

VAMPIRE GIRL

By Karpov Kinrade

Chapter 1

THE ROXY

*"We are the oasis in the desert, the safe harbor in the storm, the place anyone is welcome, as long as you're not a jerk to the servers."*

—Arianna Spero

**The rain falls** in sheets, like layered waterfalls outside my second story window. I hug my knees to my chest and press my cheek against the cool glass as I watch the world outside soak itself in the Oregon mist and water.

My mom is downstairs cooking something that smells wonderful. Waffles and bacon, I think. My favorites. Breakfast for lunch? Or would it be dinner? Working graveyard messes my whole schedule up. I check the clock. It's nearly three in the afternoon, so maybe dinner? Or lunch? I chuckle at my own stupid humor. I've been an adult now for fifteen hours. I was born at midnight on a full moon during a storm, or so my mom tells me.

There are day people and night people. I am a night person. An owl. A vampire. A being of darkness. A moon goddess.

I hear my mom shuffling around the kitchen, humming the nameless tune she always hums when she's alone. I feel a strange kind of melancholy today, but I don't know why. It's my birthday. I should be happy. Why aren't I?

I tug on the oversized shirt I sleep in, pulling it down my shins as I shiver. The heater is on the fritz again, just in time for a very cold winter.

"Ari! Breakfast!" My mom's voice is shrill. Forced frivolity. She's been on edge too, likely from those final notice bills I saw in her room.

She doesn't know I've dropped out of college to work full time at The Roxy. She doesn't know I already paid the electric bill in person so it wouldn't get shut off. She'll be pissed when she finds out, but at least we'll still have electricity.

College can wait.

It's not as if I'm behind, having graduated a year early and completed three semesters of undergrad classes already. But I have a long, expensive road ahead of me if I want to fulfill my dream of becoming a lawyer. And I don't have the time or money for that dream just yet. She'll understand one day.

I hope.

"Coming, Mom!"

I flip my legs off my window bench and grab a pair of jeans lying on my floor. It only takes a few seconds to pull them on and tie my long hair into a ponytail. A few black wayward strands fall out and I tuck them behind my ears and run downstairs.

My mom smiles when she sees me, but her eyes are creased with worry. "Happy Birthday, Arianna!" She's holding a plate of waffles and bacon, with eighteen lit candles sticking out of the waffles.

"Thanks, Mom." I walk over and blow out the candles, missing the last one as I run out of air. I didn't make a wish, so it doesn't really matter.

"What did you wish for?" she asks.

I smile, hoping my eyes don't betray my strange anxiety. "If I tell you, it won't come true."

She nods. "Of course." My mom and I don't look much alike. She's wild, with red curly hair, freckles, and hazel eyes. I take after my father, she says. The few pictures I've seen of him prove her right. The pale skin, black hair, elfin features, and green eyes are nearly identical. I may have gotten my looks from my father, but I get my determination and stubbornness from my mother.

She limps around the kitchen serving up our breakfast, and I resist the urge to help her, to insist she sits. I know she's in pain. I can see it eating away at her, in the pinched expressions on her face and weariness of her eyes. It's gotten worse over the years, and her pain pills are less and less effective. But despite it all, she won't let me help. My mother is nothing if not proud and fiercely independent.

We sit at our two-person plastic kitchen table surrounded by peeling yellow walls with cheap flea market paintings of flowers and fruit decorating them. I love our kitchen, as tiny and old as it is. It's cheery and always smells of cinnamon and honey.

I'm mid-bite when my mom looks up, her grin faltering. "What time do you have class today?"

I hate lying to her, but today isn't the day to tell her the truth. "It's Friday," I say. "No classes. Just work."

Her eyes light up. "Oh, maybe you could take the day off? We could go hiking? Or maybe to the museum?"

I want to say yes. I really, really do. But I can't afford to lose a day's worth of pay. Not when I know rent is overdue and we're getting eviction notices. But I can't tell her that. She works so hard to provide for us, and I know it would break her heart if she thought I was worried. So instead I shrug and try to act casual. "I can't, I'm sorry. I wouldn't be able to get anyone to cover for me this late. But how about we go out to eat after my shift? My treat."

I can see the disappointment on her face, but she covers it quickly with a smile. "That would be fun. But I'm paying. No arguments. You only turn eighteen once."

"Deal." I take my plate to the sink and wash it, then kiss her on the cheek as I head upstairs. "I've got to get ready for work. I'll see you in the morning."

"I don't like you working these late shifts, Ari," she says as I'm halfway up the stairs. "Such strange people coming and going. It's not safe."

I stop and look at her over my shoulder. "Shari looks after us. Don't worry. I'm fine." But her words send a shudder down my spine.

If I'd known how the day would progress, I would have stayed. I would have spent every minute with her I could. I would have tried to

find a way to change fate. But that's foolish thinking from a foolish girl who didn't know anything, isn't it?

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I dress quickly in my standard black skinny jeans and tight black shirt. I wear my uncomfortable push up bra to give my breasts more cleavage than they naturally have. Better tips that way.

The only jewelry I wear is the blue sandstone ring my mother gave me when I turned thirteen. She said it's a star stone, often called 'sparkle fairy' during the Renaissance and believed to be blessed by fairies. I always wear it, and though I don't believe in the magical properties some attribute to stones, I still feel happier and luckier with it on.

I turn my attention back to my hair, pulling it into a braid, and then apply red lipstick, charcoal eye shadow and black mascara to my eyes, until I look the part of a Roxy waitress.

It's a long walk to work, and even still I'm lucky to live so close to downtown. My mom got our apartment for a steal when I was a baby—some kind of friend of a friend connection—and we've only had a few rent increases in all this time. It's the only way we can still afford to live in this part of Portland.

I know the drill as I walk, even in this friendly city. I walk with a determined gait, eyes focused, senses alerted to everything around me. Women walking alone will always be cause for caution in our world,

sadly. But I'm not an inherently paranoid person, and yet my senses are on high alert.

Someone is following me.

I can't see them, or even really hear them, but someone is watching me, stalking me, and my every instinct is screaming danger.

I walk faster, my heart hammering in my chest, my palms getting sweaty. I pull pepper spray out of my bag and clutch it in my hand. I won't go quietly, whatever they think. My black boot heels click against the wet pavement. I try to quiet my breathing so I can hear if someone else approaches, but all I hear is the steady drone of rain washing the city away.

By the time I enter the crazy world-unto-its-own that is The Roxy, my thin jacket is soaked and I'm shaking, though not just from the cold. The diner is buzzing with people, and the warmth and fragrant smells set my nerves at ease like nothing else can. I peek outside, but see nothing unusual. Maybe it all was just in my head.

One of our regulars says hi, and I smile and wave, grabbing a napkin to dry my face after the rain. I enjoy the eclectic personalities that come in at all hours. I love interacting with them, finding out about their lives, giving them just what they need to get through the next few hours. I've often wished that working here was my destiny. It's not a glamorous destiny, as things go. I'd never make millions or change the world serving coffees and diner food to the caffeine-craving, sleep-deprived, hungover masses, but it's fulfilling work I enjoy. Doesn't that count for a lot? When most people dread waking up in the morning and facing their day, I think loving what you do and who you do it with is a gift. But I

have never felt content in my own skin, or my own life. I always thought it was because I needed to accomplish something bigger than myself. Help others. Make a difference. I chose law thinking that would be my fit. My ticket to peace and happiness, but I'm starting to doubt there is anything in this world that can make me feel those things.

Esmeralda is in true form when I arrive, her long lashes blinking frantically. "Darlin', you are late!" she says in her southern accent I know for a fact is fake. She was born and raised in Los Angeles before moving to Oregon, but I'd never tell anyone that. She's very protective of her fictional southern roots. She tsks me, waving a long, red nail in my face. "We are nearly bursting!"

I look around and see she's right. The late shift is always crazy. Professional alcoholics know to eat before they drink, and come in to fill up. Stragglers line the counters ready for something greasy, fried, or baked to satiate whatever craving they are having, and as the night wears on, the seats will overflow. We are the oasis in the desert, the safe harbor in the storm, the place anyone is welcome, as long as you're not a jerk to the servers. Shari, the owner, makes one thing very clear: The customer is not always right, and if you disrespect her staff, you're out of here. End of story. I love her for that. I worked at a different diner before getting this job, and quit after one week. The manager treated us like indentured servants. I'm nobody's servant.

"Is Shari crazy mad?" I ask Es.

Es just rolls her eyes. "Puh-lease." She takes the napkin from my hand and dabs under my eyes. "Look up," she says, as she fixes my

makeup. "Darlin', you need to get a car or learn to appreciate public transportation. This is not the weather for walking in."

Before I can argue with her, she saunters off. I sigh and look up at Jesus hanging on the cross. He always looks so reproachful, as if to say, 'You think you have problems?' but then again, maybe he's just checking out the naked sculptures behind the bar. The decor of The Roxy is nearly as famous as the cheeky staff and artery scorching foods. I run to the back to clock in. But when I turn the corner, there's a small group of people, Shari and Es included, holding a Chocolate Suicide Cake alight with candles. They begin to sing a morbid happy birthday song about death and then they laugh uproariously and someone smacks me on the butt as I lean in to blow out the candles.

Shari hugs me. "Happy Birthday, girl. You didn't have to come in today."

I hug her back. "Yes I did. But thank you."

Es hugs me next, her tall body dwarfing me. She was a tall man once upon a time, and makes an even taller woman, given social stereotypes. But she is all woman, and one of my best friends in the world. Being transgender in a binary world can't be easy, and every day I admire the courage it takes for her to just be herself. Maybe that's why we became best friends almost instantly the day I started working here, because in our own way, we each feel this disconnect to the life we were born into. I have tears in my eyes when I look up at her. "You should have warned me," I chide.

"Neva'!" she says, a twinkle in her brown eyes as she flips her blond hair out of her face.



Shari hands me a slice of cake. "Eat up. The customers can wait."

As if on cue, someone from the bar raises his voice, complaining about the service. "What's taking so damn long? What are you all doing back there, twiddling your thumbs?"

Shari's face hardens as she storms out to give that customer a piece of her mind. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize we were married in a past life."

It's a line she uses a lot. Sometimes it works, shifting the mood into happy. When it doesn't, the customer is kicked out, blacklisted from the best diner in Portland. Their loss.

This time it works. The customer apologizes, Shari is gracious, and all is well in the world of The Roxy.

I love it here. It's my family. My second home. I've lived alone with my mother my whole life. My father died when I was a toddler and we have no other relatives. Death, disease, life... has stolen them all. It's only here, at The Roxy, that I have any real family to call my own, outside of my mother.

I finish my cake and check in to see which tables I have. I'm ready.

The night is long, but fun. We have our regulars, the guy who almost never speaks, wears the same thing every day, but always leaves a nice tip and is kind to us all, the drag queen who likes to flirt with our cook, those coming off their shifts at other bars, who are too sober and properly dressed to be out drinking all night... I greet them by name, serve them what they love most, sass them just enough to make them feel like family, like this is their place too, because it is.

But when he walks in, it's like time stands still. He's not a regular. He's never been here before. I don't know how I know this, but I know

he's here for me. And my hands shake when I walk up to him, sitting in a booth alone, not looking at his menu. He has hair dark as night and eyes like the moon and sea. His skin is pale and perfect and he looks as if he's been carved from marble. He wears a tailored suit too perfect to be purchased off the rack. We get all kinds at The Roxy, but not his kind. He has no kind.

And he makes me nervous.

"What can I get you?" I ask, my tongue tripping over itself.

He looks up at me and smiles. "Are you on the menu?"

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This is not the first time I've been hit on at The Roxy. It's a regular occurrence. They flirt, I flirt, or I sass, depending on my mood. What I don't do, what I never do, is stutter.

Until now.

I literally stutter. My armpits are sweating, my head feels hot and I might have a sudden fever. I also might vomit. What is wrong with me? Is Insta-flu a thing? Because if it is, I've clearly contracted it.

He looks amused. "Are you all right?" His voice is rich and he's got the sexiest accent, something of a cross between British and South African. He holds up his glass of water to me, his long slender fingers so perfectly manicured. "Drink."

I take the glass, and our hands touch. A chill runs through my body and I nearly drop the glass. What am I doing? I can't drink a customer's water. I put it back on the table. "I'm fine. Just... hot."

"Indeed," he says, his lips in a smirk, eyes twinkling.

"Have you... uh... decided on your... what you want?" Shut up, Ari.  
You sound like an idiot.

He grins, a dimple forming on his chin. "What do you recommend?"

"Depends," I say, slowing my breathing so I don't pass out. "Are you in the mood for savory or sweet?"

Everything I say suddenly feels like a double entendre with this man.

"Surprise me." He hands me his menu and tugs at the cuff of his suit.

"You don't look like a man who usually likes surprises," I say, studying him more closely as I regain my composure.

He raises a perfectly formed eyebrow at me. "Really? What kind of man do I look like?"

"A proud man who likes control."

There's a flash of surprise on his face, before his mask falls back into place. How do I know that's a mask? How do I know these things about him? I have no idea. I'm pretty intuitive about people, but I leave the fortune telling to Es's boyfriend, Pete. He's got the gift, or so everyone says. I've always been too chicken to have him read me.

Unlike this man before me, I like surprises. Life is too bleak without them.

"The way you dress," I say.

He raises an eyebrow.

"You wear an expensively tailored Italian suit into a diner. Your nails are manicured. Your skin is well-cared for. Everything about how you present yourself screams control. Precision. There's nothing that indicates you like spontaneity or surprises."

He doesn't reply, just stares into my eyes for far too long. I look around for an escape from his penetrative gaze. My eyes fall to the table, to his elegant hands. His jacket cuff is pulled up, exposing a strange kind of scar or tattoo on his wrist. "Does that mean something special?" I ask, pointing to it.

He looks down, and quickly pulls his jacket to cover it. "Just a birthmark."

I flush and look away. "I'll just... find something for you to eat." I rush off, and hide in the back until I can slow my wild heart.

Es rushes by, hands full of plates, but she pauses when she sees me. "What's the matter with you, darlin'? You're not coming down with that flu that's going around, are you? Vomit is not a good look on me."

I shake my head. "I'm not sick. Just... flustered. I don't know. It's weird. I'm fine."

She raises a plucked eyebrow at me, then glances out to my table. "Oh, I see. Darlin', that man is a gift from the Universe. He is your birthday present, all wrapped up in silk and satin. You must give him your number!"

"No way. Definitely not my type."

"Really? Tall, dark, and sexy as sin isn't your type? Pray tell what is?" She leans closer to me, and I can smell her expensive perfume. "Look, honey. You are the closest thing to a virgin The Roxy has ever seen over the age of sixteen. You need to get some before you shrivel up."

I puff out my chest in mock offense. "I am not a virgin!"

She rolls her eyes. "High school boys behind the bleachers do not count. Now get that man something delicious to eat, and I'm not talking about anything from our menu."

Despite my bold words, I blush, because she's not wrong. For a waitress at The Roxy, I'm woefully inexperienced when it comes to men.

But right now, time is ticking, my other tables are filling up, and I need to figure out what to feed this strange man, when my eyes land on my birthday cake. I cut a slice and bring it out to him. His eyes crinkle when he sees it. "Good choice," he says.

"It's my birthday cake," I spurt out. Because I'm a five-year-old with her first kindergarten crush, apparently.

"Happy birthday," he says, taking a big bite out of the cake. "My brother would love this place. Just decadent enough for him."

"You don't enjoy decadence?" I ask.

"I prefer to stay on task, to not get distracted by temporary pleasures. What about you, Arianna? What do you enjoy?"

I narrow my eyes. "How do you know my name?" We don't wear name tags at The Roxy.

"I heard your coworker mention it," he says without pause. "But you didn't answer my question. What do you enjoy?"

"Customers who tip big," I say, turning on my heel to walk away. I hear him chuckle as I stop to take the order of my next table.

When I come back, he's gone, only one bite missing from his cake. But he left a stack of twenty-dollar bills under the water glass, with a business card. I stare at it in disbelief, then count it quickly. Three hundred dollars? For a slice of cake? My breath hitches. Was this on

purpose? Who is this guy? I pick up the card and study it. It's heavy card stock with engraved silver writing. No name, just a phone number and a hand-written note that says, "See you soon," in a formal cursive style in thick black ink. I stick the card and money in my pocket as a drunken man across the diner kicks the juke box.

Es deals with him, explaining with hand on hip the appropriate Roxy behavior. I catch her eye and gesture to the back, then escape the customers.

She finds me hovering over the remains of my birthday cake, staring at the money.

"Oh my! Did that sexy thing leave that for you?"

I nod, still unable to speak.

"And did you give him your number? Tell me you gave him your number!"

I shake my head. "But he gave me his." I show her the card.

She whistles under her breath. "Girlfriend, you had better call him. If you don't, I will."

I peel off a few twenties and slip them in Es's hand. "For your fund."

Her eyes fill with tears and she sniffs as she delicately brushes them away. "What are you doing, girl? Do you know how long it takes me to do my face? You can't give me this. You need it too much."

I shake my head. "Es, you've been saving for your gender reassignment surgery for years. I'm just doing my small part to help. You'll get there." She's on the hormones and she had the breast augmentation done, but there's one last piece to her transition that she hasn't been able to afford yet, and she's desperate to.

She hugs me, then flits away, mumbling about reapplying her mascara. I smile, and pick up an order for one of my tables.

The rest of my shift flies by, and my feet and back are sore when morning breaks. Es kisses my cheek and slips a small box into my hand as I leave. "Happy Birthday," she says.

I thank her and open the box. Inside is a pendant on a silver chain. The stone is beautiful— a blend of greens and blues. I slip it over my head.

"Pete said you'd need it. It's labradorite. It's protection against psychic vampirism, and it will help awaken your own powers."

I don't buy into most of that stuff, but I keep the pendant on as I walk back to my apartment. There's ice on the ground, the rain freezing in the dropping temperatures. I'm careful as I walk, and I pull my thin jacket around my body, trying to stay a little dry. It doesn't work. I'll need to budget for a new winter coat soon. I remember the wad of cash in my pocket and smile despite the cold.

I'm halfway home when once again I feel the presence of someone following me. This time, I don't try to run. Instead, I turn, pepper spray in hand, and challenge my invisible stalker. "Who's there? What do you want?"

I wait, my legs shoulder-width apart, fighting stance ready. I hear nothing, see nothing. Feeling foolish, I retrace my steps, but it's misty and I can't see much. "I know you're there!"

My voice sounds so loud, so crass in the silent, pre-dawn morning. Still, nothing.

I sigh and turn, walking briskly to my apartment.

The rest of the world will be waking up for their weekend soon, but my eyes are heavy, and I'm ready for bed. Then I remember I promised my mom we'd get something to eat. I yawn, stretch and try to wake myself up as I open the door. "Mom! I'm home. I'm just going to shower and change and then we can go out."

I hurry upstairs and slip out of my work clothes. My shower is quick, and I pull on my jeans and a blue sweater and use make-up to make myself look a little less tired before I see my mom. She's always worried I'm working too hard and not getting enough sleep. She's not wrong, but I can't let her know that.

I expect to find her in the living room or kitchen. When I don't, I knock on her bedroom door, the only room left besides our shared bathroom. There's no answer.

"Mom?"

I nudge the door open and peek in. I see her small foot hanging off her bed, so I push the door open all the way. She must not have woken yet.

"Mom?" I creep closer, not sure if I should wake her or let her sleep. She's lying on her back, her head turned away from me, the blankets askew around her. I can only see the back of her head, and my heart beats harder, as if it knows something I don't.

My voice becomes more panicked. "Mom!" I reach for her, my hand landing on her shoulder. She doesn't move. I brush the long hair out of her face. Her eyes are closed, but still she doesn't respond. I scream for her, but her body is motionless. Lifeless.



I reach for my cell phone and dial 9-1-1. "Please help me. I think something happened to my mother. I think she's dead."