her.

“Why isn’t he listening? I can sense you are bonded.”

Keri felt a sickening pressure building in her mind as Anatol's gaze locked onto hers. His voice slithered through her thoughts like an oily serpent. "Come to me, my dear. Let's trap the assassin again into doing our bidding. After all, isn't that what you truly want? To be free of this burden, to return to your simple human life?"

The compulsion was overwhelming, each word driving into Keri's mind like a spike. She took an involuntary step forward, her body betraying her even as her mind screamed in resistance.

"That's it," Anatol cooed, rising from his chaise with preternatural grace. "You see?

It's so much easier to just give in. Why fight what you truly desire?"

Keri gritted her teeth, every muscle in her body straining against Anatol's mental assault. "What I desire," she ground out, "is to see Joshua snap your neck and rip out your withered black heart."

Anatol's expression darkened, the facade of civility cracking. "You ungrateful child," he hissed. "I've given you power beyond your wildest dreams, and this is how you repay me?"

"You've given me nothing but nightmares," Keri spat back, finding strength in her anger. "You made me fuck a stranger. You used me like a puppet."

"And what a marvelous puppet you've been," Anatol sneered. "Do you have any idea how many of your kind I've had to go through to create something like you? Hundreds, my dear. Hundreds of pathetic humans, all failures until you came along."

Hundreds of lives snuffed out in Anatol's twisted experiments. It made Keri's stomach churn, but it also fueled her determination. She wouldn't let their deaths be in vain.

"You're a monster," she said, her voice trembling with rage.

Anatol laughed, the sound like shards of glass scraping against stone. "Monster? I'm a visionary! I'm creating the future of our kind. And you, my dear, are the prototype to everything I've been working towards." He raised a hand, his fingers splayed towards Keri. "Now sleep, my dear. Sleep and forget all this foolish resistance."

The command slammed into Keri's mind like a tidal wave. Her eyelids grew heavy, and her limbs suddenly felt weighed down as if made of lead. She stumbled, fighting to stay upright as exhaustion threatened to overwhelm her.

"That's it," Anatol crooned, taking a step closer. "Just give in. When you wake, all of this unpleasantness will be forgotten."

Keri's vision blurred, the world around her growing dim. It would be nice to have a nap. And if this could all go away like a bad dream, isn't that what she really wanted?

But just then, one of the vampire guards got in a lucky shot on Joshua. He let out a snarl of pain, and at the sight of his blood, Keri gained the strength she needed to push back against Anatol's mental assault. "Get... fucked..." she managed to growl just before a massive yawn threatened to crack her jaw.

Anatol's expression contorted with rage. "Insolent brat!" he snarled. "Fine, if you insist on being difficult, I'll just cut my losses and drain you dry. I'll use your blood to enhance the serum and laugh while Nicolau dies a painful death."

With a gesture, he sent a wave of force slamming into her. She flew across the room, landing hard on an antique armoire. Wood splintered beneath the impact, and pain exploded across her back.

"Keri!" Joshua's voice cut through the haze of pain. She looked up to see him locked in combat with three of Anatol's guards.

One guard lunged at Joshua with a wickedly curved blade, but the assassin was quicker. He caught the vampire's wrist, twisting until bone snapped with an audible crack. In the same fluid motion, Joshua used the guard's own momentum to impale him on his companion's outstretched claws.

The third guard, seeing an opening, drove a stake deep into Joshua's side. Joshua roared in pain, his fangs fully extended as he whirled on his attacker. With inhuman speed, he grabbed the guard by the throat and literally tore his head from his shoulders.

But the damage was done. Dark blood oozed from Joshua's wound, and Keri could see the pain etched in the lines of his face. The stake was still embedded in his flesh, preventing the wound from healing.

Anatol laughed, the sound grating against Keri's nerves. "Oh, how the mighty have fallen," he taunted. "The great Joshua Nicolau, brought low by my foot soldiers. Tell me, assassin, how does it feel to know you've failed? That everything you've fought for ends here?"

Joshua's response was a snarl of pure fury. He launched himself at Anatol, but Anatol was ready for him. With a casual flick of his wrist, he sent Joshua flying across the room. The assassin slammed into the wall with bone-crushing force, leaving a crater in the expensive paneling.

"Joshua!" Keri screamed, her heart seizing with fear as she watched him crumple to the floor. He tried to rise, but his movements were sluggish, hampered by the stake still protruding from his side.

Anatol turned back to Keri, his eyes glowing with an unholy light. "Now, where were we?" he purred, advancing on her with predatory grace. "Ah yes, I believe I was about to drain you dry."

Keri scrambled to her feet, ignoring the pain that lanced through her body. She could feel her connection to Joshua weakening, their bond stretched thin by his injuries. But that bond had given her strength before, and she called upon it now.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:24 am

With a primal scream of rage, Keri charged at Anatol. The vampire lord's eyes widened in genuine surprise as she closed the distance between them in the blink of an eye. Anatol's centuries of experience clashed against Keri's primal fury and the raw power of her bond with Joshua. Every punch Keri threw was met with a counter, and every kick was blocked with frustrating ease. But she refused to give up, refused to let Anatol win.

"You can't beat me, child," Anatol taunted as he danced away from another of Keri's attacks. "I've lived for centuries, seen empires rise and fall. What hope do you have?"

"Hope?" Keri spat, blood and saliva speckling Anatol's immaculate shirt. "I don't need hope. I have rage."

She feinted left, then dropped low, sweeping Anatol's legs out from under him. The vampire lord hit the ground with a satisfying thud, his eyes wide with shock.

Keri pounced, straddling Anatol's chest and raining down blows with all her enhanced strength. Each punch landed with the force of a sledgehammer, cracking bone and pulping flesh.

But Anatol was far from defeated. With a roar of fury, he bucked, throwing Keri off. His hands closed around her throat, squeezing with inhuman strength. "I will enjoy watching the light fade from your eyes," he hissed, his face a mask of hatred.

Spots danced in Keri's vision as she clawed at Anatol's hands. She could feel consciousness slipping away, her lungs burning for air. This was it, she thought. After everything, this was how it would end.

And then, like an avenging angel, Joshua was there. Wounded, bleeding, but filled with a fury that radiated from him in waves, he grabbed Anatol from behind.

"Let. Her. Go," Joshua growled, each word dripping with menace.

Anatol's grip loosened just enough for Keri to gulp in a precious breath. It was all the opening she needed. With the last of her strength, she drove her fist into Anatol's chest. Bone cracked, flesh tore, and her fingers closed around something cold and unbeating.

Anatol's scream cut off abruptly as Keri ripped his heart from his body. For a moment, time seemed to stand still. Anatol's eyes, wide with disbelief, met Keri's. Then, Joshua snapped Anatol's neck.

A wave of dizziness washed over Keri as Anatol's lifeless body hit the luxurious carpet. The heightened senses she'd grown accustomed to suddenly dimmed, colors losing their vibrancy, sounds becoming muffled. A spike of pain hit her like a migraine from hell, and the bond that had hummed in the back of her mind since her joining with Joshua snapped like an overstretched rubber band, leaving a painful emptiness in its wake.

"No," she whispered, stumbling towards Joshua. He had collapsed to the floor, his wounds no longer healing with vampiric speed. Dark blood pooled beneath him, staining the carpet a deep crimson.

Keri gathered him in her arms, her vision blurring with tears. "Don't you dare die," she pleaded, her voice cracking with emotion.

Joshua's eyes fluttered open, a weak smile tugging at his bloodstained lips. "It doesn't matter. We are no longer bonded. You will not die if I do."

Keri pressed her forehead against his. "I don't want you to die."

"I've lost too much blood. It's all right. Go find Chrissy. Tell the vampires at the safehouse what has happened."

"No." She shook her head. "You can drink from me to heal yourself."

"It's gone beyond that," he said. "I'm all right dying. I completed my mission."

"You're more than your mission," she said fiercely.

"We've known each other less than twenty-four hours. You know nothing of me or of the horrors I've done. It's over, and I will be at peace for the first time in over a hundred years." He coughed, and shudders racked his body. "Let me sleep until one of my clan comes to snap my neck and take my heart."

"But if you drink blood, you could survive."

Joshua's eyes closed. "Too much blood would be needed by the time my clan would arrive, and I am not worth the amount of lives it would take to reinstate me."

"Yes, you are."

His head rested back on the carpet. "Thank you. For being my mate, even if it was fake."

"It wasn't fake. It was just forced on us, but it was real." She wiped blood from her wounds and painted it across his lips.

Reflexively, he licked them, and his eyes popped open. "Run from me."

“I won’t. You won’t hurt me.”

“I will drain you dry and leave you a withered husk. I don’t want to do that,” he said with effort.

“Why not?” she asked, but she already knew the answer. The mating bond was gone as if it had never existed, but she still felt a pull towards him, this stranger — her soul mate.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:24 am

“Because of what could have been.” His head thunked back on the carpet. “I love you,” he said and then went still.

“Oh no, you fucking don’t.” Keri didn’t allow herself to second-guess her decision. She grabbed his hand and raked his claws across her wrist. Then she all but shoved it into his mouth. It took just a moment before his body twitched, and he clamped onto her arm to prevent her from escaping. But she wasn’t going anywhere.

You’re a fool, she heard in her mind.

But she wasn’t sure if it was Joshua’s voice or her own.

Chapter 8

KERI'S WORLD NARROWED to a single point of focus: the warm, wet sensation of Joshua's lips on her wrist. She was desperate to save him, and now she felt the pull of his drinking. The initial sharp pain of his fangs piercing her skin had given way to a strange, almost pleasurable sensation that radiated up her arm and throughout her body.

This has to work, she thought fiercely, gritting her teeth against the dizziness that threatened to overtake her.

The room around her began to fade, the opulent furnishings of Anatol's lair blurring into indistinct shapes. Keri's knees buckled, but she forced herself to remain upright, to keep her arm pressed firmly against Joshua's mouth. She could feel the strength leaving her body with each swallow he took.

"Take what you need," she said, unsure if Joshua could even hear her in his weakened state. "I'm not going anywhere."

As the edges of her vision darkened, Keri felt a shift in Joshua's feeding. The desperate, animal-like gulping slowed, and she sensed a struggle within him. Blinking hard to clear her fading sight, she looked down at his face.

Joshua's eyes, which had been tightly shut in his frenzy, slowly opened. They met hers, and Keri's breath caught in her throat. Those eyes, usually so controlled and guarded, now swirled with a tempest of emotions. Hunger, yes – a primal, all-consuming need that made her shiver. But there was anguish there, too, and something else. Something that looked remarkably like love.

Hope flared in Keri's chest, warring with the fear that threatened to overwhelm her. She watched, scarcely daring to breathe, as Joshua's jaw clenched. His whole body tensed, trembling with the effort of restraint, and then, with what seemed like Herculean effort, he wrenched his mouth away from her wrist.

"Joshua," Keri breathed, relief and concern mingling in her voice.

He looked up at her, his face a mask of torment. When he spoke, his voice was strained, each word seeming to cost him dearly. "Keri... I can't stop for long. You have a choice..." He paused, swallowing hard, visibly fighting against the urge to resume feeding. "Either let me turn you into a vampire, or you will die."

The world seemed to stop spinning momentarily as the weight of his words sank in. Becoming a vampire meant eternal life. In its place, she would have... what? An eternity with Joshua? A place among the Nicolaus clan?

Is that what I want? But even as the question formed, she knew the answer. The thought of returning to her old life felt hollow, empty.

He's giving me a choice, Keri realized, her heart swelling with emotion. Even now, even like this. That's how I know this is right.

She looked down at Joshua, seeing the struggle written plainly on his face. He was holding back, fighting against his very nature to give her this moment of agency. In that instant, any lingering doubt vanished.

"I choose you, Joshua," Keri said, her voice steady and sure. "For eternity. I want to be at your side as your mate — forever."

Relief and joy flashed across Joshua's features. "Are you certain?" he asked, his voice rough. "There's no going back from this."

Keri nodded, a sense of peace settling over her despite the gravity of the moment. "I'm sure," she said. "Eternity with you, Joshua. A family with the Nicolau clan. It's everything I want. I love you."

Joshua's entire body shook in reaction. "Mate. My mate."

She brought her wrist back to his mouth. "This is my choice. My destiny."

As Joshua's fangs sank back into her flesh, Keri gasped at the renewed intensity. There was no hesitation now, no holding back. She could feel the life draining from her body, but instead of fear, she felt only a strange sense of anticipation.

The room around her faded to darkness, sounds becoming muffled and distant. Keri's last conscious thought was of Joshua, of the future they would share. Then, everything went black.

For a moment — or was it an eternity? — there was nothing. No sensation, no thought, no existence. Keri floated in a void, untethered and unaware.

Then, fire.

It started as a single point of heat in her throat, quickly spreading outward. Liquid flame raced through her veins, setting every nerve ending alight. Keri wanted to scream, but she had no voice, no body to give sound to her agony.

In fragmented flashes of consciousness, Keri became aware of changes happening within her. Her heart, which had slowed to a stop, suddenly lurched back into motion, beating with a frantic, uneven rhythm. Her lungs burned as if she had been holding her breath for hours, desperate for air she no longer truly needed.

Every cell in her body seemed to be tearing itself apart and reforming. Bones shifted, muscles stretched and contracted, and skin tingled with newfound sensitivity. Through it all, Keri clung to a single thought, a mantra that kept her from losing herself entirely to the pain:

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:24 am

Joshua. Eternity. Family.

She had no sense of time passing, no way to measure how long the agony lasted. It could have been minutes or days. But gradually, agonizingly slowly, the pain began to recede. The fire in her veins cooled, replaced by a strange, humming energy that seemed to vibrate through her entire being.

Keri became aware of her body again, piece by piece. She felt the softness of fabric beneath her, the whisper of air against her skin. Scents assaulted her nose – rich earth, old wood, the metallic tang of blood. And beneath it all was a scent that made her entire body tingle with recognition: Joshua.

Her eyes fluttered open, and Keri gasped. The world exploded into vivid, overwhelming detail. She could see every fiber in the thick bedspread beneath her, every mote of dust floating in the air. Colors were richer, more vibrant than she had ever imagined possible. She was in the world's largest, most comfortable bed. It certainly wasn't her dingy apartment.

She had the weirdest dream...

"My love, how do you feel?"

Love.

Joshua's voice washed over her like a physical caress, each syllable rich with nuance and meaning she had never perceived before. Keri opened her mouth to respond and was struck by the strange sensation in her jaw, the new weight of fangs pressing

against her lower lip.

It hadn't been a dream....

"I feel..." she paused, searching for words to describe the indescribable. "Alive. More alive than I've ever been."

Joshua's face broke into a smile, and Keri felt her breath catch in her throat. She had thought him beautiful before, but now, seen through her new vampiric senses, he was breathtaking. Every line of his face, every strand of his hair, seemed to call out to her, begging to be touched, to be memorized.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"You're in my...our home."

Without conscious thought, Keri reached out to him. Her hand moved faster than she expected, and she marveled at the grace and precision of the movement. When her fingers made contact with Joshua's cheek, a jolt of desire passed between them.

"Oh," Keri breathed, overwhelmed by the intensity of the sensation.

Joshua leaned into her touch, his eyes never leaving hers. "It's a lot to take in, I know," he said.

"How long has it been?"

"A few days. How are you feeling? Are you thirsty?"

As soon as he mentioned it, Keri became acutely aware of a burning sensation in her throat. It wasn't painful, exactly, but it was impossible to ignore. She swallowed hard,

feeling the new configuration of her mouth, the sharp points of her fangs.

“Here,” he said, handing her a large glass of the most delicious-smelling liquid she’d ever experienced.

After she downed it in three large gulps, she realized it had been blood. It didn’t taste like it, though. It was like a fine wine, bursting with berries instead of a coppery tang.

“More?” he asked.

"No," she said. "I'm fine for now."

Pride and relief mingled on Joshua's face. "That's good," he said. "Very good. Many newborns are overwhelmed by the thirst at first. Your control is impressive."

Keri preened a little at the compliment, then paused as a thought struck her. "Joshua," she said slowly, "what happens now? With your clan, I mean. Will they accept me?"

"They will. You're my mate. The Nicolaus value family above all else. They'll welcome you with open arms."

The look that passed between them was charged with emotion and unspoken promise. Keri felt as if she could drown in Joshua's eyes and lose herself in the depths of feeling she saw there.

When his lips met hers, Keri thought she might combust from the sheer intensity of the kiss. Every nerve ending lit up, every sense heightened to an almost painful degree. She could taste the sweet liquid on his tongue and could hear the soft catch in his breath as she responded eagerly to the kiss. Her hands found their way into his hair, marveling at the silky texture and how each individual strand felt against her sensitive fingertips.

When they finally broke apart, both breathing heavily despite no longer needing air, Keri felt as if her entire world had shifted on its axis. Everything was new, everything was different, yet at the core of it all was this unshakeable certainty: she belonged here, with Joshua, in this new life.

"I can introduce you to the clan now if you want," Joshua said after a moment, his voice husky with barely restrained desire. Reluctantly, he helped her to her feet.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:24 am

As she stood, marveling at the fluid grace of her movements, at the strength she could feel coiled in every muscle, Keri caught sight of herself in a nearby mirror. She gasped, taken aback by her own reflection.

The woman staring back at her was both familiar and strange. Her features were the same, yet somehow enhanced, as if an artist had gone over them with a fine brush, perfecting every line and angle. Her skin was pale, almost luminous, and her eyes... Keri leaned in closer, fascinated by the swirling depths of crimson that had replaced her former brown. Keri turned away from the mirror, her mind reeling with the implications of her transformation.

Keri took a deep, fruitless breath. "This is... a lot."

"Having second thoughts?"

"No," Keri said quickly, turning to face him. "God, no. It's just — where do we go from here?"

Joshua's lips quirked into a half-smile. "Well, that depends. What do you want?"

Keri laughed. There was a slightly hysterical edge to it. "What do I want? I want to see Chrissy. I want to know if I can still do my job. I want to know if I have to hunt people in order to feed." She paused, her voice softening. "I want you."

Joshua kissed her neck, grazing her with his fangs. "In that order?"

"Shut up," Keri said, her nipples tightening. "I'm serious, Joshua. What happens

now?"

"Now?" Joshua's expression turned thoughtful. "Now, we take it one step at a time. Chrissy's doing well, by the way. You'll see her soon."

"Yeah?" Keri felt a wave of relief. "That's good. She and I can figure out this vampire thing together. It's not the first time we've started over together."

"As for your job, you might be surprised how useful an investigative reporter can be to a vampire clan."

"I'd have to work nights," she said. "And keep vampires a secret."

Joshua nodded. "As for hunting, we don't hunt humans for sport or sustenance anymore. What you drank earlier was synthetic blood. We have connections in medical fields that keep us supplied. Some vampires still prefer fresh blood, but it's either obtained ethically, from willing donors, or it's taken to punish the guilty. The Nicolau clan is very conscious about adapting to the modern world."

Keri felt a wave of relief wash over her. "That's good to know. I was worried about that part. So my life doesn't have to change at all. With the exception of having you in it."

"Is that going to be a problem?" he asked gruffly.

"Remember the 'I want you' part?" Keri asked.

"I seem to recall you saying something along those lines."

Grabbing his hand, she pulled him back towards the bed. "Chrissy and your clan can wait a few more hours while we solidify the mate bond again, don't you think?"

“Darling, I thought you’d never ask.”

Chapter 9

JOSHUA'S EYES GLEAMED in the dim light, filled with a predatory hunger that sent shivers down Keri's spine. The thick, corded veins on his arms stood out, pulsing with the power that thrummed beneath his skin. Keri's breath hitched in her throat as she took in the sight of him. She was acutely aware of the intoxicating scent of their mingled desire that permeated the air.

"Once we begin, there's no going back. We'll be bound for eternity."

Keri met his gaze, seeing her own certainty reflected there. "Eternity with you? Sounds perfect to me."

He reached out to gently trace the curve of her cheek with the back of his hand. Keri's breath caught in her throat as she felt the rough pad of his thumb brush across her bottom lip. Her body trembled with anticipation.

"You're mine," Joshua growled, his voice a deep, guttural rumble that made her so very wet. "And I'm going to make you remember that, over and over again."

With a swift, fluid motion, he crushed his lips to Keri's in a fierce, demanding kiss. Her lips parted in a gasp as she felt his tongue delve into her mouth, exploring every inch of her with a ravenous hunger that left her dizzy and disoriented.

Keri gasped as she felt the first tendrils of Joshua's emotions seeping into her mind. It wasn't just lust and love she felt from him, but a complex tapestry of feelings – admiration, protectiveness, joy, and a depth of commitment that took her breath away.

She responded in kind, her tongue twining with his, teasing against his fangs. She surrendered herself to the onslaught of sensation that threatened to overwhelm her.

Joshua's hands roamed her body, his fingers tracing patterns of fire across her skin as they explored every curve and hollow. Their clothes were just in the way, and they mindlessly ripped them off so they were skin to skin.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:24 am

Keri gasped as Joshua cupped her breasts, his thumbs brushing across her hard, aching nipples in a way that sent waves of pleasure crashing through her.

A sudden urge overcame her, primal and undeniable. "I need..." she started, unsure how to articulate the craving.

But he understood. "I know," he said, his eyes darkening with shared hunger. "I feel it, too."

Slowly, reverently, he tilted his head, exposing the smooth column of his throat. Keri didn't hesitate. Her fangs extended, and she sank them into Joshua's neck with a soft moan of pleasure. The taste of his blood exploded across her tongue, richer and more intoxicating than anything she'd ever experienced. But it was more than just taste – with each swallow, flashes of Joshua's memories and emotions flooded her mind. She saw his centuries of loneliness and understood with perfect clarity the depth of his love for her and for his clan.

After a moment that could have been seconds or hours, Keri withdrew her fangs. Joshua's eyes were hazy with pleasure as he looked at her, a drop of blood clinging to his throat. Keri leaned in, licking it away before offering her own neck.

The moment Joshua's fangs pierced her skin, her world exploded into sensation. She felt everything Joshua felt, his pleasure amplifying her own in an endless feedback loop. More than that, she felt as if her very soul was merging with his, two halves becoming an indivisible whole. As he drank from her, Keri's head fell back. This was nothing like the forced haze of madness Vasile had tried to recreate. It had been a poor imitation of this earth-shattering bliss and deep connection of spirit.

Wave after wave of ecstasy crashed over her. Joshua shuddered against her, his arms tightening almost painfully around her waist. He licked the spot where he had sucked and then traced a line of fire down the valley between her breasts. She gasped as she felt his hot breath against her nipple, her body trembling with need as she waited for the inevitable.

And then he was there, his tongue swirling around her hard, aching nipple in slow, deliberate circles that left her breathless and gasping for air. Keri's fingers tightened in his hair, her hips grinding against his as she sought to ease the ache that burned within her.

But Joshua was relentless, his lips and tongue working their magic on her breasts as he teased and tormented her with every touch. Keri felt herself spiraling out of control. Her fangs elongated, and she tugged him up so she could rain bites all over his throat and chest.

With a growl, Joshua lifted her into his arms, carrying her to the nearby bed with an ease that left her breathless. He laid her down gently, his eyes blazing with a fierce, primal hunger.

"Mate," he said. "This time, no one will be able to break this bond."

Keri's response was lost in a gasp as she felt his hand brush against the apex of her thighs, his fingers tracing patterns of fire across her sensitive flesh. She writhed beneath him, her hips bucking as she sought to get closer, to feel more of him against her.

Joshua's fingers moved with a maddening slowness, teasing and tormenting her with every touch. Keri writhed, needing him to ease the ache that burned within her. His fingers slid inside her, fucking her relentlessly. Keri's back arched off the bed, her body trembling with pleasure as she felt him stroke her in steady, purposeful circles

that left her dizzy and disoriented.

She gasped as she felt him curl his fingers inside her, hitting a spot that sent waves of pleasure crashing through her. Keri's fingers clenched in the sheets, her body trembling with need as she felt herself race towards the edge.

But Joshua wasn't done with her yet. With a growl, he withdrew his fingers, replacing them with his tongue as he lapped at her in long, slow strokes that stole her breath as the pleasure built within her. She screamed out Joshua's name as his tongue continued to stroke her through the aftershocks, and she shuddered beneath him.

When the last wave of pleasure had passed, Joshua crawled up her body, his lips finding hers in a deep, passionate kiss. Keri could taste herself on his lips, the scent and flavor of her own desire sending a fresh wave of arousal through her.

With a growl, Joshua entered her in one swift motion, burying himself deep inside her. Keri gasped, her body arching off the bed as she felt him fill her, stretching her in the most delicious way.

Joshua began to move, his hips thrusting in slow, measured strokes that left Keri moaning. She wrapped her legs around him, pulling him closer as she met him thrust for thrust. Their lovemaking was fierce and primal, a raw, unbridled expression of the bond that was weaving their souls together. Keri could feel the power that thrummed beneath Joshua's skin being transferred to hers.

As her climax approached, she lost control when he pounded into her faster and harder. His body slammed into hers with an intensity that, had she still been human, Keri didn't think she would have survived it. The pleasure shattered her into a million pieces as Joshua came with a roar of triumph.

As they lay there, spent and panting, they were more than just two souls. They were

one, a connection that spanned the ages, a love that would endure for all time.

"My mate," Joshua murmured, his thumb tracing the curve of her cheek. "My love. My eternity."

"Yours," Keri breathed. "As you are mine."

Epilogue

SIX MONTHS LATER

Keri sat motionless in the passenger seat of the sleek black car, her heightened senses drinking in the bustling nightlife of the city around her. Six months had passed since her transformation, but the vibrancy of her new vampire senses still amazed her. The scent of human blood pulsed tantalizingly from the sidewalks, mingling with the acrid tang of vehicle exhaust and the tempting aromas wafting from nearby restaurants.

Beside her, Chrissy fiddled with an impressive camera, its long-range lens aimed at the penthouse office of the Germaine Industries building across the street. Keri smiled at her friend's focused expression, marveling at how far they'd both come since their shared ordeal with the Vasiles.

"You know," Chrissy murmured, not looking up from her viewfinder, "I never thought I'd say this, but being a vampire is pretty damn cool."

Keri chuckled. "Even cooler than that fancy camera of yours?"

"Hey, don't knock the gear," Chrissy protested, but her eyes sparkled with amusement. "Although I have to admit, my night vision comes in handy for those tricky low-light shots."

"Speaking of handy abilities," Keri said, closing her eyes to focus, "let's see what our friend Mr. Germaine is up to tonight."

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:24 am

She reached out with her preternatural hearing, filtering through the cacophony of city noise until she locked onto the voice she sought. Pluto Germaine's nasal tones drifted down to her as clearly as if he were sitting in the car with them.

"...assure you, Mr. Dalca, that the next shipment will be even larger. My employees are quite enthusiastic about our new 'health initiative.'"

Keri's eyes snapped open. "Chrissy, upper left window. We've got company."

Chrissy swung her camera up, capturing rapid-fire shots of the two men visible in Germaine's office. "Got it. Oh my, who's the tall, dark, and deadly type?"

"That would be Constantin Dalca," Keri replied, her brow furrowing. "Looks like the Dalca clan is expanding their operation."

"Dalca, huh?" Chrissy mused. "He's certainly easy on the eyes."

Keri raised an eyebrow. "Really? I don't see it. Now Joshua, on the other hand..."

"Oh please," Chrissy groaned dramatically. "Spare me the 'my mate is the hottest vampire alive' speech. Some of us are still enjoying the single unlife, you know."

Their banter was cut short as Keri held up a hand for silence. Her eyes widened as she focused on the conversation above.

"Mr. Dalca, I hope you understand the risks I'm taking," Germaine was saying, his voice oily with false concern. "If certain parties were to discover the true nature of

our arrangement – or indeed, the true nature of your kind – well, let's just say the consequences could be... explosive."

Keri's fists clenched. "That rat bastard is blackmailing them," she hissed. "Chrissy, tell me you got that."

"Every word," Chrissy confirmed, her camera clicking rapidly. "Along with some very incriminating body language. Victor's going to love this."

No sooner had the words left her mouth than a commotion erupted in the building's lobby. Security guards poured out, their eyes scanning the street.

"Time to go," Keri said, adrenaline surging through her.

They abandoned the car, melting into the shadows with inhuman speed. She and Chrissy scaled the side of a building in seconds, leaping from rooftop to rooftop with exhilarating ease.

Behind them, shouts of confusion rose from the streets below. Keri allowed herself a small, satisfied smirk. Six months ago, such a chase would have terrified her. Now, it was little more than an invigorating warm-up.

They didn't slow their pace until the glittering lights of the Nicolau estate came into view. As they approached the wrought-iron gates, familiar scents washed over Keri – the earthy musk of the gardens, the subtle chemical tang of the indoor pool, and underneath it all, the comforting blend of scents she'd come to associate with home.

The gates swung open silently, and Keri felt the tension in her shoulders ease. Vampires lounged on the manicured lawn or strolled along winding paths, calling out greetings as Keri and Chrissy passed.

"Nice work tonight, ladies," a tall, elegant vampire named Elara said, falling into step beside them. "Victor's waiting for you in the war room."

Keri nodded her thanks, exchanging a quick glance with Chrissy. They'd barely set foot inside the mansion when a familiar scent hit Keri like a physical force. Her head snapped up, eyes locking onto the figure descending the grand staircase.

Joshua.

He looked as breathtaking as ever, his dark hair slightly mussed, clothes bearing the faint signs of recent exertion. Their eyes met, and Keri felt that same jolt of electricity she'd experienced the first time they'd kissed.

"Ladies," Joshua said, his voice a low purr that sent shivers down Keri's spine. "Successful hunt?"

"Very," Keri replied, unable to keep the pride from her voice. "You?"

A dangerous smile played at the corners of Joshua's mouth. "Let's just say a certain problem won't be troubling us again."

He closed the distance between them in two long strides, pulling Keri into a kiss that made her toes curl. She melted against him, savoring the taste of him, the solid strength of his arms around her.

"Get a room, you two," Chrissy teased, but her tone was affectionate.

Keri reluctantly pulled away, though she kept her hand entwined with Joshua's. "Later," she promised, her voice husky. "Right now, we've got a debrief to attend."

The war room was already crowded when they entered. Victor Nicolau, the clan's

patriarch, sat at the head of a long table, his ageless face betraying nothing but polite interest as Keri and Chrissy made their report.

As Chrissy's photos flashed across the room's state-of-the-art display screens, Keri felt a swell of pride. This was what she'd been born to do – uncover the truth and protect the innocent, whether human or vampire. The fact that she now had the strength and speed to back up her investigations was just icing on the cake.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:24 am

"Excellent work," Victor said when they'd finished. His eyes, a swirling mix of deep red and brown, fixed on Keri. "You've proven yourselves valuable assets to this clan. I think it's time we dealt with Mr. Germaine and his Dalca collaborators once and for all."

A thrill of excitement ran through the room. Keri felt Joshua's hand tighten on hers, a silent promise of support and shared purpose.

As the meeting adjourned, Keri slipped away to the balcony overlooking the estate's vast grounds. The night air was cool against her skin, carrying the scents of pine and distant wildflowers. She closed her eyes, reflecting on how much her life had changed in just six months.

Gone was the lonely, frustrated reporter, always on the outside looking in. In her place stood a creature of the night, part of a family bound by blood and loyalty. The work was dangerous, yes, but it was also deeply satisfying. For the first time in her life, Keri felt truly alive.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

She turned to find Joshua leaning against the doorframe, his eyes soft with affection. Keri held out her hand, drawing him to her side.

"Just thinking about how lucky I am," she said, leaning into his embrace. "I never imagined my life could be like this."

Joshua pressed a kiss to her temple. "Any regrets?"

Keri thought about it for a moment, then shook her head. "Not one. This is where I belong. With you, with the clan. I finally feel complete."

"Good," Joshua murmured. "Because I have plans for you. Plans that stretch out for centuries."

Keri turned in his arms, meeting his gaze. The love she saw there still took her breath away. "Oh yeah? Care to share these plans?"

Joshua's smile was both tender and wicked. "Oh, I think I'd rather show you."

As his lips met hers, Keri gave herself over to the kiss. Beyond them, the night stretched out, full of danger, excitement, and infinite possibilities. But here, in this moment, with Joshua's arms around her and the promise of eternity before them, Keri knew she was exactly where she was meant to be.