



Lord of the Vampires

By Gena Showalter

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In her dreams, a wanton vampire called to Jane Parker, drawing her to his dark sexuality and his magical realm. But for a human, all was not a fairy tale in Delfina. Jane was the key to Nicolai's memory...but exploiting her meant dooming the only mortal he craved.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Gena Showalter is the New York Times and USA TODAY bestselling author of over fifty books, including the acclaimed Lords of the Underworld and Angels of the Dark series, and the White Rabbit Chronicles. She writes sizzling paranormal romance, heartwarming contemporary romance, and unputdownable young adult novels, and lives in Oklahoma City with her family and menagerie of dogs. Visit her at GenaShowalter.com.

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"I need you, Jane."

Frowning, Jane Parker placed the note on her kitchen countertop. She studied the scarred, leather-bound book resting inside an unadorned box, surrounded by a sea of black velvet. A few minutes ago, she'd returned from her five-mile jog. This package had been waiting on her porch.

There'd been no return address. No explanation as to why the thing had been left for her, and no hint as to who "I" was. Or why Jane was needed. Why would anyone need *her*? She was twenty-seven years old and had only recently regained the use of her legs. She had no family, no friends, no job. Not anymore. Her little cabin in Smallest Town Ever, Oklahoma, was secluded, barely a blip in the neighboring expanse of lush green trees and wide-open, blue sky.

She should have tossed the thing. Of course, curiosity far outweighed caution. As always.

She carefully lifted the book. At the moment of contact, she saw her hands covered in blood and gasped, dropping the heavy tome on the counter. But when she lifted her hands to the light, they were scrubbed clean, her nails neat and painted a pretty morning rose.

You have an overactive imagination, and too much oxygen pumping through your veins from the run. That's all.

Cold hard logic—her best and only friend.

The book's binding creaked as she opened to the middle, where a tattered pink ribbon rested. The scent of dust and musk wafted up, layered with something else. Something...mouthwatering and slightly familiar. Her frowned deepened.

She shifted in her seat, a twinge of pain shooting through her legs, and sniffed. Oh, yes. Her mouth definitely watered as she caught the slightest trace of sandalwood. Goose bumps broke out over her skin, her senses tingling, her blood heating. How embarrassing. And, okay, how interesting. Since the car accident that ruined her life eleven months ago, she had experienced arousal only at night, in her dreams. To react like this in daylight, because of a book...odd.

She didn't allow herself to ponder why. There wasn't an answer that would satisfy her. Instead, she

concentrated on the pages in front of her. They were yellowed and brittle, delicate. And beaded with blood? Small dots of dried crimson marred the edges.

Gently she brushed her fingertips along the handwritten text, her gaze catching on several words. *Chains. Vampire. Belonged. Soul.* More goose bumps, more tingling.

Some blushing.

Her eyes narrowed. At last the sandalwood cologne made sense. For the past few months, she'd dreamed of a vampire male in chains and woken to the fragrance clinging to her skin. And yes, he's the one who had aroused her. She'd told no one. So, how had anyone known to give her this journal?

She'd worked in quantum physics for years, as well as what was considered fringe science, sometimes studying creatures of "myth" and "legend." She'd conducted controlled interviews with actual blood drinkers and even dissected the corpses brought to her lab.

She knew that vampires, shape-shifters and other creatures of the night existed, even though her coworkers on the quantum physics side of the equation had not been privy to the truth. So, maybe someone had found out and this was a simple joke. Maybe her dreams had no connection. Except, forever had seemed to pass since she'd had any contact with those coworkers. And besides, who would do such a thing? None of them had cared enough about her to do *anything*.

Let this go, Parker. Before it's too late.

The command from her self-preservation instincts made no sense. *Too late for what?*

Her instincts offered no reply. Well, the scientist in her *needed* to know what was going on.

Jane cleared her throat. "I'm reading a few passages, and that's that." She'd been alone since leaving the hospital several months ago, and sometimes the sound of her voice was better than silence. "'Chains circled the vampire's neck, wrists and ankles. Because his shirt and pants had been stripped away, and a loincloth was his only apparel, there was nothing to protect his already savaged skin. The links cut him deeply, to the bone, before healing—and slicing open again. He did not care. What was pain when your will, your very soul, no longer belonged to you?'"

She pressed her lips together as a wave of dizziness crashed through her. A moment passed, then another, her heartbeat speeding up and hammering wildly against her ribs.

Raw images tore through her. This man—this vampire—bound, helpless. Hungry. His lush lips were pulled taut, his teeth sharp, white. He was surprisingly tanned, temptingly muscled, with dark, mussed hair and a face so eerily beautiful he would haunt her nighttime fantasies for years to come.

What she'd just read, she'd already seen. Many times. How? She didn't know. What she did know was that in her dreams, she felt compassion for this man, even anger. And yet, there was always that low simmer of arousal in the background. Now, the arousal took center stage.

The more she breathed, the more the sandalwood scent clung to her, and the more her reality altered, as if this, her home, was nothing more than a mirage. As if the vampire's cage was real. As if she needed to stand up and walk—no, *run*—until she reached him. Anything to be with him, now and forever.

Okay. Enough of that. She slapped the book closed, even though so many questions were left dangling, and strode away.

Such a strong reaction coupled with her dreams utterly nixed the idea of a joke. Not that she'd placed much hope in that direction. However, the remaining possibilities upset her, and she refused to contemplate them.

She showered, dressed in a T-shirt and jeans and ate a nutritious breakfast. Unbidden, she found her gaze returning to the leather binding, over and over again. She wondered if the enslaved vampire were real—and okay. If she could help him. A few times, she even opened to the middle of the book before she realized she'd moved. Always she darted off before the story could snare her.

And perhaps *that's* why the stupid thing had been given to her. To hook her, to send her racing back to work. Well, she didn't need to work. Money was not a problem for her. More than that, she no longer loved the sciences. Why would she? There was never a solution, only more problems.

Because when one puzzle piece slid into place, there were always twenty more needed. And in the end, nothing you did, nothing that had been solved or unraveled, would save the ones you loved. There would always be some dumb guy throwing back a few cold ones at the local bar, getting into his car and hitting yours. Or something equally tragic.

Life was random.

Jane craved monotony.

But when midnight rolled around, her mind still hadn't settled in regards to the vampire. Giving up, she returned to the kitchen, grabbed the book and stalked to bed. Just a few more passages, damn it, *then* she'd start craving monotony again.

Jane's oversize T-shirt bunched at her waist as she propped the book on her upraised legs, opened to the middle of the story, where the bookmark was still set, and returned her attention to the pages. For several seconds, the words appeared to be written in a language she did not understand. Then, a blink later, they were written in English again.

O-kay. Very weird, and surely—hopefully—an I-just-need-sleep mistake on her part.

She found her place. "They called him Nicolai." Nicolai. A strong, luscious name. The syllables rolled through her mind, a caress. Her nipples beaded, aching for a hot, wet kiss, and every inch of her skin flushed. She thought back. She'd never interviewed a vampire named Nicolai, and the one in her dream had never spoken to her. He had never acknowledged her in any way. "He did not know his past or if he had a future. He knew only his present. His hated, torturous present. He was a slave, locked away like an animal."

Just like before, a wave of dizziness slammed through her. This time, Jane pressed on, even as her chest constricted. "He was kept clean and oiled. Always. Just in case Princess Laila had need of him in her bed. And the princess did have need of him. Often. Her cruel, twisted desires left him beaten and bruised. Not that he ever accepted defeat. The man was wild, nearly uncontrollable, and so filled with hate anyone who looked at him saw their death in his eyes."

The dizziness intensified. Hell, so did the desire. To tame a man like that, to have all of his vigor focused on you, pounding into you...his participation willing... Jane shivered.

Lose the ADD, Parker. She cleared her throat. "He was hard, merciless. A warrior at heart. A man used to absolute control. At least, he thought he was. Even with his lack of memory, he was patently aware that every order directed his way scraped his nerves raw."

Another shiver rocked her. She grit her teeth. He needed her compassion, not her desire. *He's that real to you?* Yeah, he was. "At least he would have a few days' reprieve," she read on, "forgotten by one and all. The entire palace was frothing over Princess Odette's return from the grave and—"

The rest of the page was blank. "And what?" Jane flipped to the next, but quickly realized the story had ended on an unfinished cliff-hanger. Great.

Thankfully—or not—she discovered more writing toward the end and blinked, shook her head. The words didn't change. "You, Jane Parker," she recited hollowly. "You are Odette. Come to me, I command you. Save me, I beg you. Please, Jane. I need you."

Her name was in the book. How was her name in the book? And written by the same hand as the rest? On the same aged, stained pages, with the same smudged ink?

I need you.

Her attention returned to the part directed to her. She reread "You are Odette" until the urge to scream was at last overshadowed by curiosity. Her mind swirled. There were so many paths to take with this. Forged, genuine, dream, reality.

Come to me.

Save me.

Please.

I command you.

Something inside her responded to that command more than anything else in the book. The urge to run—here, there, anywhere—beat through her. As long as she found him, saved him, nothing else mattered. And she could save him, just as soon as she reached him.

I. Command. You.

Yes. She wanted to obey. So damn badly. She felt as if an invisible cord had been wound around her neck, and was now tugging at her.

Trembling, Jane closed the book. She wasn't searching for anyone. Not tonight. She needed to regroup. In the morning, after a few coffee IVs, her head would be clear and she could reason this out. She hoped.

After placing the tome on her nightstand, she flopped into her bed and closed her eyes, trying to force her brain to quiet. An unsuccessful endeavor. If Nicolai's story was true, he was as trapped by those chains as surely as she had once been trapped by her body's infirmities.

The compassion grew...spread...

While he was kept in a cage, she had been bound to a hospital bed, her bones broken, her muscles torn, her mind hazed by medication, all because a drunk driver had slammed into her car. And while she had been—was—tormented by the loss of her family, since her mother, father and sister had been in the car with her, Nicolai was tormented by a sadistic woman's unwanted touch. She felt a wave of regret, a crackle of fury.

I need you.

Jane inhaled deeply, exhaled slowly and shifted to her side, clutching her pillow close. As close as she suddenly wanted to clutch Nicolai, to comfort him. To be with him. *Uh, not going there.* She didn't know the man. Therefore, she wasn't going to imagine sleeping with him.

But that's exactly what she did. His plight was forgotten as she imagined him climbing on top of her, his silver eyes bright with desire, his pupils blown. His lips were plump and red from kissing her entire body, still moist with her flavor. She licked at him, tasting him, tasting herself, eager for anything and everything he would give her.

He growled his approval, flashing his fangs.

His big, muscled body surrounded her, his skin hot, little beads of sweat forming, causing them to rub and glide together, straining toward release. God, he felt good. So damn good. Long and thick. A perfect fit, stretching her just right. Rocking, rocking, faster and faster, taking her to the edge of sensation before slowing... slowing... tormenting.

She clawed at him, her nails scouring his back. He groaned. She raised her knees, squeezing his hips. *Yes. Yes, more.* Faster, faster still. Never enough, almost enough. *More, please more.*

Nicolai's tongue thrust into her mouth, rolling with hers before he bit down, drawing blood, sucking. A sharp sting, and then, finally, oh, God, finally, she tumbled over.

Ripples of satisfaction swept through her entire body, little stars winking behind her eyes. Her inner muscles clenched and unclenched, liquid heat pooling between her legs. She rode the tide for endless seconds, minutes, before sagging against the mattress, boneless, unable to catch her breath.

An orgasm, she mused dazedly. A freaking orgasm from a fantasy man, and she hadn't even needed to touch herself.

"Nicolai...mine..." she whispered, and she was smiling as she at last drifted off to sleep.

Users Review

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