



Another One Bites the Lust (Moonlight Siren #3)

Author: *Lisa Carlisle*

Category: Fantasy

Description: I came on this cruise to escape my cheating ex.

Not to fake-date the hot, leather-clad jaguar shifter leading the ship's rock band. Definitely not to fall for him.

I'm a two-hundred-year-old vampire. He's a young shifter who lives on a cruise ship. But I need a pretend boyfriend to scare off my ex, and Van agrees to help me.

After one kiss to sell our fake relationship, I can't stop thinking about him.

Now he's calling me mate. And I...might be tempted to believe him.

My persistent ex isn't taking no for an answer. And this fake boyfriend of mine? He's more than ready to turn very real—and very protective.

Total Pages (Source): 18

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:11 pm

VAN

“Ladies, gents, and supernaturals of all kinds,” I rumbled into the microphone.

“Welcome aboard the Moonlight Siren. We’re Luna Blue Shadows, and we’ll be here to rrr-rock you every night!

” I rolled the Rs with my jaguar purr, adding a resonance that caught the attention of a group of women in the audience.

What a rush. This was what I craved. The energetic vibes from the audience invigorated me every night, and I couldn’t imagine a better job than that of being lead singer of this band on a cruise ship for supernaturals.

Best of all, I didn’t have to deal with the endless miles of highway on a bus or van to get to shows in different cities.

This floating city took care of it all, giving me plenty of space to roam, rather than being in cramped quarters.

I spotted a pretty young fae sipping an electric blue cocktail that matched her bright hair. I made eye contact with her several times through the rest of the set. Perhaps she’d be my catch of the night.

Through the haze of stage lights and swirling mystical fog, I saw Maribelle’s telltale silvery-lavender curls in the shadows.

Oh no, not again. She worked in the ship's spa, and we had one night together a few weeks ago, but she kept coming around as if that were the start of a beautiful romance.

No, I didn't do relationships. Why would I commit to one woman when I had countless new arrivals stepping on board every sailing?

Yet here she was again, even though I'd brushed her off during her previous attempts. Persistent little witch.

Perhaps I should rethink hooking up with anyone who worked on the ship. We had fun but it was over. I might have to make that clear to avoid stringing her along with false hope.

Or... If she saw me with someone else tonight, she'd get the picture.

We played a variety of rock classics through the decades and ended with Kiss's "Detroit Rock City."

"Thank you and goodnight!" I spread both arms wide and bowed.

After the show, I went through the usual interactions, thanking those who stuck around for coming. Then it was time to prowl.

I pretended not to see Maribelle and instead approached the pretty fae. The way her wings swayed, catching the light and shining iridescent colors, made my jaguar want to come out and play.

I sauntered up to her, making eye contact as she sized me with up with a slow, appreciative glance. Out of the corner of my eye, Maribelle did some weird circular movement with her arm. I ignored her. She was probably trying to wave me over.

“Hey there, beautiful,” I said. “Thanks for coming by tonight.”

The fae’s eyes sparkled with heat. “You put on quite the show.”

And I’m only getting started. I pictured where the night could go with this beauty. “Can I buy you a—YODEL-LAY-HEE-HOO!”

What in nine lives did I just do— yodel ? Where did that come from?

She recoiled, her pointed ears twitching. “Are you okay?”

“Of course,” I said with a laugh before trying again. “HICKORY DICKORY DOCK, DO YOU WANT TO SEE MY—” I slammed my hand over my mouth before I could finish that sentence. Where were these unexpected eruptions from my mouth coming from?

She gasped, and her mouth remained open. Then she shot me a disgusted look and skittered out of the Nocturnal Lounge.

I shook it off and blew out a rough breath. No worries. Everyone had to strike out sometime. A few minutes later, I set my sights on a gorgeous redhead. Straightening, I strode over to her.

She smiled at me. “You’ve got a great voice.”

I opened my mouth to reply—and croaked. Like a frog. It even sounded like ribbit.

What... I didn’t even try to explain but walked away, completely mystified.

A snicker from behind grew louder, that familiar laugh making my fur stand on end.

“Having trouble with your pickup lines, Van?” Maribelle sidled up beside me. “Funny how that happens when you ghost a witch.”

I turned to her. “You didn’t...” The satisfied smile on her face indicated she indeed did. “What did you do to mee-ee-ee?” My question ended with a sheep-like bleat that drew the attention of several nearby.

She twirled her cocktail straw with wicked delight. “Just teaching you a lesson.”

“This is ridiculous, Maribelle. We had one night together, and now you’re punishing me because it’s over.” She scowled, did something with her hand again, and I brayed like a donkey. I clapped both hands over my mouth, narrowing my eyes at her.

“The hex responds to intention,” she explained after cackling. “The more you try to flirt, the worse it gets.”

My heart pounded as her words settled over me. “You can’t do this to me.” I seethed, shooting eye daggers at her. “I’m a performer.” When that had zero effect in swaying her, I asked, “How long?”

“However long it takes to learn your lesson.” Maribelle patted my cheek. “Have a good night.”

She walked away and I wandered the ship, cursing how she could have done this to me. Sneaky witch. I stormed upstairs to head outdoors and paced along the dragon-scale pool, seeking a way out of my predicament.

As I paced beneath the stars, I glanced out to the sea.

We’d recently repositioned to the Caribbean after a summer season in Alaska.

The faint sound of music floated out from the Celestial Lounge.

I headed that way, drawn to the music. When I stepped inside, Bria was singing, “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” in a soft lament that paired well with the piano.

Their gentler music contrasted with our lively rock songs. Different types for all tastes.

Kylie was tending bar. She was my guitarist Damien’s mate. I walked over to her to order a drink, but then my jaguar caught a scent and upended my world.

Mate!

I turned toward the enchanting fragrance—reminding me of gardens under moonlight—and spotted a stunning woman with long, sleek black hair and light blue eyes on a pale face. Sophisticated. Elegant.

Vampire.

She caught me staring. Gaping. She sniffed, tilted her head back. Her eyes sparkled as if challenging me to speak.

That was the problem. If I tried to do so, what would happen? Would I bleat like a sheep? Spout naughty limericks? Croak like a frog?

One side of her lip tilted up in a smile. “What’s the matter, jaguar?” she teased in a sultry French accent. “Cat got your tongue?”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:11 pm

CELESTE

Why was this shifter staring at me like he'd stepped into a haunted house and I was the resident ghost?

Sure, he was attractive. That wild blond hair. The amber eyes framed by dark lashes. The cut cheekbones and strong jawline. A lean, muscular form encased in tight black leather pants. And his scent? Delicious. Sparking an instant craving.

But I doubted he was even thirty—far too young for me, a vampire who'd been around for over two centuries.

After I'd teased him about his awkward stare, his mouth dropped open as if about to speak, but then he clamped it shut. He turned and rushed away without uttering a word.

I snorted at the odd behavior and returned to the performance. A woman finished singing, "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," in an enchanting voice, while a man played piano masterfully beside her. A soothing sound, the perfect way to unwind on my first night here on the cruise.

I sipped my cocktail, a blood-infused expensive champagne, and sat back in my chair to enjoy the show in this tastefully decorated lounge at the bow of the ship.

The scents of various supernaturals surrounded me.

None as enticing as that jaguar's, but my reaction to him was almost as odd as he'd

been.

It had stoked awareness, a hint of hunger like I hadn't experienced since I'd been turned into a vampire.

But back then, I had been consumed by the desperate thirst for blood.

This was— different .

A surprising response. Alas, perhaps it had something to do with adjusting to the ship.

I took a long sip of my drink. A vampire across the room nodded in greeting and raised his glass.

I kept my lips tight, nodded back out of courtesy, but gave no other encouragement to start a conversation.

I wasn't here for any kind of romantic entanglement but to escape one.

I'd booked this Caribbean cruise to get away after I'd discovered that my fiancé had been cheating on me.

It had been three months since I'd called it off, but he'd started coming back around a few weeks ago, saying he missed me.

I snorted. He probably missed my money and my lifestyle more than he missed me.

After the show, I ventured outdoors to stroll beneath the moon and stars. The scent of saltwater filled my nose. I passed a few other couples but walked mostly alone. After a few laps around the deck, I headed back inside to explore the rest of the ship.

So much was going on—shows, restaurants, a casino. One voice reached me, and I froze. No, it couldn't be.

It sounded just like Lucien.

I spun around, scanning the crowd—but saw no sign of him. I exhaled sharply, my hand instinctively clutching my chest.

A human reaction, to be sure. Yet some reflexes remained, even decades after my physiology changed.

I let out a nervous laugh. This was exactly why I needed this vacation. Because even thousands of miles away from home, I thought I heard my ex's voice.

That was the toll he'd taken on me.

He was probably searching for another woman to mooch off of by now. Lucien loved to spend money he didn't have. And I'd indulged him. But no more. I'd never let anyone use me that way again.

Even if I had to spend the rest of immortality alone.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:11 pm

VAN

Mate, my jaguar murmured in the recesses of my mind.

That jolted me from the fringes of a beautiful dream to bolting upright in bed. I needed to find Maribelle. What she'd done to me last night was beyond a prank.

I dressed quickly and took the stairs two-by-two up to the spa. The neutral tones, soothing music, and relaxing aromatherapy scents were totally incongruent with the chaos churning inside me. She was busy with a client, so I paced up and down the deck until she was done.

Once she returned to the reception area, wearing her light blue ship uniform, I motioned for her to come talk to me.

When we had a tad more privacy, I growled out, "How could you do that to me? Messing with me like that. Having my jaguar think we'd found our..." I trailed off, seething. The very idea was simply ludicrous.

Maribelle narrowed her eyes. "What are you talking about? It was just a playful spell."

"Hell no. Nothing playful about that hex. More like a curse." I ran my fingers through my hair and paced before her. "It's been tearing me up inside." I placed my hand on my chest. "Are you happy? You win. I learned my lesson all right. Now, I beg you—please lift this hex."

Maribelle's mouth opened a fraction as her gaze flickered over me. She raised her hand slowly in front of my chest, up to my face, and then circled it.

"What are you doing?" I snapped.

"Seeing if the spell is still there. It's not." She cocked her head. "You're really overreacting, Van. It was only for a few hours last night."

I scowled and then straightened. That was a relief.

She could have told me, though, rather than some cryptic message about however long it took me to learn my lesson.

"Okay, then. So that mate thing was just a prank too. All that—" I paused to circle before my chest, in a quicker motion that she'd just done.

"—Chaos inside me, telling me I found my mate, that was just part of it."

Nuh-uh, my jaguar protested. It's her.

Maribelle's eyes widened. "Did you say mate?"

"Yes." I pictured that beautiful woman in the Celestial Lounge. With dark hair and pale skin. The sophisticated vampire.

My jaguar purred, sounding all moony.

Cut it out, I snapped. It was just a spell.

Maribelle pointed at herself. "I didn't do that, Van. I wouldn't do that. That's well beyond teasing. Beyond any magic I would mess with."

“Suuure,” I replied, dragging out my response with sarcasm. “It was a coincidence with timing then.” I nodded and gave her an expression calling out her explanation as bullshit.

“None of my spell remains,” she insisted with an earnest expression. “I don’t sense any lingering magic on you.”

I snorted. “Rubbish.” I pointed to my temple. “You’re messing with my head, Maribelle, and it’s not cool or in the least bit funny.”

She raised her hand, palm forward. “I swear, I had nothing to do with it.” She lowered her hand to her hip. “If you found your mate, well, then, Mr. Tyrian, congratulations.” Her lips twitched into a smile before she burst out with a chuckle. “This is even better than I could have ever planned.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Hate to break it to you, but it must have been a magical misfire or something.” I turned and walked away.

I wasn’t buying Maribelle’s denial. I’d test it myself when I found that woman again.

If I tried to speak to her and ended up braying like a donkey or spouting limericks, it would prove that Maribelle’s hex was still in effect.

And I wouldn’t put up with it. There were rules around magic, and she couldn’t go around messing with people’s lives.

During our set that night, I welcomed the guests, a little wary that my voice might crack or—worse—I’d suddenly start singing nursery rhymes. But so far, so good.

“We’re Luna Blue Shadows, and we’re going to play a ‘60s set tonight,” I said into the mic. My nerves still buzzed under the surface, but my words held steady. “All

right, who likes the Stones?”

Lots of people applauded. We played “You Can’t Always Get What You Want.”

The show was going great. The crowd was into it. But then she peeked in.

The woman from last night. The stunning vampire with sleek black hair and pale blue eyes.

My heart jolted. My jaguar stirred, wild and restless, eager to sprint over to her.

She scoured the room, her gaze skimming over faces until it found mine. For a few heart-quaking seconds, our eyes locked. Recognition flared in hers, and a sly smile curved one corner of her mouth. Then she nodded and turned, slipping out of the lounge.

Ouch. Total rejection. My stomach sank like an anchor.

I was used to drawing crowds, not having them take one look and walk away. And this wasn’t just any woman. This was the woman. The one I had to find again so I could ensure Maribelle’s curse was gone.

Although plenty of hot women were in the audience and I would have been flirting with them from onstage, they stirred zero interest in me tonight. I was too distracted by the dark-haired vamp.

Damn Maribelle.

Once the show ended, I did the usual rounds—chatted with people, smiled—but I didn’t dare flirt. Fortunately, I didn’t quack or spout rhymes, so that part of the curse had been lifted.

Then again, I wasn't trying to flirt with them.

Where was the vampire?

Find her, my jaguar urged.

Yes, I agreed, that's the plan.

I headed out of the Nocturnal Lounge and searched for her scent. Through the haze of colognes and perfumes, it was hard to isolate, but then I caught a hint—just the faintest trace—and it hit me like a boulder. Jasmine. Moonlight.

Mate , my jaguar insisted.

No, you're wrong , I told him. That's Maribelle's curse. And that was what I meant to prove.

But I couldn't deny how my pulse sprinted. How my skin was clammy. How I was desperate to find this woman.

I followed the subtle trail, weaving through the corridors of the cruise ship, but the competing scents kept throwing me off. I was ready to tear the place apart just to find her.

Twenty minutes later, I picked it up again—stronger this time—on the upper deck. I lost it briefly by the outdoor pool, but once I stepped into the Celestial Lounge, it surged forward.

She had been here. Recently.

I tracked it up to the gargoyle's perch on the top level, an open space beneath the

stars.

And then—I saw her.

Her midnight hair fluttered in the sea breeze. My heart shot up to my throat. My jaguar strained to run over.

A man stepped up to her and she turned to face him. My hackles raised as a possessive streak flared through my body.

But then my heart dropped like an anchor.

Had someone already claimed my mate?

That would be—devastating. I tried to decipher if they were together from their body language. Then I realized I was standing there gaping at them like some creep. I was about to turn away before they caught me staring, but too late, she saw me.

Crap. Caught.

She raised her hand and waved at me. “Darling, I’m over here!”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:11 pm

CELESTE

When I walked the ship, I took my time beneath the moonlight on the upper level before heading inside to find some entertainment.

I meandered across the decks, ducking in and out of different venues, and was surprised to spot the shifter who'd gaped at me the night before—now standing center stage, singing like he'd been born for the stage.

He appeared to have found his voice.

I paused, listening for a few seconds. He was...captivating. Those tight leather pants, the black button-down shirt opened just enough to hint at golden skin beneath. And his voice—like velvet seduction. Smooth and sinful. He purred like a cat.

But he was too young for me. Besides, I wasn't here for romance. I needed to shake off any thoughts about how enticing he looked—and how delicious his blood would taste...

I moved on, wandering the decks, eventually returning to the Celestial Lounge later that night to listen to the piano while I sipped a glass of cabernet laced with a little B positive.

After the show, I stepped out for some fresh sea air and wandered up to the top deck dubbed the Gargoyle's Perch.

Although my blue evening gown and stilettos were appropriate for the evening on the

cruise, they were less suitable for climbing the stairs up to this level.

But a few minutes here, bathing under moonlight, was all I needed before I headed back inside.

“Celeste,” a man said in a low tone.

I turned slowly, with wariness, knowing that voice.

My skin prickled with unease. When our eyes met, the reality of seeing him here—on a floating vessel where I’d come to escape—hit me hard.

But it was him. Standing ramrod straight, with his long, white-blond hair draping over his velvet-lined cape.

I blew out a frustrated breath. “What are you doing here, Lucien?”

“I came to be with you, my dear.” He motioned around with a wave. “Brilliant idea, Celeste. This is the perfect place for us to rekindle our romance.”

I bristled. “No,” I said sharply. “I booked this cruise to get away—not to ‘rekindle’ any sort of relationship.”

“Don’t be silly,” he dismissed. “We’re engaged. We’re supposed to get married. We will get married.”

“No.” I shook my head, firm. “I ended it after you dipped your wick in every candle, like sniffing out each scent in the shop. You know this. You need to accept it.”

“That’s ridiculous, Celeste. Dalliances are acceptable in our circle.”

Whether he meant the aristocratic families or vampires, I wasn't sure.

Nor did I care. I'd had a loveless marriage before I'd been turned.

Our families had arranged it. I didn't have much choice back then, but I did now.

I had money, power, and immortality, and I'd be damned if I'd let someone control me again.

"Not for me." I gritted my teeth. "What do you want? Are you trying to get money from me? Want me to pay you off to leave me alone?"

"No, I made a mistake, Celeste. I just want you."

I snorted. "Martine didn't have enough for you?" I didn't believe a word of what he said, not after he'd betrayed me with my best "friend."

He looked hurt, but it was all an act. He never cared for me. My money, yes. My connections, yes. My name and title, yes. But me? No.

"We just need to talk." He reached for my hand.

I pulled it away in disgust. If he really wanted me, he wouldn't have spent all that time entertaining other women—with my money.

Across the deck, I spotted the jaguar shifter—the one who'd been singing earlier. He stood there like fate had just opened a door for me with a glorious beam of moonlight. A lifeline.

"It's over, Lucien. You need to leave. I'm here with someone else."

Lucien narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips. “Who?”

He wasn’t going to let it go. This was my shot—I just hoped the young shifter was sharp enough to roll with it.

I raised my hand and waved, calling out, “Darling, I’m over here!”

The shifter had just turned away, but when I called out, he glanced over his shoulder—confused, understandably, especially with me waving like we planned to meet.

Lucien muttered something under his breath.

I turned on my heel, not easy to do in the strappy sandals I’d foolishly worn on a moving ship, and crossed the deck.

“You got my note in the suite,” I said, trying to half-ass a reason for us meeting up here while I strode over to the shifter.

He stared at me with wide eyes. Silent. Just like last night in the Celestial Lounge. If I hadn’t heard him sing earlier tonight, I wouldn’t have believed he could speak.

I rose up on my tiptoes and wrapped my arms around his neck, leaning in close. He smelled good—so good that I had to fight the urge to bury my face against his throat and inhale more deeply.

I whispered into his ear, “Just go with it. Please.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:11 pm

VAN

What in the world was going on?

A minute ago, I'd felt defeated—thinking this gorgeous vampire was with another man. But now? She'd wrapped her arms around me and asked me to help her. Everything in me screamed to go for it. Protect her.

Claim her.

What the hell was going on?

My jaguar clawed at my insides, snarling with certainty. She's the one. We found our mate. He declared it over and over, prancing around like a kitten in an inflatable bounce house.

Calm down and stop bouncing around like an idiot, I chastised him, desperate for a shard of self-control.

My insides were going haywire, responding to this heightened awareness. The vampire's delectable scent infused my senses with insatiable, possessive urges. Was this all part of Maribelle's twisted prank?

It's real, my jaguar insisted. He snorted. And you think I'm the idiot.

I still hadn't responded to this woman with the French accent. Other than instinctively wrapping my arms around her in response to her unexpected embrace. This

vampire—whose name I didn't even know—who'd pressed her soft curves against me.

A purr rumbled out of my chest. It was impossible to deny how right it felt to hold this strange woman.

"Please," she whispered, barely audible.

Stop standing like a dumbass. Say something . Anything. I swallowed, praying I wouldn't croak like a frog or channel Dr. Seuss's rhymes when I opened my mouth.

"Sweetheart, there you are. I missed you." The lie rolled off my tongue as smooth as velvet.

"Oh, I was just out exploring the ship. Seeing what there is to do. I'm tired, though. Let's head back to our suite, love." She pulled her body away and slipped her hand into mine.

Love? Suite? Damn. Where was this going?

But hell if I wasn't going to run along it, if not downright gallop wherever she wanted to lead.

"Of course, darling." I'd have to use pet names since I didn't know her actual name. "Let's go."

She flashed a brilliant smile that shone brighter than the moon. My insides turned warm and fuzzy. She turned over her shoulder and I followed her gaze to see a man glaring at us, jaw clenched. Even at this distance, I sensed he was a vampire—but not like the one in my arms.

How odd. I'd grown up with a wariness of other supernaturals, especially vampires. Their undead bodies. Their unnatural need for blood. Yet once I'd started working on this ship, I'd gotten used to other types of supernaturals, including vampires, especially since joining a band with one.

"Bonne nuit, Lucien. Enjoy your cruise." She paused and chewed her bottom lip, drawing my attention to her red lips. "Actually, you might want to get off at the next stop. It'll make this a more enjoyable voyage for all of us."

We marched past the dragon pool, and once out of earshot, she leaned close and whispered, "I'll explain everything in a minute. Can you come with me to my suite?"

"Of course," I said, following without hesitation. I'd follow her to the ends of the ship—and then beyond.

Wait, where did that come from?

The vampire woman led us toward the luxury suites. I'd never been in this exclusive area before and couldn't imagine how expensive a night up here would cost, let alone an entire sailing. She swiped a key card, and we entered.

The very atmosphere seemed to change—quieter, smelling faintly of lilacs, and somehow luxuriant. Plush carpets muffled our steps, crystal light fixtures sparkled above us, and cool marble lined the hallway like we'd stepped into a luxury hotel.

Damn. This wasn't just a section of the ship—it was a different world.

I'd never been here before. Cruise personnel like me were often crammed into the lower levels near the hum of the engine and the never-ending smell of bleach.

At least I had my own cabin—not glamorous by any means, and the size of a

shoebox, but it was private.

Much better than sharing a cramped space with another dude, especially one of the guys from the band.

We already spent a lot of time together and could get on each other's nerves, as evidenced by an onstage brawl instigated by our former bassist. That led to his departure, but now we had Rex, who was a much better fit.

He was mellower, even for a wolf shifter.

Here? This place had room to breathe. To stretch without knocking over a mini-fridge.

She opened the door, and I gaped at her suite.

It looked like it could be featured in a vampire version of Architectural Digest —dark wood, tasteful furniture, and sleek, modern touches.

Floor-to-ceiling windows with rich drapery framed the dark ocean like a living painting.

The space was big enough to fit my entire band twice and our instruments twice over—even with room for our egos.

A bar with gold fixtures gleamed in one corner, stocked with bottles that probably cost more than my monthly paycheck.

I stepped inside with wide eyes, half-expecting someone named Jeeves to hand me a silk robe and a glass of champagne.

“Whoa...so this is how the upper half of the ship lives,” I said with a smirk.

“Thanks for doing this,” she said, placing a pale hand on her chest. “I’m Celeste Deveraux.” She motioned at me. “I saw you perform earlier tonight. Impressive, by the way.” She gave a small, approving nod.

Her praise rolled through me. “Thanks,” I uttered. “So...who’s the guy with the glaring problem?”

She frowned. “My ex-fiancé. It’s over. It has been for months—ever since I caught him cheating. But I just discovered he’s on board.”

“Did he follow you here?”

“Yes.” She scowled. “Anyway, thanks again for going along with this,” she said. “If you don’t mind hanging out here for a bit to help sell this, I’d appreciate it.”

I didn’t mind one bit. “Sell what exactly?”

She gestured back and forth between us. “You know—that we’re together.”

My jaguar perked up at that.

“Sorry I sprang it on you. It just happened in the moment. I figured if he thought I’m with someone else, he’d finally give up and leave me alone.” She paused, then blinked. “Wait—I still don’t even know your name.”

“Van,” I said. “Van Tyrian.”

“Van,” she repeated, extending her slender hand. “Nice to meet you.”

I took her hand. It felt oddly formal, considering we'd just been wrapped around each other like long-lost lovers. Not that I was complaining. Especially not with that giant king-sized bed whispering how much room was available to—play.

She stood and walked over to the bar. "Can I get you a drink?"

"Sure," I replied. "Whatever you're having."

She chuckled over her shoulder. "You okay with a blood cocktail?"

Oh, hell no. "How about vodka?"

She peeked inside the fridge and pulled something out. "That I can do," she said, pouring our drinks and then handing one to me.

"So," she asked as we settled onto the couch, "since we have some time to kill, why don't you tell me about yourself? How did you end up as a singer on this ship?"

I sipped my vodka, tasting the bite of alcohol on my tongue. "I saw the opportunity and went for it."

She arched a brow. "Is that how you approach life?"

I thought for a moment, then shrugged. "Pretty much. Life's short, right? You have to seize every moment."

She laughed lightly and placed her drink down. "Human life, yes. But after two centuries as a vampire..." She tipped her head and quirked a brow.

Two centuries? All those years of life and experience. I felt like a child in comparison. I gulped. And she didn't look a day over forty. "You look fantastic."

“Thank you. Courtesy of no longer aging.”

We chatted more while we drank, and I grew more comfortable for being a fish out of water in this opulent space.

“Where are you from, Celeste?”

“I spend most of my time in the south of France.”

Ah, that explained her accent—rich and lush, like a soft melody with a hint of sensuality?—

“And you?” she asked.

“Florida, before I joined this ship earlier this year.”

Her brows arched up. “I’ve heard about ‘Florida Man.’ Does that also apply to shifters?” she teased.

“Some, maybe,” I agreed with a grunt. “But not me. I’m more of a go-with-the-flow guy. As long as I can play my music without anyone ruffling my fur, it’s all good.”

“I see,” she said with an amused glimmer in her eyes. “Well, I’ll be sure to keep my hands to myself.”

No, you can touch me anytime. I bit my lip to avoid coming on too strong to this elegant vampire, confusion raining down on me.

Since when did I avoid the chance to flirt?

Well, Marielle’s curse had definitely given me pause.

Then again, I'd never met someone quite like Celeste before—someone who made my jaguar rumble with a possessive instinct.

We chatted as we finished our drinks. Although I didn't want to go, I also didn't want to overstay my visit.

“Maybe I should leave.” That was the opposite of what I wanted. I'd rather wrap my arms around her again, wake up still holding her, breathing in her scent. Crickey, what had gotten into me?

I shook my head. “If you need anything—or if your ex gives you trouble—come find me. I play in the Nocturnal Lounge both nights.”

She walked me to the door. “Thank you, Van. And yes...hopefully Lucien gets off at the next port in a couple of days. But until then—” She hesitated.

“What?” I prompted.

She met my gaze. “Would you consider pretending...for a little longer? Pretend to be my lover?”

I blinked at her while my jaguar purred inside. Was this really happening? This beautiful woman wanted me to pretend to be her boyfriend.

“I'd make it worth your while,” she added. “I'd compensate you, of course?—”

I raised my hands. “No, no. Of course I'll help you. No payment whatsoever.”

Her smile lit up her entire face, and damn if it didn't do something to melt my heart.

“Great,” she said, beaming. “When are you playing next?”

“Tomorrow night.”

“I’ll come to your show.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:11 pm

VAN

After a night of vivid, erotic dreams about Celeste, I woke in a cold sweat. My jaguar stirred as well, rumbling mate.

I felt his longing, shared his agony to be near her.

The problem was I didn't know what the hell to do about it.

I took the stairs up two at a time to the spa. Fortunately, Maribelle was at the reception desk, so I didn't have to wait.

She gave me a knowing smile. "Funny how I see you now more than ever."

"Maribelle," I greeted her with a small nod. "It hasn't faded."

She lowered her head. "What hasn't?"

"The hex." I huffed out and threw both hands palms up. "I still— feel things for the woman."

Her smile turned every more sly as it widened. "Can't help you there, rockstar." She stood and motioned downward with her hand in front of my body. "Yup. Nothing left of my magic. It's all you."

I grunted and tapped my fingers along the side of my thigh. "It has to be connected," I uttered in disbelief. "What are you saying? That I met my mate on the same night

you cast a curse on me?”

She snorted. “Stop being so dramatic, Van. It was a little magical mischief. Surely you can handle a little prank.”

“A little prank?” I repeated with wide eyes and placed my hand on my heart. “I’m all wrapped up in confusing knots thinking about her. How am I supposed to deal with this?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m not a shifter.” A woman stepped into the spa and Maribelle turned her attention to her, all but dismissing my epic predicament.

Maribelle’s words echoed inside me during band practice that afternoon. It wasn’t like me to miss a cue or forget lyrics, but I was performing like an anxious amateur hampered by stage fright.

After I’d messed up once again, Damien grunted. “What’s gotten into you, Van? Did you add too much hairspray in that ’80s hairband mane?”

I eyed the bloodsucker from a new perspective. If he was up, Celeste might be as well. What was she doing? Never in a million years would I expect to have it this bad for anyone, let alone a vampire with their nocturnal ways and need for blood, but now she dominated my thoughts.

“Just an off day,” I muttered, shaking my shoulders as if it could dislodge this growing compulsion to be near Celeste. “But thanks for caring, Nosferatu.”

Damien spun his hand in front of his guitar with a flourish before he flipped me off.

“Touchy.” I grinned. “Must be low blood sugar.”

I grabbed the mic and tried to focus. Would she show up tonight as she'd said? If so, I had to get my act together. The last thing I wanted to do was sing off-key to the woman who'd haunted my dreams and almost every moment since I'd woken.

When I missed another cue, Caleb snorted and dropped his drumsticks. "Maybe you need to run that shit off."

"Yeah, good idea." I could run into the forest and shake off this sudden obsession with a vampire.

I'd been with some in the past, but never so consumed by one.

Since we were sailing, I'd have to wait until we docked at a private island that the ship owned.

It had plenty of space for supernaturals to run and hunt.

"Let's take fifteen," I suggested. At least I could head outdoors to get some fresh air to clear my head.

The others mumbled in agreement, and I strode out of the Nocturnal Lounge.

The sun had already set. Where was Celeste?

Did she stay in that exclusive private area with other wealthy passengers?

That was one of the things that separated us—her fortune—not to mention the vast differences between our species and our century-plus age gap.

I rushed up the stairs to the pool deck.

The balmy scent of the sea greeted me as the stars twinkled overhead.

Several passengers took advantage of the dragon pool and hot tubs, even though it was cooler after sundown.

Shifters like me typically ran hot and the cool water would feel refreshing.

What about vamps? Did they prefer the hot tubs to warm their bodies?

I could heat Celeste up in my arms. In my bed...

Jeez, there I went again thinking about her. What could I do to get her out of my head?

Later that night, when we began our set, I searched for her in the lounge. No sign of her. Had she changed her mind?

Worse, what if she'd decided to take another chance with her ex, that damn vampire who'd cheated on her? Every muscle in my body tensed.

As I began to sing the Zombies song, "She's Not There," the lyrics hit, and I poured myself into the performance.

I could sense my bandmates exhaling with relief as if to say finally.

A few songs later, when we moved on to Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline," I sensed Celeste walk into the room.

There she was, standing in the entrance of the lounge. She practically glowed for me just standing there, even though her midnight hair and dress were as dark as the shadows.

The crowd joined in, enthusiastically singing the chorus and adding, “So good, so good, so good,” like enthusiastic Red Sox fans.

Celeste caught my eye, and a small smile spread across her face. She lifted her hand and blew me a kiss.

My heart fluttered, elated. My jaguar purred in contentment.

Then it all crashed to the ground as I realized why she’d done so. It was all an act.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:11 pm

CELESTE

After sundown, I'd dressed in a slinky black dress with spaghetti straps, red heels, and a matching red scarf, and then headed down to the Nocturnal Lounge.

It was a dimly lit space with dark paneling and several seats stacked around small tables and a bar serving colorful cocktails in the back.

Fortunately, there was no sign of Lucien.

Although I was not a big fan of rock, I recognized "Sweet Caroline." I ordered a blood-infused cocktail and found a seat along the side.

Van stood under the lights at the front of the stage, a charismatic front man gripping the microphone as he sang and encouraged the audience to join in—which they did with vigor.

His tousled blond hair was just messy enough to give him a rebellious edge, and my fingers itched to run through it.

A dark-haired vampire played to his left and a bearded shifter to his right.

A gray-skinned gargoyle pounded drums at the back of the stage.

They slowed it down a few songs later with the Police's "Don't Stand So Close to Me."

” Van practically vibrated with undeniable sensuality, his feline saunter on display as he swayed slowly with the song.

The way he moved in those tight leather pants didn’t hurt either.

His deep voice reverberated with sensuality as he slid his hand down the mic stand.

Why did that slow, minute gesture captivate me so, bringing all sorts of unexpected, sordid thoughts to mind?

His raw animal magnetism was difficult to ignore. He winked at me, and a playful grin spread across his face. My skin felt hot and tingly.

I wasn’t the only one who noticed Van’s appeal. The women who sat near the front leaned forward, their gazes locked on him like he was the last drop of water in a desert. A surprising jolt of something I hadn’t felt in a long time shot through me—jealousy.

What in the bloodless moon was that about? I had no claim on him, nor he on me. I was only here tonight to continue a ruse so I could finally shake Lucien off my back. I relaxed in my chair and enjoyed the rest of the show.

After Van thanked the crowd and said goodnight, many women approached him.

He acknowledged them with smiles or polite small talk, but made his way over to me.

His scent filled my nostrils, an enticing mix of masculinity and his shifter blood.

I leaned closer, tempted by his scent. If he smelled this good, what would he taste like?

Showtime. It was time to act like a musician's girlfriend to cast Lucien out of my life forever. Forcing myself to straighten, I noted, "You put on a good show, Mr. Tyrian."

His smile widened as he appraised me, his nostrils flaring slightly.

"I liked seeing you out here tonight, Ms. Deveraux." He leaned forward and kissed me on the cheek, leaving a tingle that vibrated with heat.

My fingers twitched, eager to rise up and stroke where his lips had just touched me, almost as if to see if he'd left an imprint.

He slung his arm around my shoulder. "Come on, darlin'. The night is young and the ship is ours."

Darlin' . The way he said it, like he had last night with a hint of a drawl, replayed in my head like a pleasant song. I liked it.

Van lowered his arm to take my hand as we strolled across the deck. His hand was so warm against my skin, so large and protective. What would it feel like tracing over my body?

Focus!

Some eyes turned our way. We must have looked like an odd fit—me in my black gown and red heels and him in his black leather pants, vibrant purple shirt, and silver-buckled black boots.

When we passed the casino, he turned to me and bent closer. "Want to try your luck?" The warmth of his breath fanned my ear.

"Sure." I stepped inside and my senses were immediately pummeled by the blinking

lights and clinking sounds of machines. A haze of expensive perfume, alcohol, and desperation made my nostrils curl. Van placed his hand on the small of my back, and a tingle danced down my spine.

Since the end of the show, he'd managed to keep his hand on me in some way. Sure, it was part of the boyfriend plan, but if he kept touching me this way...

As we ventured deeper into the casino, I turned partway to scan the options. That's when I saw him. Lucien sat at a blackjack table. Of course. I should have known he'd be here. If he saw me, he'd likely try to convince me to give him more money to gamble away.

When I froze, Van asked, "Everything okay?"

My lips curled. "He's here," I muttered.

Van searched around. "Oh yes, I see him." For the first time that night, the sultry edge to his voice was gone, replaced by something harder and more dangerous.

Lucien noticed us and straightened. Well, at least we'd made our appearance, and he'd seen me with Van.

"Let's go." I suggested.

Before he could come over and ruin my night, I turned and strode to the exit, wishing I'd worn flats instead of these heels that slowed me down.

Van's hand on my lower back steadied me, providing reassurance that he'd capture me if I tripped.

Was he this way around every woman? Or was he putting it on for his role?

Whatever the reason, he had a manner about him that made my instincts sing—his wild and alluring nature creating a disturbance in my controlled composure.

“Where to?” he asked.

“I could use some air.”

We stepped outside onto the promenade area that circled the perimeter of this deck, and the salty fragrance of the sea reached my nostrils.

The breeze swept my hair up and around my head, and I had to tame it down.

Goose bumps prickled on my arms in response to the cold.

I instantly regretted not wearing something warmer over this dress.

The waves rolled out down below, small whitecaps churning beneath the moonlight.

After the cacophony of the casino, the calm out here was a balm to my senses.

“You look freezing.” Van placed his large hands on my shoulders and rubbed them vigorously down the sides of my arms.

“I am.” I leaned toward him, his shifter heat enticing me.

“I got you, darlin’,” he said and wrapped his arms around me.

Darlin’. I could get used to that. I rested my head on his chest. His heart beat against my cheek, the quick rhythm of it instantly stirring my hunger.

Fortunately, I’d fed already because my fangs itched for a taste of this young shifter’s

blood, which tormented me with a wild thirst I hadn't felt in over a century.

"You feel good," he rumbled, a reverberation rolling through his chest. He inhaled. "And you smell amazing."

I pulled my head up to glance at him, about to admit the same. From the corner of my eye, I spotted Lucien's white-blond hair and straightened.

"He followed us," I whispered.

Van turned to follow where I'd looked, but I raised my hand to his cheek, stopping him.

"Kiss me," I urged.

His amber eyes widened with surprise as he stared down at me. Then he bent toward me and my eyes fluttered close. I rose to my tiptoes and brushed my lips against his.

Sudden sparks danced along my skin, warming me from within. Heat soared through my veins and pooled in my core. An undeniable connection bloomed between us, one that was almost magical.

How was this possible when this kiss was simply meant for show?

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:11 pm

VAN

Celeste's lips were soft on mine and her scent enchanted me. I pulled her closer, pressing her soft curves against my body, as she looped her arms around the back of my neck and trailed her fingers through my hair.

Mine.

Yes. My jaguar purred inside, languid and content. Mate.

She pulled away, and her eyes fixed on mine—searching. I was still dazed by the unexpected kiss that threw me off like never before.

Celeste appeared just as flustered, but ran her hands down the sides of her dress. She glanced to the side and exhaled, relaxing her shoulders. "He's gone."

"Who?" I questioned as I returned to earth, coming back to our surroundings.

"Lucien," she said. "My ex."

"Oh, right." I shook my head, which seemed to be filled with angels singing a sweet song about destiny and my jaguar's insistent mantra about finding our mate.

Could it—could it be possible?

She placed her hand on my cheek. "Thanks, Van. I think that discouraged him thoroughly from bothering me tonight. I'll see you later."

She turned to head toward a door leading back inside.

“Wait,” I called, stepping toward her.

She stopped and turned halfway. “Is something wrong?”

Wrong? No, everything in the universe was suddenly right after having her in my arms and kissing her.

But everything was wrong about her leaving.

To her, it was just pretend. I’d be a fool if I thought otherwise.

“I’ll talk to him.” I straightened. “Warn him to leave you alone.” If he didn’t, I’d be more persuasive. Such as ripping his snarling head off his undead neck.

“No need for a confrontation,” she said. “But I think seeing me with someone else is finally nailing it into his coffin that it’s over.” She motioned toward me. “Are you free at midnight tomorrow?”

I had a show earlier in the night but would be finished by then. “Yes.”

“Interested in art?”

“Art?” I repeated.

“Yes, there’s an art auction for the late-night crowd.” She chuckled. “Essentially rich vampires. Want to join me as my date ?”

“Of course.” Then my throat tightened. I had less than a day to try to learn something about art so I wouldn’t look like an idiot.

The next day after practice, I headed over to the library. Piper, a witch with pinkish hair who worked art auctions and was my bandmate Rex's mate, sat at the desk. She helped a woman check out a book.

When she saw me, her eyes widened. "Van, is that really you— in a library ?"

"Yeah." I ran a hand through my hair and exhaled. "You work here?"

"Not usually. I was asked to cover for someone for a couple of hours. Easy enough gig."

I stepped closer. "Piper, can you help me?"

"Sure, what do you need?"

"I—uh—" I glanced around. Shelf after shelf of books. "I need to learn about art."

She squinted at me. "What specifically?"

How would I know? I adjusted my weight, my hands feeling clammy. "Whatever you're showing tonight."

She snapped her head back with surprise. "At the art auction?"

"Yeah."

"Are you coming? I've never seen you there before."

I nudged my chin up. "I have a date."

Her eyes sparkled with mischief. "Oh, a date, eh?" Several weeks ago, Piper and

Kylie had talked about placing bets on who would be next at finding their mate—Caleb or me.

I'd sworn that it would never happen for me, but that was before a tall, stunning vampire with sleek black hair had stepped on board.

And now? I didn't know what the hell was going on. I couldn't really have found my mate, could I?

Yes, my jaguar insisted.

"And I want to impress her," I told Piper. "She's—elegant, sophisticated, rich?—"

Piper let out a low chuckle. "Sounds like she's out of your league."

I grunted. "Exactly. And I don't want to sound like a bumbling baboon. Can you give me a quick overview of art?"

Piper glanced at a clock. "That would take more than a few minutes, Van, so I'm afraid not.

I have to close up the library and then I have stuff to do before the auction.

Our main attraction tonight is a painting of a dryad in the forest." She clucked her tongue and then flashed a teasing grin.

"That means no time to help you get laid, Casanova."

I straightened, somewhat uncomfortable. Sure, I wanted to sleep with Celeste, but she was more than someone just for the night. "It's not like that."

Piper drummed her fingers on the desk. “But I can reserve two front-row seats for you, if you like.”

“Yes.” I nodded eagerly. Anything to impress Celeste. “Thanks, Piper.”

“No problem.” She stepped over to one of the bookcases and pulled out a book. “Here you go. Plenty of pictures and short but interesting overviews.” She handed it to me.

I glanced at the book on art history and peeked inside. “Is this a kids’ book?”

“It’s an overview,” she said. “Skim through it and stop on anything you find interesting. Then you can bring it up later.”

I was pretty sure it was aimed for kids, but wasn’t complaining. “Good plan, Pipes.”

“Pipes?” she echoed, narrowing her eyes. “I’m not part of the ship’s plumbing system.”

I chuckled, said thanks, and left the library.

After taking the stairs two at a time up to the pool deck, I found an empty chair where I could bask under the sun while I read.

Ah, the warm, sunny skies of the Caribbean.

So different from our Alaskan route with its majestic views.

I opened the book, flipped through some of the pages, and promptly fell asleep.

I stood outside Celeste’s suite just before midnight, feeling like a penguin in a sauna.

Damn, this monkey suit was uncomfortable.

I was sweating in a suit I'd borrowed from the ship's costume department.

It was a little snug in the shoulders. But hey, dressing fancy was the way to go if I wanted to impress a woman like Celeste.

When she answered the door wearing a dark purple dress that clung just so to all the right places, my tongue felt dry. I swallowed. Then her scent hit me, that intoxicating mix of midnight flowers and moonlight.

Mate.

What the hell? That wasn't my jaguar responding that time, but me . I cleared my throat. "Celeste, you look stunning."

A small grin spread across her face before she appraised me. "You clean up well yourself."

"Thanks." I puffed out my chest but the tightness of the suit restrained it. "I've secured us prime seats at the art auction," I announced in what I'd meant to sound suave but instead came out in a faux posh accent. To run with it as if it were intention, I added, "Shall we?" I offered my arm.

We took the elevators down and headed into the Mermaid's Gallery.

A fox shifter, Sloane, handed us numbers and explained how the bidding worked.

Her number was sixty-eight and mine was sixty-nine.

It took a tug on my self-control to bite back a dirty joke about it.

I wasn't shooting the shit with my band, and now was not the time to sound immature.

Supernaturals were dressed up in their finest clothes, flaunting their money with fancy jewels. A server handed us champagne, hers tinted pink, and I was sure I knew why.

We wandered through the paintings on display before the auction began.

With all the wealth surrounding me, I felt as out of place as an ogre in a teashop.

I wished I'd read up on art and hadn't fallen asleep so I could have something intelligent to say.

Damn, this woman got to me good. Not only was I suited up, but trying to discuss art?

Marcel, the vampire who was Piper's boss, spoke to a couple about another painting. I tried to eavesdrop on their conversation but only caught "magnificent" before they moved on.

When we reached the painting, I gaped at the abstract swirls of color, searching for something profound. Pointing out that it looked swirly didn't sound too cultured.

"Now this piece is magnificent, isn't it?"

Celeste's lips twitched. No doubt she'd heard Marcel and realized I was echoing him. "Quite magnificent," she agreed.

I stared at the painting, trying to drum up something interesting, but nothing came. Instead, I turned the focus on her. "Are you interested in anything particular tonight?"

“Yes.” She nodded. “There’s a piece supposedly painted by a druid. I love a painting with a good story. Fun to point out at parties.”

Ah ha! I knew that painting. I only wish Piper had told me more about it.

Celeste’s mention of parties with talk of artwork reminded me how different our worlds were.

I’d frequented rock clubs before I’d joined the Moonlight Siren.

The fanciest piece of art on the walls was more like a neon flashing sign advertising cold beer.

“Then you must have it,” I declared. What the hell was I talking about? I’d never been to an art auction before and had no idea how this would all play out—nor how much the artwork would go for.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:11 pm

CELESTE

The Mermaid Gallery dazzled with exquisite paintings in gilded frames. I sought out one in particular—an ethereal painting of a dryad, her luminous skin intertwined with vibrant blossoms and twisting vines.

The auctioneers told us the bidding was about to begin. One of them, a witch, greeted us.

“Van, your seats are saved right up front,” she said with a smile.

“Thanks, Piper,” he said. “I appreciate it.” Then he turned to me and said, “I reserved the best seats for us.” He smiled as if proud of his accomplishment.

“Lovely,” I said, appreciating the gesture.

He introduced us. “Celeste, this is my friend, Piper. Piper, Celeste.”

After brief greetings, I thanked her for the seats and we sat down.

Piper and a shifter named Sloane started with a few smaller pieces that went quickly. I watched while I sipped my pink champagne, which was an expensive champagne with a healthy pour of blood. Van squirmed in his seat beside me.

I leaned over and whispered. “Is something wrong?”

“I can’t believe someone paid that kind of money for a bunch of swirls,” he spoke

low in my ear. “Even I could paint that.”

I raised my glass back to my lips to stifle a chuckle.

He’d dressed up in this suit and put on a sophisticated air to come with me tonight, but it was clear this was not his scene.

Still, I appreciated the effort and liked having him with me—especially with the warmth of his breath on my ear, which affected me in a way I hadn’t experienced in decades. Definitely not with Lucien.

Speaking of which, there he was a few rows back and to the side, staring at me. I frowned and returned my attention to the next piece of art.

Finally, we neared the end of the auction and the dryad piece was pulled out.

“Can I get a starting bid of ten thousand dollars?” Her voice rose above the gentle hum of the crowd.

Bids quickly shot up, passing each other. My anticipation rose with each bid.

Time for me to play. “Twenty thousand.” I raised my number.

Van turned to me with surprise. I reached over and squeezed his hand to assure him this was fine. The bidding already felt like a contest of wills.

“Twenty-five thousand.” I knew that voice.

When I turned back, Lucien fixed his gaze on me and smirked. What was he getting at? Did he think he could win my affection by outbidding me?

“Thirty thousand dollars.”

I snapped my head back toward Van, who proudly held up his sign reading sixty-nine, almost as far as his arm would stretch.

I leaned closer to him and whispered, “What are you doing?”

“Getting you your painting,” he declared.

Oh my. He was so sweet. But could he even afford this? I had no idea how much he made working on a cruise ship, but I guessed it wasn’t enough to toss out fifteen-thousand dollar bids for a woman he’d just met.

“Thirty-five thousand,” Lucien hissed, shooting eye daggers at Van.

“Forty,” Van barked back.

Jeez, now they were going to have a pissing contest in the middle of the auction. This was ridiculous. Neither one of these men wanted the painting. The auctioneers’ eyes widened with excitement, and they sped up their bidding.

More bids passed, mostly with Van and Lucien warring against each other, and we passed the seventy-five-thousand dollar point.

I squeezed his hand and whispered, “I got this.” Raising my sign, I declared, “One hundred thousand.” While gasps echoed around us, this amount didn’t affect me. I had several more pieces that had cost much more and had appreciated with value over time.

I knew Lucien didn’t have that kind of money, and my bid finally shut him up. He didn’t want the painting anyway.

“One hundred thousand going once,” Piper said, her voice quick with excitement. “One hundred thousand going twice.” She paused. “And sold!”

I walked out of the ballroom smiling with my arm looped through Van’s.

He joked, “If that’s how much art sells for, I need to learn how to start painting.”

I chuckled. “Unfortunately, so many talented artists never sell a painting at all. I like to find talent among the unknown.”

“You must have a number of them at home.”

“A small collection, yes, at my villa. I also found some in New York that are in my apartment in Manhattan.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me?” he said with a playful grin. “How many properties do you have? I don’t even have a permanent address now that I live on this floating hotel, let alone own multiple properties.”

“Oh, just a few more,” I said with a light wave. No need to emphasize the differences between us, which were already quite vast.

A low snigger made us both turn to see Lucien had stepped up behind us.

“You can’t seriously be with this boy toy, Celeste,” he said with a sneer, without even looking at Van. “He can’t even wear a suit that fits properly.”

I snorted in reply. “At least I didn’t have to buy it for him, like I had to do with almost everything for you.”

Van stepped up to Lucien so they were merely inches apart, their chests almost

butting together. “Celeste has made it clear she’s finished with you, so I just suggest you back off.”

“Or what?” Lucien scowled.

“I’ll break each limb slowly so that you’d wish you were actually dead rather than undead.”

Lucien’s eyes gleamed, flashing red in warning.

“Are you about to do something that’ll get you fired?”

” He stepped back and crossed his arms over his chest, his mouth spreading into a cold smile.

“I’d love to see that. After all, I’m a guest on this ship.

And you—” He peered down his nose at Van with a look of total disdain. “Do you sleep below with the fishes?”

“That’s enough!” I stepped in between them, pushing my arms to the side.

I couldn’t let Lucien bait Van into a fight that would cost him his job.

“Lucien, if anyone is going to make any type of report, it will be me noting your harassment. Now get the hell away from us or I’ll get your ass kicked off this ship at the next stop! ”

My chest was heaving as we glared at each other.

Blood surged with volcanic heat as it rushed through my veins.

Silence fell around us with an empty thud.

I'd never spoken to Lucien that way before.

That wasn't how I'd been raised in an aristocratic society where keeping one's composure was key.

I hadn't even raised my voice like that when I'd discovered Lucien's betrayal.

No, I'd struggled to keep my tone cool and measured.

But the way he threatened Van rattled me, and I had to do something.

Lucien ground his teeth before storming off. Van's posture was ramrod straight and tension rolled off his body like fog.

I turned to him and sagged with relief. "Come on."

He turned to me slowly, only tearing his glare from where Lucien had left at the last second. His eyes gleamed with golden amber, giving him a devastatingly feral look.

Without thinking, I threw my arms around his neck and relaxed against the warmth of his body.

He wrapped his arms around me, pulling me close.

His heart beat strong and steady against my chest. All the turmoil and devastation from Lucien's betrayal and persistent pursuit that had built up over months dissipated as Van embraced me.

Something about him—his strong, protective, rebellious behavior—comforted me,

even though he was so young and so different from the uptight world I'd been raised in.

Even if we were from different worlds, born in different centuries, I had to wonder—what if?

At least for one night.

“Are you okay?” Van asked, nuzzling close to my ear.

“Yes,” I said with a slight tremble, drinking in his alluring scent.

“Where do you want to go?” he asked.

His heart continued its thrum against mine, and the rush of his blood sang to my ears. Hunger grew, quick and sudden, and my fangs itched for one little taste.

I opened my mouth, utterly captivated by this devastatingly alluring shifter. “My suite.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:11 pm

VAN

The walk up to Celeste's private suite was a blur of anticipation and raw desire. Each step echoed with the thrum of my heartbeat and the hungry growl of my jaguar resonating within me. Her scent—jasmine and moonlight—enveloped me, making it hard to think of anything but wanting her.

I needed to be close to her, to touch her, to protect her.

She unlocked the door to her suite with her card. As soon as we stepped inside, the atmosphere shifted. The air was charged with electricity, the tension between us palpable. The door clicked shut behind us.

Celeste turned to face me, her eyes dark and full of longing. She reached up, her fingers gently tracing the line of my jaw, her touch cool and feather-light. I leaned into her hand, captivated.

"Celeste," I whispered, my voice hoarse with desire.

She stepped closer and looped her arms around my neck. "I want you."

We came together hard, our bodies crashing against each other, as we claimed each other's mouths. But it wasn't enough.

I wrapped my arms tightly around her, and she gripped my shoulders. We clutched at each other, grasping and clawing.

My jaguar roared within, urging, demanding more. To mark her, claim her, make her ours.

I carried her over to the enormous bed, which was at least twice the size of my tiny one in my cramped room.

She kissed my neck, desperate and hungry, and the sensation of a vampire's fascination with my neck thrilled me in a strange way.

I placed her gently on the bed and crawled over her.

Her blue eyes looked like dark sapphires now, intense and full of yearning that matched my own.

"Are you sure you want this?" I asked, my voice ragged. I needed to hear her say it, to know that she wanted this as much as I did.

"Yes," she said, sounding breathless. She pulled at my suit jacket, sliding it off my shoulders.

I quickly shrugged out of it, letting it fall to the floor, and kicked off my shoes. Then I was on her again, kissing her lips and touching her shoulders, sliding the straps down her arms. She arched up beneath me, encouraging me to continue, and we both eagerly pulled her dress off her.

Seeing her in just a black lace bra and matching panties, I sucked in a breath.

"You're beautiful," I murmured, stunned by her beauty. A goddess with raven-black hair. I gaped at her, yearning to explore every inch of her pale skin.

She reached for my shirt and fumbled with the buttons. "Take this off," she pleaded

in a raspy tone.

Damn, I'd wear one of these stiff uniforms every day if it meant exciting her like this as she undressed me.

With delicate fingers, she caressed my chest, tracing the lines of my muscles with her delicate fingers. I shuddered under her touch, my breath coming in ragged gasps. My entire body was hard, needy, aching.

I shoved my pants off and climbed back over her, desperate to touch her again. My lips found hers again, staking a claim.

As I caressed the curves of her body, the weight of her breasts, I kissed and nipped along her neck and down to her collarbone. The tips of my teeth elongated, burning to break through, bite her.

Mine.

I fought against that insistent urge, the heady sensation leaving me dizzy. Moving down her torso, I reached her bra and paused to remove it. She arched her back to help me continue.

I palmed her soft skin and teased her pert, pink nipple with my tongue.

She released soft sighs and tangled her fingers through my hair.

My heart pounded as I turned to the other one and continued down, eager to taste every inch of her.

She writhed beneath me as I moved down, and the heady scent of her arousal perfumed the air.

It was intoxicating, driving me wild with desire.

I slid her panties down her legs, and she kicked them off, spreading herself before me.

I moved between her legs, enticed by her, and tasted her with a long, slow lick.

Heaven.

I added my hands as I drove up her desire, and she arched up, moaning and clawing at the sheets. She was wild, uninhibited, driving me near feral with lust.

She was close. So close. And I yearned to bring her pleasure.

Applying more pressure, I pushed her over the edge, and she cried out with a shudder that shook her body.

As she recovered from her climax, I shed the last of my clothes. Her hooded eyes widened as they scanned me. Her eyes rose to meet mine once more, and her hunger matched my own.

“I need you, Van,” she pleaded, her voice thick with desire.

I didn't need any more encouragement. I climbed onto the bed, my body covering hers. She wrapped her legs around my waist, pulling me closer. I could feel her heat, her wetness, and it took every ounce of my self-control not to drive into her right then.

I kissed her deeply, my tongue tangling with hers. She ran her hands down my back, digging her nails into my skin. I groaned, the sensation sending shivers down my spine.

I teased the head at her entrance and then paused. “Do we need a?—”

“No,” she cut me off with a low chuckle. “That ship has sailed centuries ago.”

She pulled me closer and I edged in, moaning in blissful delight as her tightness enveloped me. I inched in gently to give her time to adjust. She was so hot and felt so good, the sensation almost overwhelmed me.

"Celeste," I whispered, my voice hoarse with desire. "You feel incredible."

She moaned softly and moved her hips against mine, urging me on.

I snaked in, slowly at first, then faster, harder, more demanding.

She gripped my shoulders with a fierce hold.

Small gasps and sighs escaped her, tangling in with my ragged moans.

A connection between us grew—powerful, magical, undeniable.

Her eyes locked on mine, and in that moment, I knew.

“Mine,” I growled.

She was my mate. The one my jaguar had recognized from the start. A surge of possessiveness coursed through me.

The urge to bite and claim her returned, fiercer this time—a sensation I’d never struggled against until now.

No, she didn’t want that. I couldn’t do that to her.

Our bodies rocked together, harder, faster, each thrust bringing us closer to the edge. Her moans grew louder, more desperate, and her muscles tensed beneath me. I was close, so close, but I needed to bring her to her peak one more time.

I rocked into her harder and she arched her back.

Her body convulsed as she cried out my name and pulsed around me.

Her spiraling pleasure sent me crashing with her.

My muscles coiling taut, I plunged into her with fierce thrusts and exploded.

I roared out as my body shuddered with this intense release.

Rapturous waves crashed through me, leaving me breathless and weak.

I collapsed on top of her, bracing my weight, unable to find words after that epic encounter. Was this what it was like to find your mate?

Yes , my jaguar purred, content.

I was stunned as my heart pounded against her sweet body. We were both covered in slick heat. I held her tightly as my breath slowed and never wanted to let her go.

She ran lazy circles over my lower back. “Van,” she whispered, barely audible.

“Yes,” I replied, my voice hoarse.

“That was...incredible,” she murmured.

I rose up to glance into her eyes. “You’re amazing,” I praised her and then pressed a

soft kiss to her mouth.

We recovered in silence, our bodies entwined, and I knew.

Tonight had changed everything for me. I'd found my mate.

Nothing else mattered—not our age gap, not our lifestyles, not even the fact that she was a vampire who lived in the south of France and I was a shifter floating around the world on a cruise ship.

All that mattered was that I'd found her and I'd do anything to protect her and make her mine.

Only one epic problem...

Would she see it the same way?

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:11 pm

CELESTE

I woke after sundown, invigorated from the night before with Van.

Stretching beneath the silken sheets, I recalled each moment—every touch, every kiss, every whispered word.

Van's scent lingered on my skin, and I inhaled deeply, savoring the blend of feline and forests with his unique masculine musk. My fangs itched, wanting more.

Last night had been wild, my body high on rapture while also tormented by agonizing thirst. I'd desperately wanted to bite Van, not just to taste his blood, but to mark him. Claim him as mine. And that was something I'd never experienced in two centuries.

I better have a nourishing meal before I was near him again. As I sat up in bed, I noticed a folded note on the bedside table. I picked it up and unfolded it—a piece of paper with the Moonlight Siren's logo.

Celeste,

Had to meet up with the band. Meet me at the Nocturnal Lounge after my show tonight?

Yours,

Van

I smiled and held the note to my chest. Tonight couldn't come soon enough. Van was incredible in bed, without doubt—that wild, feral, animalistic side to him revealing itself. But there was something else—something deeper. We'd connected on another level; I was sure of it.

Or maybe I was deluding myself after having the best sex of my life.

I climbed out of bed, still naked, and walked into the bathroom to shower.

I hated to wash Van's scent from my skin, but we had tonight.

Once I'd dried off and put on a royal blue dress, I glanced at the daily schedule to see what time Luna Blue Shadows was playing.

Not until ten. That gave me plenty of time to feed and explore.

I spent time savoring breakfast while I read a few chapters of my book.

Later that night, I left my suite. The decks of the Moonlight Siren were alive with the sounds of conversations, activity, and the distant clanking of the ship's machinery. I stepped out on the promenade deck, staring out at the silvery tips of waves twinkling beneath the stars.

"Cut the act, Celeste," a voice cut in, breaking my reverie.

My muscles tightened. I braced myself for another unpleasant encounter as I turned to face Lucien.

"How could you choose that clown over me?" He sneered. "He's nothing. A child. A kitten."

I seethed. “Why must you continue to pester me?”

“I did some digging,” Lucien continued, ignoring my question. “You and that boy toy just met. No way you’re that serious after just a few days.”

I clenched my hands at my sides as my body heated with fury. “It’s none of your business what I do or who I choose to be with.”

He stepped closer, his eyes flashing cold. “You think I don’t see what you’re doing? Trying to make me jealous with some young, dumb shifter? Don’t worry, it worked. Now it’s time to drop the charade so we can start over.”

“This has nothing to do with you,” I hissed, my voice trembling with barely contained fury. “I’m moving on with my life, and you need to do the same, Lucien.”

Lucien scoffed, his lip curling in disgust. “You’re deserve better than that stray cat. Why is he interested in you? Your money, that’s why.”

His words stung, striking a nerve deep within me. The connection I’d felt with Van had felt real. Could I be fooling myself?

I shook my head, pushing the doubts away. I shouldn’t let Lucien get to me. “The only one who used me for money was you.”

Then I turned and walked away.

I found a seat in the lounge, my blood still racing from the confrontation with Lucien. Only once I heard Van’s voice did I start to calm down. I met his gaze and his locked on me, intense and soulful. Warmth spread through me, chasing away the chill Lucien had left behind.

Maybe it had started as an act, a ruse to keep Lucien at bay, but somewhere along the way, something had shifted.

I felt something for Van, but Lucien's words twisted beneath my skin.

Was it foolish to let myself fall for someone so quickly?

Someone I'd just met? I could be setting myself up for heartache—again.

Van thanked the audience for coming and said goodnight.

As he stepped off the stage, he made his way through the crowd, stopping to chat briefly with those who sought his attention, but his focus remained on me.

My blood simmered with anticipation as he approached, his amber eyes pooling with such heat that my stomach fluttered.

"You made it, darling," he said with a smile, his voice a low rumble. Then he bent down and greeted me with a kiss on the lips that shot tingles down to my toes. When he pulled away, he purred, "I've been thinking about you all day."

"I've been thinking of you too," I admitted, my voice barely above a whisper. All my doubts, all my fears, seemed to dissipate in his presence.

He leaned in, his lips brushing against my ear. "Let's get out of here."

I nodded, and he led me away from the lounge, his hand resting on the small of my back as he guided me around small groups of people.

We wandered the decks, exploring the ship together.

The Caribbean night air was cool, and the stars above twinkled like diamonds on black velvet.

We talked and laughed, our conversation flowing effortlessly and all the unease that Lucien had fueled was forgotten.

In the early hours of the morning, I suggested, “How about we have a drink on my balcony?”

His eyes shimmered with heat. “Anywhere I can get you alone.”

We ventured back up to my suite and carried drinks out on to the balcony.

But then the moment we stepped outside, they were placed on a side table and forgotten.

We rushed together in a heated kiss, as if the anticipation that had built up all night burst through the surface.

Then we undressed each other slowly under the moonlight, and the urgency slowed.

We took our time, exploring each other, savoring each touch, each kiss.

The sensation of being naked out there, surrounded by thousands, yet shielded from view with the privacy of our location, shot a forbidden thrill through me.

“You’re so beautiful,” he murmured, his voice dark and sensual.

Van ran his hands through my hair, pulling me closer as he deepened the kiss. He traced the curves of my body with his strong hands, igniting a fire within me. As my hands fluttered to his chest, his heartbeat pulsed strong and steady under my

fingertips.

We made our way back inside to the bedroom.

Van led me to the bed and covered my body with his long, lean one.

His hands stoked intense flames beneath my skin.

I explored the muscles of his back, feeling the strength and power beneath his skin.

He trailed kisses down my neck, and I felt the heat of his breath, the gentle graze of his teeth.

My fangs ached, the primal urge to bite him now entwined with another one—to be bitten.

“Tell me you feel it,” he whispered as he kissed down my torso. “This connection.” His tongue swirled over my breast, and I arched into the wet heat of his mouth.

Tears stung my eyes. I wasn’t imagining it, this bond forming between us. “I do,” I swore. “It’s almost overwhelming.”

“But so right,” he murmured. Then he licked down my midriff and lower still, to my inner thighs, tormenting and torturing me with a yearning for more.

“Don’t tease me,” I begged.

He finally relented, his tongue unbelievably magical as he drew out my pleasure in a blinding climax. When I returned to my body again, I crawled out from under him, emboldened to take the lead.

I slid down his thick shaft, taking him all in, as my fangs lengthened and slipped out of my lips. “Sorry.” I covered my mouth, not wanting to ruin this moment by terrifying him.

“No, it’s okay,” he insisted and pulled my hand away. “Natural. Trust me, I’ve wanted to bite you too.”

I searched his eyes. Did that mean?—

He reached up and captured my lips in a searing kiss, then pulled away a fraction.

“Do it, Celeste,” he urged. “Bite me.” He leaned back down and turned his head, exposing his smooth, tanned throat.

My fangs itched as my excitement grew. A hunger rose in a way I’d never felt before. I ground up and down on him as the pressure built inside.

I bent down, brushing my lips against his neck, where the steady thrum of his heartbeat whispered to me. I could swear I heard his jaguar rumbling within, spurring me on to claim him. The scent of salt and musk on his skin mingled with the arousal coursing through the air, intensifying my thirst.

And then I rose higher, and higher, and—clamped my teeth into his throat. Van let out a low moan and gripped my hips so tightly it would leave marks. The second his delectable blood flowed over my tongue, something happened—something unexpected. I hadn’t felt it in that way since I was human.

My heart thumped.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:11 pm

VAN

The sensation of Celeste sucking at my neck was unlike any experience I'd ever had. Sensual. Surreal.

My body was on fire, more sensitive than it had ever been, every touch a shockwave. A primal call sang in my veins, urging me to mark her, claim her.

The pressure built as she drank from me.

I bucked beneath her, feral with lust, as our slick bodies ground against each other.

I sensed her growing closer, and I was right on the edge with her.

When she shattered, pulsing around my cock with exquisite tightness, I lost control and surged into her with a feral growl.

“Mine.”

I held on to Celeste through the early afternoon, not wanting to leave, but I had to eventually get up and meet the band. I practically floated into the practice space.

“Someone's got a shit-eating grin on his face this afternoon,” Damien teased.

Caleb grinned. “Must mean he got with the hot vampire last night.”

I raised a finger, wagging it. “A gentleman never tells.”

The three of them exchanged glances and burst into laughter.

“You are not, and have never been, a gentleman,” Caleb shot back.

“Well, perhaps I could be,” I countered. “You know, being around those who are more sophisticated, rather than the rough sort.”

Damien rolled his eyes. “One night with a rich vampire, and suddenly you’re sophisticated?”

I should strive to be because Celeste was and she was out of my league. And how soon would it be before she tired of me? If I wanted her to take a chance on me, I had to step it up.

That night, we played a ‘90s set—Stone Temple Pilots, Audioslave, Nirvana—and near the end, my dark-haired beauty, stepped into the lounge. She might as well have been a beam of moonlight. My entire body lit up at the sight of her.

She watched me with those keen, sharp eyes, a small smile playing on her lips. I saw a hint of awareness in them, as if remembering our night together. Was she having second thoughts? No. I would prove to her that we were right, that we were meant to be.

After the final song, I wrapped things up with the band, thanked the crowd, and practically sprinted over to her.

I kissed her on the lips and growled, “I missed you.”

“You were wonderful tonight,” she murmured, and her grin spread wider. “And last night as well.”

I chuckled. “And tonight, too, I hope.” I couldn’t stop touching her, stroking her arm.

“Yes,” she whispered, her voice low and raspy, and my entire body tightened with anticipation.

But I wanted more. More than just a fling for her while she was on vacation.

This was real to me, and I had to show her I was serious.

“How about we go dancing tonight?” That was what the older, more sophisticated set did.

They didn’t come to our shows to hear rock covers.

They went to the Celestial Lounge for piano and slow songs they could dance to, or to fancy restaurants or the theater or art auctions.

Her eyes sparkled. “Sounds magnificent.”

Minutes later, I had her just where I wanted—a pure moment wrapped in my arms under the moon and stars. Music drifted from the piano lounge nearby, and we swayed to it—a perfect moment.

“This is where I met you,” I murmured. “Celeste. In the Celestial Lounge. Must be fate.” I was only half-teasing.

“Must be,” she agreed with a gentle laugh.

We talked and laughed as we held each other. Then my senses heightened. I searched around, vigilant for her ex lurking in the shadows.

“Van? Everything okay?” Celeste’s voice pulled me back.

“Yes.” I wasn’t going to let that damn vampire ruin this otherwise magical night. She was mine.

Well, not yet—not technically. But she would be. If I could find a way to win her heart.

CELESTE

E motions warred within me. Ever since I woke, my mind had been in turmoil. Last night, when I bit Van and my heart beat—truly beat with one loud thump—I knew he was the one. But then, upon awakening, doubts began to creep in.

How could this work? With someone so different from me and generations younger. He lived and worked on a cruise ship while I resided at my villa an ocean away.

Worse, what Lucien had said slithered beneath my skin, poisoning me with more toxins. What if Van was just like Lucien? Using me for my money? Having fun with me until the next younger, shinier attraction came along?

This attractive singer with the captivating voice was adored by countless women. I'd seen the way their eyes tracked him. Once I'd left, he was sure to forget me and move on. And where would that leave me? No better than when Lucien had betrayed me.

Betrayal never became easier, no matter how many years I'd lived. The knife slipped beneath the bones, twisting and taunting with the question shouldn't you know better by now ?

And I should. I had centuries of experience. I shouldn't let common sense be overruled by sensation with how I felt in Van's arms, tasting his blood, feeling his heartbeat. Or by being wrapped in his embrace now, dancing with the ocean surrounding us and the stars and moon shining above.

Both Van and Lucien were young and blond. Did I have a type—one that would

continue to be a mistake? If I were smart, I would consider this cruise a magical voyage before we went our separate ways. And yet, the idea tormented me. How could I let go of someone who made me feel the way he did?

We spent the rest of the night exploring the ship. He suggested a musical, which he didn't appear to be invested in, but I appreciated the gesture.

After we left the theater, we returned to my suite. He furrowed his brows as he studied me. "Is something wrong?"

"No, of course not," I said quickly. I walked over to play some music, selecting something gentle. "You know, I really liked dancing with you up there, but the whole time, all I could think about was us being alone again." I extended my hand. "Dance with me again?"

He gave me a panty-melting smile that I was certain had captured countless hearts at his shows. "There's nothing I'd rather do, darling."

When he took me in his arms and we danced, a vibration rumbled in his chest. I placed my hand over his heart, feeling the faint tremor.

"I feel that rumble... Is that a good thing or a bad thing?" I asked.

He chuckled. "A very good thing." He caressed my face with the back of his knuckles. "It means you make my jaguar very happy. And you make me very happy."

"Oh." A flutter of happiness bloomed within me. I wished I could capture this moment in time, so it would never disappear.

I glanced into his eyes and admitted, "I feel the same way."

His eyes brightened. “Really?”

“Yes.”

He swallowed. “You mean something to me, Celeste. I think you’re incredible.”

His words took flight inside me, giving me hope—but I had to be strong, to remember two centuries of experience that warned me to be cautious.

“There’s something I need to tell you,” he said, shuffling his feet.

“Go ahead.” I braced myself for whatever terrible thing he was about to reveal.

“Celeste, I’m... you’re...” He exhaled, laughing nervously. “Too bad this isn’t a song lyric I could use to say it.”

“What is it?”

“Celeste, I know this started out as pretend, but this hasn’t been fake for me for a long time.

Since...almost since we met. Because my jaguar...

because I...” He took another deep breath, ran his fingers through his hair.

“Okay, I’ll just say it. You’re my mate.

And there’s nobody else I want in this world. ”

He traced his knuckles along my cheek, down my jawline. “Only you, Celeste. Only you.”

My body stilled. The fluttering inside went manic. What he said was beyond anything I'd ever considered—it made me blatantly happy on one level, and on another, it terrified me beyond comprehension.

“Celeste?”

I must've looked frozen because he frowned. “Am I freaking you out?”

“I... I'm just...” I didn't know what to think.

“Oh, no.” His face fell. “Forget I ever said it. We can keep doing what we're doing.”

I stepped back, the weight of his words sinking in. Two centuries of experience, and none of it prepared me for this moment. “We've...we've only known each other for a few days, Van. Maybe we're rushing things.”

“Fuck,” he muttered under his breath, groaning. “I never should've said anything.”

“No, I'm glad you did.” I struggled to make sense of the war between my heart and mind. “But maybe...maybe we need some space. Time to figure out what we really want.”

Van's expression crumbled. I wanted to yank every goddamn word back, but I didn't. I just stood there, watching him hurt.

He walked to the door, paused, and turned back. “I already know what I want, Celeste.”

His gaze pierced me. “You.”

Then he opened the door and walked out.

VAN

Sleep was rough. Putting myself out there the way I had for the first time, only to be rejected, gutted me. I'd revealed my feelings, exposed my soul to Celeste, and what had it done? Nothing.

Except to claw at my psyche.

She didn't want me. I should have known better.

And now I had too much time to think.

The ship was docked at the cruise line's private island in the Caribbean Sea—a place I usually loved to explore on my time off.

Beyond the beach was a lush forest teeming with wildlife, a haven for shifters.

The dense green canopy whispered with the flutter of wings and the rustle of unseen paws.

The fragrant scents of small prey trekking over soil called on us to hunt.

We'd have several hours off while many cruise passengers went ashore to bask on the island.

Normally, my jaguar would crave the time onshore. But today...

We could have used the distraction of playing with the band. Of wailing into the mic. A channel for our anguish. The urge to go back to the ship grew.

To return to our mate, a pale beauty who shielded herself from the sun that warmed my skin. A vampire. Never would I ever have thought I'd be intrigued by one, let alone craving one as my mate. Now I pictured my moonlit queen in peaceful sleep in her suite, and I longed to be there with her.

I forced myself forward, venturing deeper into the forest rich with the scent of earth and moss and small animals.

After removing my clothes and stashing them in a storage cube for this purpose, I shifted into jaguar form, my muscles reshaping and limbs reforming to stand on four legs.

My jaguar stretched out and sniffed at the ground, but he didn't bound into the woods the way he usually did, eager to run or hunt or just frolic.

Instead, he turned his snout back toward the dock and let out a low, mournful wail.

Mate...

I know, I replied, sharing his pain.

It would be a long day fighting the instinct to return to the ship just to be closer to her.

And then what happened tomorrow?

Would I fight this excruciating urge to be near my mate for the rest of this cruise?

What about after she left?

No... I couldn't go there. Couldn't bear to think of that separation just yet. A shifter rejected by his mate... I gulped.

Come on , I urged my shifter. We don't have much time out here.

My jaguar prowled through the tall grasses while birds sang and fluttered through the trees above. He sniffed for small game, but the thrill of the hunt did little to distract him. Within a few minutes, he turned his paws back toward the Moonlight Siren.

She needs space, I told him, the words bitter in my mind.

I thought what we had together was real. That it went beyond pretend. But maybe I was wrong. I was nothing but a distraction. A diversion.

What a fool I'd been to ever think that someone as sophisticated and elegant as Celeste would be interested in a singing buffoon like me.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:11 pm

CELESTE

I sat up with a bolt. Had I made a mistake?

While I had breakfast with a blood cocktail, I stepped out onto the balcony.

We were docked at a private island in the Caribbean.

To my right, moonlight waltzed across the ocean's surface, its silvery threads cascading over the waves.

The dark sands of the beach welcomed visitors from the shore.

If anyone had been out bathing beneath the sunlight earlier, they'd long since packed it up.

Now stragglers walked across the beach or back to the ship, many couples strolling hand-in-hand.

I could have been one of those couples strolling along in this romantic moonlit paradise if I hadn't let my fears get the best of me. If I hadn't let Lucien get under my skin, his toxic words worming their way through my veins as they poisoned my happiness.

And now I was left simmering with regret.

Enough...

I wouldn't sit here on my balcony all night, ruminating on mistakes.

After dressing in white linen pants and a shirt, I shoved my key card into my pocket and headed out to the island.

The moon bathed everything in silver. The scents of supernaturals commingled as they always did, although they dissipated in the sea breeze.

As I stepped through the sand, my sandals sank in.

The ground grew steadier as I trekked higher, toward the dense forest pulsing with quiet, hidden life—the flutter of bat wings, the distant splash of something slipping into water, the heartbeat of a small rodent scurrying through the underbrush.

The night air was fragrant, tinged with salt and orchids and damp earth—and prey.

One of the key features of this island was that it provided an abundance of wildlife should any supernatural want to hunt. After two centuries as a vampire, I'd learned to control my appetite so as not to lose control at the slightest scent of blood.

Until Van...

When I'd tasted him, it had stirred long-dormant urges, reminding me I was a woman. Awakening a sexuality like I'd never felt.

I frowned and balled my hands at my sides, then forced myself to unclench them.

Why had I let Lucien get to me? Van was nothing like Lucien.

He'd never once shown any interest in my money.

Never expected me to pay for everything, the way that Lucien had.

He'd turned down my offer to pay him to pretend to be my lover.

At the auction, he was going to purchase the painting I wanted for me, although it was much more than I suspected he could afford.

And for what? He didn't ask for anything in return. He'd never asked for anything .

Except to give him a chance.

And I'd turned him down.

I winced, remembering what I'd said when I'd turned him down.

His expression, often so devilishly amused, had turned devastated.

Crushed. I'd let my fear get the best of me.

Let the pain of my past cloud my judgment.

Let my bad experience with Lucien ruin any chance of a happy one with Van.

In choosing to shield myself from more pain, I sensed it had done the reverse.

Because what I felt for Van was real.

It had grown the more I spent time with him, basking in his bright aura.

He was golden sunshine to my pale moonlight.

Full of life while I'd lived the same undead existence for decades.

Eager to try new experiences and visit new places, easygoing as he went with the flow, even if it meant wearing an ill-fitting suit at his first art auction.

And once I'd tasted his blood, experienced that fiery connection that had seared us and jolted my undead heart, I'd known it was the truth.

Despite all our differences, we were meant to be together. Bonded. Like he'd claimed—we were mates.

I continued deeper into the woods, caught up in my tangled thoughts. And then I caught the scent of a feline. It was stronger than the one I recognized, yet still recognizable as one that I'd never forget.

A sleek, black, huge jaguar stepped onto the path before me and stared up from bright, golden, inquisitive eyes—ones that reminded me of the shifter I'd fallen for. He was enormous and gorgeous.

“Van?” I whispered.

He nodded. With a tentative hand, I reached out, and he took a step closer. I ran my fingers over the top of his head, and he purred, turning so I could stroke his cheek. I trailed my fingers over his back, through his silky-soft fur.

He motioned with his head for me to follow him. I did so, and he bounded forward. Once he disappeared behind trees, I followed his scent. My skin tingled with excitement. Where was he leading me?

“Celeste.” His voice was a low rumble that stirred my senses.

I turned to see him, no longer in jaguar form, but standing upright looking more devastatingly handsome than ever in just a pair of shorts. The golden skin of his toned upper body was bathed by moonlight. He fixed an intense gaze on me that sparked a fire inside me.

Struggling to keep my composure, I smoothed my hands over the sides of my linen pants. “Why did you lead me out here, Van?”

He chuckled, and that low reverberation added more kindling to the smolder burning within. “I figured I should put some shorts on rather than shifting back in front of you.”

With the sinfully beautiful way he appeared right now and how delicious I remembered touching every inch of his beautiful body in my suite, I wouldn’t have minded that one bit. In fact, as I pictured it...

I stepped forward. “Van, about what I said last night,” I began.

His smile vanished. “I understand.” He shook his head. “You’d made it clear from the beginning that it was just supposed to be pretend.”

A man’s cruel laughter interrupted before I could respond.

“I knew it,” Lucien declared smugly as he emerged onto the path. His cold smile lingered. “A woman like Celeste could never be interested in a”—he glanced down his nose at Van and sneered—”kitten.” He tutted. “Face it, boy, you were nothing but a happy little meal.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:11 pm

VAN

I resisted recoiling at Lucien's verbal slap, which cut beneath my skin as if I'd been snapped by a nearby vine.

"Lucien!" Celeste said. "How dare you?"

"Come now, love." His voice softened as he turned to her and offered his hand. "I know you miss me like I miss you."

She stepped back. "No."

Lucien sneered. "Enough of slumming with this mangy stray. You've made your point. Let's go."

I stepped up to him. "Don't talk to her like that. Perhaps you have trouble hearing. Or understanding." Staring him down, I added, "The lady said no."

Lucien turned to me with a disgusted expression. "Saunter off into the sunset, shifter." He motioned toward distant shadows beneath the trees.

I growled in warning as my jaguar rose within, ready to tear into undead flesh.

He let out a dark chuckle. "What's the matter, kitty cat? Need to cough up a furball?"

My claws extended and my fangs emerged. I glared at the vamp through narrowed eyes. "Celeste deserves better than you. Someone who respects her. Treats her like a

queen. Not someone who uses her and betrays her trust.”

“Oh, Van...” Celeste sighed. “He’s not worth it. Don’t risk your job over him.”

I wouldn’t step back. Not this time. Not when he’d insulted my mate. Casting a quick glance in her direction, I said, “You’re worth it.”

The vamp seized that moment to launch himself at me with a hiss. We tumbled onto the sand, kicking up grains around us.

With his speed and surprise, he quickly gained the advantage and landed on top of me. His eyes were red and feral as he stared down at me, opening his mouth to reveal deadly fangs.

Just as he was about to tear out my throat, I shoved him off me and launched to my feet.

“What are you going to do—scratch me?” he taunted.

“I have a better idea. Slicing you up and roasting you in the sun like hamburger patties.”

We parried and tangled as we headed down the beach, landed fierce gouges from our claws.

I launched at him with so much force that he fell into a crate of beach toys, breaking the wooden slats and sending inflatables flying.

A pink rubber duck floatie bounced off his head and landed beside him.

It would have been comical if I wasn’t already seeing red.

I pinned him down with my paws, then opened my mouth for the fatal blow.

“No!” Celeste cried out. When I paused, she said, “I can’t let you risk everything for me.” Her voice was as soft as an angel’s breath. “Please.” She offered her hand and helped me up.

She faced Lucien, still seething with red eyes. As he stood, she stepped between us and spread her arms wide. “Enough.” She straightened, tall, regal, and expression fierce, as if declaring I’m sick of this shit.

“Lucien, it’s over. I don’t want to be with you .

Leave me alone.” She turned to me and her expression softened.

“Van, perhaps it was pretend that first night, but my feelings have grown for you ever since. I feel the same way about you.” Her lips parted before she continued.

“Destiny brought us together. You’re my one, my true—mate. ”

I gaped at her, this magnificent gothic goddess. She chose me?

My jaguar purred softly inside, basking in her declaration.

As I walked over to her, it felt like walking through clouds. That heavy, dragging sensation that had weighed me down since she’d pushed me away lifted, replaced by something so light and buoyant, I could have been walking through clouds.

I took her in my arms and breathed in her scent. The universe turned right again. I’d hold her there forever and tell her how I feel, but we still had this walking corpse to deal with.

I turned to the undead beast. “In case you haven’t heard, shifters are territorial about their mates.

We’ll do anything to protect them. If you get too close...

” I edged my chin up and my nostrils curled.

“We turn feral. Since you haven’t been able to comprehend basic words up to this point, I’ll make it very clear.

If you come near us again, I’ll stake you to the ship’s mast and watch your undead corpse burn as the sun rises.

Lucien’s almost permanent aristocratic scowl turned scowlier. He opened his mouth as if ready to retort, but Celeste stopped him with one word.

“Don’t.”

His nostrils flared. He turned and walked away and we both stared after him. Once he was no longer visible beyond an expanse of palm trees, I pulled Celeste more tightly into my arms.

I whispered into her hair. “I love you.”

CELESTE

L ove. Van loved me.

What he'd done for me last night, risking everything to protect me from Lucien, warmed my veins.

Now I sat in the front row in the Nocturnal Lounge as Van announced their first song, the Doors' "Moonlight Drive." Although I'd claimed not to be a fan of rock music, it was most definitely growing on me—especially when a sexy shifter crooned in a way that ignited heat in my veins.

I examined the rest of the band, all talented musicians and supernaturals.

Van had told me a bit about each one and said he'd introduce me after the show.

I spotted the dark-haired guitarist, a vampire named Damien.

To Van's other side was a burly, bearded wolf shifter playing bass.

And at the drum set loomed a massive gray gargoyle shifter with horns and leathery gray skin.

He pounded on the drums with his sticks so hard, it seemed he might break right through them.

That was Caleb, who Van told me often liked to perform in gargoyle form.

I didn't blame him—it was a great visual, one that would be unforgettable to anyone attending the show.

But not as enticing as the singer.

It still seemed somewhat like a dream that despite all our differences, we'd fallen for each other. Fear had pushed me away from him, but I was grateful I smartened up to take this chance. Never in my two-hundred years prowling this earth had I ever been so hopeful and optimistic about the future.

When we'd returned to the Moonlight Siren last night, I'd reported how Lucien had been harassing me by following me and later physically attacking my mate.

Perhaps I should have done that upon first spotting him on the ship, but then I wouldn't have had that foolish idea of enlisting a shifter's help as a fake boyfriend—and I had zero regrets there.

Lucien, however, hadn't come back on board. Van's warning must have worked far better than my words. While his fierceness had intimidated Lucien, it had a starkly different effect on me. I found it devilishly enticing.

In fact, I wouldn't mind experiencing his feral side again tonight.

He sauntered across the stage, looking ever-so-decadent in a pair of black leather pants that fit just right—perhaps a little too right—with the way they drew my attention to what they covered within.

This was a thousand times better than a suit, although he'd looked incredibly dashing in one.

I loved all the different sides of him I'd seen so far and couldn't wait to discover

more.

Last night, we'd ended back in my suite and tumbled into my bed together—kissing and touching and caressing with gentle words until the sun came up. Once I'd woken up at sundown, I went down to the reception area and inquired about some arrangements.

Van and Luna Blue Shadows finished up their set with Queen's "Another One Bites the Dust," encouraging the audience to chime in.

At the end of the show, he quickly made his way toward me.

"I loved seeing you in the front row there tonight."

"Good. Because you might see it more often."

"Oh? Was I that good tonight?"

"I'm hoping for even better in my suite tonight."

He chuckled. "I'll do my best."

"You know, I've greatly enjoyed my time on the Moonlight Siren. I've booked an extended stay."

His eyes widened. "Brilliant." He wrapped me in his strong arms. "I couldn't imagine anything I'd want more."

I gazed into his eyes. "Van, I've fallen in love with you too." I paused before I admitted, "When we were together and you let me bite you, my heart beat for the first time in two centuries. I knew then—I knew you were the one."

He beamed, his eyes twinkling as he stared down at me.

“What’s the matter, shifter?” I teased and cocked my head. “Cat got your tongue?”

He dropped his head back and chortled at the memory of our first encounter, when I’d given him a hard time for catching him gape at me.

“Oh, I’ve got a story to tell you about that,” he said.

“But first, I have something far more important to say.” He searched my eyes again, a hint of a smile lingering.

“I love you, Celeste Deveraux. Beautiful vampire, sophisticated woman.” He bent down and kissed me, then pulled his lips a fraction away to murmur, “And most fortunate for me—my mate.”

VAN

“These musical menaces are Damien, Rex, and Caleb,” I teased as I introduced Celeste to my bandmates after our show. “Menace-monsters, this is my extraordinary mate, Celeste.”

Caleb acknowledged her with his standard grunt, while Rex tipped his head in a silent greeting.

“Enchanté,” Celeste said in her musical accent.

“Likewise,” Damien said with a grin. “But I have to admit—if a stunning woman like you chose this fur-for-brains, I have serious questions about your taste in judgment.”

“Was it coercion?” Caleb asked with a faux serious expression. “If so, blink twice and we’ll get you out of here.”

Celeste laughed, quickly catching on to our typical band banter. “You know, questionable judgment isn’t something you outgrow—even after two centuries.”

“I think you made an excellent choice.” I winked at her and cocked a smile. “Let’s have a drink before I start swinging my tail to knock my own band overboard.”

We settled in at a table in the Nocturnal Lounge with our beverages, us with beer and her one of the vampire’s specials with a pink champagne—basically bubbly with blood.

The witches joined us soon after when Piper came after a midnight auction and Kylie after her shift at the bar in the Celestial Lounge.

That night, I carried her into the suite and onto the bed, unable to keep from kissing and touching her. Almost feral with need, we grasped at each other's clothes, shedding them with vampire speed.

"You were so hot tonight," Celeste murmured as she ran her hands down my bare chest. "I couldn't wait to get you back here. Claim you as mine."

Claim . Mine. Those words resonated with my jaguar and me as I bent her back and kissed down her soft body. "Mine," I rumbled.

"Yess," she purred. "Yours."

The scent of her desire drove me almost feral. I could barely restrain myself as I wanted to devour and claim her, but I forced myself to slow down and draw out her pleasure with my mouth and hand until she shattered and cried out my name.

I slid up her body as she recovered. The sharp points of her fangs were visible between her lush red lips. Mine had already extended, but when I fixed on the smooth pale skin near her shoulder, they extended completely. An insistent thrumming beat in my veins to mark her, claim her as mine.

"Are you ready for me?" I asked as I rubbed back and forth in between her slick folds.

"Yes," she rasped out. "I need you inside me, Van."

I was just as desperate to sink in. As I slid the tip inside her tight flesh, a low rumble spilled from my lips. Slowly, I drove in, her exquisite tightness enveloping me in such bliss.

Mate.

Soon I was driving in and out of her, near feral with the instinct to claim her. She grasped onto me, letting out small cries as she met each thrust. Harder, faster, we were both barely on the shred of control.

“Your fangs,” she gasped out. “I’ve never seen them like that.”

I could barely mutter words to explain, but managed, “Want to mark you.”

Her eyes, dark with desire and tinged with red, gleamed brighter. “Do it.”

Dear gods, that’s all I wanted. Every instinct inside insisting I do so. But she didn’t know what that meant, and that wasn’t fair.

“No,” I murmured as I slowed down my urgent thrusts. “It’s more than just a bite,” I uttered. “It’s a claim. Marking you as my mate.”

She held up her dainty hands to the sides of my face and stared into my eyes. “I know.” She bent her head to the side, exposing more of her sweet flesh. “I’m yours, Van.” With a sigh, she added, “Always.”

Every sense inside me lit up, every inch primed with awareness. I extended my fangs as I bent down, the salty scent of her skin calling me. The moment my fangs brushed her skin, she braced herself. When I pierced her flesh, she cried out and held onto me.

Her blood—like sweet ambrosia on my tongue. I was in heaven. A blissful moonlit haven. I rocked into her harder, thrusting faster, as the magic flowed. It wound between us, connecting us, as we lost ourselves in each other’s bodies.

She clung onto me so tightly as she shattered that I thought she might have broken my bones. But it would be worth it, so worth it.

She pulsed around me, so tight, so wet, and I didn't stand a chance of holding back. Volcanic pressure built as blood rushed through my veins, and I erupted with a fierce growl.

I lost all sense of our surroundings as I floated back to the earth in a million pieces, settling back to bliss in my mate's arms.

We were bonded. Connected.

Mates.

The next night, Celeste and I met up with the band and their mates after our show. We were sitting at an outdoor table near the dragon pool beneath the stars.

When I spotted Maribelle walking toward us, my muscles tensed. Oh no.

"Maribelle..." I began as she reached our table, about to beg her not to hex me in front of Celeste.

"Relax, Van," Maribelle said with a placating gesture. "Word on this ship spreads fast. Is it true?" She glanced at Celeste and then back at me with one eyebrow raised.

I put a protective arm around the back of Celeste's chair, still wary of what the witch might do. "Maribelle, this is Celeste, my mate. Celeste, Maribelle works in the spa on board."

Every nerve was heightened with awareness as I anticipated a flick of her wrist turning me into a neighing horse. What she did surprised me even more.

She laughed. "I never would have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes." She motioned to my mate. "Celeste, you must be quite a remarkable woman. I'm ever so pleased to meet you."

Celeste nodded. “The pleasure is all mine.” She gazed at me with her brows drawn tighter in question.

“I’ll explain later,” I muttered and took a sip of my beer.

“I’ll explain now,” Maribelle said with mirth in her eyes.

She pulled up a chair beside Celeste. “You see, before you came along, Van was a little reckless with people’s hearts, and so...

I decided to play a prank on him.” Maribelle sat upright and crossed her arms across her chest with a smug expression.

“What did you do?” Celeste asked.

“I hexed him!” Maribelle declared proudly. “You should have seen him bleating like a buffoon. Croaking like a frog.” She chortled and the rest of the table joined in.

I raised my glass. “Har har. Laugh it up, rocks-for-brains. It all worked out in the end.”

Celeste turned to me with a sly smile. “Did you really croak?”

“I may recall a yodel,” I admitted in a posh accent.

“That was why I was afraid to talk to you that first night. I thought I might ribbit, or worse, spout dirty limericks.” I shot Maribelle a look and then turned back to Celeste.

“That was the story I was going to tell you later, but Maribelle beat me to it.”

Maribelle bowed forward. “You’re welcome.”

“Ribbit?” Celeste let out a soft laugh. “Now that would have been quite the introduction.” She leaned closer to me and whispered, “I’d rather hear you howl.”

That was all the cue I needed. “Good night, everyone.” I squeezed Celeste’s thigh. “Ready?”

“Just let me finish my drink.” She took a dainty sip.

“I guess a mate will bring even the most stubborn shifter to his knees.” Maribelle’s eyes gleamed with amusement. “What do you think, Caleb?”

“I wouldn’t know.” He grunted. “And I won’t know,” he added in a resolute tone. He took a long sip of his beer, downing it as if wanting to avoid the conversation.

Piper and Kylie exchanged glances across from me, and I could all but read what they were communicating— Is he next?

Oh, you know what’s coming next—grumbling Caleb is going to meet his fated mate, but not in the way you’d ever expect! Read Caleb’s story in *Rock of Stages* .

Here’s a sneak peek: He will, He will ROCK YOU!

~ Lisa