

****PAX VICTORIA**** The Story

Enter Victoria: Chapter 1 - Contentment

7am: Friday

Bus 262 slithers curved roads, determinately making its way to the city. The roads are lined with Eucalyptus trees on both sides, birds are chirping. There are blue skies, the sun is just coming up and the temperature calls for a light jacket at 7am on this Friday.

If you would zoom in on the woods, you would see countless dog-walkers and joggers enjoying a morning outing. You would see wild bunnies and maybe even a fox or two.

Inside the bus it's full but only 3 people have to stand. At this hour mainly business men and women make up the bus' contents. In their dress-casual clothes, neat make-up and freshly shaven faces, nearly all of them are engulfed in their cellphones. There are a few parents with children and one stroller driven by an exhausted mother.

The bus smells like Dunkin Donuts coffee and hums along further.

The winding roads are slowly replaced by straight ones and the trees by houses and then buildings, followed finally by grey skyscrapers as the bus nears its destination.

A woman dressed in black boots, black pants and a light pink blouse stands up, book still in hand, eyes glued to the book. She manages to put on her jacket whilst reading and only closes the book briefly to get out of the bus at 7th Street, nearly the end of the line.

"Morning, Victoria," the receptionist says to her as she enters the building around the corner from the 7th Street bus stop, and she begins her work day.

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4:30pm: Friday

On her way home, Victoria waits at the 7th Street bus stop on the opposite side, ready to do the morning commute in reverse. Her colleague, Lily, has joined her, so she can't read her book, but Victoria was raised to have proper manners, so she chats with Lily.

Unfortunately the conversation with her colleague goes from bad to worse when Victoria has to sit through the different names of the fish Lily took pictures of whilst scuba diving in Thailand. Her mind begins to drift.

The commute feels longer than usual. Victoria starts to think about her evening.

Finally back home, Victoria grabs her gown and make-up and heads over to the local bar/club, where she'll eat some dinner before singing a set. They always treat her to a meal when she sings and they even serve vegan, gluten-free, vegetarian, or wheat-free dishes, if you're into that kind of thing.

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7pm: Friday

I'm sitting in a chair, staring at my reflection in a beaten up old mirror backstage and I look elegant. Not that I shouldn't - I've been getting made up and dressed up for the past hour here.

It's almost time to sing. I'm not nervous - I kind of wish I was. I miss those days. But I've done this gig so many times now. It's fun - I'm content with it.

"Victoria, you're almost on!" Stella shouts to me.

I smile at myself in the mirror as I stand up - at my long, black evening gown, hair pulled up, revealing browned, bare shoulders. I heard that tonight's show would be full.

As I sing my set, some family friends will accompany me (the old guys from down the street). They play fantastic back-up and I get to sing what I want - covers and jazz standards. I'll start with "I Can't Get Started" tonight, for irony's sake. After the show I'll go home to read. I'm addicted to romance novels, unbeknownst to all.

I am not an isolationist (that's what I tell myself). I sing once or twice a month here and I talk to people at my office, where I work as a secretary, as well as my family of course. My family silently wonders whether I am a lesbian (or at least it seems like they do), and they can't understand why I crave solitude. They almost never come watch me sing.

Maybe I am too picky but there is no one that pulls or interests me. But my romance novels... that's where my heroines and heroes exist. Tonight I'll pretend I'm singing for Siegfried, the latest hero in one of my books (things got really exciting with him on my bus ride this morning). He's strong and intriguing and the game will make singing more fun.

"Vicki, now!" Stella says, with slight irritation. "I'm here - sorry," I say and rush to enter the stage with the other musicians.

In the bright lights it's hard to see the audience but I can tell that the hall is full to the brim. I wonder who is here tonight. Maybe the city folk coming to see the up-and-coming rock band performing after me? "Twisted Allies" is their name and they grew up in this town, which is why they even do this gig at all.

I get a little nervous. I let the musicians know what song we'll start with and we go to town. Halfway through "I Can't Get Started" I see a man in the audience who looks startlingly like Siegfried from my book. I know what he looks like because he's drawn on the book cover, with his big muscles and piercing blue eyes. Sometimes I like to examine the book covers, studying every detail.

This Siegfried look-alike is at the bar and he is staring at me as I sing. His stare frightens me somehow. I try to ignore it and make a plan to get out of this gig as soon as possible. As intriguing as Siegfried is in my book, the prospect of any real contact with some Siegfried look-alike intimidates me, terrifies me.

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8:45pm: Friday

Dashing out the back door into the cool night in a baseball cap, small polka-dotted scarf and an unglamorous oversized black jacket, I leave the loud, energetic songs of "Twisted Allies" to rev up the crowd inside. I'm sure the "Siegfried Starer" has no interest in looking for me and I am just running and hiding for no good reason, but I'd like to get home. I've got a book to read.

"Excuse me, miss...excuse me!" I hear a voice calling out. Surely that's not meant for me. "Victoria, wait!"

I turn around to those piercing blue eyes.

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Vicki in love: Chapter 2 - Love

7am: Tuesday

Bus 262 slithers along hot curved roads. The Eucalyptus trees are fragrant and the blue skies are tainted with white smog on this Tuesday summer morning. Only 7am and the temperature suggests a bathing suit and a long day at the beach.

Inside the bus it's packed, but at least air-conditioned. The business men and women wear their summer outfits, hardly different from their winter outfits, as they head to their air-conditioned offices. A tired baby howls. Its attentive mother tries to comfort it, worried that something worse than heat distresses her child.

A few people are drinking cold Frappuccinos through straws. The bus smells like sunscreen.

The winding roads are slowly replaced by straight ones and the trees by houses and then buildings, followed finally by grey skyscrapers as the bus nears its destination.

A woman dressed in black sandals, a black skirt and a white flowing sleeveless top stands up to exit the bus at 7th Street, nearly the end of the line.

Her eyes are bright and she walks with confidence and a sway in her hips, a smile on her face.

"Morning Victoria" the receptionist says to her as she enters the building around the corner from the 7th Street bus stop, and she begins her work day.

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4:30pm: Tuesday

On her way home, Victoria waits at the 7th Street bus stop on the opposite side, ready to do the morning commute in reverse. Her cell phone is buzzing. As she types in response, her smile widens.

She can't wait to get home.

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8:25pm: Tuesday

As it turned out, the Siegfried look-alike was called Alexander. After trying to escape him that evening, I have spent the past five months doing just the opposite.

He's coming over right now. Actually he was supposed to be here at 8pm, so I guess he got hung up. He'll be here any minute, I'm sure.

I stopped reading romance novels and I stopped singing at the club. I am consumed by the addition of this beautiful human being to my life. Everything has changed since his blue eyes met mine. I am alive, electrified and emotional. Life has direction. I'm still working full-time as a secretary, but I dream about a life in a quaint suburban house, where I care for my blue-eyed children — baking and smiling, picking beautiful flowers for the dining table.

I feel immense love for Alex. We don't express a lot in words, but I love him deeply. I want to help him, I want to take care of him. I accept everything about him.

He's mysterious and he disappears, sometimes for weeks on end. I don't know where he goes nor what he is

doing but when he returns, I read something disturbing in his eyes. We don't talk about it. I don't need to know what it is because I believe in love and I believe that I can heal his wounds.

When he is with me, his heart grows softer. He still guards something, but I feel him become vulnerable. I have faith that his absences are not to avoid me. I have faith that whatever he does in his absences is not immoral or bad. But I wish he wouldn't go away at all. Maybe I can convince him.

I have faith. I have love. I am love.

Love is a river.

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Downfall: Chapter 3 - Love disappears

7am: Friday

Bus 262 slithers across wet, curved roads. Lining the road outside its window, the shuddering Eucalyptus trees gulp the rain thirstily. The grey, shrouded sky offers no promise of change on this Friday morning at 7am.

The bus is crowded, wet, and stuffy, filled with out-of-sorts people annoyed with the rain. Spilled coffee leaks down the centre aisle.

Slowly, the winding roads are replaced by straight thoroughfares, and the trees exchanged for houses, then large buildings. Finally concrete-grey skyscrapers appear as the bus nears its destination.

A woman, dressed in a black-and-white checkered rain jacket, shiny black rain boots and red lipstick, exits the bus at 7th Street, nearly the end of the line.

Pop! She opens her yellow umbrella and trudges the short distance to her office.

As she enters the building around the corner from the bus stop, the receptionist says, "Morning Victoria." The woman's work day begins.

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4:30pm: Friday

The work day finished, Victoria waits at the 7th Street bus stop on the opposite side, ready to do the morning commute in reverse. Luckily, her work colleague, Lily, left early today, so Victoria can ride home in peace. No buzz alert comes from her cell phone, so she refreshes it once again to make sure she hasn't missed any messages.

Her eyes darken at the silent phone.

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1am: Saturday

Last week I started singing at the club again. They had a slot open up, so I said yes. I felt like I needed a distraction. I don't make any money off my singing. It's fun and I'm tired of canceling plans just in case Alex might call. Besides, I've started talking to Stella, a waitress at the club. You could call it a developing friendship.

Alexander's been absent lately, more frequently and for longer periods. I go through cycles: self-doubt, anger, jealousy, followed then by forgiveness. I experience my own little "circle of hell" privately before he returns. Then when he's with me again, I celebrate.

I notice the darkness in his eyes when he returns, as I always have, but now I start to suspect it. Perhaps he's with another woman - maybe he's involved in something illegal. He seems less open with me, less vulnerable. But he always returns and always tries to make me feel special. That's what makes it hard.

I'm drinking more. I'm even smoking my rollies when things get really bad. I can't go back to my romance novels. Now they disgust me. I rip them all out of my bookshelves and kick them around the room in a fit.

Poison.

Why don't I just tell him to stay away? But I feel some kind of responsibility - a duty not to throw in the towel. Is this feeling blind love? Stupidity? Or is he really just a calculating, horrible person?

I keep giving him time - another chance. And he keeps fulfilling my expectations just to the edge of "acceptable". I know ultimately what I have to do, but I dread it. I stare at my phone, no messages, no love. I grab another glass of whisky and have a fit.

Who am I? What have I become? A suffering fool? Where can I go? How can I find the energy to leave him?

I roll a cigarette and stare out my silent apartment's open window. To fill the void, I put on some Charles Mingus, take deep breaths to relax, and blow streams of blue smoke into the cool, dark summer sky. I get lost in the music. I feel the presence of the musicians—the music magicians—and I begin to feel a spark.

It's late. I finish my cigarette, turn off the music, and sit down at my desk. The whisky rests untouched on the window sill. The spark I felt, like a small outlet for my agony, begins to flare. I start to write, frantic at first. Then my pace slows as the flow of words begins to soothe my troubled heart.

I awaken at 9am, slumped across my desk. My phone's buzzing. There's a message.

Alexander is back.

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Chapter 4 – Revolutions in the Dark. Revolutions in the Light.

5am: Thursday - Victoria

When I came to, there was a stench and my shirt was soaked in sweat - fear filled the car, the salt from my tears drained into the gag cutting across my face. Memories of the past couple of hours slowly started to return.

I had followed Alex out to the desert but for the first time he noticed. I hadn't trailed far enough behind - I wasn't careful enough and he caught me. But he didn't just "catch" me - he tied me up and gagged me - roughly, in a fury. He yelled at me.

And there I was in between two young Mexican women, tied up in the back of Alex's car. One of them was crying as I moved into a state of some variant of calm, trying to outsmart the situation. We sped along the highway in the dark, rain splattering the windshield.

I scrolled through idea after idea in my mind. *There must be some way out of this*, I told myself. There is always a secret door. *Alex isn't a bad person*, I told myself, *he just ended up influenced by the wrong people*. I felt love mixed with hatred.

Alex was driving too fast. He was angry, agitated. It paid back - he slammed on his brakes as the traffic came to a sudden stop, the rain made it too much and his wheels slipped - the car spun out of control.

And then I awoke in a pool of sweat.

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3pm: Thursday - Alex

"Hi, Victoria!", I say, answering my phone whilst in the middle of a workout on my balcony. The sea air is fragrant and I sit down in my plastic green chair, actually not minding the break.

When I saw Victoria sing for the first time over at "Club Inanna", I loved her voice and way she moved. She's beautiful and really fun to be with. The only problem is that she wants more than I can give - more of my time, more attention.

Maybe she will chill out though. We're still in touch and we still have fun when we hang out, but it's not as often anymore.

The one issue that worried me was her curiosity about what I do for work. I studied business but last year I got a good gig from a trustworthy friend transporting people from Point A to Point B.

Okay, it's transporting women.

But that's all I do - I just take them from here to there. Sure they are Mexican and yes, they most likely entered the country illegally, but I just do what I do and don't see anything wrong with it.

I just do my job and close my eyes to the rest. I'd like to move back over to legitimate work, but it's hard when the illegitimate work is this easy and pays so well.

Victoria got really curious about my life for a while. She stopped that lately, thank goodness, and I've distanced myself from her to prevent it from happening again.

I don't need her involving herself and I can't tell her anything - there are too many links involved in this chain. It could even threaten my life. That's the downside of illegitimate work.

"This Saturday? Sure, I don't think I have any plans. Shall I come around 8?" We close off the conversation and I resume my chest workout. Saturday I can rest, but Friday I work.

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4pm: Thursday - Victoria

My nightmare in the desert doesn't come as a surprise, as I *have* been trailing Alex out to the desert - I've done it three times now without getting caught. Tomorrow I will go again if I can borrow Stella's car.

I don't want to betray him but it's clear that he's into something illegal. And it appears to have to do with women, though I don't believe he is sexually involved with them. That's not the issue.

At first I had to find out what was going on. Once I knew - after the third trailing to the desert - I couldn't stand back. I knew he had to be involving himself in trafficking - the trafficking of women.

I know Alex so intimately that I can only believe that he doesn't feel what he does is wrong. But it is. I don't have a vengeance towards Alex personally, but I can't stand back or turn my head away.

And tomorrow night I'll see if I can make a change. I have a good idea.

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Chapter 5 - Imprisonment

*Excerpted from: "Human Trafficking in the United States
From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*

"Human trafficking is a modern form of slavery, with illegal smuggling and trading of people (including minors), for forced labor or sexual exploitation.

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California:

A significant leak in 2020 gave authorities the opportunity to shut down a fairly large limb of the trafficking operation located between Tecate and Campo, when a sketched map was left anonymously by a woman at a gas station in Campo. The map led to the findings of a tunnel running between America and Mexico, stipulating the location of a tunnel exit on the American side of the border.

In total 13 suspected trafficking agents and 24 persons suspected in connection with three warehouses containing illegal immigrants were arrested. The warehouses were shut down by authorities. All immigrants in the warehouses were women and the warehouse suspects are currently being tried for sexual abuse."

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7am: Monday - Victoria

Life in Paris has been good. I don't miss California most of the time. I'm different since my relationship with Alexander and my rendezvous with the underground world of trafficking. So different.

My actions helped fight against trafficking - they had results. Unfortunately Alexander was one of those arrested last year.

After I managed to expose part of the operation to the authorities, I mourned Alex. But an intelligent fear arose in me as well. The trafficking operation is huge and big money is involved. If the exposure would ever be traced back to me, I would be killed - no doubt. What would Alexander do if he knew I had caused his imprisonment? Would he kill me?

These concerns became more and more difficult for me to live with and I made the decision to move to Paris. My life in California was small and humble anyway and my savings to buy a house with Alexander superfluous.

So I took my savings and moved to Paris. I now live in a small apartment in the 11th arrondissement on Rue Sedan. I work as a secretary and don't read romance novels. I sing and dance in my free time and have made several friends.

I still have fear that I will be found. I still have nightmares.

Back in California, Alexander never tried to contact me from prison. I drove past his apartment a couple of times and someone had cleaned it out - presumably a family member.

I believe that I will overcome my fear - these worries. I did what was right and I covered my tracks. I was extracted out of my mundane life by Alexander and maneuvered a rocky road. I handled it as best I could and will never again be mundane. It's not possible.

If I hadn't met Alexander, I wouldn't have been able to put a stop to at least some of the trafficking, as I did. And I would simply be growing older, reading romance novels and traipsing the same streets year in, year out, maybe singing at the same mediocre club. I have scars from my experiences with and around Alexander and I am trying to find peace with them.

I must find true contentment and not a rut disguised as contentment. I now value deep, calm love as opposed to frenzied, romantic love. Deep love cannot disappear. There was a revolution in myself that will never burn out. I don't just exist anymore, I live.

Imprisonment is my final task. Alexander is literally imprisoned at the moment, but I have imprisoned myself in the fear of being discovered as having exposed the trafficking - the fear of being hunted down. And I am breaking out of this prison of my mind because I know that peace will always be the victor.

PAX VICTORIA.

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This is a work of fiction, including the cited Wikipedia article.

This story was written by Liz Davinci as well as Underhatchet (cowrote Chapter 1), K.A. Laity (cowrote Chapter 2) and James Shaffer (cowrote Chapter 3).