
ODESSA'S ADVERSARY

JAYE LEVIN



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

Chapter 1

Odessa frowned up at the burned out street light. It flickered weakly, a sort of sputtering orange every couple of seconds like it was desperately trying to hold on to life. The shopping center in which her veterinary clinic stood was already small and dimly lit, and one streetlight among the many made more of a difference than one would think. The overhang she stood under protected her from the faint, misty rain but cast deeper, darker shadows.

The keys jangled against each other as she turned the final lock. Really, Odessa wasn't supposed to be here at all. The closing tech had begged off due to a problem with her babysitter, and her receptionist, Rebecca, had left early for some appointment. So here she was, late on a Thursday, wondering if there was anything good left in her fridge and cursing the fog she'd have to drive home in.

She pocketed her keys with a sigh, hitching her bag further up on her shoulder. Her white coat was already packed neatly away, and a glass or two of wine and bad television awaited her at home.

The heels on her oxfords clicked loudly in the mist-filled

parking lot, and she quietly cursed herself for parking so far from the entrance to the clinic. It seemed like there was nothing but miles of wet, black pavement stretching out around here, the white paint delineating empty parking spots, glowing in the dim light.

There was a scraping sound behind her. When she had locked up, there hadn't been anyone in the parking lot. Odessa's shoulders tensed. She suppressed the urge to look around, and didn't let her steps speed up. She pulled her bag around in front of herself and started looking for her keys—and her pepper spray.

She already wasn't in the best area of the city—the rent was cheap here, at least—not that there was a truly "safe" part of the city. Ingold was a port city, a thriving area for trade and the arts if you listened to the marketing the Chamber of Commerce put out.

The other thing thriving in Ingold was the cold war between several rival crime families, a fact that Odessa was, unfortunately, intimately acquainted with. The mugging of a veterinarian wouldn't make news, or at least not the kind of news she wanted to be a part of.

"Ma'am?" Oh, shit. Not good. She ignored the voice behind her. She was steps from her car, only a few parking spaces away.

"Ma'am? Please? You dropped this?" God *dammit*. She was at the car now, and her keys were out, held spiked in her fist like every self-defense class she'd ever taken had taught her.

Odessa turned slowly, her instincts screaming at her to not keep her back to what was pretty obviously a threat. This instinct solidified into certainty when she came face to face with a ragged looking guy with a patchy beard. He was way too close to her, his eyes rimmed red and the corner of his mouth twitching in a way that was reminiscent of junkies who tended to linger outside clinics.

"You got a pharmacy in that clinic?" he said.

"Oh, shit," she breathed, holding her bag to her chest. Her hands felt a little numb. This was... very bad. The man's eyes caught the dim orange light in a way that reminded her of an animal's, and there was a sheen of sweat on his pale forehead.

The mugger's left arm jerked, and a skinny little blade flicked out from an old switchblade. The light reflected, and it looked like he was holding a pure white blade, the reflection burning its way into her corneas.

"The keys to the clinic," the man demanded, the knife shaking a little bit. Odessa stared at the man's too wide eyes, the sweat bead trailing down his face.

"I don't have..." she said, a little frantic. "I don't have the keys to the pharmacy with me. The tech locked up earlier—"

"Liar!" the man hissed, whites flashing like a spooked horse. "I know you—"

There was a black smudge in the corner of Odessa's vision. It was coming up fast, quickly solidifying into a shadowy figure. Moving on instinct, Odessa threw herself back against the car, hard. Her shoulder blade banged against the doorframe.

The mugger suddenly went down. The man who'd tackled him gave a sharp, short grunt of pain. The mugger scrambled up, face scraped with gravel, and took off. The sounds of his footsteps were swallowed up quickly by the rain soaked pavement, and he was lost in the deep shadows in seconds. The whole incident took less than ten seconds.

Odessa stood frozen against her car door for another moment. The man let out a quiet groan, rolling over, and Odessa's eyes widened when she saw blood.

"Oh my god!" she said, kneeling down next to the prone stranger. "Are you okay? Jesus Christ, you're bleeding."

"Fucking got me in the shoulder," the man grunted, face twisted in pain. "I think mostly by accident, honestly."

"Let me see," Odessa said, trying to move his hand from

where it was pressed against the wound, pulling at his shirt with shaking hands.

"Stop trying to fucking strip me," the man groaned, twisting. His face crumpled in pain as he did so, however, and Odessa managed to pull the collar of his now blood-soaked t-shirt down over his shoulder, stretching it beyond repair.

She hissed in a breath. "This is not cute," she surmised, looking at the stranger. "We need to get you to hospital; you're gonna need stitches—"

"Can't go to a hospital," the man replied, shaking his head.

Odessa sat back on her heels. That only meant one thing in this town. "Look, man, you need stitches," she repeated.

The stranger looked up at her from his half-prone position, one hand putting pressure back on the ragged cut. Pale blue eyes caught the sparse street lights for a second. "You're a vet, right?"

Odessa stilled. "Absolutely not," she said firmly. "That is a bad movie trope, and I won't be a part of it."

"C'mon," the man wheedled. "Just think of me as a hairless cat or something."

"No!" Odessa said, pushing herself up to standing. Her knees wobbled a little. She put her hands on her hips and only felt a little bad about glaring down at the bleeding man who had saved her. "Listen, I don't care what sort of... of... criminal activity you engage in that won't allow you to go to a hospital—"

"Criminal activity?" the man asked, a thread of amusement curling through his voice despite the obvious pain he was in.

Odessa ignored him. "But don't you have, like, some sort of shady doctor who can stitch you up?"

The stranger looked her up and down.

Odessa looked down at her blood-splattered hands and her now stained pants from where she had put her hands on her hips. "Human doctor!" she said.

"As opposed to, what, a robot doctor?"

"A doctor for humans!"

"I'm going to bleed out in front of your clinic," the man pointed out. He looked a little pale in the face. "And after I took a knife for you and everything."

"Fucking hell," Odessa said, barely restraining herself from putting her head in her hands. "Can you stand?" She eyed him dubiously. "You're a little too big for me to carry." She squeezed her eyes shut tight. "I can't believe I'm even *considering* this. I should know better."

"Right," the man grunted, ignoring her crisis, and rolled over onto his knees. He pushed himself to standing carefully, still putting pressure on his shoulder with one hand.

Odessa started to dig through her purse for the clinic keys, saying, "You should probably ball up your shirt or jacket and use that to put pressure on it. I don't think your hand—"

She startled a little as a shadow loomed over her. The stranger was tall. And built. Odessa scowled up at him. "Don't do that," she scolded. "I have pepper spray, and you're injured."

"Right," the man said again, sounding distinctly amused this time. "I'll just not stand up?"

Odessa hunched her shoulders and marched back to the dark clinic, muttering, "I must be absolutely insane."

They made it to the door, Odessa fumbling a little bit with the lock.

The man said, "So you had the keys after all?"

"I wasn't about to give a junkie the keys to a clinic full of ketamine, no."

"Brave," the man commented and then went quiet again as Odessa's hands shook against the door frame for a second.

"So you heard him, huh?" Odessa said, desperate to distract herself from the very bad decision she was currently making.

"Well, when someone follows a woman to her car to ask for the pharmacy keys, I figure they're not exactly an employee."

"No, I don't think he'll be hired," Odessa agreed, and it actually got a laugh from the man.

It took a scant few minutes to unlock the clinic and head back into the surgical area, bypassing the prep room. By the time Odessa had flicked on the bright white lights and scrubbed her hands, however, the man was distinctly white around the mouth.

"I don't have any anesthetic that would be safe to give you," she said, half-apologetically.

"No vodka?" the man replied through gritted teeth. His hair was a startling blue-black under the surgery lights, curling around his ears and neck.

"Alcohol is a blood thinner," Odessa lectured as she snapped on her gloves. "If I wanted to let you bleed out, I would have let you do it in the street and not on my operating table."

"Your operating table for dogs," the man reminded her, a corner of his mouth quirking.

Odessa stopped and leveled him with a flat stare. "Are you belittling me?"

The man visibly swallowed. "No."

"Because belittling someone's choice of career while they're choosing to do a very illegal surgery on a stranger out of the goodness of their heart would be a stupid thing to do," Odessa said, still keeping that flat stare on the man.

"I apologize," the man replied.

At least he sounded sincere. "I'm going to wash this with a saline solution first." Odessa sighed. "It shouldn't sting too badly." She gave him a dubious look. "How attached are you to that shirt?"

"I think it's a goner," the stranger admitted.

"Good, because I'm going to cut it off," Odessa told him, brandishing a pair of trauma shears. "I don't want you to put more stress on the cut by trying to pull it over your head."

"You're the boss," the man said. He seemed strangely relaxed despite the paleness of his face and the tight set of his mouth.

"You're very calm," Odessa observed as she ran the shears carefully up the front of the t-shirt, cutting all the way to the

collar and then again down the sleeve. There was no response. She gently peeled the fabric away from the jagged slash on the front of the man's shoulder.

The man hissed out a breath as it stuck to the cut with half-dried blood, but he remained silent otherwise.

Odessa let out a little sigh then reached for the saline. "You gangster types," she said, shaking your head. "It's okay to be in pain, you know. You don't have to be quiet."

"Ah, you don't like them quiet?" the man said. His words were flirtatious, but when Odessa glanced up, the space between his eyebrows was deeply furrowed.

"Sound is an excellent determination if something's going right or wrong," Odessa explained lightly, picking up the needle and sutures.

"I'll remember that," the stranger answered. "Is that statement solely surgery related or..."

Odessa ignored him. "This is going to hurt."

"I'll be sure to make a lot of noise for you." the stranger said, though his voice had gone thready and strange as Odessa started to stitch him up. When she glanced away from the needle, his hands were gripping the edge of the table hard, white-knuckled.

"What's your name?" Odessa asked, breathing evenly as the cut slowly began to close.

"Victor," the man said on a heavy exhale.

"Don't forget to breathe," Odessa instructed, keeping her eyes on the suturing. "Or you'll pass out, and then we'll really be in trouble."

"Right," Victor said, still tense. "What's yours?"

"Odessa,"

"Dr. Odessa, veterinarian?" he asked. "What are the letters you get after completing your animal doctor license?"

"Shut up; your shoulder moves when you talk," Odessa ordered, still concentrating.

"You can't talk to me while you stitch?" Victor commented. "No vodka, no distractions..."

"Fine," Odessa snapped a little. "Forgive me, my patients usually don't *talk back*. I have a doctorate of veterinary medicine, so the letters are DVM." She paused to double check her work so far. "Except if you graduate from UPenn, you get a VMD. Fun fact for you. I'm the only veterinary surgeon at the clinic, although we have a couple of techs, nurses, and the support staff. We're a small operation. Now, hold still for a second. I'm almost done."

Odessa bit her lip as she finished the last stitch. She tied it off as gently as she could. Eight neat sutures stared back at her from Victor's shoulder. She sat back in her chair with a sigh, looking up at Victor. He was just as pale, but his mouth had relaxed somewhat.

"Thank you," he said, and it sounded genuine. His eyes were an even paler blue than they had looked in the glow of the streetlights, an almost silvery grey.

"Don't do that again," Odessa said, turning her face into her shoulder to get the hair out of her face.

Victor laughed.

"I'm serious," Odessa frowned, "I don't want to get a rep as some weirdo vet who'll stitch up whatever. Or whomever."

"I'll make it up to you," Victor said, a slight smile at the corner of his mouth.

Odessa snorted. "I'd rather you didn't. I don't want to be involved in any of," she waved a hand in front of the half-dressed, blood-spattered man sitting on the operating table where she usually saw golden retrievers, "of this nonsense."

Though there was a terrible thought sneaking in that, based on what she could see of the built chest through the now-shredded shirt, getting involved might not be as terrible as she thought.

"Of course," Victor replied, smile gone from his mouth but still lingering around his eyes. "I'm gonna call for a pick-up."

"I'm going the hell home," Odessa said, snapping off her gloves. "Right after I scrub up this illicit surgery garbage. Get out of my clinic."

Victor snorted out another half-laugh. "Right, of course." And damn him if he didn't sound amused. "Thank you, Doctor."

Odessa rolled her eyes. "Right."

"Anything I can do to help?"

Odessa looked at him incredulously. "I'm honestly still worried you're going to pass out from blood loss," she told him. "Please just sit. And don't touch anything."

Odessa disposed of the empty packets of suture and saline in the medical garbage can and scrubbed her table.

Victor did as he was told, just sitting quietly and watching as her hands made rhythmic circles in the soap. "Do you like being a vet?" he asked as she was finishing.

Odessa paused. "It's a hell of a lot better than what I thought I was going to be doing when I was growing up," she said and then bit her lip. *Damn. A little too honest there.* "I do." She went back to her final wipe down. "I get to help."

Victor looked like he wanted to ask more, but Odessa cut him off at the pass. "Your ride here yet?"

"No," he answered, "be another ten minutes. You should get out of here, though."

Odessa took his advice and locked up for the second time that night, with Victor standing next to her. His jacket was still stained and had a nice rip in the shoulder, but it was a sight better than the shredded t-shirt under it. He'd had to zip it one-handed to his collarbones, after Odessa decided that would be one action too far.

"Should I walk you to your car?" Victor asked. "I hear there are muggers about tonight."

"And have to stitch you up again?" Odessa teased. "I'd rather just give them the keys to the pharmacy and let them have it."

"Of course," Victor said with another little half-smile. "Be safe."

Odessa raised a hand in farewell and walked quickly over to her car, unlocking it as speedily as possible and relocking the doors immediately. She rested her head against the head-rest for a split second and ignored the way her hands were shaking.

When she glanced out the window as she pulled out of the parking lot, she could still see Victor posted up on one of the brick columns in the pavilion, watching her car pull out.

She might have to have more than one or two glasses of wine tonight.