

## Chapter One

The mirror behind the bar reflected the familiar figure of her ex, and Venus' stomach lurched.

Loud music and voices around her faded away and blasted back. She abandoned her rum and coke on the counter and hurried toward the cloakroom to collect her coat and bag. A firm hand rested on her shoulder and stopped her in her tracks.

"Why are you leaving early?" The voice belonged to Marco, her best friend and teaching partner.

"I'm beat," she said, keeping her back to him.

"Liar liar, pants on fire."

"Don't be childish." Venus swung to face him.

"Well," Marco said in a mix of apology and self-defense. "What's going on with you? You're never tired when salsa music's playing."

Venus gave Marco a pained look, broke eye contact, and hung her head.

"Pedro's turned up with his latest bird." The words fell from her mouth, choked with emotion.

"This isn't an exclusive club. He can go wherever he pleases." Marco shrugged his shoulders. "And you shouldn't scurry away. Say hello, smile, and leave."

"I can't, M, I can't." Venus slanted her body away from Marco.

"Look, it's been six months since you guys split. Come with me to see my godfather. He'll make you forget the Colombian idiot."

"You know I'm not into your Santeria beliefs, Marco," Venus said, making eye contact again.

"Oh, ye of little faith." Marco shook his head at her. "I'll give you a ride. Wait a minute while I fetch my gear."

Venus leaned sideways and noticed a slim brunette hovering behind them.

"I think you're wanted elsewhere."

Venus grinned up at her friend, who twisted around and recognized his latest female conquest.

"Right. Do you mind if I don't drop you home tonight?" Marco turned back to Venus.

"No, you guys enjoy yourselves."

"And you take care. I'll see you at our next class."

Marco kissed Venus on her cheek before he gave the hoverer his full attention. Venus watched them walk onto the dance floor and smiled. *What a Casanova.* Cuban born, Marco practiced his homeland's indigenous faith, the worship of Orisha deities. Marco's godfather, a Santeria priest, offered many spiritual services. In her case he'd ask the deity, Orisha Idowu, to remove her sadness. Marco believed these rituals worked. Venus didn't. She needed to leave right away. Pedro out of her sight removed him from her mind.

Venus exited the popular Latin nightclub and strode toward the nearest tube station, hurt that Pedro turned up with a gorgeous date, and furious he spoiled her fun evening.

The DJ spun a sweet medley of tunes after lessons ended, and club goers took over the floor. She always danced salsa with them, but not tonight.

She marched on to the buzz of conversations, the pound of footsteps and the hum of city traffic, but her angry stride did not quell her distress.

"Damn you to hell, Pedro," she said aloud, hurrying across the busy Shaftesbury Avenue intersection before the green light changed.

Venus stomped into the station and clattered down the escalator to the eastbound platform. Pedro had dumped her soon after her gran died, and she lost her main source of employment. It devastated her at the time, but she kept her hurt and disappointment under control.

"Then you turn up and bring my emotions bubbling back to the surface again."

A train roared in, its windblast whipping her hair around her face and left strands sticking to her lipstick. Venus peeled them away. *Yuck*. Distaste joined the bundle of aggravation balled inside her. *I never considered how to handle meeting Pedro after the breakup, if I'm honest with myself*. Venus boarded an empty carriage, and the tube train set off, gathering momentum. Monochrome tiles and lights merged into a blur before the dark tunnel void hit with a hollow roar.

Venus settled into her seat, remembering the tough months after she lost Gran and Pedro, and the one miraculous event. On her last day of work, the office Lotto syndicate won a large money prize. The financial worries she envisaged due to her imminent redundancy vanished, and she pulled through her other difficulties. Venus' recollections stopped short when the train slowed with a raucous metallic shriek that hurt her ears. She pitched forward in her seat.

"Cheers, London Transport." Venus righted herself while a metal squeal that grated on her nerves brought them to a stop inside the tunnel.

The customary apology for the delay never came, and to further irritate her, the overhead lights buzzed and blacked out. Venus blew an exaggerated sigh and craned her neck. Other carriages remained lit further along. Why did *her* car lose power and no other? Venus did not want to sit on her own in the dark, so she shouldered her handbag, stood, and turned left toward the nearest connecting door. She closed her fingers around the handle and paused, sensing a presence behind her. She wasn't alone. Except the carriage had been empty when she boarded. Venus was a hundred percent sure, and they'd made no stops at any stations yet.

Breath held, pulse racing, she swiveled her head, one slow second at a time.

Venus glimpsed a man's outline behind her before her fingers slipped from the smooth handle, when it pressed down hard from the other side of the door, and distracted her from the apparition.

"Come with me," a transport cop said, barging into her car.

He grabbed her forearm, pulled her into the next carriage, and kept a tight grip of her arm. He led her to a set of double doors where they waited while the train moved off, with a metal on metal squeak that set her teeth on edge. Other passengers' glances cried out *fare evader*. She glared back at them.

"What's occurring? I have a valid Oyster card," she said and tried wrenching free without success. "I'll show you if you release my arm."

"Your ticket's not the issue. I'll explain when we alight. Too many ears in close proximity."

The cop tugged her through the doors at the next station stop and headed, with purpose, along the platform.

"I'm not going with you until you tell me why you are dragging me off as though I'm a suspect." Venus tried to resist being propelled and failed.

"You're not. Come with me if you don't want to die."

"Don't what?" Venus stopped short and surprised herself when she yanked free of his hold. Then she realized his attention had moved from her.

Venus looked to see what the distraction was. One person stood out among the crowd on the busy platform—a stocky dark-haired guy whose general shape resembled the figure in her carriage. Swarthy, his disturbing tawny eyes spoiled his handsome features. And those disconcerting eyes held her with their gaze.

"Quick." The policeman snatched her hand and headed for the exit sign.

Venus sensed danger from the stranger and ran with the cop. They dodged commuters coming and going until automated announcements, and the hubbub of voices, faded. The tunnel they sprinted down opened into an empty square, where an escalator squeaked and lumbered upward as if worn out. They boarded, but halfway up it shuddered to a halt. Venus jerked back, and the copper caught her before she fell. Then they soared, up the metal stairs, over the ticket barrier and out into the street outside the station.

As he set her down on the firm pavement, her heart pounded. With her hand splayed on her chest, feeling every single heartbeat, Venus gathered her bearings. The lit-up *Rock* sign at the Dominion Theater blazed overhead on her left. Straight ahead, she spotted a Black Cab idling at traffic lights on Tottenham Court Road and hurried toward it. A slight sense of security returned to her amid the West End's familiar night-time ambiance of vehicles, voices, and laughter.

"What's your postcode?" the cabbie asked after they pulled the door shut behind them.

Venus stayed silent. Her mind couldn't put together an answer while it reran how she, and a superhuman policeman, exited the station in a red blur. When the cop leaned over and looked deep into her eyes, she stared at him without blinking. He ran two fingers over her right cheek, and Venus' eyelids flickered. She focused and gave the driver the details he needed for his GPS.

"You okay, luv?" The cabbie peered at her through the partition.

Her mouth said *yes*. Her head shook *no*. If the man from the train posed a problem, why didn't the cop call for help? He wore the paraphernalia on the front of his high-visibility vest. While she frowned at how nothing added up, train-guy whizzed into the street. He spotted Venus before she ducked, and to her amazement indulged in a fist-shaking, feet-stamping tantrum.

Then he skyrocketed.

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Bolt settled back into his seat opposite the select, relieved he'd located her before the Wizard did. By accident, he'd bypassed the nightclub where she worked and transported into a London underground tube station instead, where he saw the sorcerer. Puzzled at his unauthorized presence on Earth, Bolt had followed him and realized the man was tailing the select. Before Bolt reached them, a noisy horde of commuters disembarked and blocked his path. He lost sight of the Wizard, boarded the train several carriages along from hers, and made his way toward her. When the sorcerer materialized behind her, alarm bells sounded in his mind at the man's furtive behavior, and Bolt had hurried to her rescue.

Bolt glanced out the window. He saw no sign of the wizard, but he remained alert, knowing the man could track them while remaining invisible. Allegations made against the sorcerer of practicing banned magic crossed Bolt's mind in a stomach-churning flood. The powers had believed his clever explanations. Now Bolt appreciated their poor judgment. The wizard had practiced the forbidden sorcery of their enemies because he'd joined them, and he wanted the select dead before she could help Radiance.

*You're a curative genius, Zaru. A celebrity on our world. Where did it go wrong for you?*

Bolt's gaze slid back to the sleeping girl—their one hope, and safe for the moment. He clenched his fists and pushed them into the upholstery. His stomach churned as bitterly as with acid reflux, and he vowed the sorcerer would not harm the select. Her vulnerability made Bolt want to protect her from danger until she attained her magical abilities.

*"Once you gain those, you will kick enemy ass."*

His hackles rose in a rush of fierce protectiveness. The girl, who had fallen asleep after he induced it with his touch, bore a strong resemblance to her mother, his childhood friend and colleague who helped both he and the wizard, overcome debilitating problems. Apart from the fact the young woman would undo enemy magic, Bolt owed his friend's daughter his protection. The sorcerer wouldn't consider himself so indebted, not like Bolt did.

Bolt tore his gaze off the select when they turned onto the embankment of this city's main river. Although the traffic moved faster, Bolt itched to speed it up further. He resisted the urge, for his orders were to go easy with magic in public places. And he'd disobeyed those instructions when he made a swift exit from the station. Bolt puffed up his cheeks and blew out air. The safety of his homeland was vital, not forgetting his own personal agenda.

But a powerful defector was on his tail—invisible and coming for them—and Bolt couldn't stop him. He'd hunt them down with his evil magic and take a twisted delight in their fear. And as hopelessness gnawed at Bolt's insides, he knew he had to find a way to keep the select out of Zaru's reach.