

Turn to me, Natalie.

His mental call to her was dangerous, of course. Dangerous for him. Dangerous for her too, but she was in danger, anyway.

Look at me now.

Her gaze traveled slowly upward. With every moment, physical awareness stretched tauter between them. Her eyes wandered over Julian's face, over his slashing dark brows, down the ridge of his aquiline nose to his chiseled mouth.

“You're our angel!” The ballerina smiled.

The vampire smiled back.

She explained, “An angel is someone who makes an extremely generous donation to demonstrate his or her love for the ballet.”

“I do love the ballet,” Julian told Natalie fervently, his shadowed eyes fixed on her breasts. Their firm swells strained against the sweat-soaked fabric; buttons were undone to the moist hollow between them. *God.*

He didn't have to kill her right away, did he?



NAIMA HAVILAND

A story of
obsession

BLOOD ROOM

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Naima Haviland

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Bloodroom

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To the Swan Queen, who died at my feet when I was five.

CHAPTER ONE

“Hullo, Andrew.” A cherry licorice whip of a smile balanced on her pointy chin. Her cheekbones jutted into a black velvet hat overblown with silk poppies. Beneath its brim, her gray eyes glimmered.

Andrew blinked at her. She looked like an Edwardian angel. Her yellow hair cascaded over a lustrous lamb’s wool coat. Beneath the partial mummy suit and all the slings and pulleys, he was a Gen-Y Adonis.

“Who are you?” he rasped.

“A friend of the hospital. See, I brought you flowers!”

She held up a glorious abundance of waxy white lilies. They nearly hid the princess lines of her coat as they swooned over her narrow arms. The girl's hands, as translucent as a Madonna's, gently restrained them. Above them, her scarlet lips reached nearly to the edges of her face. Her teeth were tiny and perfect.

“I bring flowers to all the patients. Well...all the ones who are bedridden and helpless.”

The nurses' buzzer was close to his nearly immobile arm. Andrew tried subtly to reach it. He found his uninjured fingers suddenly paralyzed. He met her eyes.

"Andrew!" she chided, as if his call for help had injured her.

Dread pinned him. Awe held him.

The lilies spread through the air, obscuring her black coat entirely. The arrangement swelled into two, then three arrangements. The white petals gleamed. Above them, her white skin gleamed. Behind her, all the surfaces of the hospital were white. The color of her hair stood out among the ceaseless dunes of white. Its shimmering goldflowed over the flowers and across the white sheet that covered him. In the center of the whiteness were her silver eyes.

She looked over his cuts and multiple contusions. "What happened to you," she whispered. Tiny daggers grew out of her mouth.

"Hhh.... I was attacked."

"Oh...." She climbed weightlessly up his chest with her cold hands. "How...awful!" She buried her fangs in his neck.

It stung. Lightning flashed inward. It blazed through every vein and artery, every capillary.

Her fingers found his naked flank and trailed softly over the taut skin. She caressed the naked inches of his thighs above their casts. Her hand slid between them. Andrew groaned. His heart took flight. She gnawed.

Through the white lilies that covered his face, he stared at the white ceiling. He breathed the shallow pants of a stunned animal.

Independent of his torpor, Andrew's pelvis heaved against her. His catheter was painlessly, magically gone. Despite all medical expectation, his penis bucked and swelled. When, at last, her cool hand curled around it, chlorophyll burst on his tongue. He went under in a haze of pleasure.

The angel pulled and stroked him while her suckling ground in his ear. Sexual urgency mounted inside his inert body. Ecstasy flew out on the knife edge of panic.

Andrew was at the peak of orgasm when the angel slashed his throat.

...

Nightfall. Dark as pitch.

But it was early yet, and the after-theater crowd was hours in coming. His massive black shadow fell across the terra cotta tiles of the entrance and blocked out the mellow lamplight from within. On either side, gilt columns and faux marble framed the entryway. The glass doors, heavily paned with dark wood, stood open to entice people inward.

Julian Mouret paused before walking in. Closing his eyes, he listened to the delicate strain of violins. Bach. Without knowing it, he smiled deeply at the corners of a mouth that was both stern and sensuous.

“Julian!”

The dim light, to anyone else, would have revealed only the height of the girl’s facial bones, the slender curve of her neck, and her smile. But his night vision picked up everything. He saw bright welcome in her eyes, as well as the nervous rustling of her fingers among the reservation sheets at her lectern.

“Maria,” his voice rumbled softly. He accepted the slender length of her arms around his neck, felt her innocence and trust, and answered it with the brief pressure of his hand on her back.

“Seven p.m.,” she observed with a teasing look, “That’s early for you.”

His white teeth gleamed. “It feels like morning.”

“Alphonse is...” Maria started to leave her post, and he stopped her.

“I’ll find him.”

“Julian!” Many of the wait staff called out his name when they looked up from their duties and discovered him walking through. Their greetings were like Maria’s, a mixture of nerves and pleasure. He stopped to chat and meet those who had been hired in his absence.

Those who had been there for a while were used to Julian’s taking off for varying lengths of time, but they felt his presence at *Bacchantes* even when he was gone. They knew this European style coffeehouse was a pet project of his, the moneymaking hobby of a rich man whose priorities took him far from Charleston. He had chosen every item in the coffeehouse, decided on every detail, from the bar inlaid with satinwood to the muted, swirling pattern on the walls to the music that seemed to descend from the ceiling like a symphony from another age. Even the international newspapers, delivered daily, were hung on wooden racks by his orders.

Alphonse was in the kitchen stooped over skewered cubes of tuna that gleamed with vinaigrette. He nibbled, nodded, and spoke to Timothy, the chef. “You put in a little less sesame this time. Good. Let’s not knock them out with it.” He then noticed the tall man whose frame overwhelmed the doorway. “Julian!” Rubbing his hands roughly in a towel, he rushed forward.

The two men shook hands and clapped backs. They had worked together now for years. An enormous respect existed between them, although the shorter man’s regard was deferential.

“How are things?” Julian wanted to know.

“Not bad,” Alphonse replied in a tone that implied an understatement. “We could meet tomorrow night if you’d like. Seven p.m., okay?”

Julian nodded. He inspected the kitchen from where he stood, with a wandering and deceptively casual gaze.

“How was Europe?” Alphonse asked, nudging a lock of hair off his forehead with the heel of his hand. The action pulled at the cuff of his crisp, white shirt and revealed a Piaget watch.

“Fine,” Julian replied. “The damnedest weather in Munich. But, altogether, fine.”

“I hope you brought us presents,” Megan teased, as she passed with a garnished wedge of almond Brie.

“As a matter of fact, I did,” he replied. “See me on your break. I’m going to sit a bit.”

“Would you like some wine?” Alphonse asked Julian, the man who was both guest and employer.

“I brought my own.” Julian withdrew a black glass bottle from the bag he carried.

Alphonse nodded.

“Julian, don’t let the customers know!” Megan admonished.

“Oh, he always brings his own,” Timothy reminded them.

“And I’ve kept my secret all this time.” His pale green eyes gleamed with humor until they seemed iridescent in the bright glare of the kitchen lights.

Shortly, Julian relaxed at a little table at the front corner of his coffee bar. It was not a prominent location, but it commanded a view of every table on that side of the house. If he grew tired of the goings on there, he could take in the window view that swept the length of the wall behind him. With a wineglass at his fingertips, a slice of cake he never tasted, and an open newspaper on the table, Julian sometimes watched for hours with a stillness and patience that made him almost invisible.

He seemed the personification of the shadows behind him, a dark-haired man in a dark, pinstriped suit. His black leather jacket, military in the severity of its cut, hung on

the back of a chair. Its metal closures gleamed dully in the lamplight, the same lamplight that cast a yellow glow over his pale skin. His eyes, crystalline green orbs that took in everything and revealed nothing, provided the only color in his appearance. They gazed often through the window as if assessing the depth of the night.

He contemplated the fact that, in the next few hours, the streets behind him would steadily fill with people. The sidewalks would give voice to their quick, self-conscious footsteps. The garish traffic lights would illuminate the backs of men's heads as they leaned in toward women who would smile brightly up at them.

Such faith they had, week after week, that romance and intrigue danced elusively ahead of them, like a flirt who would eventually give in. Never mind last week's disappointments, this evening the night air was different, magic. This week they were unaccountably better looking, more deserving. Destiny waited for them to bump into her.

From the sidewalks, they would pour into his cramped, dim little nightspot. They would balance on the edges of chairs that vied with other chairs for space. They would lift their demitasses full of coffees with names they couldn't pronounce. Music would hover in the air and mix smoothly with the lowered murmur of their voices. If their lives would ever take an unexpected turn, this night offered a most promising atmosphere.

They had no idea how close destiny could be. As close as his elbow, resting inches from their elbows. As close as the keen, ice-green focus of his eyes on the vulnerable arch of their necks. As close as their reaction to the soft thunder of his voice when they drew him into conversation. He was a most amiable vampire.

They would never believe it, if he came right out and told them. They believed, though, that an atom could be split into three particles that they would never see. They accepted as true stories of happenings in places they had

never been. Why not? They got their information from televised images of people they had never met. They even believed that perfumed liquids in shiny bottles could smooth away the ravages of age. Each century, after all, had its own truths.

Why, just twenty minutes ago, when he had been warning Megan on the inadvisability of her new love affair, she had pouted at him.

"You're too young to be so paternal!"

"How old do you think I am?" He had tossed the question playfully back at her. His smile had widened as she squinted, trying to make an accurate assessment.

"Thirty-two," she had guessed confidently. When he'd thrown back his head and laughed, she had burst out, "Well, all right, how old?"

"Two hundred and thirty-four."

There had been a moment of silence.

And then Megan had broken up into giggles. He'd joined her, the two of them, their heads close together, laughing at Julian's little joke.

"Cheers," he'd managed to say through his mirth. When he raised his glass, she had cried out, "Cheers!"

When the last drop of blood fell from the glass onto his tongue, she had clapped delightedly.

Julian, whose destiny had long since passed, now cast an eye about the place he had set up for the hell of it, his long, white fingers drumming on the surface of his unread newspaper. If he were taking himself to the ballet tonight, he supposed he had better get going.

He had some difficulty leaving straightaway. Some regulars had come in early and were calling out his name. They waved, stretching out their arms to exchange half hugs. How was he? They heard he'd been to Europe. How was it?

He knew they expected his old-world courtliness, the wide warmth of his smile, and the crinkle at the corners of his eyes.

He knew they would talk about him.

Did you hear what he said to Daisy Hennessey at the Wilkin's party for artist Marv Tate? And did you know he was the guest of Allissa Bernerd of the Bernerd Vineyard Bernerds at Goat Island two weeks last spring? All of this speculation and rumor he let pass with a smile.

He left his establishment on North Market Street and headed briskly down King Street toward the theater. A cool wind off the Ashley and Cooper rivers blew at his back, the start of another pleasantly crisp South Carolina winter. Under the holiday lights, Julian's hair, dampened with the evening's first tentative rainfall, shimmered like strands of jet.

People rushed by him. Music blasted onto the sidewalk as doors opened and closed. Christmas lights winked in shop windows. Seated at Le Midi and Café Rainbow, or browsing in the warm interiors of Sh'Boot and Nice Ice, were other vampires. They ordered exquisite food and did not eat. They handled merchandise they'd rather steal than buy. They moved among humans, smelled them, brushed shoulders with them, exchanged innocuous smiles with them.

One world watched, while the other sped on unaware.

And Julian walked between them, under a starless night, with barely a sliver of moon shining down.

CHAPTER TWO

After the ballet, Julian found himself back at his coffee bar wondering if he cared to go in. The place was packed, but he decided to brave the crowd.

Almost to a person, his customers wore black, the universal dress code of the chic. They took very good care of themselves and were beautiful. If they were hauled out of their condos the next morning and forced to stand bleary-eyed and blinking under fluorescent lights, they might not be so beautiful, but they would still have a certain style you wouldn't find in the everyday slobmob of humans.

Julian plunged through a press of hard bodies. The lack of space and air nearly caused him to reel under their delicious scents. All that Paul Mitchell and Bijan and, under that, the warm, slightly sticky body smell of living prey.

Julian broke free of the breasts and buttocks of complete strangers into a space around the curving glass cases that housed the desserts. In the world of Gwyneth Paltrow and her detox diets, these decadent confections

had the illicit cachet of designer drugs. People stood at an awed distance and ogled before choosing.

Julian pulled at his French cuffs and smoothed his jacket. La Habanera from the hidden speakers wove seductively through the buzz of a thousand conversations. Julian looked around. He stopped cold.

There she was. It was as simple as that.

He gazed at her stupidly, as if she was Coppélia, the doll brought to life in tonight's ballet, somehow transported from the stage into his life. Yet, this was no doll, but the very ballerina who had portrayed her only an hour ago. Julian rubbed his fingertips together in an unconscious desire to touch her.

The ballerina flinched, a hand going up to her cheek.

Her fine black hair retained some of the curl from the night's performance. Dark spirals of it pooled in the tender curve of her neck and shoulder. She had a short, sharp nose with upright nostrils and a mouth that was delicate and precise. Her golden eyes shimmered beneath the flickering fans of her lashes. Her skin glowed with a faint tan. To Julian, everything about her seemed golden.

A brash redhead at her table delivered a punchline that made everyone laugh uproariously. Natalie Heyward gave the woman a stark stare.

See me.

Some inner force compelled him to send her the command.

She began looking around the room. It excited him that she was so malleable.

To live the savage reality of vampirism is to find that madness is a shadow following close, so close behind. Eager for you. And determined.

Turn to me, Natalie.

His mental call to her was dangerous, of course. Dangerous for him. Dangerous for her too, but she was in danger, anyway.

Look at me now.

He barely registered the change in atmosphere. The force of his lust sometimes stole his peripheral awareness. He watched her eyes follow an unnatural light, one visible only to her and to him.

She gave him a meaningless little smile. The polite smile she would have given a stranger with whom she believed she had accidentally connected. Julian's answering smile grew until every tooth, including his retracted fangs, glimmered whitely.

La Habanera had changed to something deeper, sweeter, a compelling caress of unidentifiable notes.

He went to her with no awareness of actually moving.

Her eyes traveled slowly upward. With every inch they covered, physical awareness stretched tauter between them.

Her gaze traveled over his face like fingers exploring in the dark, over the demonic peaks of thick, dark brows and down the ridge of his proud aquiline nose. Her eyes rested on his full, yet chiseled, mouth.

The eroticism of her slow appraisal made Julian take a sudden breath. He couldn't read her mind, not unless he drank from her and forged a one-way psychic bond, but he was a man with an eye for the right responses.

Amber glinted in her golden eyes, bright as sunlight through stained glass.

The ballerina smiled.

The vampire smiled back.

He took her offered hand in his.

She gasped. People often did that. He was cold to the touch. He smiled reassuringly. "Hello, Natalie."

Her fingertips hovered in the open grasp of his hand. She asked, "How did you know my name?"

Julian looked into those unsuspecting eyes and couldn't resist baiting her. "If you knew who I was at all, you wouldn't wonder."

She stared back, at a loss.

“Mr. Mouret is a fan, Natalie,” said a man at the table. Edgar Montaigne, the Executive Director of the ballet, captured her attention with a significant stare.

Julian knew the old man would sell his ballet any way he could. Rumor had it he encouraged his ballerinas to be “especially nice” to rich patrons.

A flicker of distaste marred Natalie’s face. “I don’t have those kinds of fans!” She laughed nervously, pulling her hand away. Julian left his palm open; it felt her swift retreat in degrees of emptiness.

“Natalie’s imagining a vulgar excess of flowers in her dressing room and a well-dressed pack of wolves panting her door,” the brash redhead tossed off.

Wolves, Julian thought with regret.

Wolves, Natalie’s eyes said to him. She looked down at her lap. Fidgeted.

The redhead charged in with an airy smile, “For some reason, Natalie hates that sort of thing. I love it. Wouldn’t you?” she demanded, thrusting out a slender hand.

He took her hand politely. With her pixie haircut and snapping blue eyes, she had an arch attractiveness. Her lashes swept down, then slowly upward. “Rowena Kemp,” she introduced herself.

Conversation spun around the crowded table. “They’re turning out scores of those wolves. They make good pets if you can control them.”

“If you can tame them.”

“If they don’t have too much wild in them. Sometimes they seem tame enough. Then, like a flash, they turn savage.”

“Hybrid wolves? You mean they’re bred with dogs?”

“Shut up about wolves, can’t you?” A blonde man grated. He threw a sharp glance at Natalie. Everyone fell awkwardly into silence.

The redhead's laughter shrilled. "We can't vouch for the pedigree of Natalie's wolves." She looked coyly at the newcomer. "You're not one of those, are you, Mr. Mouret?"

Julian didn't play into it. He wanted to lay his open palm on Natalie's down bent head, fondle her sleek hair.

"I'm sorry . . .," Julian faltered. "I didn't mean . . ."

At his tone of sincerity, she quickly said, "No, of course you didn't." Her face lifted to his.

Neither blinked. The polite moment to look away arrived, and they ignored it. Time stretched immeasurably.

Suddenly, he laughed, revealing the square, even gleam of his white teeth. "Don't be too heartless with your wolves, Natalie, if they feel they want to devour you!"

"Shut up!" the blonde man growled into his coffee liqueur.

Natalie laughed uncertainly.

"I saw you dance tonight," Julian told her. "No doubt they feel the same impulse that makes little boys try to catch butterflies in their cupped hands." Butterflies. He congratulated himself on switching to a gentler species.

"Hmm," Natalie's rival joked cynically. "We know, though, what little boys do with butterflies once they've caught them." She turned pointedly to Natalie, her face full of rash humor. "They'll want to clip—your—little—wings!"

"Then Natalie should allow herself to be caught only by one who appreciates her . . . rarer qualities." His smooth rejoinder had the effect he desired. Natalie's chin lifted to a prouder angle.

"But then, ballerinas are a rare breed, are they not?" His gaze swept over the other woman with gentle humor, diplomatically keeping things even.

"Are you the one who approves those incredible desserts?" Rowena smiled as if she thought Julian Mouret was an incredible dessert.

"Rowena has a sweet tooth . . ." Edgar began.

“Does she really?” There was a silky quality to his voice, and Rowena looked as if she thought that tone was meant for her. She made such assumptions naturally.

“Well, you’d never know it by the looks of her,” Edgar purred.

Now she eyed Julian as if he were a naughty boy keeping secrets. “Is that your big old house up on the Santee River? You must have a time keeping it up.”

“It’s more demanding than a good-looking girlfriend,” he joked, not caring how she interpreted his remark. He was already bored with her acquisitive manner, and as long as she did not suspect he was a vampire, he didn’t care if she thought he was a jerk.

Rowena didn’t think he was a jerk. She tried, instead, to insinuate herself further. “Maybe your good-looking girlfriend doesn’t understand her competition.”

Natalie didn’t block Rowena’s attempt on Julian’s attention. She lacked competitive skill, he decided with annoyance. He was accustomed to the openly aggressive women of this post-feminist era. They, in fact, had made him as lazy as an overfed cat.

He sank easily into a crouch by Natalie’s side.

She gasped. For every second she held her breath, Julian’s heart beat faster. He squinted intently. He smiled.

She stared at his jacket with an almost desperate concentration. Her fingers dug into her knees.

Julian inhaled the scent of her with a connoisseur’s abandon. She used vanilla-scented soap and a floral-based perfume. Beneath that, her skin smelled like any other woman’s. And underneath that? Bone, brain, personality?

She wore a velvet skirt. The collar of her thin blouse fell in languid ruffles. The way her hair twined and her lashes curled! If Julian had been crazy, he would have simply fallen forward. He would have rubbed his hands on her velvet skirt and over the flat grain of her chiffon sleeves. He would have encircled her narrow biceps,

wrapped his arms around her waist and buried his face in her lap. He could have made an orgy of this multi-textured, subtly scented, visually beguiling woman.

Natalie's eyes swelled into twin suns around pupils of polished jet. Her cool, distant manner hadn't prepared him for this sudden flare of passion. The fires revealed in her eyes, usually locked up safe within an ordered mind, were still somewhat contained. And by the looks of her, Natalie Heyward didn't give her secret away easily. He watched her valiant struggle to hide it away again.

Her secret only made him hotter. His arousal was almost painful now. Rowena Kemp had shown willingness, but Julian was looking at the one he wanted.

His remarkably white skin tightened over the high, haughty bones in his face.

She was shaking.

A cell phone rang.

They both jumped.

And rang and rang and rang.

Natalie tore her gaze from his and snatched her purse. She brought the phone out with a violently unsteady hand.

"Yeah?" Pant. "Yes?"

Her eyes grew round. Her forehead pleated. "Oh!" she wailed.

She jumped up with the cell phone still in hand. Anything in the way got jostled, including Julian.

"He's worse," Natalie said in a quavering voice. "Oh God, Edgar, he's worse." She clutched the old man's knobby hand, pulling him with her as she grabbed for her jacket. She missed the jacket, but knocked over the chair.

Everyone at the table threw back a chair to rush after her. The effect of the human turbulence they caused as they surged through the noisy crowd seemed lost to them.

CHAPTER THREE

Natalie still clutched Edgar's hand as they rushed down the corridors of Charlotte Mouret Memorial Hospital. Julian seemed to lead them with his forceful stride. Dancers and directors kept pace.

"He's better already," the doctor told Edgar. He seemed winded from his sprint with these people. "That is, he's out of the coma. We gave him a transfusion, and it seems to have precipitated a recovery." The words blood and transfusion caused a group outcry. The doctor had to shout over them. "That's good! Unexpected. Very good. But he awoke in a panic. He's not . . ."

The doctor threw himself in front of them, blocking entrance to Andrew's room. "He's not sane."

Edgar hissed. "What the hell does that mean?"

"He's ranting."

They stared. Their impatience threatened to plow the doctor down through psychic force alone.

"Only three of you should go in at a time," he said tightly. They moved en masse. He held his ground. "Don't overwhelm him."

Edgar did not push the man out of his way, but the blazing look that so often intimidated international stars had its effect. The doctor sidestepped, and almost cleared the door, before all of them plunged into the room.

Julian saw a beautiful young man obscured by casts and slings. His silky, blonde hair was cut in longish layers, made shaggier by his recent trauma. His chest and arms were heavily muscled, his overall build long and sleek. Pink-skinned from the blood transfusion, he was still gray around the edges.

His blue eyes roved sightlessly across the ceiling. He seemed unable to connect the sound of their voices with the reality of their presence.

“He’s better already.” The doctor repeated heartily. “The blood transfusion brought about a full recovery.”

Julian shifted into strategy. “A full recovery?” he inquired skeptically. Nobody asked him what he was doing here. “You call this a full recovery?”

Inside his own dead weight, Andrew appeared to be struggling. His head flopped. His neck bulged around the edges of the bandage that encircled it. Apparently trying to calm him, Natalie touched his hand.

Andrew screamed.

“We’ll be adjusting his drug intake,” his doctor said.

Natalie moved her face into Andrew’s line of vision. Andrew smiled with relief. She smiled shakily back.

A colorless man standing bedside in a rumpled corduroy suit told her, “He hasn’t given us anything we can use.”

“Hospital negligence was not a factor,” the doctor said. “Sometimes certain traumas have psychological effects. Temporary effects,” he quickly added.

“Exactly where did all his blood go?” asked Julian in a dead, calm voice. Edgar had ceded control, probably still hopeful of Julian’s future patronage. The others were too upset to care.

"It was a hemorrhage. Of sorts," the doctor informed him.

Natalie glanced back in appeal.

Julian pressed. "From where did he hemorrhage?"

"She bit my neck," Andrew broke out hoarsely.

"Julian!" Natalie murmured thinly.

"From his neck," the doctor answered.

"From his neck?" Julian enunciated.

"She was beautiful . . ." Andrew raved breathlessly. "She bit me and . . ."

"Someone in your hospital bit him!" Natalie cried.

"No," the doctor denied coldly.

Andrew babbled dreamily "She had . . . long hair and fangs. She bit me and . . ."

Julian's calm turned edgy. "You let someone in here who . . ."

"He wasn't in a restricted area." The doctor was defensive now. "Anyone could have . . ."

"She jerked me off . . ." Andrew rambled. "Uuhhh . . ."

"That boy is psychotic!" The doctor thundered. "Temporarily!" he added quickly. "An apparent accident . . ."

"Accident? How?" Natalie shouted. She leaned in closer, urging him to speak. "Andrew, how?"

"He bled this much from a bite?" Julian demanded.

"A cut, really," the doctor understated.

"Enough to need a transfusion? Exactly how long was he allowed to bleed?"

"She was beautiful," the muscle-bound invalid sighed. "She sucked all my blood out . . ."

"With what, Andrew? A hose?"

"There must have been blood all over the place," Julian jabbed.

"There wasn't," the doctor snapped.

Natalie stroked his matted hair. He confided more. "She had teeth that grew . . ."

“We can’t go on this,” corduroy suit repeated.

Natalie sprang to her feet. Andrew’s eyes darted frantically after her. “Someone sexually assaulted him and siphoned his blood! That’s not a big enough clue for you, *detective?*”

“Somebody cleaned him up. There’s not a trace of semen on him. Not a fiber, not a hair.”

“Our staff reacted appropriately,” the doctor cut in.

“No one visits him,” Julian ordered coldly. “Not even his friends. Only you and the nurses.”

The doctor glared with a stiff-faced defiance that had no point other than pride. Julian’s cool green eyes held the doctor’s. The silence between them thickened with tension and secrecy. The doctor’s eyes dropped. The standoff had gone unnoticed by the others. They were in their own standoff.

“Look,” the detective argued, “everyone agrees his blood was taken, but a centerfold with fangs?”

“It’s your job to find out,” Natalie sparred.

“You said it was a man who attacked you and Andrew.”

“That’s what I said.”

“A man you didn’t see.”

“Hello, Andrew.” Julian leaned over him, power inherent in his face and bearing. “Remember me?”

“No,” Andrew said.

Natalie reached for Julian and clung. “It was night,” she reminded the detective.

“You didn’t hear him leave?” the detective demanded.

Natalie broke in with frustration. “He threw Andrew through the air. He got me from behind. He’d already killed those wolves. It was very confusing!”

“Confusing, right. You and Andrew ever experiment with drugs?”

“No!”

“It’s just, whatever got those wolves, it wasn’t human.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Julian's eyes flickered over them as they filed into the receiving room, dwelling on the down bent head of each one who knelt before him.

"The blood is the life," he intoned.

"Blood is the life." They each chanted the phrase before they kissed his hand. The statement was not a twisted religious reference. It was the fact that underscored everything.

The legendary vampire mystique had inevitably evaporated in the modern age. Garlic and the crucifix, mist-shrouded mountains and ruined castles blanched beneath the unblinking eye of a digital world. The new scrutiny of technology also forced new evasions. To get the blood and keep it now required a complex network. The vampire world had become, in fact, an international police state that organized its cross-country food transport and carefully controlled its population. To protect this network, Draconian laws were severely enforced. The blood was the life and only survival mattered.

But to a species that valued only blood, Julian's vampires had a peculiar weakness for the luxury of Lion's Court, his family home. They preferred its lofty airiness, the silk curtains lifted by errant breezes in the aboveground rooms, the fortress-like security of the belowground rooms, the majestic interiors throughout.

Among them were businessmen, laborers, number crunchers and computer techs, all vampires bound to Julian by supernatural force and legal contract. Some among them were eccentrics. Leticia was the most exclusive call girl of the most exclusive escort service in South Carolina, appropriate enough for a woman who was by definition a creature of the night. Bobby hung out in bus terminals and jockeyed against pimps and dealers for the trust of desperate runaways. Mara savored the blood of babies as humans do the taste of veal. Sylvia, artists' muse, reclined languidly on a Duncan Phyfe sofa, her long hair rippling over its satin arm, her voluptuous body repeating the smooth curves of its Empire style. They all had been officially summoned, and he let the silence lengthen as they settled into couches and chairs.

Julian leaned back in the claw-footed Directoire chair, and stretched out his long legs. By his side, Swisher sat cross-legged on a satin-cushioned, Roman-style campstool. Sensing his gaze, she gave Julian an impudent wrinkle of her pretty nose.

She looked angelic. Her breasts were mere buds, her hips nonexistent. Flat, golden ringlets parted at the center of her high, waxy forehead, clinging to her tiny skull, and spilling to her waist. Her gray eyes were as luminous as an angel's, but they shimmered from lash line to brow bone with heavy layers of smoky blue, gray and black. Her thin lips glistened with multiple applications of Elizabeth Arden's "Scarlet Parfait," Swisher's signature color since 1924.

She stroked the white poodle in her lap. She took a deep, long drag on a thin cigar, "Swisher Sweet" brand, hence the nickname. Blue mist hovered on her tongue. She pursed her lips and blew a stream of it into the air as she moved her hand to Julian's arm. She was the only one who dared touch him in that possessive way.

"What does he want us for?" the others whispered to each other.

At the sound of footsteps in the hall, Julian leaned forward. His eyes narrowed to emerald slits. A muscle leapt into motion in the granite angle of his jaw. Sensitive to his moods, the others tensed and watched the door.

They heard a young woman's voice. "He's here? Why didn't he meet me upstairs?"

Among the many gathered together, one vampire abruptly stood.

They heard a man answer the girl in a thick Irish brogue. "Oh, he said I was to bring you down here. It's where he hangs out."

The owner of the accent stepped in. He was wiry, short and as tough as whipcord from the soles of his combat boots to his shock of red hair. He swept the room with contemptuous yellow eyes. No kissy-kiss on bended knee for him. Mick, nicknamed by Swisher and owner of a real name no one remembered, had been appointed by higher-ups for Julian. To all present he was cop, executioner and Internal Affairs. He owed Julian nothing and Julian couldn't kick him out. Not that he'd want to, Mick was the best. Many exceptions were made for him. Mick was a wild dog on a leash longer than most because the hand that held the other end lived on distant shores. He pulled the girl into the room with an arm around her shoulders. "Here, darlin'."

"Jeanie!"

All eyes were suddenly on the man who'd stood.

“Damon!” she cried, her young face suddenly flushed and giddy. Behind her, Mick’s body twitched with latent threats. With the carelessness of the young, she’d trusted him. Mick looked cool.

The vampires looked at Damon, who was charming by nature and very popular. His aristocratic features were downright pinched, his body taut with repressed fear. Mick’s teenage captive was his fall from grace.

The vampires knew now why they were here. The girl had scabby holes in her neck.

In the old days, they all could have been killed for Damon’s folly. In the old days, humans drove stakes through their hearts while they slept, sawed their heads off and stuffed their mouths with garlic. Vampires policed themselves now.

They had globalized more effectively than any blue chip corporation. They were unified under one law, fed from one source. Silenced by one secret.

“Damon,” the girl asked, “are they all vampires?”

There was a collective gasp to hear it put so baldly. Some laughed. The girl laughed, too.

Julian’s nerves tightened until his long, white fingers transformed into talons that impaled the tapestry arms of his chair.

Maybe they wouldn’t believe it if you came right out and told them you were a vampire, he was fond of saying. But you couldn’t chance it. You couldn’t tell them or bite them, no matter how badly you clouded their minds. It was against the law. They were ancient monsters in the mass-retail age. Humans came packaged and bought. And that now caused the vampires to waste all the skills that had once been so important.

The girl continued to scan the room, stopped at one face and said, “Hi, Bobby.”

She was one of Bobby’s bus stop finds, a runaway. And she was very young. Fifteen? Bone structure was just

emerging from the baby fat. Her teeth were good, and her sparkling eyes were thick with dark lashes.

Bobby twisted in his seat and gave Damon an exasperated look. "You didn't kill her?"

"Huh?" Jeanie said nervously.

"A bad joke," Julian said. His mildness didn't hide the icy danger underneath.

"A joke, hon," Damon said flatly.

"Damon?" she squeaked.

"It's okay, baby."

Mick wrenched her arm. She gave a shriek of pain.

"Let her go!" At Damon's eruption, crystal lamps shuddered.

Swisher puffed on her cigar.

Mick's eyebrows did a little dance.

Damon advanced as if Mick were a hungry tiger with a toddler in its paws. "I'll take care of you, darling," he said to Jeanie. "Don't worry."

"Oh!" Mick squealed with mock emotion. "That's so sweet! What other promises did you make? I love you, baby," he crooned in the squirming girl's ear. "I'm gonna *marry* you, baby."

"I'll kill you," Damon threatened.

Mick bent her elbow inside out. The crack of breaking bone competed with the girl's scream. Damon's scream.

"Enough!" Julian roared.

Damon grabbed a vase, smashed it against the stone wall and lunged. As Damon hit his target, Mick shrieked, grabbed his torn face, and counter-lunged. The two men crashed to the floor and took Jeanie with them. Her screams became one continuous shrill of pain and fear. She dragged herself into Damon's frantic embrace with her one good arm. Mick pulled with the broken arm. The pitch of her screams rose.

Julian levitated them with the force of his cold green eyes as, all around the group, a storm of psychic fury swept

the room. Candlesticks, silver urns and bowls, Rococo bric-a-brac—all elaborate, priceless and heavy—flew through the air. A scallop-edged mahogany card table and Hepplewhite chairs soared over ducking heads. A tsunami wave of hothouse flowers whirled about their faces. The vampires howled excitedly, and rose and ducked in equal measures, as they grabbed the furniture that bucked beneath them.

Only Julian was motionless. His deadly purpose never wavered.

In the tempest, Damon clutched Jeanie tighter. He kicked and flailed. She wept hysterically. Her eyes were bleary slits, her mouth as wide and wavering as an infant's. He buried his fangs in her neck. The maelstrom ripped her from his bite. Her jugular sprayed.

At the sight of the blood, the vampires were on their feet with a roar. They thrust their open mouths to the wild, red storm. Furniture rose and flew and crashed into them. Swisher's long, blonde hair streamed over her face. She squinted. Her thin, red mouth smiled. Kiki, her frenzied poodle yapped. Mick, holding his face, snarled into the blinding mayhem. Julian stood taut and silent.

Damon tried to keep his hold around Jeanie's waist, but converse winds tore their bodies in opposite directions. In seconds, only their clasped hands remained connected. Their desperate hold on each other then broke by an inch. He struggled against the tide. Their clutching fingers straightened against their will and then loosened. Damon strained to press his fingertips to hers. Like a shutter torn from a window, she was gone.

Mick bellowed again at the outrage of his shattered face and knocked Jeanie to the ground. Julian knocked Mick aside.

Julian threw his head back. His mouth opened and then widened—so wide that his mouth became a complete circle studded with teeth and fangs. The lower jaw swung

out horizontally and grew still more. Jeanie's bleary eyes rounded into pools of watery terror.

Julian dove, took the tender beating throat entirely into his jaws and clamped down.

"She's a person!" Damon screamed until his red throat swelled. "She's like you and me!"

But she wasn't.

Jeanie's eyes bulged and rolled to the ceiling as Julian lifted her in his teeth. Wind tore at his dark hair until it blazed like black fire around his monstrous face. He shook the girl in his jaws. Her eyes went glassy. Her limbs beat the air.

Damon shrieked and shook like a machine about to explode.

Suddenly, the wrought iron implements at the hearth rose abruptly from their brass holder. They turned horizontal. Through multidirectional wind, they fired straight and swift. The black poker speared Damon's back and emerged from his chest, brilliant and sticky. Blood appeared around the rim of Damon's lips, and then poured.

Julian slapped Jeanie's limp body onto the floor. The others fell on her.

No one saw Damon's hands and knees hit the floor. A dead vampire held no fascination for them, not when human prey was near.

The air was thick with the noise of feeding.

CHAPTER FIVE

Eventually, Natalie and Jeff were the only ones left in the ballroom. Selected members of the corps and the soloists had gone home. The Ballet Master, Edgar, and the others in charge, had followed.

Julian stood at the apex of the dual stairs. Above him rose the single stair that led to the vast ballroom. If he chose to intensify his senses, he'd hear their hearts and their breathing. He listened a moment to the whispered spinning of Natalie's toe shoes as she pirouetted down the waxed expanse of the ballroom's hardwood floor.

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