

## **Red Shadow**

*L.M. Connolly*

*Book 3 in the Ecstasy in Red series.*

Johann isn't happy with his latest assignment for STORM. That changes when he meets Ania.

Johann and Ania ignite passion that lights up the Los Angeles sky. They can't get enough of each other, even though Johann thinks Ania knows more than she's telling about his quarry, the elusive Dr. Bennett.

Ania should be concentrating on her failing catering company and her sick brother, not spending her days and nights in sexual ecstasy. She just can't stay away from Johann. When Johann introduces her to his best friend, she discovers what it's like to have two demanding, lustful men in her bed.

She's falling in love with Johann, even though she knows, as a vampire, his lifespan is much longer than hers. Perhaps in his arms she can discover what forever feels like. Or perhaps they'll both die, if they don't find Bennett before he finds them.

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## Chapter One

Johann turned his wrath on Jack Hargreaves as they stood in front of the monitors watching the guests arrive for the charity auction. “What do you mean you know her?” They watched the tall, elegant woman move across the screens from the imposing lobby of the Timothy hotel to the elevators that would take her up to the ballroom. She looked too perfect for sex.

Jack shrugged, his shoulders barely moving inside his elegant tuxedo jacket. “I had her earlier this year in New York. She’s some kind of celebrity journalist. She was after some rough English trade, so I gave it to her.”

Chase groaned. “When you were investigating that building for STORM.” Dressed in a tuxedo like Jack’s, he was the epitome of elegance, his blond hair shining in the harsh light of the security booth. The owner of the Timothy group, Chase was heading up this investigation into the whereabouts of rogue scientist Dr. Bennett. With any luck, Johann thought, they might finish this one before the fourth member of the team, Ricardo Gianetti, got here from Seattle. All they had to do was make the contact with their informant, who said she’d be here tonight, and then close the labs down and capture Bennett. He had hopes this would be an open and shut case and they’d all be on their way back to New York in a few days. He hoped so, anyway, because he hated LA. Too sunny for this vampire.

Jack chuckled. “That’s the one. I was playing Jack the English plumber. She caught me digging around her boyfriend’s apartment on Seventy-Sixth, so the best way to distract her was to take her to bed. I think I persuaded her all the pipes were in order.” Jack’s wolfish grin didn’t appease Johann who knew what was coming next.

“Okay, guys, switch places.” Chase exchanged a wry grin with Johann, his bright blue eyes failing to hide his amusement. He knew how much Johann loved fronting operations. Not at all.

Johann groaned. “Shit. Gimme the tux.”

Johann heard Chase’s chuckle echo through his head as he crossed the lobby of the hotel and climbed the stairs to the ballroom. He’d know that laugh anywhere, although he’d heard it more often recently. He tugged at the sleeves of Jack’s tuxedo jacket to try to restore it to something similar to the tailor-made one he’d left at home.

*You are one sick bastard*, he informed Chase, using their secure telepathic link. *You should be here turning on the charm, not me.*

*Jillian might kill me.* Jillian adored Chase, as he adored her. Nice for them, but it meant Johann was stuck with this assignment, since newly married men didn’t seduce other women, especially when they’d made it so obvious to anyone who cared how much in love they were. Didn’t work. All they knew was that their contact was female, so they’d have to go in expecting romance or, at the very least, flirtation. Johann didn’t do flirtation. He did sex.

This definitely should be Jack, who women unaccountably seemed to like. They wanted to mother him, not knowing the jaguar shape-shifter lurking under the human skin. Or perhaps they did know. These days everybody knew.

Johann would have snorted, but he was trying to appear suave. Hard enough in this damn tux. The best he could hope for was an in-and-out job. Make contact, find the lab’s location and go.

Johann couldn’t even remember the official excuse for this shindig. Some charity fundraiser or

other, an auction and a ball. They should have just given their money to the charity, but then there wouldn't be that priceless opportunity to see and be seen. The auction had just taken place and people were making their way to the ballroom for the next part of the event. The all-important socializing part.

The lobby was filled with people wending their way upstairs but he deliberately chose to go alone.

Once he contacted the woman, he could leave and then help to track down and destroy another fucking laboratory, one of those hellholes where Talents had been tortured as part of a plan to extract their gifts and sell them. They were doomed to failure but it didn't stop them trying.

The thought of that didn't improve his mood. But his first sight on entering the ballroom did.

He waved away a drinks tray. The man holding it glanced at the blonde waitress holding a similar tray and grinned.

Small, blonde and cute. Johann liked her compact, curvy figure. Things were looking up. She wore a typical waitress's outfit, a neat black blouse and skirt, not too short, not too tight, with black hosiery that Johann found himself hoping were stockings rather than passion-killing pantyhose. Over it, she wore a crisp white apron, no frills. A parody would have had the apron surrounded by frills, the skirt flirty and tiny, showing glimpses of the stocking tops, maybe a corset-style top or no top at all, breasts contained in the apron. But that would have tilted sexy over to sleazy and sleazy had stopped interesting him a long time ago.

Johann tried to read her telepathically and couldn't. His telepathy wasn't his strongest gift even when, as now, he was in full possession of his vampire powers but her block suggested a natural barrier, one some mortals had almost from birth.

She got closer and so did the tingle in his mind. Sure, he enjoyed looking at the curvy, compact body but it wasn't the drinks she held that he wanted.

He glanced around and caught sight of a cool brunette dressed in a tight-fitting black knee-length dress that showed all her curves. Slim, elegant curves, matching the dark hair swept into a chignon. Her lips were glossed, her eyes shaded, but the whole effect was so perfect he found it a turn-off. He watched her as she set her sights on him and came closer. He scanned her mind. Ah. This one was the one from the labs. He could see the knowledge at the forefront of her mind. Maybe he'd have a chance to get to the blonde later.

She walked closer with a sassy sway of hip. Johann let the merest smidgeon of information out, felt her grab the knowledge of his Talent, saw her dark eyes sparkle.

"May I help you, sir?" Not a guest here then. He needed to get her alone, then they could capture her, Chase could strip her mind for the location of the labs and they could get the hell out of LA. He spared the blonde one last, regretful thought and turned his mind back to his job.

So he gave the brunette a smile and turned on the charisma, the glamour that drew prey to him and now drew her. Her eyes widened and she blinked, turning it into a flirtatious glance up at his face through her lashes. Johann smiled at her. "That depends. What do you have to offer?" He suppressed his wince. That was the worst line he'd ever heard, much less delivered.

But it worked. "Whatever you want." Her smile broadened. "My name's Jeanine. Jeanine McCray. I'm managing the catering tonight and I can promise you that all the girls here are at your service. We offer more than food." Her look smoldered with promise.

That would work. It would get her out of this ballroom to a place he could take her without making a fuss.

"We should discuss this later. Your room or mine?"

*I'm in the ballroom, watching your six. Is she the link?*

Johann didn't turn around. He knew Chase's cool, precise tones whether spoken or mind to mind. *Seems so.*

*I sense other Talents in the room.*

*Not all Talents are out. Or even on our side.*

*True enough.*

Chase was too trusting sometimes. But with a mortal lifespan he hadn't seen as much sick behavior as Johann had. Good to have him as a backup though. Chase had a cool temperament and a useful pair of hands. And feet, come to that. No one looking at the suave, sophisticated hotel owner would imagine that he could deliver a roundhouse kick they'd be proud of in the kickboxing ring. But Johann had seen it and been glad of it.

Waitstaff circulated with glasses of something that looked like champagne cocktails. He took one and pretended to take a sip. Vile stuff. It was well after sunset now and he'd be sick to his stomach if he drank any of it.

The brunette leaned closer and he got a whiff of her perfume. It smelled expensive and French. Everything about her was refined and cool. And controlled. "The girls here all perform a variety of functions. Take your pick and I'll arrange it for you."

Johann's stomach turned. This woman was into more than illegal Bennett lab activities. He did what he should have done at first, but all the coming out crap had made him warier of opening his powers in public. They might be out, but he preferred to keep a low profile. But he had to read her. So he opened his mind and entered hers.

What he read made him heartsick, that such corruption should fester in the heart of her. This woman would lead him straight to the mother lode. Although he didn't penetrate to her innermost thoughts, he didn't need to. She was disorganized inside and all her thoughts had one end—money. Dollars floated through her mind. In collusion with her boss, the absent Sheila, she acquired Talents for the labs for cash, she prostituted the girls who worked for her for cash. Maybe soon she could afford that beach house she had her eye on.

She'd never reach that beach house if Johann could help it. Once she'd led them to the lab, she was done.

*Want me to break her?* Chase was a powerful Sorcerer. He could fracture most minds without breaking into a sweat. Not that he did it very often. But if he did it to this woman he'd be doing a lot of other people a favor.

*Let's get her out of here. Somewhere quieter.* He leaned closer. "You do personal services? Get your own—hands—dirty?" He upped the charm factor.

She blinked, her heavily mascaraed lashes sweeping her cheeks. "It's not something I usually do."

He knew her weakness now. "Give me an hour of your time and I'll give you five thousand for it."

She licked her lips, already glistening with lip gloss. "I can't do it yet. I have to supervise this function." And get some more customers, he'd bet. "Later, I'll do whatever you want." She smiled. Not completely impervious to a little mental push then.

Johann ran his fingers down her bare lower arm and felt her shiver. "I'll look forward to it. Don't go far." He slipped a card to her, a keycard to the room where they'd take her. "The number's on the card. As soon as you can, say a couple of hours?"

She raised a brow and swept a glance over him. "Are you sure you can afford it? Extras are—extra."

Johann smiled. "You shouldn't always judge by appearances. This tux is a last-minute hire."

Mine is somewhere between here and New York. I only got in today.”

She relaxed. “Then I should be able to give you a hearty welcome to Los Angeles.”

He sensed Chase’s presence closer. *I’ll chat to her. As the hotel owner, I can take an interest. Make her sweat a little bit.*

*Are you sure that’s wise?*

Johann saw the gleam of bared teeth in his mind. Amazing how he could do that. *Trust me. I want to keep tabs on her and if you stick by her all evening people will notice. And I want to soften her up a little. When I go in, I don’t want to kill her immediately.*

That made sense. Chase could penetrate to the back of someone’s mind instantly but if he did it without warning, he could kill them. Getting close to her meant he could sense her patterns, find weak spots and use them instead. They didn’t want her dead. Or rather, STORM didn’t. Johann wouldn’t extend that to himself. Dead would suit him fine.

“Is everything all right here?” Chase’s urbane voice cut into the flirting. He’d never been so glad to see his colleague before, even when Chase was saving his neck or he was saving Chase’s.

“Perfect.” Johann glanced at him. “I was just complimenting Jeanine here on the service this evening. The waitstaff are working well.”

Chase addressed Jeanine directly. “I’m pleased so far. We use our own people normally, but we were pushed tonight with two other functions, so I decided to give your company a try. So far I’m impressed. Can you tell Ms. Zelinski I’ll call her in the morning?”

Now it was Chase’s turn to receive the blinding smile. “I haven’t met her yet. Her partner employed me, but she’s away on leave right now. I’ll be delighted to pass on your message in the morning.”

Johann’s cue to leave. He’d pick her up later. He nodded to her and smiled.

Then two things happened. The orchestra struck up for the first waltz. And a crash made him jump out of his skin. The little blonde waitress had finally reached him and dropped her tray.

## **End of Chapter One**

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