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## Dark Promises (Carpathian Novel, A)

By Christine Feehan



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**Lovers challenge destiny and risk their lives in the new Carpathian novel by the #1 *New York Times* bestselling “queen of paranormal romance.”\***

Gabrielle has had enough of battles, of wars, of seeing the man she’s engaged to nearly lose his life when it isn’t even his fight. Once Gary was a gentle and very human researcher. Now he’s a fearless and lethal Carpathian warrior with the blood of an ancient lineage coursing through his veins—a man Gabrielle still needs and dreams of with every breath she takes. All she wants is a life far away from the Carpathian mountains, far from vampires and the shadows cast by the crumbling monastery that hides so many terrible secrets. But Gabrielle soon learns that promises made in the dark can pierce the heart like a dagger.

*And she isn’t the only one in search of answers in the corners of the unknown....*

Trixie Joanes has come to the Carpathian mountains in search of her wayward granddaughter, fearing that she has been lured there by something unspeakable. Instead, Trixie has stumbled onto the path of a desperate woman on the run. And they’re all fated for the lair of a mysterious ancient with revenge in his soul and the undying power to make bad dreams come true.

\*J.R. Ward



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## Editorial Review

Review

### Praise for Christine Feehan and her Carpathian novels

“The erotic, gripping series that has defined an entire genre...I love everything she does.”—J.R. Ward

“Carpathian lovers will be happy.”—*USA Today*

“After Bram Stoker, Anne Rice and Joss Whedon (who created the venerated *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), Christine Feehan is the person most credited with popularizing the neck gripper.”—*Time*

“Feehan has a knack for bringing vampiric Carpathians to vivid, virile life in her Dark Carpathian novels.”—*Publishers Weekly*

About the Author

**Christine Feehan** is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of the Carpathian novels, the GhostWalker novels, the Leopard novels, and the Sea Haven novels.

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Dark Promises

## Chapter One

“Joie, can you believe this night?” Gabrielle Sanders stared out the window at the stars scattered across the sky. The night was almost a navy blue, with so many stars overhead it would be impossible to count them. The moon was rising, a beautiful half-crescent of shining light. “It’s perfection. Everything I dreamed of.”

Her wedding night. She’d dreamt of it for so long. At last, this was the evening she’d waited for, and the weather was cooperating, just as if it knew she was marrying the man of her dreams.

“We’ve got to get you ready, Gabby,” Joie answered. “Come back here. I need to make certain you have everything you need and give you the ‘talk.’”

Gabrielle turned back with a short laugh. “I’m marrying Gary, Joie, the love of my life. I certainly don’t need the ‘talk.’ I love Gary Jansen with every breath in my body,” she whispered, as her sister smoothed a hand down the filmy ivory and lace gown and stepped back to survey her handiwork.

“Daratrazanoff,” Joie corrected, a hint of worry in her voice. “You still persist in acting as if you’re human, Gabrielle. You aren’t. Neither is Gary. Both of you are fully Carpathian. When Gary rose Carpathian, he rose as a true Daratrazanoff. He’s from one of the most powerful lineages the Carpathian people have. You can’t pretend he isn’t.”

“He’s still Gary,” Gabrielle protested gently. She took both of her sister’s hands in hers. “Be happy for me. Truly, I’ve never been happier than this night. We waited so long to be together.”

"I am happy for you," Joie said immediately, smiling at her sister. "You look so beautiful. Like a princess."

Gabrielle looked at herself in the mirror. Her dress was exactly right. The perfect fit, a lovely fall to her ankles, swirling around her so that she appeared to be ethereal. She loved the square lace neckline and the fitted bodice showing off her small waist. She was tall enough to pull off elegant, and the gown did just that.

Joie didn't understand. None of them did. Only Gary. He knew. He saw inside of her. Way down deep where no one else had ever looked.

"Joie, I'm not like you or Jubal," she admitted, referring to her brother. "I'm not a woman who craves adventure. I'm not a warrior who wants to go fight the injustices of the world. I'm just Gabrielle, no one special, and I like my life simple. Peaceful. I like to sing when I wake up and hum all day long. I like picnics. Horses. Galloping across the fields and jumping over tree trunks and streams. I love sitting on a porch swing and talking quietly with someone I love. That someone is Gary."

"Oh, Gabby." Joie put her arms around Gabrielle. "I didn't realize you've been so unhappy. You have, haven't you?"

Gabrielle hugged Joie back, feeling lucky to have a sister and brother who loved her so much. She felt their love at all times. Their support. More than anything, she wanted Joie's support now in the biggest moment of her life.

"I don't fit in this world, Joie," she said gently, trying to find a way to carefully explain. Joie pulled back and looked at her with liquid eyes. Gabrielle's heart beat louder. She didn't want to hurt her sister, but she wanted to be honest. "I like to observe people from a distance, not be in the middle of some kind of crazy battle between vampires and shifters. I didn't even know there were such things as shifters or vampires in the world. Carpathians. Lycans. Mages. Jaguars. It's all crazy, like a mad nightmare, Joie. Violence and war aren't big on my agenda. In fact, the entire Carpathian way of life is totally foreign to my nature."

She had, thankfully, never heard of Carpathians when she was growing up. And she'd always thought vampires were a myth. She still wished she thought that. Carpathians never killed for blood, but they slept in the rejuvenating ground, couldn't be in the sunlight, and existed on blood. They hunted the vampires who lived to kill their victims.

Gabrielle gave a little shiver. She'd had enough of battles. Of wars. Of seeing someone she loved—such as Gary—nearly lose his life when it wasn't even his fight. She had nearly lost him. Gregori had converted him, bringing him fully into the Carpathian world—as if they hadn't already brought him there.

Gary had somehow become an integral part of Carpathian life, so essential to them that even the prince sought his opinion on matters Carpathian. Gregori, second to the prince, was always with Gary now. It wasn't as if Gary was born a Daratrazanoff. He was born Gary Jansen, a genius, off the charts intelligent, a tall, thin reed of a man with glasses and a thirst for knowledge. A geek. Like her.

Now he was a tall, completely filled out, walking warrior. He went into battles without flinching. Even before Gregori had converted him he had. She'd watched him slowly change from her nerdy geek to a completely different man as the Carpathians put more and more demands on him.

Joie moved to a chair as if Gabrielle was delivering a terrible blow, and she probably was. She hadn't told anyone but Gary her true feelings. Her beloved Gary. He was quiet and solid. He could always, *always*, be counted on. Everyone counted on him, but especially Gabrielle.

She kept trying to make her sister understand. “Joie, you and Jubal belong in the Carpathian world. I don’t. I don’t even want to be here. Not anymore.”

Joie inhaled sharply. “Gabby . . .”

Gabrielle shook her head. This had to be said. She wanted Joie to understand just what Gary meant to her. What he’d been for her in the past and what he would be in her future. “I hope, after tonight, after I marry Gary, we’ll go away together and live in a beautiful little house. Nothing big. Nothing fancy. Just small and snug and filled with love. That’s it. That’s my dream. Gary and my little house tucked away someplace where there are no such things as vampires and women carry their children to full term and give birth to healthy, happy babies. No wars. Just peace and happiness.”

There, she’d said it. That was the strict truth, and Joie needed to know how she truly felt.

Joie’s eyebrows came together as she frowned. “You mean you want to move away from here? Where your laboratory is set up? You love working here. You want to move away from the Carpathian Mountains? From the prince? From Gregori?”

Gabrielle straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin. “*Especially* away from the prince and Gregori.”

Joie shook her head, looking shocked.

“I don’t belong in the Carpathian world, I just don’t. Only Gary seems to understand that about me. He doesn’t mind that I’m not a fierce warrior woman. The thing is, Joie, I don’t *want* to be different. I’m a book person. I like to live quietly.”

“Gabrielle, you are so far off track about yourself and Gary. Where is this coming from? You love adventures. You’ve gone ice climbing with Jubal and me a million times. You’ve gone caving. Hiking in remote, third world countries.”

Gabrielle nodded. “I went caving because you and Jubal did, and I enjoy spending time with you, but I don’t live for adventures the way you do. I’m really a homebody.”

“Are you crazy, Gabby? You’re a genius who thrives on studying hot viruses. Newsflash, sister. Playing with that kind of virus without a way to fight it can get you killed. If you didn’t like adventure you would never, under any circumstances, study them.”

“You fight the world’s injustices your way, and I fight them mine. Viruses make sense to me. I can solve the puzzle and try to help with things like finding a way to stop the Ebola virus from being let loose on the world. Vampires make no sense. None.” She gave a little shudder. Joie would never understand that she escaped into a lab, that once she focused on whatever she was studying, everything around her disappeared and she didn’t have to think about anything else at all.

“You have crazy, mad skills in a lab, Gabby,” Joie said. “You’re a genius, it isn’t just Gary. He isn’t smarter than you.”

“Actually he is. Most men bore me silly after two minutes alone in their company. I can talk to Gary for hours. More, I can just listen to him when he talks to others. He’s brilliant. He’s also the kindest, sweetest man I know.”

Joie shook her head. “He’s a Daratrazanoff. Every bit of power, of knowledge, their blood, their ancestors, all of it was given to him in the cave of warriors. You know that. You were there. He was powerful before,

Gabby. He's even more so now."

Gary always took the back of the hunters and he'd never let any of them down during a battle, not once. Gabrielle knew it because when he'd nearly died, their best hunters came in to give blood and to pay their respects. She knew it because Gregori Daratrazanoff had made him his brother, his own flesh and blood. The power of the Daratrazanoff family ran in his veins. Was in his heart and soul. Was there, in his mind.

Okay, she had to admit to herself she shied a little away from the sheer power there at times, but still, he was always her Gary. Gentle and kind with her. Seeing her when others couldn't—or wouldn't. She'd tried to tell Joie and Jubal that she was different, not at all wild or willful, but they laughed and said she didn't know herself very well.

Maybe she didn't. But she knew what she wanted—what she'd always wanted—and that was Gary. "I don't care what his last name is, or whose blood runs in his veins, he's *mine*," she declared firmly. "He's always been mine, and I want him back. His life shouldn't be fighting vampires. He's such a genius and I miss him in the laboratory. I want him back there. Once we're married and we find a home, we can set up a lab and he can research for solutions to all the Carpathians' problems *away* from the Carpathian Mountains and vampires and anything else that is monstrous."

Joie cleared her throat, and Gabrielle's gaze jumped to her younger sister.

"Just tell me, Joie," she said. "We've always talked straight with each other."

"You can't change him, Gabby. Gary is a man who will put himself in harm's way over and over if it comes to his sense of right or wrong. He has a clear sense of honor, of duty, and that's why Gregori accepted him from the start—from the very beginning when he first met Gary. Gregori didn't associate with humans, but Gary already had the same values. He was willing to put himself on the line. Like Gregori, he's a man of action, and he's decisive about it."

Gabrielle shook her head. "They've forced him to become like them. He belongs in a laboratory. He loves research and he's got the mind for it, Joie. You know he does, but more and more they're pulling him off that work to go hunt the vampire with them. He's with the prince and Gregori all the time."

"Because they value his advice, Gabby," Joie said gently. "You should be proud of him."

"I am, superproud," Gabrielle assured her sister, and she *was* proud of Gary. "He's a brain. *Gregori* changed him."

Joie bit down on her lip, her eyes shadowed. "He didn't, Gabby. Gregori wouldn't have changed him—he couldn't. Fundamentally, Gary is the same man he always was. Gregori looked into his mind and he saw a brother—a man who thinks as he thinks. Gregori accepted Gary because Gary is exactly like he is. Of course Gary didn't have the skills or knowledge to fight the undead, but he does now. He is Carpathian through and through. You have to be very sure you know him and you accept who he is, not just a small part of him."

"They almost got him killed. In a way they *did* get him killed." She ducked her head and twisted her fingers together. "I was there when he was dying. I was *right* there. Do you know what he said when Gregori told him he was going to convert him? Gregori explained that Gary was *dying*. We all knew."

She pressed a trembling hand to her mouth as the memories flooded in, the ones she tried so hard to keep at bay. She actually felt sick to her stomach. Her lungs refused air and her heart accelerated to the point where she was afraid she might have a heart attack. She would never forget the sight of Gary, torn and bloody in so

many places. He'd saved the life of Zev Hunter, lifemate to Branislava of the Dragonseekers. Zev was *Hän ku pesäk kaikak*—guardian of all and a very needed member of their people. But in saving Zev's life, Gary nearly died. So close. It had been a terrible few hours. The worst. She never wanted to go through that again.

She wasn't a healer like some of the women. That wasn't her gift. She didn't even know what her gift was other than a party trick or two. So she could look at a map and locate things. What good was that? Her family—and the Carpathians—said she was psychic, but she wasn't. Not like Joie, not like Jubal. She was just plain Gabrielle. No one special. But Gary was a gift, and he saw her that way as well. She'd nearly lost him to the madness of Carpathian life.

"He said he could better serve the people as human," she whispered, her fingers covering her mouth as if she couldn't say the words aloud. "He was ready to die for them. He didn't make the decision to become Carpathian. Gregori made it for him."

There was hurt in her voice. She knew Joie heard it. The Carpathian people had been put above her. Everything in her life had changed when she'd been nearly killed. A member of a human society of vampire killers had stabbed her repeatedly, a vicious, brutal attack. She still had nightmares, although she didn't share that with anyone, not even Gary. She had been brought into the Carpathian world in order to save her life.

Had it not been for Gary, she would have wished they hadn't saved her. She didn't belong. It was that simple. Mikhail, the prince of the Carpathian people, had given her the choice. Live or die. Of course, it had been her own decision to be converted, but Gary was a huge part of that. She'd never had regrets because of him. At the time, terrified and in pain, she had been happy for the chance. Mostly, because she knew *this* day would come. Her day. The day she married Gary.

"Gabby," Joie said. Her tone said it all. Compassionate. Sympathetic.

Gabrielle blinked back tears. "I know he has a sense of duty. I know that. I love that about him. When we're bound together as lifemates, my soul to his, that sense of absolute duty and honor and love will be for me. I'll be first. Traian puts you first. Even Gregori puts Savannah first. Lifemates are always first."

"You're absolutely certain that Gary is the one for you, Gabrielle?" Joie asked.

Gabrielle had always chosen to think before she spoke, especially to her sister and brother. She loved them both fiercely. She turned what Joie said over and over in her mind. Was she fooling herself? Was her love for Gary real? Did she see him the way he saw her? Because she knew, without a doubt, Gary saw her. Inside of her. He knew her better than anyone else had ever known her.

She moistened her lips. She had never really used her abilities as a Carpathian to look into Gary's mind. That was true. She could. He would have allowed it, but she wanted that human aspect of finding out slowly about her partner. She even needed it. She was lost in the mountains, amid the wars going on, wars she didn't understand and wanted nothing to do with.

"I love Gary, Joie. I always have. His mind is so incredible. He starts working on something and it's breathtaking to watch him. He gets a scent and he's like a bloodhound. It's such a beautiful and mind-blowing thing to see. He's always going in the right direction. I love that about him. I love that I don't have to talk down to him. Or dumb it down. When I talk, he listens to me, and he believes I'm intelligent. Together we can accomplish so much."

"You already have," Joie said gently. "Give yourself credit. You and Shea were right there with Gary trying to find solutions and coming up with all sorts of things."

“But it was really Gary who pointed us in the right directions. It could have taken years or longer to figure things out,” Gabrielle said. “I love his mind. I love how it works. I love how gentle he is and how kind. I love how sweet he is.”

“What about his sense of duty,” Joie said. “That’s a *huge* part of him. His sense of honor. His integrity. Those things make up his character. He’ll put others before his own life. He’ll put himself in a dangerous situation in order to protect others. He, like Gregori, is a shield.”

Gabrielle felt her stomach settle. Her heart slowed to normal. The breath moved in and out of her body naturally. “Once we’re lifemates, that shield is mine, Joie.” She knew that was the absolute truth. She’d known it practically since the moment she’d laid eyes on him. He was hers. After tonight, she would be forever grateful she was Carpathian. Tonight was her night. The wait was finally over.

Joie smiled at her. “I can see you’re absolutely certain. I can tell Dad and Mom I had the ‘talk’ with you and you passed with flying colors.”

“I’m so in love with him I can barely breathe sometimes when he’s around,” Gabrielle admitted.

“You really are breathtaking,” Joie reiterated. “I’ve always thought you were beautiful, but the way you look tonight, Gabrielle . . . Gary is a lucky man.”

Gabrielle smiled. Her heart leapt. *She* was the lucky one. Gary and she would exchange their vows and go away, far from the mountains where every single night Gary was asked by the prince, or Gregori or someone to perform some monumental task that no one else could possibly do but him. Some terrible thing that put his life in jeopardy. She couldn’t bear that, not ever again. Being proud of your partner was just fine until they died in your arms, then pride wasn’t all that great anymore.

Gabrielle smoothed her hands down the line of her filmy gown and took a deep breath, pushing her fears away. Nothing was going to mar this special night. Nothing at all. Tonight was hers. Once more she glanced out the window up at the night sky where the stars glittered like a ceiling of diamonds. The rest of the tension coiled in her stomach slid away.

There wasn’t a single cloud. Not one. Just a beautiful blanket of stars, and she knew why. Gary. That was the reason. Carpathians created storms easily. They could also bring beautiful, perfect weather when they needed it. Gary had brought her this night. She didn’t feel the subtle pull of power, but she knew it was there.

“He’s waiting for me.”

“He can wait. You need something borrowed,” Joie said. She pulled a necklace from around her neck. A small pendant hung from a thin chain. “I keep this with me most of the time.” Her fingers wrapped around the pendant. “Well, *all* of the time. I found Traian in that cave and when we were escaping, I found this embedded in the ice. I think it belonged to one of the mages. Maybe even Dad. I’ve never showed it to him because I love it and feel very drawn to it and I really don’t want to lose it. It feels as if should be mine.”

Gabrielle understood that her sister was giving her something that was important to her. She took the pendant and chain on her open palm, studying it from every angle. It was made of rock. It looked like quartz to her, but it was shaped into four circular corners with lines in the middle of each circle. It was highly polished, but still appeared crude. Gabrielle closed her fingers around it and felt warmth instantly. More, she felt her sister’s presence—as if she held a small bit of her in her hand.

“I can’t take this,” she whispered, her heart fluttering as love for her sister overwhelmed her. “This is meant



for you. I feel you in it.” She could feel the way Joie loved her. Fiercely. Protectively. Unconditionally. She had that. Tears filled her eyes. Joie gave her that.

Joie reached out and gently put her hand over Gabrielle. “Just for this night. For *your* night. I want to be there with you in some way. I can’t go to the field of fertility with you, but I can give you something that matters to me so I can travel with you and know how happy you are. And you deserve to be happy, Gabby.”

“Thank you, Joie, I’ll wear it, then.” Gabrielle carefully slipped the chain over her intricate hairdo and let the pendant rest between her breasts.

“Something blue,” Joie said, and grinning, fashioned a lacy garter to slip under the wedding gown and onto Gabrielle’s thigh. “Gary will be happy to discover that.”

Gabrielle blushed. “Lovely. He will.”

“Something old.” Joie said, sobering a little. “Jubal gave me this for you. He said it was Dad’s, an ancient bracelet from an ancestor we’ve never heard of.”

“Dad gave this to Jubal? It’s for a woman,” Gabrielle said, her eyes on the delicate links, all fashioned by a brilliant ancient jeweler. The bracelet was made from a material she was unsure of, but the links were locked together and couldn’t come apart. She couldn’t see the clasp.

She wanted it instantly. It was beautiful. Primal. It held power. She felt it in the delicate links. “Why would Dad give this to Jubal?”

“He said Jubal would know who it belonged to and when to give it to her. Jubal says it belongs to you and now is the time,” Joie said.

Gabrielle bit her lip and took the links from Joie’s palm. Instantly the bracelet felt alive. Warm, like Joie’s pendant, but there was a surge of power, almost like an electrical current. The links moved, snakelike in her palm. She should have been afraid, but she wasn’t. Her heart beat faster, but only in anticipation.

This was hers. Just as the pendant was Joie’s and her brother had a bracelet that was really a weapon, this delicate piece from ancient times was meant to be part of her.

She closed her fingers around it, accepting it. Accepting that it held power and would somehow become a part of her. She felt the ancient links move again, slipping out the side of her fist to curl around her wrist. For one moment the links blazed hot, changing color from that strange metallic to a glowing red. Her wrist felt hot, but not burning, just the sensation of heat—a *lot* of it. Then the bracelet was there. Closed. No clasp. No way to take it off. It was as if the links surrounding her wrist were a part of her.

Joie caught her hand. “It’s beautiful, but Gabby, it’s some kind of weapon like Jubal’s is. I think my pendant is for protection, but I think this is a weapon.”

“I don’t know what this is or who it was made for,” Gabrielle said softly, stroking the links with the pads of her fingers. “But I know it belongs to me. It’s *supposed* to be mine. I love this, Joie. It feels right on my wrist, almost as if it’s part of my skin.” She lifted the bracelet to admire it in the moonlight.

As soon as the beams of light hit it, the bracelet lit up, moving of its own accord, a glittering warmth that surrounded her wrist, snug, but not at all tight. She loved it. More, she loved the fact that it had belonged to an ancestor before her and that Jubal had been the one to pass it on to her.

“You have something old. Something borrowed and something blue. You still need something new. You said you wanted to blend traditional with human so we need to cover all four bases,” Joie said.

“Everything is perfect, Joie. I couldn’t ask for anything more.”

“Shea, Savannah and Raven had something made for you. Something brand-new. Byron made it. Do you remember him at all? He lives in Italy with his lifemate, but he’s a gem caller, and they asked him to make you something special for your wedding.”

Tears clogged Gabrielle’s throat. She knew she’d become bitter toward the Carpathians ever since Gary had nearly died—ever since Gregori had brought him fully into their world. She felt like she’d lost him twice. First in death, and then to the prince and his second-in-command. Gary was fully a Daratrazanoff, and with that name came the power and responsibilities given—and those were huge. Still, she’d pushed aside the friendships she’d forged with some of the women, and that had been wrong. Very wrong.

“I don’t deserve anything from them, Joie,” she admitted in a low voice. “I’ve been standoffish.”

More than that, she’d been restless and irritable, as if something deep inside her called to her. Wanted. No, even needed and recognized that time was growing short. She’d pushed for the marriage because she knew if she didn’t do this now, something terrible was going to happen.

She pressed both hands to her churning stomach. She’d woken up from her sleep—the terrible paralysis of the Carpathian people—deep beneath the earth. She could hear her heart thudding dangerously loud. She felt the echo of the nightmare, the vicious stabbing as the knife blade penetrated her body, slicing deep over and over. She relived it, but the moment she woke, there was an echo of something else. Something she couldn’t quite catch. So elusive, but so important. The feeling of dread built in her until every rising she wanted to run away and hide.

She still couldn’t tell Joie, as much as she wanted to. She could only tell Gary. He didn’t look at her as if she wasn’t quite up to the standards of the Sanders family. Joie and Jubal could kick serious butt. Gabrielle stood over Gary’s broken, wounded body and cried her eyes out. She had nightmares when other Carpathians said they didn’t dream—as in ever. She was growing afraid as each rising passed. She had to be somewhere, and the need in her was so strong, she feared she would take off on her own soon. She didn’t make sense. The Carpathian way of life was definitely not good for her and she had to find a balance before she went crazy. Gary was her balance.

“Shea, Raven and Savannah love you, Gabrielle. All of us noticed you’ve been withdrawn, but it’s entirely permissible and even understandable, after what happened to Gary. Everyone knows you love him. How could that not affect you? Of course you’ve been moody and withdrawn.”

“Don’t make excuses for me,” Gabrielle said. “They’re my friends, you’re my sister, and I shut all of you out.”

Joie hugged her tight. “I’m the queen of shutting people out, Gabby. You’re a Sanders. When we have problems, we tend to keep them to ourselves until we figure out a solution. It isn’t possible with your lifemate. I’m warning you right now. He’ll know when you’re upset and he won’t mind in the least getting into your head and reading what the problem is. Males want to fix everything.”

Gabrielle smiled. She couldn’t help it. It was the truth. The good thing was, Gary knew her. He knew how to fix her. He didn’t have to invade her personal space, and she liked it like that. Although, since he’d risen as a Daratrazanoff, she’d noticed he was far quieter—and he’d always been quiet. Much more serious, and he’d

always been serious. He had the same look that Gregori sometimes got, or Darius, Gregori's younger brother—one bordering on command, as if everyone had better do as he said when he said it. Still, he never looked at *her* that way.

Joie showed her the ring. It was beautiful. Elegant. Breathtaking even. It was to be worn on her right hand, the ring finger, and the moment Joie slipped it on, Gabrielle knew there was more to the ring than platinum and gemstones. She loved it just like she loved the bracelet, the pendant, and her blue garter. Perfection for her wedding. She knew each of the gems set in her ring were power gems and each would have a purpose. She'd learn about them later. For now, she could enjoy the fact that her sister and her three best friends were sharing this monumental event with her.

She stood there for a moment, feeling radiant and lucky. She actually felt beautiful, like a princess about to meet her prince. She'd never been happier than that moment knowing he was waiting right outside for her. She felt him. She always knew when he was close to her.

"He's here," she said softly to Joie. "He's waiting for me."

Joie hugged her again and kissed her cheek. "You've never been more beautiful than you are at this moment, Gabrielle. I hope you always stay this happy."

"I'll be with Gary. How can I not be happy?" Gabrielle asked, and hugged Joie back.

She turned toward the door, a lump in her throat. She wanted to see his face when she stepped through. That would tell her everything. She would know if he felt the same way. Joie, staying to one side of the door, pulled it open for her, and Gabrielle picked up the sides of her dress and stepped outside. Her crystal shoes and ivory gown, all lace and crystals so that the moment the beams of light from the moon hit her, sparkled like the stars overhead.

Gary turned toward her, and she drew in her breath. He was gorgeous. Every time she looked at him, she felt as if she was seeing him for the first time. He looked older than when she'd first met him, but it suited him. He had a few scars, but they suited him as well. His hair was long and thick, growing like the Carpathians' hair seemed to do. That gave him a more primitive, ancient look, but she found she liked it. He had a few streaks of gray spun into his dark hair.

Gary was a few inches shorter than Gregori, but no less commanding. She'd never seen that in him before. He'd always been a man to slip into the shadows and let others take the spotlight. She couldn't imagine him in the shadows now. His eyes were glued to her. He no longer wore his glasses. In any case, because he was so often in battle, defending the children against vampire puppets, he'd long since settled for the contacts Gregori manufactured for him. Now, he was fully Carpathian and didn't need glasses or contacts, and she could see the amazing green of his eyes.

She loved the expression on his face. She couldn't have asked for a better manifestation of his love. His entire face lit up. His mouth went soft. His face went warm, and his eyes went hot. *Really* hot. A million butterflies took wing in her stomach. Her lungs felt a little as if they couldn't quite get enough air. She moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. He was so beautiful to her. Inside and out. Everything about him. Especially his mind. She loved his mind, although, right at that moment, when he was looking so handsome in a dark suit, so appropriate for a wedding, she thought maybe she could love his body even more. Well. Equally.

He held out his hand to her. "You look beautiful, princess."

He always called her princess when they were alone. Never in front of others. He made her feel like a princess in a fairy tale. Always. No other person in the world was so gentle with her in the way that he was. When violence swirled around them, Gary was always her rock.

“Thank you. I think you’re quite handsome tonight as well,” she said, a little shyly. She felt shy with him. She didn’t know why. Gary knew her better than anyone else did, but still, it was their wedding and after tonight, they would be bound together in the Carpathian way. Not just in their hearts, but in their very souls. She secretly loved that idea. Being his other half. She *loved* it, knowing it was better than any fairy tale.

Gary drew her to him, his eyes still drifting over her face. Over her body. Slowly. Taking her in. Appreciating the time she’d spent getting ready. Human time. Not Carpathian. She had carefully put on every article of clothing manually. Taking her time, making it right. Wanting this night to be a mixture of both cultures, human and Carpathian.

Her hand was trembling and he knew it. He immediately enveloped her hand in both of his.

“You’re safe with me, Gabrielle. Always.”

She knew that. She had always known it. She loved the timbre of his voice. So gentle, like a caress. He was such a good man. As much as Gregori intimidated her and she didn’t want Gary to be *anything* like him, she couldn’t help but admire the flashes of Daratrazanoff in Gary. The confidence. The ability to keep her safe.

Maybe it wasn’t so bad that he was a Daratrazanoff, especially if they could move away from the prince. Always Mikhail Dubrinsky and his family would draw vampires and now, rogue Lycans. To eliminate the prince was to eliminate the Carpathian people. Mikhail now had a daughter and a son. Both were threats to the vampires and rogues.

The attacks would never stop, and Daratrazanoffs protected the prince. If they remained, no matter that she was his lifemate, even putting her first, Gary’s life would always be in danger, and she didn’t want that. She couldn’t have that. And that made her *so* not a Carpathian. It was ingrained in every man, woman and child to protect the prince and his heirs. Even she felt it. Gary, as a human, had always taken on the protection of all the Carpathians, from unborn children to the prince himself. Now, as a member of one of the most powerful families of Carpathians, he would be twice as in demand.

“Gabrielle?” Gary prompted softly. He didn’t tug on her hand or try to hurry her in the least. He never did. He was never impatient with her. She knew he was capable of impatience because she’d seen him giving orders to some of the other males and he did it in a voice that meant business—and they obeyed him.

“I’m ready.” She lifted her chin, pushing aside the weird urge to run that kept getting in the way of her happiness. Run where? To what? Everything she wanted or needed was standing right in front of here. She just had the vague, persistent feeling of dread, as if something terrible was going to happen any minute. The feeling was growing stronger every day. Another war? Another moment when Gary would save a life at the expense of his own? In saving Zev Hunter, Gary had been eviscerated by the rogue Lycans. He waded in where no other human—well, except her brother—would dare to go.

“Are you ready, Gary?” she asked, needing his reassurance. Needing to know he wanted her with the same urgency that she wanted him. She’d waited so long. Everything Carpathian had gotten between them. They had never had a moment to themselves. It was as if fate had conspired against them.

“More than ready, princess. This is our night. Our time. I want to give you everything you ever wanted.” Gary snapped his fingers, and a horse emerged from the trees.

Gabrielle caught her breath. The horse was a good seventeen hands. Pure white. Tail and mane flowed like so much silk with every move the graceful animal made. He came to them, prancing as he did so, his eyes on Gary.

Gary put his hands around her waist and lifted her onto the horse's back, sidesaddle, her dress flowing around her much like the horse's mane. The ivory lace settled in a beautiful drape. Her breath settled in her lungs as Gary took the reins and began to lead the horse through the trees toward the mountain where the fertility flowers grew in abundance—another thing Gary had contributed to their people. He had planted and cultivated the flowers until an entire field grew once more wild up the mountain.

White petals drifted around them and settled on the trail so that there was a carpet of white for the horse to carry her over. Overhead, the leaves rustled as they went under the canopy of trees. She glanced up and swore some of the branches bowed toward them as they passed, setting the leaves swaying so that they appeared a beautiful silver in the moonlight.

Wolves began a serenade, and she knew they sang to them. She loved that. She loved that nature surrounded them and seemed to bless their joining. The horse's gait was so smooth she didn't even have to hold on, but could balance without effort. She felt as if she was floating through the air toward their ultimate destination.

The hoofs made a light sound on the rock as they started up the mountain, adding to the beauty of the moment. She couldn't have asked for a more perfect way to make the ascent. Her man—no lifemate—leading her to an incredible field of flowers on the back of a white stallion. Who had a man like that? Only Gabrielle Sanders, soon to be Daratrazanoff. Only she did.

## **Users Review**

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