

**THE RELUCTANT  
VAMPIRE  
QUEEN  
BITES BACK**



BOOKS BY JO SIMMONS

The Reluctant Vampire Queen  
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# 1

Mo Merrydrew bounced up the stairs in her dressing gown, a piece of buttered toast gripped between her teeth. She thumped her bedroom door shut, put her breakfast down on a pile of books – physics, maths and *Macbeth* – and began towelling off her wet hair.

It was a gloomy December day. The bare branches of the tree beyond her window were silhouetted against the sky like skeleton fingers. The sun, recently risen, had made no dent in the thick grey cloud. Mo, though, was humming.

‘You’re cheerful,’ her mum said, coming into her room with a hot chocolate. Mo quickly threw the towel over the fake vampire teeth that were sitting on her desk – a specially commissioned new set, made with a custom-fitted plate and shiny fangs hand-crafted in bright white acrylic.

‘Would it kill you to knock?’

‘Sorry. I forgot teenagers like privacy,’ her mum said. ‘I can’t believe you’re almost sixteen. Seems just days ago you were a baby.’



‘Don’t get comfy!’ Mo said, seeing her mum sit down. ‘And please remember you can’t just wander in here any more. No point looking all sad about it, Mum. I’m just putting up some healthy boundaries.’

‘Absolutely,’ her mum said. ‘I’ve heard boundaries are all the rage now, aren’t they? Of course when I was young –’

‘Mum!’ Mo said forcefully. ‘I don’t have time for this. I’ve got to get ready or I’ll be late.’

‘Not like you, sweetheart. You always used to be so punctual.’

Mo raised her eyebrows and stared hard at her mum.

‘Going. I’m going,’ she said. ‘Have a great day. Enjoy your studying.’

Once the door was shut again Mo picked up the fake fangs and slipped them into her mouth. She looked into the mirror, her pale oval face serious and tough. Then she pulled back her lips in a huge hiss, her dagger-like teeth shining and her eyes glinting with malice. She took a selfie and sent it to her best friend.

**Scary, no?**

Lou messaged back almost immediately.

**Looking fierce! But why are you cosplaying vampires when you should be getting ready for school? You better be on the bus in a minute.**

Quickly Mo texted back.

**This isn’t fancy dress. I’m the Vampire Queen and you’d better show me respect or else I’ll rip your head off and drain your blood!**

Lou pinged back.

**Whatever.**

Mo laughed. Tucking the fangs away in a locked box in her wardrobe, she grabbed her school uniform, her hand grazing the soft velvet of the black regal robe hanging next to her white school shirt. She dressed quickly and scooped her school books into her backpack. She hid the letter that she was working on in her desk drawer, written in thick black ink, inviting all the undead of Great Britain to their first reception with the newly appointed Vampire Queen, just as her phone trilled into life. It was Luca, video-calling.

‘Morning, girlfriend.’

Mo grabbed her backpack and headed for the door. ‘Hey! Your timing’s terrible,’ she said through the last bit of toast she’d just stuffed into her mouth. ‘I’m going to be late for the bus and it will be *your* fault!’

The face on the screen smiled back.

‘I just wanted to say hi before you disappear into school and leave me all alone again.’

Mo slammed the front door and broke into a jog.

‘Luca, give up!’ she half shrieked, half panted, the cold turning her breath into clouds. ‘You’ve got the easiest gig going. You’re a vampire’s familiar to a fake vampire. It’s not a real job. You get to relax all day, all expenses paid.’

‘I know, but it’s a bit boring. I almost miss being Bogdan’s familiar.’

‘Miss clearing up vampire vomit and dead bodies?’



'Yeah, that wasn't great, but Bogdan was very cultured and at least he needed me.'

'I need you,' Mo said, then blushed at her words.

'Are you finally going to tell your parents about us?' he asked. 'It's been three weeks now.'

Three weeks since Mo had convinced the Vampire King of the East – aka Matislav Rosstistavich, aka Steve – the mightiest vampire in all of Europe, that she was the Vampire Queen, the Chosen One, destined to rule, ruthless, fearless, good at ripping heads off. Only she wasn't. A vampire, or a head-ripper-offer. She was a human schoolgirl from a small rural village, focused on her studies and ambitious for her future career but also, it turned out, super good at facing down vampire overlords.

'Are you ashamed of me?'

'What? Luca! No!' Mo gasped. 'Really no. It's just that keeping that side of my life secret is what I'm used to. You know, the vampire side.'

'But I'm not a vampire.'

'I know, and neither am I,' Mo said. 'I just want to keep my parents out of it. There's so much they don't know about me. Suddenly I've got a whole other life. I've got *you*.' She blushed again.

'I get that,' Luca said, 'but your parents will always be your parents, and you do still live at home.'

'I know, I know. It's me that's changed, I suppose. Squaring up to the Vampire King, protecting you and Lou from him . . .'







'Saving us,' Luca said. 'He was so going to eat us. Me first, all hypnotised and floppy, and then Lou for dessert.'

'I don't like to think about it,' Mo said, 'the way he ran his fingernail down the vein in your throat, eyeing it up . . .' She shuddered. 'But, him not eating you is definitely my biggest-ever achievement. Mum and Dad have always been proud of my good grades and prizes, but standing up to the Vampire King feels like the most real thing I've ever done, and they know nothing about it.'

'Are you going to tell them?'

'God no!' Mo said. 'Never! My vampire life needs to stay secret forever.'

'At least tell them about me though. I'm sick of meeting outdoors,' Luca said. 'Anyway, your folks will be happy. You've got a boyfriend. Normal. Well done. Pop open the champagne.'

'I've always been normal, thanks very much.'

'Sure, but you studied a lot and they worried about you, and then I came along and changed everything!'

'Shut up!' Mo puffed. 'I don't need a man or a woman or anyone to complete me.'

'Yeah, but it's fun, right? Having a boyfriend, having *this* boyfriend.' He jabbed his thumb into his chest. 'It's pretty good, isn't it?'

'Luca, where did you get all this confidence from? You used to be so polite.'

He laughed.



'Look, OK, I'll tell them,' Mo said.  
'When?' Luca asked.  
'Soon,' Mo replied. 'I've got to go. The bus is pulling in.'  
'Try not to miss me too much.'  
'Shut up *again*,' Mo said, climbing aboard.  
'I know it's hard to be apart from me, but you need to concentrate on your schoolwork, OK?'  
'Bye, Luca,' Mo said firmly, and quit the call.



## 2

Mo walked halfway up the bus and stood next to her regular seat. Lou was looking up at her, her blonde fringe almost covering her blue eyes.

‘Talking to Luca? Ahhh, young love. So beautiful!’ she said.

‘Any room for me?’ Mo pointed at Lou’s broken leg, still encased in plaster after she had been run over by Bogdan in the lane outside Mo’s house. It was resting on the seat. She squeezed in next to it.

‘How much longer?’ she said, tapping the plaster with her knuckles.

‘Another three weeks. They’re taking it off just before Christmas.’ Lou sighed. ‘It’s doing my head in. It’s so itchy. I have to poke a knitting needle under the cast to scratch. What was lovely Luca saying?’

‘He was moaning about getting bored while I’m at school.’

‘Sweet,’ said Lou. ‘He’s into you. That’s great.’

‘Do you think so?’





'I know he is,' Lou said, and paused. 'You do too. There – you're smiling and blushing.'

'I still can't quite believe I've got a boyfriend,' Mo said shyly.

'I'm shocked too,' Lou said, and didn't look like she was joking.

'A few months ago, when I wasn't at school I was always at home with Mum and Dad, focusing on The Plan for my life. I mean, I do still really want a job in politics or the UN, in the future, but right now I've got a boyfriend, I'm the Chosen One and I've convinced the Vampire King of the East that I am the rightful Vampire Queen of Great Britain. Everything's changed. *I've changed.*'

'Now you've just got to do it.'

'Do what?'

'Be the queen. Rule. What does that even involve?'

Mo shrugged. 'I'm not sure, but I'm aiming to keep it quite minimal. I've seen what the real human king does on royal visits. A short speech, shake a few hands, then he's off. I can do that.'

'I'm pretty sure he does other stuff too, when he's back in his palace. Paperwork and letter writing and dinners. It's a full-time job.'

'Yes, but he rules over millions of people and I rule over just twenty.'

'But they are vampires,' Lou pointed out. 'This isn't the debating society any more.'





‘Yes, but they’re not power-crazed psychopathic vampires like the Vampire King. These guys have been hiding away for the last couple of decades, since vampire hunters killed loads of them during the purges. They have been ignored and frightened. They’ll just be glad someone has noticed them.’

‘You sound confident,’ Lou said.

‘What’s wrong with that?’ Mo snapped. ‘You’re not going to pull me down, are you? Women should support each other.’

‘Of course I support you, I just want you to be OK.’

‘Sorry, yes, I know, and thanks for caring, Lou, but I’ve got this.’

Lou nodded. ‘Loving the new fangs, by the way,’ she said. ‘So much better than Tracey Caldwell’s gumshield with teeth painted on.’

Mo glanced over her shoulder to where Tracey was sitting on the back seat, staring sullenly at her phone. Tracey, who used to call her a neek as soon as she got on the bus each day, but was now silent.

‘I know,’ she said. ‘I can even speak with them in, they fit so perfectly. They were really expensive.’

‘That’s not all you’ve been buying though. New coat, am I right?’ Lou said. She pushed Mo’s long hair back a little. ‘And earrings. Been hammering your vampire charge card again?’

‘I only got a few things. Bogdan is always on at me to spend more. “Queen Mo, go splish-splashing the





vampire cash, yes? You have Dark Card now. No limits! Enjoy plenty shopping.”

‘Can I see it, the Dark Card?’ Lou asked.

Mo pulled it out of her wallet and passed it to Lou. It was shiny black and at first appeared to be completely plain, but then silver numbers appeared like a hologram when she moved it in the light.

‘Cool,’ Lou said. ‘How much could you spend on this then?’

Mo shrugged. ‘I don’t think there’s a limit.’

‘What? You’re kidding. I am so jealous!’

The bus swung through the school gates.

‘We’re here,’ Mo said, putting the card back in her wallet. She stepped into the aisle and crashed straight into Tracey Caldwell. Tracey moved backwards a bit, but said nothing. Mo still couldn’t get used to this. Tracey Caldwell not shouting at her, calling her names, belittling her. Since that night when Mo stood up to her, just before Lou got run over by Bogdan, Tracey had stopped all of it. Just like that. Three-plus years of picking on Mo were over.

‘Hi, Tracey,’ Mo said.

Tracey didn’t reply. She was looking beyond Mo at a couple of younger kids who were standing in the aisle. ‘Move it, you two!’ she shouted. ‘Lou needs space.’

‘Yeah, can’t you see she’s on crotches?’ piped up Danny Harrington, her regular sidekick. Danny, who never used capital letters because he didn’t ‘believe in them’. Who said ketchup sandwiches counted as one of his five a





day. Who once gave mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to a duckling (it survived).

Mo gripped her backpack strap hard, trying not to grin – at Danny’s ‘crotches’ and Tracey’s personality transplant. She glanced behind them at Jez Pocock, the school alpha male. He hadn’t looked so alpha when Bogdan had hurled him to the ground in the lane near Mo’s house, intending to suck his blood. He’d knocked Jez unconscious, which meant Jez never saw Mo hit Bogdan with a chemistry textbook. Fine, Mo thought. My little secret. Or, rather, one of my little secrets . . . She smiled quickly at him. He flicked his eyebrows up at her in response.

‘Thank you, Tracey,’ Lou said cautiously as she slowly manoeuvred herself upright and hopped down the bus.

Tracey nodded sternly.

‘Wow,’ said Mo when they were outside. ‘Tracey still isn’t hassling us.’

‘It’s guilt. She thinks she’s to blame for this.’ Lou indicated her broken leg.

‘Maybe she actually cares about you,’ Mo suggested.

‘Say what now?’ Lou’s manga eyes pinged wide in disbelief. ‘Tracey only cares about herself.’

‘People can change,’ Mo said. ‘I have. I’ve got a boyfriend now.’

‘Oh really? I had no idea. You didn’t mention him for about, like, two minutes.’

‘You’re the one that likes talking about him.’

‘Prefer looking at him.’





'Lou!' Mo said. 'Back off! Anyway, it's wrong to objectify a man.'

'Doesn't feel wrong,' Lou muttered, then changed tack. 'What does your mum think of him?'

'Ummm . . .'

'Your dad? Oh, you're kidding! He hasn't met your parents yet, has he?'

'Not exactly,' Mo said, wincing. 'He met Dad once, before we were together, but Dad was weird and wouldn't shake his hand.'

'Mo! Come on. What are you doing? You can't keep Luca a secret forever. Anyway, your parents are great.'

'My mum can be touchy-feely,' Mo said, wincing.

'Your dad's nice.'

'He's obsessed with carpets.'

'It's his job.'

'It's his job to fit carpets, not to be obsessed with them. Plus, he can be really judgmental.'

'Not about Luca though, surely? They'll love him. He's great. Big shoulders, even bigger smile, kind, intelligent, smells like apple crumble.'

'Well, more like a cinnamon bun really.'

'They'll love him because they love you,' Lou said.

'I suppose so,' said Mo.

'And because you love him.'

'Yeah, I guess.'

'Ha! Got you,' Lou shrieked, whacking Mo with one of her crutches.







'Wait, no, I didn't mean I, you know, feel *that* way about him. I don't love him, of course I don't.'

'You do, you love him. You *luuurve* him. Mo loves Luca. Forever!'

'You're being childish now.'

'You're the one who hasn't let her boyfriend meet her parents. If I had a boyfriend, I'd introduce him to my rellies right away, but you've always liked to keep things boxed up. I've seen your desk. Weirdly tidy. Sticky notes colour-coded. Pencils sharpened. You're doing that now. Luca over here. Vampire Queen over there.' Lou moved her hand from place to place. 'Schoolwork here, parents over there. All neat and organised.'

'Lou! I'm going to tell my parents about Luca. I am. I promised him just now.'

'Cool,' Lou said. 'Now what do you say?'

'Erm . . .'

'Not *erm*. You say, thank you, Lou, you're the total best. How would I cope without you?'

'I'm not saying that,' said Mo, starting to smile.

'Say it!'

'Never!'

'Say the words!'

'I will not say the words!' Mo shouted.

Lou shrugged. 'It's OK, I don't care. You're thinking it, I can tell.'

Then she planted the end of one crutch in the small of Mo's back and shoved her through the school door.





### 3

When Mo got home she found an envelope on the mat, addressed to her in a familiar swirling hand. Inside was a postcard, showing palm trees lolling above a turquoise sea, white sand and a setting sun. She flipped it over.

*Dearest Mo,*

*How are you liking this sunset? Pretty nice, eh? This is new beach I discovered. I swim here every night. I have made friends with turtle. I am calling him Atilla. Looks like paradise, no? But I am not going to lie to you Mo, I am feeling a tiny bit boring. There is nothing much to do here. No cinema, no art galleries, hardly any shops. At least plenty tourists coming and going so I'm having nice international menu. When are you meeting your subjects? Do not delay. Are you exciting for this? I wish I could see you ruling. And Luca. Is he plenty well? Send me your news! I hope to read from you soon.*

*Bogdan*



Mo smiled and tucked the postcard away in her desk drawer, alongside the six others Bogdan had sent since he had retired to the Caribbean. In each one he moaned about retirement not being as much as fun as he'd hoped. They were oddly emotional too, for a six-hundred-year-old vampire, often referring to Mo as family. I'm not, she thought. I could never be related to a vampire. I can only pretend to be one, and that's as far as it goes. Bogdan must be going soft in his old age.

The front door slammed. Dad. Fifty years old, and still no idea how to close a door quietly.

I have to tell him I have a boyfriend, Mo thought. I'll wait until Mum gets home. Then I'll do it. And there she is now. Oh great. Fine, right, let's get this over with. Mum, Dad, I've got a boyfriend. Gah!

Mo felt bubbles of resistance rising up and popping at the surface of her thoughts. Is it any of their business though? They don't know I'm the Vampire Queen, so why do they have to know about Luca? And what if they start asking difficult questions about how we met?

Mo was thinking all this as she left her room and trotted down the stairs and into the kitchen.

'Are you all right?' her mum asked. 'You look worried.' 'I've got a boyfriend,' Mo blurted.

'You've got what?' her dad said. He was rummaging for snacks deep inside the fridge, like a fox in an overturned bin. He turned to face her, a slice of ham pinched between finger and thumb.

'A, erm, boyfriend?'

'A boyfriend,' he said, staring at Mo like she'd just confessed to shoplifting or getting a full sleeve tattoo. The ham hung motionless.

'Yes. One of those. That.'

Silence from dad, but Mo's mum rushed over and hugged her.

'That's so lovely, darling,' she said. 'Is it Jez?'

'Jez? No, it's Luca. Remember him?'

Dad's eyebrows climbed slowly up his forehead. 'Hmmm,' he said.

'Hmmm?' Mo replied.

'Yes, hmhhh.' He stuffed the ham messily into his mouth.

'We'd love to meet him, properly. How about dinner tonight?' suggested her mum.

'Tonight?' Mo said.

'All right. Get him over,' said her dad. 'Let's find out what he's made of.'

Back in her room, Mo messaged Luca.

**Dinner, here, tonight at 7.**

Luca messaged back:

**You told your parents about us then?**

Mo quickly replied:

**Yup. Dad wants to find out what you're made of, apparently. Mum wants to feed you. You asked for this! Don't be late.**



Luca wasn't late. In fact, he arrived early. Mo gave him a hasty kiss on the doorstep.

'Remember, you're here studying at Donny College, OK? Just say any kind of techie course. They're both clueless about stuff like that.'

Luca nodded. Mo led him into the kitchen.

'Mum, Luca's here,' she said. 'Where did Dad go? Oh, Dad, there you are and . . . oh, you're filming this, are you?'

He had appeared behind them in the doorway.

'Some of it,' he said, panning his phone across their confused faces. 'For my records.'

'You've put on a suit too. That's nice. Possibly. It's a Tuesday though. We're just having some dinner. Like we do every Tuesday. Every evening, in fact. Plus, you hardly ever wear a suit anyway. Except to funerals.'

'Hopefully that's not what this is,' Luca joked.

'Well, we'll see, won't we?' Mo's dad replied.

'I think your father looks very smart,' Mo's mum said, smoothing her hands across his shoulders and straightening his tie. 'It reminds me of when we were first dating, and you always looked so dapper and handsome and I used to think –'

'OK, moving on,' Mo said in a voice that was a little too loud. 'Luca, why don't you sit here next to me?'

'And I'll sit here, at the head of the table,' Dad said.

'The table's circular,' Mo pointed out. 'There is no head of it.'

'I'll carve too,' he went on.





‘Carve what?’ Mo asked. ‘We’re having veggie lasagne, not a roasted boar.’

He picked up a large, sharp knife and pointed it straight at Luca. ‘Now, young man, what are your intentions towards my daughter?’

Mo sprayed the mouthful of water she’d just sipped across the table. ‘Come off it, Dad! It’s not the Victorian age. He doesn’t have “intentions”.’

Her dad didn’t even look at her. He simply raised a hand in a stop sign, then nodded at Luca to speak.

‘Well, Mr Merrydrew, we’re just dating and enjoying each other’s company for now.’

‘Define dating, please.’

‘Dad, please stop,’ Mo said.

Luca swallowed nervously. ‘Just, you know, spending time together and, er, that’s it really.’

‘Is this how you go about things wherever you’re from? You have a hint of an accent.’

‘Dad!’ Mo shouted, sharp and loud. ‘I’m so sorry, Luca, my dad’s turned into some sort of racist patriarch from the Dark Ages.’

‘Mo, you have to understand that, from my position, this young man has just turned up here, in your life, in our family, from who knows where. I wouldn’t be doing my job as your father if I didn’t ask a few tough questions.’

Mo’s mum put a huge dish down on the table. ‘Come on, Mike,’ she said. ‘Lighten up. Sorry, Luca. He can be a tiny bit protective of his daughter.’





‘Of course I’m protective,’ he said. ‘I want the best for Mo. She’s special. Precious. She will always be my priority. Family is everything.’

‘What about friends and a career and travel?’ Mo said. ‘And carpets, eh, Dad? Sometimes they definitely seem to be your priority.’

He didn’t laugh. He plunged the knife into the lasagne and swiped through it.

‘Family first, always,’ he said. ‘Understand, Luca?’

‘Yup,’ said Luca, nodding.

Mo’s face creased into an apologetic grimace. Family first at being super embarrassing. I knew this was a bad idea, she thought as she squeezed Luca’s hand under the table.

They ate in silence for a few seconds, then Luca smiled at Mo’s mum.

‘This is delicious, Mrs Merrydrew.’

‘Call me Kate, please,’ she replied.

‘Or stick to Mrs Merrydrew,’ Dad said.

‘More salad, Luca?’ Mo’s mum pushed the bowl towards him, smiling encouragingly. Mo’s dad shoved it away.

‘Now for those tough questions,’ he said.

‘Haven’t we done those already, Dad?’ Mo asked.

‘Nope. We’re doing them now. Ready, Luca?’

Luca nodded uncertainly.

‘Why are you here?’

‘Well, that’s a big question. Why is anyone here?’ Luca replied. ‘I guess I believe people are here to do good, help their fellow man and –’



‘No, why are you *here*?’ Mo’s dad stabbed the table with his finger. ‘In Lower Donny.’

‘Oh, I see. I’m studying at Donny College.’

‘Course?’

‘Technological studies. With digital software interface relations.’

Mo’s dad blinked a few times and continued.

‘Favourite day of the week?’

‘Saturday.’

‘Favourite smell?’

‘Lemons,’ Luca said.

Mo’s dad made a tutting sound. ‘It’s freshly mown grass. Best season?’

‘Spring?’

‘Really?’

‘Autumn’s nice too.’

‘Better,’ said Mo’s dad. ‘TV or radio?’

‘Ummmm.’

‘Don’t think, just answer!’

‘Both!’ Luca yelled.

‘Who would win in a fight between a bear and a lion?’

‘Would it be the –’

‘Too slow. Favourite part of a museum?’

‘The gift shop?’

‘No!’ said Mo’s dad, slamming his palm down and making everyone jump. ‘It’s any Bronze Age artefacts. Last time you cried?’





‘Oh, er, not sure,’ Luca said. ‘Maybe later on this evening.’

‘Don’t be clever with me, young man. What’s better, jazz flute or jazz recorder?’

‘Sorry?’

‘Dad, stop this,’ Mo pleaded.

‘Just a few more. Do you have any plans to grow a moustache? What was your nickname as a child? Have you ever sworn at a senior citizen? Ever been stung by a jellyfish? Can you tell the difference between a frog and a toad? Any survival skills? What’s the correct way to address the Pope? Can you curl your tongue? Do you have any piercings? Ever gone to prison? What do you consider your greatest achievement? How many kilos can you bench-press?’

‘Dad!’ Mo said.

‘I’ve started so I’ll finish. What’s the longest you’ve gone without talking? Can you whittle? Have you ever eaten eel? What would your superpower be – flying or reading minds? How often do you say thank you and not mean it? What’s the best time to –’

‘DAD!’ Mo shot up, shoving her chair back noisily.

Her dad blinked up at his daughter.

‘This is stupid. It’s unfair. You’re not even giving Luca a chance to answer. Please can you stop?’

‘Mo’s right, Mike,’ her mum said. ‘Perhaps that’s enough questions for now.’

‘I’m just finding out about him,’ he said. ‘You can tell a lot about a person by firing questions at them.’





'What can you possibly find out from all that? Apart from he likes spring and isn't sure who'd win in a bear-on-lion fight?'

'I have ascertained that he seems . . .' he searched for the word, 'acceptable.'

Luca smiled like he'd just been given a prize. Mo was less impressed.

'Acceptable?'

'Yes, but here's the thing, Luca, and the thing is this. And it's here. You may be acceptable, but that doesn't mean I have to like you. I do, though, have to trust you. Can I trust you?'

'Yes,' said Luca.

'Trust is vital. It's essential. Do you understand?'

'Yes,' said Luca.

'Great!' said Mo. 'So, now that all this patriarchal sparring is over and Luca is officially "acceptable", we're going upstairs, OK?'

'Thanks for the meal, Mrs Merrydrew. I mean, Kate,' Luca said. 'Great to chat, Mr Merrydrew.'

'You can put your camera down and stop filming now, Dad,' Mo said.

'Leave your bedroom door open a bit,' he called after her.

'I won't!' Mo called back cheerfully.

