

The Darkest Gift

A novel

by

Len Handeland

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Yes, I now feel that it was then on that evening of sweet dreams, that the very first dawn of human love Burst upon the icy night of my spirit. Since that. I have never seen nor heard your name without a shiver half of delight, half of anxiety”

~ Edgar Allan Poe ~

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Chapter 1

Fabien and Stefan

(FABIEN NARRATES)

Some have said that there are advantages to being a younger son. The older son gets all the land, but the younger son has more freedom. Nothing was more important to me.

My older brother Jean Claude did not understand why I wanted freedom. I didn't realize it myself at the time.

"Why do you want to go to Paris?" he asked me when I applied to him after our father's death for money. Teasingly, he added, "Do you want to see all the fine ladies of the court?"

This was a joke with him, my supposed finicky taste in women. I had reached the age of twenty-two without ever having had a sweetheart. My sisters teased me about an acquaintance who they said made eyes at me and whose heart they accused me of breaking. Did I think I was so good-looking that I could have any girl I wanted without troubling myself to be polite?

Well, I was good-looking; I did not know why I should deny it. Naturally, I did not say that to my sisters, but I did say that the girl in question was not precisely the reigning beauty of the Loire valley. I would not say she was ugly, but I could do better.

My sisters Marie and Antoinette went into gales of laughter, and from that day onward, my arrogance was added to my being highly selective as a subject for teasing.

I longed to get away from them and needed to get away from country life, with its few neighbors and absence of entertainment. When I asked my brother for money, I did not know exactly what I wanted, but I had a reasonably good idea of what I did not want.

“Here, take this,” my brother said to me, handing over a small bag with coins that rattled against each other. “It’s not much, I’m afraid. I don’t know why you want to live in Paris when you can live here much better on so much less. Be sure to call on our cousins in the Marais as soon as possible. The Vicomte is said to be easily offended.” These cousins were the Vicomte d’Amboise, which consisted of an elderly bachelor and those of his family who lived with him, his widowed niece Louise and her young son Alec.

My sisters wished me good luck finding a wife suited to those fastidious tastes of mine, and two days later, I set out from Valençay with my servant Jacques walking behind me and carrying my things.

Jacques could talk with other servants along the road, resulting in us having a guide to show us the city by the time we reached Paris. It was summertime, and we were glad to stop at an inn on the edge of the town, where they furnished us with water to drink and wash off the road’s dust and then supplied us with a simple meal. The proprietor himself served us. He was full of a place called the Procope, which he had visited for the first time earlier that day. It was the newest place to see and be seen. While I was wondering what the word café meant, he asked us if we had ever tasted coffee.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It is the most exquisite drink from the East that tastes like nothing else. It is rich and yet somewhat bitter, but somehow the bitterness adds to rather than detracts from the flavor.” He had bought a small amount, ground, from the Procope, and he insisted on brewing us some. With the enthusiasm of a true fan, he said that if he were looking for new quarters, which he wasn’t. He would look for rooms near the Procope to have coffee daily.

Jacques and I and our guide, Luc, laughed at the man’s enthusiasm as we walked on into the great city, but in the end, we were so curious that we ended up visiting the Procope. By the time we got there, night had fallen.

Jacques and Luc soon got into a conversation with a waiter. He was clearly giving them directions of some kind.

“He knows of some rooms that might be just what you’re looking for,” Jacques explained.

“Attic rooms,” the waiter said apologetically. “But I understand that may be what the gentleman requires.”

“Admirable,” I said. “But we will have some coffee first.”

We were glad to sit down. I looked around at the café and marveled. First, I marveled at the significant number of people who managed to crowd themselves in. All of Paris was like that to me, though, country-bred, I was struck everywhere by the density of the population. The café was also remarkable for its mingling of the classes. I had never seen anything like this before. There were bakers with loaves of bread for sale and apprentices who had no money to pay for a drink and were standing around as if waiting for someone to pay. Up the social scale were master artisans, printers showing around their latest pamphlets, tailors showing off their latest coats, and then there were lawyers' clerks and the lawyers themselves. I guessed that was what they were by their inkpots and pens and long rolls of parchment and by the arguments going on around them, and then there were gentlemen, the upper-class members, in silk suits and stockings and long, curly brown wigs.

One of these gentlemen caught my eye with his, which was bluer than any eye I had ever seen before. This blue-eyed man held my gaze for moments long enough to signal that his glance was not an accident. He was perhaps the finest gentleman, judging by the white lace overflowing his bright blue vest. This lace was of a quality I had never seen before, and it was as clean and fresh as if he had just put it on for the first time. Even more remarkable was that his skin was as white as his lace, a smooth porcelain-like complexion, as beautiful as it was strange. As he held my gaze with his eyes, which grew more intensely blue every moment, I began to feel embarrassed, yet it was pleasurable. I did not look away. I was confused but somehow thrilled as well. These were the looks I had seen men and women exchange. And with that thought, I realized the most remarkable thing; there were no women in the café. Was this the paradise I had come to Paris unknowingly seeking?

I suddenly became fatigued. It took too much effort to go on gazing into those heavenly eyes. Jacques and I left the café and crossed the street, and just around the corner, we found the sign of the mortar and pestle that marked an apothecary's business. The apothecary was closing shop, and when he was done, he showed us upstairs to the rooms.

They, indeed, were nothing more than an attic, reasonably large but entirely unpainted and unadorned in every way. There was a bed, a table, two chairs, and aside from a cupboard and washstand, not much else. For Jacques, there was a minute room that doubled as a broom closet. I stepped across my room and looked out of a dormer window. All was black at night, but since there was no traffic abroad at that hour, I could hear people at the café around the corner. I listened to the strange, far-away sound of music, clinking glasses, and laughter.

Was I happy I had come to live as a poor man in Paris? I could not have expressed how glad I was.

There were no curtains on the windows, so I awoke in the morning with the sun. Leaving Jacques asleep, I went down the stairs and into the street, seeing it for the first time. Few people were abroad at that hour, and the shops were all closed. However, the Procope was open. I went in gladly and asked a waiter what time they had opened. He told me that the café never closed. As soon as the last stragglers of the night had gone home, the first men taking their wares to market arrived, wanting coffee and a shot of brandy to go with it. He asked if he could get me some brandy.

I declined and said I wanted only coffee and rolls. A hungry young man of twenty-two can eat rolls almost without number, so while I ate, I had plenty of time to observe the life of the café. Men came in and discussed the news of the day. I heard “the king” mentioned several times and the name of his present mistress, and I caught mention of a duel in the Bois de Boulogne, of various tennis matches, and of the latest opera to be put on. I listened to everything with great interest, but what I was doing there was waiting for my gentleman with the blue eyes and immaculate lace. I sat most of the day waiting in the café for him, getting up to take a stroll around the streets and to see that Jacques was provisioning us properly.

Our guide from yesterday turned up, the one who showed us first the Procope and then the rooms I was letting. For a few *sous*, he showed me some of the sights of Paris. Despite my exhaustion yesterday, we walked as far as the Ile de la Cité to see the Cathedral of Nôtre Dame and climbed the bell tower to see the city of Paris before us. It is hard to describe how I, a farm boy who had never seen anything higher than the roof of the parish church, felt when I saw the full magnificence of Paris.

When we got back to the café, I paid and dismissed my guide, and, giving up for today on my gentleman in blue, I was ready to climb the stairs to my attic. The sun had gone down about an hour ago, and I thought I would have a brandy before going home. I turned to look for a waiter, and there he was, wearing the same blue breeches and vest, the same lavender coat, the long brown wig, and the lace at his neck that was as white as the first snow. And he was looking at me with those bright blue eyes, staring. Not to be intimidated, I stared back. Finally, he smiled. With one hand, he indicated a table with a chessboard set up upon it. I took a chair, and we sat down opposite each other.

“I am a habitué here. You are the guest and must take the white” were the first words he ever said to me.

Since I was young, I thought myself to be an excellent chess player, ready to match my skills with the best the capital had to offer. I often played against my sisters and brother and beat them all. However, my father would never take me on, which should have told me something.

This gentleman checkmated me in two moves. He did not laugh at me, but he did smile out of the corner of his mouth. We played another game, and this time he checkmated me in three moves.

“Sir, I perceive I am out of my class,” I said. “I thought myself a good player at home, but I had only my family to play against me, and I see now that what we called chess was very different from the game you play. I am not worthy of playing against you, sir.”

It was clear that the gentleman had enjoyed dominating me game after game. He was pleased by my tribute and smiled at me now more indulgently. “I suppose you must learn from me, then,” and he proceeded to show me a series of maneuvers. I would have felt foolish except that he so obviously enjoyed instructing me.

A waiter stopped at our table and said, “Milord?”

“Two tankards of ale,” my lord, answered without raising his eyes from the chessboard.

Now, assuredly, I would learn his name.

“If you buy me an ale, you must know my name,” I said boldly. “I am Fabien Levesque” I waited.

“Stefan, Baron of Vitre.”

There, it was on the table: if he were an aristocrat, he would have heard the name, Levesque. Although I was no better dressed than a tradesman, and Stefan was a member of the court, we were both members of the aristocracy. Things between us were now put on a new footing. We could associate openly. We might even visit each other without risking suspicion from anyone. It was a significant step forward, and I hoped to see Stefan again after this night.

When our ale arrived, we drank to the health of the king. I drank freely while Stefan sipped. When I reached the bottom of my tankard, I could feel my face getting warm, the ale was strong. Notably, however, Stefan’s face remained that uncanny white. I wondered if he were ill.

We lingered over the chessboard long into the night. Other men joined us to watch and learn from Stefan. I gave up my seat to a man who wanted to play, and Stefan finished him in minutes. I couldn’t help observing that Stefan had given me much more leeway, had allowed me to lose much more slowly, as if he had enjoyed my company and wanted to keep it. He beat several other gentlemen. By then, it was pretty late.

“Come, let me take you back to your rooms,” Stefan said. “Are they far from here?”

“No, just around the corner,” I said.

“Nonetheless, it is pitch dark, and you do not know how dangerous Paris can be at night. My carriage is waiting.” He made a gesture to a servant who was sitting on the sidewalk outside of the café.

I did not want to look like some effeminate coward who could not be trusted to walk around the corner by himself, so I protested.

Stefan ignored my protest and repeated, “You do not know Paris. Come.” He put down his tankard, and I noticed, with considerable surprise, that it was full. Those sips had been pretend; he had drunk nothing.

Stefan brushed the servant cruelly aside and helped me into his carriage himself. He lifted me as effortlessly as if I had been a cat. When he got in, he brushed his knee against mine. An accident, no doubt. However, the carriage was big, and he did not need to sit so close to me.

“This is it,” I said when we came to the sign of the mortar and pestle.

“Did the apothecary give you a key?” Stefan asked, and I had to admit I had not thought to ask.

“Here, give me that lantern,” he said to his coachman; and by its light, we picked up dirt clods from the street and threw them at every window we could reach. After a time, my landlord, the apothecary, appeared in his dressing gown, rubbing his eyes.

“Good night, my friend,” said Stefan, and he tipped his hat to me and was gone.

The apothecary had taken Stefan’s measure, so he scolded me very little for waking him up. “I will have a key made for your lordship,” he said.

“I’m not a lord. But I will be obliged.”

I ought to have gone to visit my cousin d’Amboise the next day, but I could not pull myself away from the Procopé. I knew I was making an idiot of myself, but there I stayed, as fixed as if I had planned a meeting. I played chess. I played cards. I listened to men talk politics, which was all new to me; at first, the only name I recognized was that of the king, Louis XIV.

At last, as the sun waned, I ordered a brandy. What a jackass I had been to suppose that that fine gentleman, Baron Vitré, had nothing better to do with his time than to hang around in a café with an infatuated young man! Didn’t I have more important things to do? I asked myself angrily as I drank another brandy. If he showed up, he would know I had been waiting for him, and the power imbalance between us would weigh even more heavily on his side. I didn’t even know if he had these feelings for other men. I suddenly felt foolish!

Thus I spoke to myself as I consumed my third large brandy. When it was empty, I sat the glass down and stood up, and the next thing I knew, I was grabbing at the table, and there was a crash as the dishes hit the floor. Everybody looked at me, of course.

“Don’t worry; I’ll take care of it,” said a voice in my ear; it was Stefan’s voice. I turned quickly, and our faces were so close that we could have kissed. For a long moment, neither of us moved. I was staring into his blue eyes and seeing thoughts and images I had only imagined.

The proprietor came forward, and Stefan moved his face away from mine, circled my bicep with his hand, and told the proprietor he would pay for everything. He brought a gold coin that would have paid for everything many times. The proprietor smiled and took it, and the café swirled back into its customary amusements. Stefan was still holding my arm. I was as still as a statue, afraid that my knees would buckle if I attempted any movement.

At last, Stefan dropped my arm and moved away. He smiled in a pretty ordinary way and said in a relatively common voice, “Did you do your duty and visit your cousin today?”

I blushed. “No, I’m afraid Cousin Geoffrey will have to wait one more day.”

“And who is this Cousin Geoffrey? Is he a Levesque?”

“No, Geoffrey d’Amboise.”

“The Vicomte?” Stefan said in surprise. “I know him well. Let us call on him together.”

“You mean tomorrow?”

“I mean tonight. He keeps late hours. Lately, he has said he dislikes crowds, so now he sits at home for an evening with no more company than his silly niece. He’s decided that he’s going to read all the books in his library, which is an exceptionally dull one, so he’s probably nodding into a volume of Euclid right now. He’ll be glad to see us.”

We got into Stefan’s carriage, and he held my hand as if this were the most natural thing in the world to do. It was as cold as milk on a winter morning, but I decided I did not care. There had to be an explanation, some rare disorder, and Stefan would explain when the time was right. I laid my head on his broad, muscular shoulder.

Chapter 2

The transformation of Fabien

(FABIEN NARRATES)

Stefan was right; Geoffrey was glad to see us. He sent his niece to her room, put down his book, and asked the servant to bring cordials. “Stefan never drinks anything, but you.”

“I have come to pay my respects to you, Vicomte; I am your cousin Fabien Levesque, just arrived in Paris.”

“Little Fabien? The last time I saw you, you were—well, let us not go into the number of years that have passed. Suffice it to say you have done a good job of growing up. You were always pleasing to the eye, but now, you could get into any trouble you liked.”

I was shocked by his forthright immorality, but I could hardly say it displeased me.

“Yes, that’s what Fabien has come to Paris for, trouble,” said Stefan. “We must steer him in the right direction, mustn’t we?”

“It seems to me that if he’s met you, he’s in sufficient trouble already,” said the baron.

Stefan laughed uncontrollably. He seemed pleased to be cast as someone who would corrupt youth.

The servant came in with a tray of cordials. The baron poured me a tiny glass of what turned out to be elderberry cordial, the same as we made at home.

“Yes, your dear mother sends me a bottle every year,” the baron said when I remarked on this.

From then on, the conversation dealt with all the new marvels of Paris; the opera, the ballet, the musical gatherings, the public dances, and the galleries where you could see fine paintings. Paris quickly became a center for the arts, and the baron was glad about it.

“So much of the time, the city has been just like the country, only muddier. You’ve done well to come in the summer,” the baron said as he caught me looking at my boots. “This new Paris will have the world flocking to it. It will be a city like no other.”

“There’s already the university,” Stefan said.

“The university! A bunch of drunken, penniless would-be priests who would duel each other to the death for a bottle of cheap red wine! The university has not brought us any glory, and it never will. I don’t hold with priests. I don’t hold with the Church.”

“And our precious Notre Dame de Paris, said to be the finest cathedral in Europe?” Said, Stefan.

“Notre Dame is a thing of beauty in its own right,” said the baron, and then he changed his subject to the opera. He planned to go tomorrow night, and would we care to go with him?

I had never heard any music beyond the pipes and guitars that the peasants on our estate played on feast days. Before Stefan could answer, I said, “We would love to go with you!”

“They’re putting on a new opera by Lully, called *Persée*, at the Palais Royal. The king will be there, which means everyone will be there. Shall I meet you in my carriage at?”

“Call for us at the Procöpe,” said Stefan.

As we left, I thought life in Paris would be more magnificent than I had imagined. Tomorrow night I would hear an opera for the first time, witness the new art of ballet, and perhaps even see the king. As for tonight, I did not dare look ahead to what would happen when Stefan and I were alone. I was sure it would be the fulfillment of my dreams.

Stefan handed me into his carriage once again with those enormously powerful arms. I must admit I was growing to like it. His strength made me feel delicate and treasured. I wanted to give in to that strength and see where it would take me.

Stefan got in and called out to the coachman to start, and I heard the sound of the whip cracking at the horses.

The Paris night was so dark that Stefan did not bother to close the curtains before he took me in his arms and kissed me.

“What is wrong? Are my lips too cold for you?” he asked a moment later.

That made me draw back, despite all my desire for him.

“I have a rare circulatory disease. The blood does not flow properly. Do you wish me not to kiss you?”

“Oh, no, Stefan, I want nothing more in the world than for you to kiss me again and again.”

Which he did, with his strong arms tightening me against him. I have no idea how long the drive was to the apothecary's, but I know I was surprised when we stopped there. Stefan withdrew his lips from mine. I tried to think what to say so that he would come upstairs with me. I wanted him so much I could hardly speak for confusion. He had a word with his coachman, who drove off into the night, and then I let us into the building.

It was just as dark inside as out. With Stefan holding onto my coattails, I had to feel my way up to the attic stairs. Outside my room was a small table where a candle and a tinderbox always stood. I tried to strike a fire, but my usual skill had evaporated along with my nerves. Stefan took the flint and steel from me, and in a moment, the candlewick shone a muddy light. I was embarrassed that I had not bought a beeswax candle, being able to afford only tallow.

Stefan asked me if he was invited in. I glanced at him with a confused look and said, “Yes” We only needed enough light to show us to the bed. Closing the door, we pulled the curtains closed, and then we were alone, as I had wanted to be with Stefan since I first saw him. We stood face to face, suddenly leaning forward to kiss me deeply, passionately, our tongues wrestling with one another. He picked me up as if I were light as a feather and carried me over to the bed. He threw me on the bed and then slowly nuzzled up to me, growling a bit as he got closer and closer to me. He undressed and stood before me. I could tell he was aroused. His body reminded me of a marble statue; even though Stefan was well-to-do, his body was not soft as a woman's. No, every muscle was defined, his veins protruding, and his skin as white as the winter snow.

“Undress!” he commanded me. I did as I was told; I had longed and dreamed about an encounter like this for as long as I could remember.

At once, he was at my neck, licking it, smelling it as I heard myself groan with pleasure. Stefan continued making sexual advances along with licking and smelling my neck, which quickly led him to caressing both of my thighs with his large hands inching higher and higher until they had found their way to my buttocks, giving them a slight squeeze. Then using his tongue, he licked every inch of my body, returning from time to time, kissing me deep and passionately. I experienced various emotions and anxiousness, as I had not been intimate with anyone before, man or woman. Feeling such incredible passion, as if I were about to burst out of my skin, and fear I could somehow not point my finger on. I had the feeling of being entirely under his control, feeling powerless to prevent anything that I might not desire from happening.

I will not try to describe the ecstasy of that night, even though it was all about to change. Stefan took even more pleasure in dominating me than I had guessed he would. I became his possession; I belonged to him entirely before the small hours came. As we rested on the pillows, Stefan stroked my hair away from my forehead and called me tender names.

“You have made me hungry, Fabien,” he said. “It’s been a long time since I was with someone of your energy, your passion. However, now I must get up and go out to nourish myself.” “Shall I come with you, Stefan?” I asked, feeling confused. “No, this is something I need to do alone; soon, you will join me,” he said.

I thought to myself, there were times when I felt I understood Stefan, and there were many times when his mood would change so quickly from a momentary display of tenderness to outright cruelty, as in this moment. “But, when will I see you again?” I asked, feeling weak and timid and suddenly very aware of my nakedness. “We shall meet again at the café” Perhaps in a day or two. I cannot say for sure,” he said coldly. “Good night Fabien,” he said. “Good night Stefan.” I watched him leave feeling confused and empty. While we were physically exploring each other’s bodies, I felt as if I was his and he was mine, then suddenly everything changed.

Perhaps the handsome gentleman I had recently met at the café had suddenly lost interest in me as if I were merely some conquest? The thought of finally having experienced a physical encounter with another man and possibly losing him, or instead, him losing interest in me. I knew I had to return to the café and win him over again.

The following day came, and my mind again became fixated on Stefan. All that mattered was to reignite the passion and tenderness we had shared before his sudden departure the night before. I made my way over to the café, hoping to see him sitting there, perhaps enjoying breakfast, and maybe he would be willing to have me join him. Instead, I arrived not seeing him, thinking perhaps he was trying to avoid me.

I ate my breakfast alone, asking myself, would I ever see him again? I decided I would return to the café that evening, and perhaps I would see him again and that my luck would return to me. Later that evening, I returned to the café to see him seated with another man in the back, engaged in a chess game. I walked over to where he was sitting and asked if I could pull up a chair to observe the match. He glanced at me and returned his attention to the game, easily defeating his opponent. The man got up to leave and offered me his chair as I nodded my gratitude to the stranger.

“Stefan, I don’t understand why you left so abruptly last night,” I said as I watched his expression. He looked at me and glanced away, saying, “I told you Fabien, I needed to satisfy my hunger,” as he appeared to dismiss my question with a simple answer. “Stefan, I have spent the

entire day thinking of only one thing; you, thinking I must have done something wrong?” I said, practically pleading with him. I hated that he had such a hold over my emotions and loathed myself even more for allowing it.

“When can we be together as we were last evening? I long for you?” I asked suggestively. “Well, I am feeling a bit tired,” he said, indicating he was willing to return to my room at this very moment. He looked at me and grinned. I felt tremendous relief all at once; he hadn’t lost interest in me, and we were about to become once more intimate, my last night as a human. I was about to learn everything about this handsome and cunning creature.

We returned to my room above the apothecary, and once again, as before, Stefan asked me if he could enter. I replied, “Yes, with pleasure,” as we laughed. “Will your servant be in?” Stefan asked softly.

“No, I let him go for the evening. He’ll be at some whorehouse, no doubt, drinking watered wine by the quart and disporting himself with the ladies. He’ll stumble in at dawn.” “Shall we go upstairs, then?” Stefan asked even more softly. We made our way and entered my room. As soon as the door closed, we entered a world of ecstasy and passion. Our bodies clung together tightly with soft caresses and deep passionate kisses. We walked over to my bed hand in hand; despite his icy cold touch, the passion flames had ignited again. We undressed each other and lay on the bed. As our first physical encounter had been, exploring each other’s bodies yet again, Stefan suddenly froze; he stopped talking. He was listening.

Unfortunately, I had heard the same sounds. They came from the bottom of the house, from the front door. I realized that I had forgotten to re-lock the door behind us in offering myself to Stefan a second time. So, whoever it was had no difficulty gaining access to the house and only the difficulty of darkness in finding the stairs. Whoever it was, stumbling and singing bits of a popular song as he climbed. It was my servant Jacques. Near panic, I told Stefan.

Stefan’s reaction was one I could not have anticipated. He was not embarrassed in the least. “Your servant, eh? Tonight, he’ll serve me better than he has ever served you.”

I could not imagine what Stefan meant by this. Indeed Jacques was about to provide the most scandalous of interruptions. I racked my brain for solutions to the problem as Jacques’s footsteps sounded closer and closer. At the same time, I wondered at Stefan’s actions. He had found the tinderbox next to the bed and was kindling a spark and then a fire. A stick from the fireplace smoldered at the end, first red and then yellow. Did he want Jacques to see us?

No, that was not it at all. It was Stefan who wanted to see Jacques.

“Monsieur, monsieur, I am so sorry to be so late,” Jacques said through the door. “I found the front door unlocked, maybe you have the key? I will go down and lock it.”

With these words, Jacques opened the door to my room. Jacques stopped in his tracks when faced with the tall, powerful, naked stranger who seemed more like an animal about to spring at his prey than a human being.

“Monsieur?” was all he had time to say before the horror began. I was too afraid to close my eyes to it, I was so scared of Stefan at this point that I was fearful I might be his next victim. But I was not the one chosen. Stefan seized Jacques by the shoulders, pulled him close, and bent his head to one side. No, no, this could not be happening, not to Jacques! But as I watched, Stefan pierced Jacques’s neck with those extraordinarily long incisors, and began to drink Jacques’s blood. Perhaps the greatest horror was that Jacques was still alive—and worse, that his terrified eyes caught mine. I read in his gaze the belief that I would do anything to save him, just as he would have done anything to save me.

How could I have looked on as Stefan murdered him? How could I have stood there and watched and done nothing to stop the carnage?

I have often thought about this, and I still do not understand it. I was paralyzed by fear; I felt there was nothing I could do, nor anyone on this earth that could have done anything to prevent this attack. I felt as if I had betrayed my servant, who felt more like a member of the family, my Jacques.

At last, after what seemed like a very long time, the light in Jacques’s eyes dimmed and then went out. My good servant Jacques was dead, and I had watched passively. My lover, Stefan, who had overwhelmed me with pleasure, now overwhelmed me with grief and terror. He turned toward me, his face was that of an animal still seeking more prey. I shrank into the bedclothes, but that did no good. I had to fight him. His physical dominance, which had appealed to me so much when looking forward to being sexually overpowered, now took on a new and threatening aspect. There was no way I could crush this man, who was no ordinary man.

He saw my fear and began to laugh. He was delighted that he had terrified me. For a moment, I thought that my terror alone would afford him sufficient pleasure, but I might as well have expected a wild boar to lose interest in a newborn lamb. I was at his mercy and was nothing more than food to Stefan. His appetite for sex was just that, another appetite. He experienced no tenderness, no passion, nothing that made an encounter human.

I crouched in the corner, waiting for him to do whatever he wanted. I could not think of a single way to defend myself.

He threw his massive body on mine, crushing me into the mattress, and put his hands around my neck. Now no other part of my body interested him.

“Are you going to kill me?” I asked faintly.

“Oh, no, not you,” said Stefan: “I have other plans for you.”

His hands grabbed me and tightened on my throat. I noticed that, for the first time, his hands were warm.

“What are you going to do to me?” I insisted.

“I will make you one of my kind, a creature of the night, a vampire.”

I had never heard the word before, and he did not elaborate on the meaning of the word saying only, “You will learn over time, but for now,” he menacingly said as Stefan bit into my neck and drew my first blood. He drank for a long time as I got weaker and weaker. It did not matter very much to me whether I lived or died. I thought I had found love, the love I had unknowingly longed for all my life—and that love had turned to degradation and horror!

Stefan did not kill me; true to his word, I was about to be transformed into the same creature he was, a vampire. “You are very weak now: you must be strengthened, or you will die” he bit his wrist till the blood flowed, and then he held his wrist up to my mouth and ordered me to drink. “Our blood combined will make you as I am.”

“Go on, drink. It will not seem unnatural to you now.” He commanded.

He was right. I was now as thirsty for his blood as he had been for mine. I clutched his wrist ever tighter. Once I had drunk enough, I sat there and thought about what I had just done. Shortly after that, the convulsions started as I began to panic. “What is happening?” I looked at Stefan looking, confused, as I pleaded for an explanation. “You are dying a mortal death. Soon you will be reborn as one of the living dead, a vampire.” He said. No sooner had he said that than the light in my eyes dimmed as I lost consciousness. I awakened and immediately felt different, stronger, and somehow invincible. I looked at Stefan, who sat there waiting for my transformation. There was a clarity to my vision and hearing that hadn’t existed before. I somehow found the courage to ask him, “What is a vampire?” Stefan said mockingly, “A vampire has the best of life, never needing to work, having nothing to do but go to parties and all these fashionable new amusements, the opera, and the ballet, and mixing with the best of society.” Stefan continued to educate me, giving me even greater clarity. A vampire could change shapes at will into any number of animals, whether bat, wolf, or rodent, that a vampire could turn into mist or fog. That there was no longer a need for food or alcohol. If consumed by the vampire, it might generate extreme nausea. That the tears we shed are not the salt tears of mortals but rather made of the same substance we needed to consume to

survive blood. A vampire could levitate, fly through the sky and move incredibly fast, so fast that a mortal's eye could not detect it. That the vampire was free from sickness and death or, instead, the traditional end which befell mortals; that the vampire was neither living nor altogether dead. In addition to the word vampire, there were other descriptions, such as the undead. And lastly, that vampires were not entirely invincible as immortal beings. That sunlight would disintegrate a vampire. That fire could destroy us as well as a wooden stake through the heart.

“And killing innocent people to stay alive.”

“Jacques? He was nothing. He was a mere servant. There are always more servants to replace him.” He said cruelly.

“I think he was more than a mere servant to his mother,” I said.

“Why are you so sentimental? I expected better of you. You seemed to enjoy the kind of life I lead.”

“Jacques was not simply a mere servant to me, either. I knew him all my life,” I said.

Felling enraged, it was at that moment I began to loath and distrust him. I realized he was diabolical, who not only took delight in luring me with his charm and good looks but also took great pleasure in destroying me as well as Jacques or anyone he chose to. “I still feel the hunger,” Stefan said as he told me I would soon experience the thrill of the hunt, Stefan said mysteriously. “Come.”

We got dressed and went out into the pitch-black street. I had an idea Stefan would be looking for another victim to satisfy his cravings; however, I was under his spell and would do whatever he told me to do.

Remarkably, we encountered someone right outside my building. No sooner had we left than a man approached us from the darkness carrying a dagger and a lantern. He demanded we hand over all money we had. Stefan's reaction was not that of any mortal man; he began to laugh uncontrollably, almost doubling over. The thief became enraged and took the dagger and stabbed Stefan in the stomach, and that was when the attacker realized that Stefan was no mere mortal: he stopped laughing and removed the blade from the thief's hand and threw it on the ground, there was no blood coming from where the knife had been thrust.

The thief stood there quite motionless, undoubtedly shocked.

“Shall we dine, Fabien?” Stefan asked, and with that, he took the thief by the neck with his powerful hands and ripped open the thief's shirt, lunging toward his neck. I noticed what I had missed before, but how had I missed it? Stefan's incisors were much larger than those of any human being. They were more like the fangs of a rabid dog. Baring these large incisors, he bit into the man's throat. Blood spurted on the dirt below.

In a muffled voice, Stefan commanded me to join him. “Here, bite into his wrist,” he said. I knew I was powerless to resist, although I did not yet understand why. I only knew he had made me into the same unholy creature as he. I followed his command, for now, Stefan was my lover and my maker and master. All my instincts told me to obey. In the time it took to blink an eye, I had taken the man’s wrist and bit into it. All the while, the thief was screaming. No one cared if you yelled, nor would anyone come to your rescue in lawless Paris. We drained every drop of blood from this man and left the body propped up against a building as if the corpse were some poor marionette with its strings cut.

“How do you feel, Fabien?” Stefan asked. He had hold of the lantern and held it up to my face.

“I feel as if an unquenchable thirst has, for the moment, been satisfied.” I wiped the blood from my lips with my handkerchief, which I then handed Stefan to use.

Stefan wiped his mouth as if he had just finished a long and sumptuous supper. He spoke quietly as his sensuality returned. “Shall we go back to your room?”

Chapter 3

Parting is such sweet sorrow

(FABIEN NARRATES)

The following morning, I woke alone. Stefan had left in the night, and mercifully he had taken Jacques's corpse with him. But as soon as I felt that gratitude that I would not have to get rid of the body, I felt remorse for having had such a thought. How could I think of Jacques, who had always been kind to me and like a family member, as merely "the body"? Jacques had looked out for me since I was a tiny child with a talent for falling into water butts, finding patches of nettles to get lost in, and angering the ill-tempered ram. I had a flash of memory now of Jacques throwing me up in the air and laughing as he made me laugh. Jacques passionately loved to fish—notably when he was supposed to be doing something else—and taught me all the ways of angling. He loved girls, too. It sometimes seemed to me that there was not a girl in the world that Jacques did not think was pretty and had winning ways of complimenting them. Someday I would be grown up, and I would admire girls just like he did. It came to me now that my brother had not chosen at random when he sent Jacques with me to Paris. No, indeed. Jacques's family had worked alongside our family since before anyone could remember, and Jacques himself had been looking out for me my whole life.

And now, because of me, Jacques was dead. For a night of pleasure, my pleasure, Jacques had given his life. Instead of being glad about the removal of the body, I became anxious about what Stefan had done with it. It seemed doubtful that Jacques would get the Christian burial he deserved. How would Stefan explain to a priest his possession of a dead body?"

No, Jacques's body would have been consigned to the Seine hours ago. As I thought of this, I wept; as my tears fell on the white bed sheet, I was startled to see that they were red, and in a flash,

I remembered Stefan's words about creatures such as us not shedding mere mortal salt tears. And how white my hands were! My whole body was as white as Stefan's. And my heart, which should have been thumping, was silent. I put my hand to my chest; nothing. With this thought, I became more frightened than ever, but the worst had yet to happen. As the sun rose higher and the light in the room grew stronger, my skin began to burn as if I were in the Sahara Desert.

I quickly sought refuge in an empty trunk I had bought to store valuables. The bare chest would be used instead to provide me an escape from the blinding and blistering sun, which only a short time ago had provided pleasure and warmth, was now and forever more my enemy.

I fell into a deep slumber, and awakened as soon as the sun had set, as I climbed out of my chest. Stefan was sitting on my bed.

"Why did you leave me?" I asked him in an agitated voice.

"I had every confidence that you would put that empty trunk to good use, and I was not mistaken," he said and laughed.

"You will come and live with me and give up this ridiculous room you have called home. Perhaps now you understand why I was a bit secretive with you?" His mood had abruptly changed; he now looked at me tenderly. He seemed to switch from cold and cruel to loving and caring instantly. I didn't know exactly how I should feel about the man who was now my master since he was the one who had made me into a vampire, but I stayed with him for a hundred years. I felt powerless to leave; I felt like his prisoner. Though he continued to be cruel, he also continued, at times, to be tender. After each incidence of cruelty, he lured me back with the hope of physical affection and lust.

I could see that he enjoyed having power over me; he delighted in controlling me and forcing me to kill uncontrollably, commanding me, cheering me on as I unwillingly stalked my victims alongside him. I felt that I had no choice but to remain with him.

Our nights were spent pillaging the city of Paris and the countryside, feasting on the blood of human beings. We strolled through the parks or the darkened streets of Paris looking for victims. Sometimes we would happen on a robber. Other times we would observe a patron from the café going out into the blackened streets of the city, and we would ambush him as he went around the corner and into the darkness, where no one would hear the screams for help. It felt as if Stefan and I were unstoppable since the police were powerless, they had no idea what was causing this endless list of casualties.

There were brief, enjoyable outings during this time, as they were very much in keeping with Stefan's personality. We attended dances and the opera, and the theater. However, every night

invariably ended in slaughter. I recall one instance involving an entire family, a father, a mother, their children, and their coachman, who had enjoyed a picnic outside in the Luxembourg gardens.

Stefan and I arrived just after sunset as the family began to board their carriage. There were no other onlookers around except for the coach's driver, who would be included in the killing of the family. Stefan felt it was the perfect opportunity to drain each of them, including the two small children. I remember hearing the screams from the coachman, the husband, and the wife to take their lives and spare the children. Stefan merely laughed a deep, sinister laugh. I shuddered inside, knowing what he and I were about to do.

The first victim was the coachman, who pleaded for his own life to no avail. He tried to run away but was tackled by Stefan's muscular frame. He was drained of blood in an instant.

Next came the father, who bravely held his screams to himself, eyes fixed on his wife and his children as if offering an unspoken final goodbye. He appeared stoic, finally uttering a sound more like a whimper, until his lifeblood flowed out of his jugular vein like a stream during heavy rain, with Stefan lapping and sucking until the man was nothing more than a corpse. Next came the mother, huddled with terror in the carriage, trying desperately to protect her children. She screamed, "No, please, for the love of God, spare my children and me!" But it was useless.

Under Stefan's command, Stefan and I attacked and killed her within a few minutes.

All the while, I heard the screams of the two small children, who appeared to be five or six and had wild-looking eyes that spoke of the panic and terror they were seeing. Taking the lives of the children left me feeling hollow inside as if everything inside of me was empty. It felt like Stefan had destroyed my innocence and ripped out the last vestige of my soul.

I felt numb, and guilty for existing. My hopes would be dashed when I would begin to think that some normality might be possible in our otherwise damned existence. So many times, I pleaded with Stefan to spare the lives of our victims. An inhuman and uncaring laughter answered my desperate pleas. Stefan was mocking me; worse, I was questioning my sanity. Because my actions were not freely willed but forced, I felt as if I were a mere witness to them. It felt like an out-of-body experience. I did not want to grasp the horror that I was helping Stefan to inflict on so many people; I did not want to look at their faces or see the terror in their eyes; I did not want to hear their cries for help or pleading for their lives. On more than one occasion, I broke down and cried blood tears, cursing Stefan and myself.

My actions caused me to loathe more and more what I had become. As Stefan's accomplice, I had become what he was— a bloodthirsty animal. Even though I tried to maintain such human

emotions as love and tenderness, I felt those emotions had slipped away during the endless nights under the command of Stefan's diabolical killing sprees.

Stefan knew that my feelings for him were changing. When I met him at the café, believing him to be a man, I had become consumed with visions of passion and wanted to be with him forever. But he had become my tormentor. What was once lust and then love was turning to contempt and hatred. Over time, I grew defiant, and on more than one occasion, I shouted out loud to Stefan how much I loathed him. There was not a trace of love for him left in my heart.

I could tell that he, too, was growing increasingly miserable: he would curse me and say, "You ungrateful bastard! I gave you a new existence, resurrected you, gave you powers beyond your wildest imagination, gave you immortality, and now you're unhappy! I wish I had never transformed you. I wish I had never given you my dark gift!"

Two things kept me by Stefan's side; the power he held over me, the power of the vampire maker over the fledgling, and the fear of never finding another male lover. Was I destined to spend my life alone if I dared leave Stefan? I didn't know. But in the end, I had to go. I could not bear to be tied forever to this feral beast.

There were countless times when I begged Stefan to release me, but each time he would laugh and say, "You are mine for all eternity!" But then, one day, abruptly, without any apparent reason—Stefan did allow my freedom. All I could guess was a slight trace of human feeling was left inside him, perhaps a tinge of pity. Or maybe there was a part of him that did love me. Whatever it was, he did free me. But it came with a price, with a command he made to me. He warned me never to make a fledgling vampire of my own. If I did, he would infallibly learn of it, and would come to destroy my creation.

I believed him.

I agreed to his demands but knew that they would be impossible to abide by. I would not be able to spend eternity on my own.

In my hundred years with Stefan, I realized he was one of those beings capable of existing independently, not needing to be close to anyone nor needing companionship. I had been merely an apprentice of sorts.

I wanted to be more than that, and although I loathed the creature I had become, I had not given up on finding someone who loved me and could love in return. I was not going to inflict the cruelty my maker inflicted on me on another man; that was a rule I had firmly established for myself. I felt that I could find a soul mate by following this rule.

