

LOVE LIKE BLOOD

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J.J. MASSA

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By

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Dedication:

To my editor Tracey for her guidance, my husband Jimmy for his support, Rae Monet who knows exactly what it feels like, and my good friend Nix for holding my hand.

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Chapter One

“I don’t believe it! Look!” Paul Fieval said to his friend and employer, Raiden Vagner.

“And what is it I am looking at?” Raiden inquired dryly.

The men were seated at a table in an upscale restaurant atop a four-star hotel. They were enjoying a drink while Paul waited for his meal. All the sustenance Raiden would need was in the wine glass in front of him.

Born in the year fifteen hundred and one, Raiden Vagner had been converted to a vampire after the Ottomans conquered Buda in Hungary during the year fifteen hundred and forty-one. He was forever the image of a suave, sophisticated forty-year-old man.

“It’s her!” Paul announced in a low and excited voice. “She’s among that crowd beyond those doors.”

“I do not see her, Paul.” The lazy amusement was gone from his voice.

“That crowd, Raiden, look at them. Don’t you recognize some of those faces?” Paul’s voice was urgent now.

Looking intently at the group, Raiden said, “I see Deella Morganette, Reya Fortuna, and is that...” he waited until the man he was watching turned. “That *is* Solomon Stevens, the current king of the horror genre.” He turned to Paul. “She *must* be here.”

“All the notable writers of vampire and werewolf fiction, both horror and romance are there, Raiden. I’m sure I saw her—*there!*” He pointed.

“Do not point!” Raiden snapped, following his finger, nonetheless.

“She looks happy, Raiden,” Paul said in a muted voice.

“She always looks happy in public, Paul. She called out to me.” Raiden stared at the woman they were discussing. “She is so small. Is that a wheelchair, Paul?”

His eyes were fixed on the diminutive figure of a woman. At five feet, nine inches, Raiden wasn’t a tall man. But she was a very small five feet, if that. Her shoulder

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length hair was mostly dark brown with dark ash highlights and waved about her heart-shaped face. She had full lips with dimples on both sides of her smiling mouth.

He watched for a minute as she chatted with several men and women around her while she sipped at a glass of dark red wine. Her friends, Reya and Deella, didn't stray far from her.

She murmured something to one of them and he saw her mouth form the word, "Up!" A very large chocolate lab moved to its feet.

He'd known she was blind but the wheelchair surprised him. Raiden saw her speak to her friends and then issue a command to the dog. Her chair turned and he thought she was headed for the Ladies' room. While her friends mouthed the word, "Independent", she turned left and the dog took her outside to the restaurant's wide verandah overlooking the ocean.

"Paul, go introduce yourself to those women and keep them busy," he ordered, pushing his chair back.

"Raiden..." Paul placed a hand on the other man's arm and then let it slide off.

* * *

He'd been looking for her for three long years. Ever since that spring night when he'd heard her soft voice, sobbing in his head.

"Please, where are you? I know you're real. Make this pain stop. I don't want to live this way," she'd cried.

Those years had seemed longer than every one of the four hundred and sixty-four previous years that had passed since he became a vampire. There had been times since then that he'd heard a similar plea from her.

He knew that the only times she couldn't control that weakness was when she was truly suffering. He'd heard her wrestle with the pain and convince herself that she was whining. The frustration he felt at those times was especially intense.

She began writing shortly after the first time she'd called out to him. Raiden recognized her when he read her first book. He had made it a habit to read all of the vampire fiction on the market as it came out. The books she wrote were uncannily accurate.

He'd tracked her to a post office box, which then sent her mail to another box. The person who checked that box then sent the mail to two other boxes. They'd been changed often enough to make tracking her a difficult process.

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Now, as he approached her, Raiden saw her slight figure standing against the verandah railing. Her dog, Kofy, turned his head and curled a lip at him. He saw her body tense as he moved toward her. He sent soothing thoughts to the dog. He would calm the dog but he wouldn't influence her that way.

"You write under the name of Jewel Orianna but you are Juliana Gold," he told her in a low voice.

She reached for her dog's head and turned toward Raiden with a start. "Who—who are you?" She tried to sound strong but her voice shook slightly with nervousness.

"Do not be afraid, Juliana, you are in no danger from me." He moved to her side and stood looking down at her.

She tilted her head back to him even though he knew she wouldn't see his face. He couldn't stop himself from brushing her soft cheek with his fingertips. Her sightless eyes were a dark olive color.

As he hungrily absorbed every detail of her face, he noted that the pictures on her book jackets didn't do her justice. She was small and delicate with a fairylike countenance. Her haunted and mysterious eyes were framed by high cheekbones and full, winged brows.

He stroked her cheek again. "*Meu piatră prețioasă*," *My jewel*, "I have searched for you the last three years since you called out to me in your pain. I will make you well again."

"Sir," she said carefully, "You must have me confused with someone else."

"Please, Juliana, you must call me Raiden. I am Raiden Vagner." She could have no idea how hard it was for him to only touch her. He wanted to hold her to him and never let her go.

"Um, Raiden then. I certainly appreciate that you have read my books but I assure you, I've never called you. I've never met you. I don't even have your phone number." At her earnestness, he threw back his head and laughed.

Could a man be a lunatic and still have such an incredible laugh? Juliana didn't know. A laugh like that caused a woman to want to take chances—do things that weren't safe and acceptable, things that weren't middle-class normal. For so much of her life, she'd taken chances but the last sixteen or so years had been relatively chance-free.

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After her teenaged affair with a married man, Juliana had given birth to her son, Evan. Levi Gold had asked her to marry him on her twentieth birthday and she'd accepted. She'd known that he wasn't the love of her life but she had come to believe that there was no such thing. Her daughter, Erin, had followed within a year of their marriage. Now thirty-seven, she tried to be consistent and dependable.

She and Levi had experienced twelve reasonably normal years of marriage before Juliana's vision had begun to seep away. Deep inside, she felt guilty for taxing a good man like Levi with a blind wife, so she tried to make the transition as painless as possible for him. He let her know that he felt the hardship of her disability.

She didn't like being blind, not at all. Nobody would enjoy blindness, but Juliana tried to be a good sport about it. After all, life didn't stop just because she had a problem. The disease that had caused the blindness was an entirely different matter.

Juliana felt herself edge a little closer to the warmth of the laughing stranger, Raiden Vagner. He was probably a psychotic killer or something, but he smelled so good. He had a smooth, rich voice that made her want to move closer and listen for hours. This was a dangerous man.

"Three years ago, you cried out to me in your anguish, begging me to make it stop. I could not find you. I searched and searched. Even after I read your first book, I was unable to locate you." He seemed so sincere.

"I admit that I was experiencing some discomfort three years ago, but I knew that nobody could make it stop. Certainly you can't make me well again, although I, um, I certainly appreciate your desire to..." *There, that was very diplomatic, wasn't it?*

"I do not blame you for your wariness, Juliana—may I address you thus?" he asked politely.

Surely a serial killer wouldn't be quite so polite? But they were, weren't they? On the news the killer's neighbors always said...

His chuckle halted her speculations. "Um, I guess you might as well call me by my name." She bit her lip. Was she taking chances again?

She felt his feather soft touch tracing the outline of her lower lip. "Please, Juliana, do not inflict pain on your sweet mouth. Instead, join me in a glass of wine. We can sit out here or go inside where you will be warmer—and surrounded by a nice, safe crowd."

What harm could there be in drinking a glass of wine with a handsome man? He sounded handsome, anyway. That deep, satiny voice, like caramel and rich liquor was

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more attractive to her that his face could ever be. They would sit inside and talk while she prayed fervently between sips that he wasn't a psychotic killer.

"Suppose I were some other kind of killer, *meu* Juliana? Would that be more acceptable to you?" he asked.

"Are you?" she blurted. She gasped then, clinging to the railing. "You can read my mind!" There was no other way he could have known her fears.

He stepped forward and slid an arm across her back, pulling her against him and supporting her. "I assure you that I do not arbitrarily kill people. As for reading your mind, you have my word that I will refrain from it without your permission. I can only do so when you are nearby."

No doubt it was foolish of her, but Juliana leaned back into the warm strength Raiden offered her. Her legs felt distinctly wobbly right then. Luxuriating in the hard body and the tantalizing scent of him, she never wanted to move away.

Just one more minute and I'll budge. He smells so good. He feels so good and strong.

"I have frightened you, have I not? That is why you tremble so." Raiden lightly ran his hands up and down her arms, warming her, chasing errant goose bumps away. She shrugged one shoulder. "I expect I will frighten you again before much more time passes. I am sorry, Juliana."

"I'd like to go in and have that wine now, please," she said primly. Groping carefully in front of her, she found her cane, wrapping her fingers around the handle.

Raiden pulled her chair close to her and she located it with her hand. Cautiously, she eased herself into it.

"Shall I push you?" he asked her.

"No, please just get the door," she smiled slightly, to soften the rebuff.

It was nice that people wanted to help but she and Kofy had their own way of doing things that worked for them very well. So often well meaning people rushed in and acted for her own good in ways that really complicated simple chores. She was pleased that he had asked what she'd preferred and then stood back to let her do things her own way.

As he held the door open, Kofy smoothly guided her through it. She used her feet a little to help Kofy propel her and the chair inside. She aimed another smile at him,

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grateful that he'd treated her as an equal in spite of her blindness and use of a wheelchair. Even if he was a psychotic killer, she decided, he was considerate and understanding.

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Chapter Two

As the couple re-entered the busy restaurant, Raiden beckoned to the maitre d' who quickly set up a small table for them at the edge of the assembled writer's group. He then helped her situate her wheelchair out of the flow of traffic and then settled in across from her.

The maitre d' left to find a waiter to deliver their wine when a masculine voice sounded from behind him.

"So, Vagner, you finally cornered your favorite writer?" Solomon Stevens drawled from behind them.

"You've met Raiden before, Sol?" Juliana asked breathlessly.

"I've known him more than a decade now. He's been asking about you for over two years, Sweetness," Solomon replied.

"You see, Juliana, I am not a deranged killer!" Raiden smiled, letting the warmth in his voice share his smile with her.

"No, just a persistent stalker," Solomon crowed. "Oh, there's Will Bright," he mumbled, naming another writer and backing away from Raiden's angry glare.

After he'd gone, Raiden turned to Juliana. "You look lovely tonight, Juliana. Your pictures do not do you justice."

"You're very kind, Raiden," she smiled. "Those pictures are a few years old. I know I've put on weight. I've lost a few pounds since the last treatments, but I'm under no illusions about my appearance."

"You discount yourself overmuch. You are lovely, inside and out." He reached over and gently lifted her hand, placing a kiss on the smooth skin above her knuckles.

She wore a fitted sheath in a dark rust color topped by a long-sleeved jacket with a mandarin collar. The dress didn't quite reach her knees and she did look attractive in it. She looked very attractive as far as Raiden was concerned.

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Pulling her hand back, Juliana took a sip of her wine. “You’re making me nervous. What do you want from me, Raiden?”

“It is not my intention to make you nervous, Juliana. I simply want to know you. Will you allow that?” He waited apprehensively for her answer.

“Why?” she asked, her brow furrowed.

Reaching out to stroke the crease in her forehead, Raiden knew that his answer now would be pivotal. He couldn’t remember the last time a woman had meant so much to him. Possibly one never had.

“Something in you speaks to me. I find it too compelling to ignore.” He waited to see what she would do with his answer.

Her lips twitched at the sides. “There can’t be much sport in stalking a blind person, Raiden. What do you do the rest of the time?”

Once again he found himself laughing deeply with her. No one had touched him this intensely and on so many levels for centuries. He took her hand and kissed it again. She made him laugh, she moved him, and she made him hungry. How long must he wait for her?

“I own companies that specialize in Medical Research and Development. These companies develop new treatments, new drugs, and even new medical equipment. I have other holdings as well, but the bulk is Medical related. I simply oversee them, however and involve myself little in the technicalities.” She tilted her head, considering.

“That’s a pretty big deal. Did your family start the company or did you go to school for it?” He could tell that she was surprised and once again suspicious. Did she think her health was all that interested him?

“It is something that interested me many years ago and developed into what it is today. I spend more time monitoring the legal and financial aspects of it than anything else. Tell me of your life—the part you left out of your short biography.” Raiden was anxious to change the subject.

“Hmm,” she mulled it over. “My little bio does tell you that I was studying to be an English teacher when I began to write. I did achieve my degree but the actual teaching was too stressful. Multiple Sclerosis is worsened by stress. You know that I’m married and have two children—my son Evan is nineteen and Erin, my daughter, is sixteen—she’ll be seventeen in a month. Do you have children? A wife?”

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He smiled. She didn't bother with subterfuge. Perhaps she suspected him of sexual interest, he couldn't tell. He'd given his word not to read her mind without permission and he'd keep it although it was a struggle.

"I am no longer married. My wife died many years ago. I had two children, Victor and Tereza. They, too, died long ago. I am much older than I seem." He would be honest with her but not too honest here in the restaurant. "You seem very attached to your dog. Tell me about him?"

"The best relationship I've ever had with a guy!" she chuckled. Raiden laughed, too. "I shouldn't say that. Levi, my husband, is," she hesitated--just barely, but he noticed. "...He's a fine man. It's just that I spend so much time with Kofy."

"Well, then, lovely Juliana, tell me more about this most important male in your life," he chuckled, realizing that he felt lighter and more at ease with her than he'd felt with anyone—even Paul, his most trusted and beloved friend.

"Oh," she gave him an impish smile. "He's dark and muscular, loves M&Ms, hates folk music, and has helped me through many a cliffhanger."

"M&Ms?" Raiden asked, intrigued and amused. "Aren't those chocolate candies?"

"Yes," she smiled. He could swear she was looking right into his eyes. He would have been lost at that moment, if he hadn't already been. "He likes the green ones best."

"The green ones?" he asked, oddly disconnected from what she was saying as his eyes roved over her face.

She chuckled at him, a musical, happy sound to his ears. "Well, you know what they say..." she wrinkled her nose at him, leaning in conspiratorially.

Enchanted, he leaned in, too. "What is it they say?" he hardly recognized his own voice. It seemed to come from somewhere else as he inhaled her delicate fragrance.

"There's just something about the green ones," she breathed huskily into his ear, giggling softly.

Her humor was infectious and he joined in, laughing with her.

They chatted about her guide dog and family for a while when finally she asked him to excuse her. The hour was late and she wanted to say goodnight to her friends.

With difficulty, Raiden watched her leave. He had enjoyed her company and was reluctant to see her go. He knew she'd be in town for a few days and he'd make sure that their paths crossed again.

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He found Paul and the two men rode the elevator in silence to his hotel room. Once inside, Paul turned to him.

“Well? Is she everything you’d hoped she would be?” he asked Raiden.

“She is,” Raiden answered. “She is intriguing, compelling, and beautiful.”

“What happens now?” Paul asked.

“I am concerned about her health. She didn’t talk about it but she seemed very weak. I’m afraid that changing her may be the only way to save her.”

Paul looked speculatively at him for a minute. “So a little medicinal fucking might be the only answer, huh?”

Without thought, Raiden drew back his arm and backhanded Paul across the face. The younger man flew up and backward in an arc landing on a coffee table and causing it to splinter.

Raiden strode to him and stood over him, holding out a hand. “Are you hurt?” he barked, his voice low and angry.

“No” Paul gasped, trying to drag air into his lungs. “Sorry—out of line,” he gasped. Raiden pulled him to his feet and stalked out.

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Chapter Three

Juliana sat huddled on her balcony. Kofy lay nearby enjoying the night air.

Her head was beginning to throb and her neck and shoulders were hurting. Her doctor had explained that she was having what amounted to spinal seizures. She took a prescription drug to help control them but just now, its effectiveness was questionable.

On top of that, she was experiencing what most people with Multiple Sclerosis called crawling ants. Both legs felt like fire ants were feasting on them while both hands were aching. It wasn't this bad all the time but this second, it was almost more than she could stand.

Sleep was impossible. She sat on the balcony hoping the sound of the surf would soothe her. Failing that, she hoped the chill night air would somehow combat the aching tingling in her hands and legs. Now that she was outside, it would be a while before she could go in again.

"Raiden," she whispered, "I wish you *really could* come and make it better."

Being blind, she of course didn't see the lone figure walking on the beach below. When she mumbled her plea, the figure stopped short and looked up.

Upon hearing the soft scraping noise, Juliana jerked around toward the outer edge of the balcony sucking in her breath, her heart in her throat. She had no idea what it could be, only that it wasn't normal, couldn't be natural for something that sounded so large to have landed on her balcony.

"Do not worry, Juliana, it is only I," said Raiden, his rich, velvet voice failing to sooth her.

"How can that be? The door is locked to the hall. I am way up here on the sixth floor...Raiden?" She was alarmed and afraid. There was no logical explanation for his appearance on her balcony.

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“You called upon me, *Dragă unul*, and I came to you,” he explained patiently enough, although not very clearly. *Dear one* he’d called her. “While I was walking near the waves, I heard you call out to me, you are in pain, and you needed me.”

“I don’t understand...” The stray tears that had been trickling down her face from the pain had dried somewhat but still sparkled in her lashes. “I whispered, I didn’t call, I whispered.” She shivered.

“Juliana?” he said, squatting in front of her. “You are cold. Please let me bring you inside.”

“You’re scaring me, Raiden,” she choked.

“You will always be safe with me, *dulciuri* Juliana,” he promised her, not condescending but trying to sooth, and calling her *sweet*. “You are safer with me than any other person anywhere.”

“No other person anywhere can come here the way you have. Raiden, please, tell me what... Tell me.” She heard her voice break. She hated sounding so frightened and weak but she was both. *Why isn’t Kofy growling?* “Kofy?” she croaked.

The big dog was instantly at her side nuzzling her hand. “He knows you are safe with me. May I carry you inside?”

Sliding forward in the padded chair intending to stand on her own, she realized that her legs were shaking too badly to hold her. Even if they hadn’t been shaking, she knew that standing right then would have been a mistake.

Turning it over in her confused mind, she tried to make sense of this man. The bottom line for her right that minute though was safety and sanity. Certainly, she was as sane as she’d always been but safe?

All things considered, she realized that, no matter who or what he was, she would be no match for him in physical strength. If he wanted to do her harm, he could and she would be powerless to stop him. With that in mind, she decided that she might as well be comfortable and warm. Nervously, she reached her hand out until her fingers touched him. Facing toward his warmth and strength, she held both arms out to him.

Instantly she felt herself lifted against his broad and muscular chest. She noticed that he was no longer wearing the suit he’d been wearing earlier that evening. At first she was tense but she gave in to instinct and relaxed, resting her head upon his shoulder.

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She felt his arms cradling her even as she heard the balcony door open and close. Expecting him to deposit her either on the bed or on the chair, she was surprised when he lowered himself into the chair still holding her.

He sat with her in his lap for long minutes, lightly rubbing her arms and legs through her robe and gown. "Do your legs hurt?" he asked her in a low voice, holding her bare foot in his hand, massaging it gently.

She nodded against his shoulder as if she were too weak to sit up. He tucked her leg and foot under her robe and wrapped both arms around her, holding her there. Turning his head to look at her face, he lowered his lips to hers, dragging his mouth back and forth and feeling the fullness of her lips.

When she sighed, opening her mouth, he carefully eased his tongue into its satin recesses. He tasted her tongue, the inside of her upper lip, and he felt her teeth with his own tongue. Shifting in the chair, he slowly lifted his head from hers.

Gently guiding her so that her head rested on his shoulder and her breath caressed his neck, he murmured, "Juliana, I must tell you about myself."

She nodded whispering, "Yes, please, Raiden," against his throat. He felt his body harden painfully.

"I am that thing you write about, Juliana." He stroked her cheek and buried his hand in her hair. "I am that monster known as *vampyr*."

Shifting, she tilted her head back against his shoulder, seeming to look into his eyes. He knew it was a gesture of comfort. She wanted him to see her face.

"I don't write about vampires who are monsters, Raiden. I write about men who are vampires. I guess I just...well, I..." She seemed to mull it over. "I guess I really always thought vampires were possible. But...I'm not sure if I did or didn't ever really believe in them. You seem to be hard to dispute, though," she sighed. "You draw me. I feel safe with you. I shouldn't—I shouldn't feel safe and I shouldn't trust you." She licked her full lower lip and exhaled a soft sigh. "I do though. I just do."

He leaned down and tasted her plush, silky lips again. "I can make you well, Juliana," he said against them, marveling at how natural it seemed to be with her.

"Tell me how," she murmured. He knew that she already knew how.

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“I would drink from you as you drink from me. We would make love at the same time.” He took a deep breath. “You would become as I am. You would become my mate.”

She took a deep breath, releasing it she said, “I cannot make love with you, Raiden. I made a promise to Levi in marrying him. If you are a vampire, really, than I know that it must be possible.” Her breath hitched a little and he saw a tear slip down her face. “It would be wrong for me to do that. My children... I just can’t. I can’t think about that, it’s so tempting.” She shifted again and he could tell she was considering the possibilities, the reality that he could make her better.

“Shh, Juliana. Do not fret. You know much about my kind. You can drink from me and it will help you become stronger for a time.” Somehow he’d known this would be her answer. He wished he hadn’t made the suggestion to her but he’d had to. *He’d had to, hadn’t he?*

“Will you tell me about yourself, Raiden? Will you debunk the myths for me?”

“I would tell you anything, Juliana,” he promised, dropping a light kiss on her nose. Settling her comfortably again and stroking her hair, he mused aloud. “The popular myths...hmmm. I cannot change my form though I can move so fast as to be unseen. I do not kill to live. I do drink blood, however.” He looked down at her. She nodded against him again. “Holy water and crosses do not scare me or harm me.”

“Sacred ground?” she asked. He stood, lifting her easily, and carried her to the bed. Gently he placed her in the center of it.

“I attend church from time to time,” he murmured. “A stake through the heart would kill most living things, as would beheading. I am no exception.” He removed his shirt and shoes, sitting on the edge of the bed.

“What about sunlight and daytime? What about garlic and mirrors?” She was covering all of the bases, he decided.

“I can be awake during the daytime although I am weaker. I cannot be out in the sun, however.” Lying down with her, he gathered her against him. “The smell of garlic offends me only as much as anyone else. I am a bit vain about my breath, I admit,” he kissed her forehead. “As for mirrors, I avoid them only because I have lived so long. I am tired of my own visage.”

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He helped her remove the robe she wore and drank in the sight of her in her gray silk nightgown. It had spaghetti straps and a low neck. One of the straps had begun to ease off of her shoulder.

“How long have you lived, Raiden? When—how...”

“Shhh, *meu* Juliana. I will tell you.” He stroked her hair and enjoyed the feel of her silk covered breasts pressed against his bare chest. “I was born in Transylvania. I was forty when a mortal blow befell me during the Battle of Buda in Hungary. I had discovered my wife in an adulterous affair and was glad to surrender my life in combat against the Ottomans.”

“Oh Raiden, I’m so sorry. Who changed you?” she asked breathlessly.

“It’s been over four hundred years. I no longer feel the sting of betrayal. A woman, a female vampire, who was lonely and liked my looks, changed me. We remained together for some time but had little in common. She surrendered to the daylight within a century.”

“You have lost so much, haven’t you, Raiden? Could you be killed that way?” he could hear the worry in her voice.

“I could be killed if I were exposed to the full light of the sun, Juliana. But I am more careful than that. She was ready to end a very long existence. I am not.” Her face was upturned and he dropped a kiss on her parted lips. “I will make a small hole here,” he tapped the prominent vein above his breast. Realizing his folly, she couldn’t see where he’d tapped; he pulled her hand to his chest and showed her tactilely where the puncture would be.

When she moved her mouth to touch him there, he thought he’d come in his pants. He took a small penknife and punctured the artery and then held her head in place until he felt her sucking.

“*Mmm, this is different than I thought,*” she was thinking to him but he wasn’t sure if she knew that.

“*Do you like how I taste, dragă unul?*” he thought back to her. He traced the rapid pulse in her neck with his tongue.

“*I do, Raiden.*” He heard her little gasp when his fangs pierced the artery in her throat. “*Oh, Raiden, this feels so... Is it always so...sensual?*”

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He doubted that she realized how she'd arched against him when his fangs entered her neck. Now, one of her hands teased his flat nipple while the other inched toward his straining erection.

"Mmmm," he groaned. *"Nothing has ever tasted or felt so good to me, meu Juliana."*

He pushed aside the thin silk covering her breast and cupped the soft globe. She arched against him more as he began stroking her nipple with his fingers.

"You taste so beautiful. Soo beautiful," he groaned in his mind.

Her wandering little hand had unfastened his pants and released his heavy erection. She arched against him again as her nimble fingers explored his length. He couldn't help his body's reaction to her satin fingers. His shaft nudged her hand and she gripped him.

He felt the clear fluid of his pre-come weep from him as she gently squeezed and stroked him, still sucking at the puncture on his chest. Groaning, he trailed his free hand up her leg to her thigh.

"Raiden! I can't do this. I can't...help me stop." She was getting upset. Her body wanted him but she believed it was wrong.

"Shhh, sweet Juliana. I will always take care of you."

He closed the puncture wounds on her neck with his tongue. Cupping her head with one hand, he straightened the skirt of her gown. Reluctantly, he removed his hand from her soft, round breast and covered that, too.

"Drink just a little more, da?" he encouraged her.

He wrapped his hand around the one holding his aching cock and gently pulled it up and off of his length and then around his waist. Trying to angle his pelvis away from her, he gathered her body against his. She lay across his stomach and upper body.

After another minute, he stopped her and closed the wound on his chest. He reached down and tucked his erection back into his pants and zipped them. He then wrapped both of his arms around her. After a minute, she relaxed and let him cuddle her.

"Raiden, that—that wasn't me," she said in a tremulous voice.

He pulled his torso away from her and looked down at her bent head. "You must tell me then, *dragă unul*, who that was, hmmm?" He arched a brow, fighting a smile.

She angled her face up to him. He could clearly see amusement warring with the distress there. Finally, the reluctant amusement won.

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“Raiden, you’re so bad!” she grinned and pressed her face into his chest, sliding her arms around his waist once again. “I can’t have an affair with you, you know that,” she said finally, in a firm voice.

“I know that, Juliana. I want you, but I will gladly accept anything you would share willingly. I will be your very good friend and not your lover.” He laid his cheek against her hair. “If ever you want me for a lover, I will happily comply.”

They were silent for some time before he spoke again. “Please tell me about this ailment that plagues you?”

“I have Multiple Sclerosis. Usually, it’s under control and I don’t suffer that much. Sometimes I do,” she said quietly.

“There are medicines to treat it? But no cure?” He knew he’d be reading up on the disease very soon.

“Yes, I take pills for some things like headaches and the little seizures in my spine and I get a shot every week. I used to have more than one a week but I didn’t like it,” she explained.

“What do the shots do to help you?” he asked.

“They control what are known as exacerbations—a time when all the symptoms seem to be happening at once and more intensely. It usually will herald an increase in the severity of the disease,” she told him.

He squeezed her gently. “That is what happened three years ago, is it not?”

“Yes, that’s when I started needing the wheelchair. I don’t need it for everything. I only need it when I have far to go or lots of standing. Things like that.” She yawned, trying to hide it.

The fact that she yawned into his chest made hiding it impossible. “Sleep now, *dragă unul*. I will lay here holding you until you do. I will find you tomorrow evening, with your permission.”

“I have a feeling you would find me even without it,” she mumbled, burrowing against him.

He couldn’t help but chuckle. She was right. He would.

J.J.Massa

Chapter Four

Juliana woke the next day around noon, stretching and yawning, feeling great. Suddenly she bolted upright.

“Kofy! Oh, you poor baby!” She threw her arms around the grunting and wagging mass of fur next to her. “I bet you have to go to the bathroom *so* bad!”

She was scooting to the edge of the bed when she heard, “*Calm yourself, deget mic dragoste de al meu! I took Kofy out at eight. It was overcast.*”

Aloud she said, “Raiden? Where are you? How are you talking to me? What did you call me?”

She heard his vibrating laughter in her head. “*So many questions. I am in bed in my own hotel room. I called you “little love of mine”. The other question I will answer later. Enjoy the afternoon.*”

Juliana sat in bed long minutes after she’d heard his voice. Finally, she gave herself a shake. She could ponder the amazing events of the night—and the morning—while she took care of more mundane matters.

“A vampire? How mind-blowing is that?” she demanded of Kofy. The big dog just thumped his tail in unconditional agreement while she moved about the room.

She supposed that, if anyone should meet a vampire, it made sense that it would be her. She grinned to herself thinking how utterly staggered her friends Reya, Deella, and Solomon would be if they knew. She giggled to herself and Kofy rubbed against her, nearly knocking her over.

Oh how she wished she could tell them and make them believe. Well, mostly she’d like to turn Raiden on Levi... That thought brought her up short. Levi. She sighed.

For some reason, maybe it was the part of her that insisted on taking chances—the part that wasn’t a middle-aged mother, housewife, blind woman—she trusted Raiden. She believed that he was a good man. Still, she wouldn’t think wicked thoughts about Levi. She’d be good.

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But right now? Right now, she would hold the thoughts and feelings of holding and being held close. She would cherish the feelings she'd shared with Raiden – every chaotic and confusing one of them. There would be no room in her mind for Levi today, no room at all.

* * *

After a pleasant shower and a light meal for herself and Kofy, Juliana dressed and prepared for a long day of book signing and hand shaking. Her friend Reya met her in the lobby and the two women made their way into the large room where the convention was being held.

During a lull in the busy afternoon, Reya turned to Juliana and teased, “So who was that hot hunk I saw you with last night? Levi’s replacement, I hope, I hope.”

“Aren’t all hunks by definition hot?” Juliana asked with a chuckle.

“Come on, girl, quit holding back. Don’t tell me your old man finally agreed to a divorce?” Reya leaned in closer, “Or are you having a torrid and tawdry affair?”

“For such a gifted writer, you’re certainly redundant,” Juliana snapped.

“Not goanna tell me, huh?” Reya grinned. “Well, I’ll tell you, he certainly is fine to look at.”

Juliana couldn’t help it her curiosity was piqued. “What’s he look like Rey?”

“Ohhh, *now* you want to talk about him, huh?” Juliana could hear her friend’s foot tapping and the sound of a chair creaking. She imagined Reya leaning back in her chair with her arms crossed.

“Oh, come on, Reya, you’ve got to tell me...” she knew she was dangerously close to whining now.

“You are SO cute when you beg,” Reya giggled. “Good thing for you I love good gossip and hate your husband.”

“Rey,” Juliana intoned in a stern voice.

“Okay, okay, well, he’s not that tall but you knew that.” Juliana nodded. “He’s got dark–well black hair. Blue black really.” She took a deep breath apparently thinking it over. “He’s solid, well built–very muscular. Hmmm. His features are aristocratic. He’s got a stern brow, dark, piercing eyes, I can’t tell the color–almost black, a chiseled jaw with the most fascinating dimple in his chin... Is that enough?”

Juliana felt her face flame. “More than enough, thanks,” she smiled sheepishly. “Um, you wanna go grab us a sandwich? I’ll sign for both of us. Nobody will know the

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difference.” They both laughed as Reya quickly took off to secure lunch for the two, letting the subject drop.

* * *

“I *told* you Barb,” Levi growled, pacing back and forth across her small, elegant living room. “If she divorces me, all her royalties go with her. Not to mention what I’m sure will be an obscene amount of child support.” The more he thought about it, the angrier he got. “Any judge will take one look at her and say, “Oh you poor thing” and give her the house and even *alimony*!” The last word he spat angrily.

“Levi, honey, calm down,” Barb tried to placate him. She was a technician in the lab where he worked and they had been seeing each other for years. But Levi didn’t want to be soothed.

“Calm down? She’s blind, she’s got MS and that damned dog...” he took a deep breath. “Does anybody care what *I* have to put up with?” he dropped to the sofa next to her.

“I care, hon,” Barb murmured, pulling him down until his head rested on her lap.

“It’s just...” Levi puffed out a sigh, his head cradled on her thighs. “I raised that ungrateful bastard of hers, gave him my name even! And I put up with her when she started getting sick.”

“I know it’s been hard, Levi,” Barb crooned, stroking his forehead. “But killing her is a big step to take. I mean, I know I gave you the chemical but it’s not too late, you know. We can...”

“She’s insured for half a million dollars, Barb. We’d have the house, the money, her royalties—you wouldn’t *believe* what people pay to read the trash she writes.” He wouldn’t be paying for Barb to live here anymore—she’d move into the house.

“Huh,” remarked Barb, as much of a sound as a word, her hand pausing mid-stroke. “She’s suffering anyway, isn’t she, with that disease?” she justified, rubbing his temples gently. “We can send your daughter to a nice boarding school, but the dog... I don’t know.”

“I’ll poison that damned dog, too,” Levi snarled bitterly.

“Levi! You can’t kill the dog! That’s just awful!” The long nails of her left hand jabbed him as she punctuated her point.

Grabbing her hands he groused, “That dog growled at me before she left. I thought he was going to attack me.”

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“Oh,” she resumed her rhythmic rubbing. “Well, we can’t let a dangerous animal like that stay around. We’ll have him put down. *Humanely*,” she emphasized.

“You have such a soft heart,” Levi smiled up at her.

“And it’s all yours,” she smiled. “Now that you have my soft heart, what do you have for me? Something hard, I hope?” Her fingers walked their way over his chest and down to his waist.

“Getting hard for you right now, Barbie,” he schmoozed. “We’re going to have a lot more money, honey,” he purred. “And I’ll spend all my nights with you.”

Her hand slid under the waist of his slacks. “Money makes me hot, Levi,” her voice was low and sultry now. “And spending nights with you just makes me hotter. We’ll be so close when this is done. Like–like family.”

“Oh yeahhh,” he rolled into her reaching grip. “Just like family.”

* * *

“Hello, Kofy,” Raiden murmured as the dog wagged and stretched, coming over to him. “Hello, Juliana,” he murmured as she sat up in her hotel bed and ran her fingers through her hair.

Giving the dog a final pat, he moved to the bed and sat down on the edge. Kofy, he saw, had picked up his bone and moved to the doorway.

“Raiden?” she said sleepily, rubbing her face with her open palms.

Almost without thought, he pulled her against him, wrapping his arms around her. When she was in his arms, he felt whole. Had he ever felt that way before? Even as a mortal man with his wife in his arms he knew he hadn’t felt this type of completion.

“I’m sorry I didn’t find you earlier, Juliana. I slept late and had some business to complete. You are not angry with me?” He squeezed her a little when he felt her nod against his chest.

“Raiden? Can I touch your face? I want to “Braille” you and find out what you look like.”

She angled her face up to him. He leaned down and kissed her gently, tracing her lips with his tongue.

“Yes, *meu deget mic dragoste*, you may “Braille” any part of me you so desire,” he answered her, calling her his *little love*. He tried to control his body’s reaction to the thought of having her touch him anywhere at all.

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She turned on the bed to face him and rose to her knees. He turned toward her a little more and she lifted her hands, fingers straight and found his head. Carefully, she moved her fingertips outward from the center of his forehead to trace his hairline.

Gently moving her fingers down his face, she lightly touched his forehead, his temples, his eyebrows, eyes, and traced his ears. She hadn't even touched his nose yet but Raiden felt heavy and hard for her.

Juliana's fingers continued their excruciating journey down his face, over his cheekbones and tracing his lips. Raiden wanted to lean into her gliding fingers. He envied Kofy's right to push his head into her hand and rub against her softness.

When her hands moved from his jaw to his throat, he shrugged out of his shirt. Juliana continued to touch him, learning his hollows, plains and contours as her fingertips lightly skimmed his taut flesh.

Her exploration took her over his heavy deltoids and along his prominent clavicle to his sternum. Instead of examining his biceps and arms, she began lightly feeling her way down to his hard pectoral muscles.

When her fingers skimmed his pebbled nipples, he groaned. She gasped, stopping her journeying and flattening her palms over them. He could smell her arousal.

He brought his hand under the short hem of her cotton nightie and up between her legs. The crotch of her panties was wet to his touch. Very wet.

"Juliana, your hunger, your painful need is as great as my own," he said hoarsely.

"Raiden, I can't—I just—I can't..." she objected. "I promised to forsake all others. I have to keep that."

"We will turn away from each other and find our release." At her indrawn breath, he went on harshly, "I will not leave you in any kind of pain, even sexual. If you will not do this, I will lay you down and plunge myself into you until we are both satisfied!"

"Raiden!" she whispered in surprise. "Surely you wouldn't force me!"

He moved his hand under the elastic waist of her bikini panties and eased his fingers through the slick folds of her labia. When he pushed them into her center and drew them back, he felt her hot juices pour over his hand.

As she clung to him, he pushed his fingers once again through her moist heat. "Would force really be necessary, *meu* Juliana?" She whimpered as he withdrew his fingers from her.

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Putting his fingers into his mouth, Raiden tasted the evidence of her desire for him. With a growl, he reached down and pulled her short nightshirt over her head. Tossing it aside, he lowered his mouth to her breast and sunk his fangs into the vein leading to her dusky nipple. With a mewling moan, she arched into his sucking mouth.

After a brief sip, he licked the small pinpricks closed and nipped at the rigid peak. He slid an arm behind her and pulled her forward. She clung to his shoulders. When he covered her lips with his own, her arms wound around his neck.

Pulling back, he groaned, "I hunger for you in every way. I admire your integrity, Juliana, but it is a flimsy shield at present."

Her own pent up frustration was so great that Juliana could feel herself shaking against him. She hadn't desired Levi physically since years before she'd gone blind. Never had she wanted him this much. This man made her hungry. He made her ache--she wanted him so badly. Yes, he was right. Her need for him was a physical pain.

I'm married to a man I don't like who reciprocally doesn't like me. Why is it that I can't make love with Raiden? Oh yeah, the kids. I made a promise and as long as I'm married, I have to keep that promise. It's definitely time to push harder for a divorce.

Raiden tugged her panties off of her and peeled off his own pants, easing them both down into the bed. She nestled in the crook of his arm, stretched out alongside of him.

Taking her hand and twining her fingers with his, he skimmed her breasts and down to her slightly rounded tummy. She covered his free hand with her own and guided it across his chest and nipples down to his flat abdomen. She insinuated her fingers between his so that she could feel him a little.

I know that this violates the spirit of "forsaking all others" but... I did ask Levi for a divorce--about a hundred times. The hell with it! I'm doing the best I can here! I've been very good. I deserve a reward.

She could feel his fingers with hers moving through the tight curls between her legs. She wanted so bad to feel his touch. She pushed her mound against their twined hands, sucking in her breath at the sensations coursing through her.

At the same time, his other hand, threaded with hers, stroked his rigid length, feeling like satin and steel to her. She flexed her fingers drawing a gasp from him. She realized that she was as hungry to feast on his body as he was to feast on hers.

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She wanted him in every way—but this was all she could have right now. When their entwined fingers moved to the top of his hard rod, she slid her thumb over the hood and scooped up the drop of liquid there. Tugging his hand, she brought the thumb to her mouth and licked it, groaning with him.

He guided their fingers to her hard little nub and began rubbing it in circles and then moving their joined fingers down through her dripping labia. She couldn't control her body's response, her hips rocking forward. She felt the warm liquid weeping from her body in a sweet trickle, gushing with every stroke.

The pair of hands gripping Raiden's cock squeezed him and pumped up to the top and down to the tangle of curls covering his balls. When their hands reached the top, she stroked his tip. When she felt his silky curls, she reached for his sacks. It wasn't long before she felt him tightening in their hands.

He turned toward her and pulled her to him, plunging their fingers into her center and rubbing her clit with his thumb. At the same time, he took her mouth in a passionate, possessive kiss. She felt his come spurt onto her stomach in a hot wave as her own body tightened and convulsed.

Juliana had never experienced an orgasm like that. She clung to Raiden and experienced little tremors. She felt him against her, his breathing heavy and his body still clenching and unclenching from time to time.

"Never, *meu dragă unu!*, have I ever had an experience like that." He held her against him.

She lay content, running her hands up and down his back, trying hard not to think. After a few minutes, he disengaged himself and went into the bathroom. He returned with a warm washcloth that he used to clean her stomach and between her legs.

There were so many questions she wanted to ask. There were too many for her to just begin blurting them out. How did he really feel about her?

"You must sleep, Juliana," he crooned, stroking her hair now. "Rest. You had a very full day before I came to see you tonight."

"I don't want to sleep," she knew she sounded like a querulous child. "I don't know when I'll see you again."

"Shhh," he murmured, leaning down to kiss her forehead and then her lips lightly. "You have taken blood from me as I have from you. I will always be able to find you now."

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“Always?” she felt the pull of sleep and fought it. She was exhausted.

“Always,” he confirmed.

She didn’t know how long he stayed. When she awoke again, he was gone.

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Chapter Five

Juliana made her way out the back door shivering. She and Kofy walked along the wood line to the vacant lot on the corner. Suddenly, the chocolate lab began to wiggle and twist moving forward.

“Kofy? What is it, big boy?” she questioned, knowing it was nothing to fear. Kofy was happy about what he’d seen--not angry.

“It is I, Juliana,” came a deep voice from a few feet ahead of her.

“Raider?” Involuntarily, her hand crept to her hair. She knew she was a mess.

“I needed to be close to you, *meu piatră prețioasă*, although I didn’t expect you to come outside on such a cold morning. Where is that man you are married to?” He sounded a little angry.

“He’s in the shower. He doesn’t like Kofy so much. I don’t mind taking him out.” She felt so self-conscious. She heard him speak softly to Kofy and release the large dog from his lead.

“Juliana, are you angered that I am here? Perhaps you feel no attraction for me at all and wish I would cease to plague you with my concern and attentions?” He spoke in a rush as if he feared the answer.

She couldn’t believe that a man as sophisticated and self-assured as Raider Vagner would worry about her opinion.

Taken aback, she blurted what was on her mind. “I’m embarrassed and ashamed about how attracted I am to you. I love your concern and attentions. How could you possibly wonder how I feel about you?” She heard her voice hit the high pitch it usually did before she burst into tears and she wrestled with it. “It’s just that I’m wearing sweats over my nightgown and I just had a drink of milk. I look terrible and I have bad breath.”

He chuckled lightly, pulling her into his arms and dropping a kiss on each cheek. “Do you know that over the last four hundred years, women have shaved their foreheads, had ribs removed and took deadly poisons all in an effort to appear attractive?”

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She shook her head from side to side. He slid his arms around her and she snuggled against him. She eased her arms around his waist.

“They even drained the blood from their bodies so that they would appear pale. I cannot begin to discuss dental hygiene over the centuries.” He shuddered. “It pleases me that you pull on extra clothes to warm yourself. You only become more beautiful to me with the passage of each day.”

“Thank you for saying that, Raiden. Just keep your nose over there so I don’t feel too bad about my breath.” He chuckled at her. “What did you tell Kofy?” She knew that the dog understood him. She could use skills like his.

“I instructed him to meet his needs, be careful, and return in five minutes. I cannot stay long, I’m afraid.”

“The morning light will be here soon, won’t it?” She was worried he wouldn’t have enough time to seek shelter.

“I will be safe *dragă unul*, do not worry. And thanks to your kind words, I will sleep with glad thoughts. I must go away for a short time but I will return in a few days. Perhaps we can meet for a drink?”

She found that funny and began to giggle. At first he stared at her in surprise and then he apparently saw the humor in his statement. He too began to laugh. Kofy came galloping up, tongue hanging out and tail wagging.

“Please, Raiden, come for a drink anytime.” She continued to giggle as he escorted her to the edge of her yard.

He leaned down and kissed her nose and brushed his lips across hers in a light butterfly kiss. “Hurry inside, my irreverent imp,” he chuckled. “I will let you know when I return. Most likely it will be Friday night.”

“Okay,” she said again, still giggling as she opened the back door.

“What’s so funny?” Levi demanded as she slipped out of her coat and shoes.

“Meeting a vampire for a drink,” she giggled.

She ignored his grumbling and his glare as he slammed out of the house. Levi resented her blindness and her disease. She couldn’t blame him for that—she did too. He didn’t like the books she wrote and he didn’t like her sense of humor. She noticed that he didn’t mind spending the money, however.

* * *

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Juliana sat on her bed, leaning back against her husband pillow, thinking as she glared at her laptop. Three times she typed a line and three times she backspaced rapidly, the voice of her screen-reader stuttering oddly.

“It was a dark and stormy night,” she typed and said aloud in an impatient voice. “Okay, Kofy, take it!” Of course, all the response she got from her chocolate furred companion was a lazy yawn. “Oh come on, I know you’re not a Snoopy fan per se, but even you have to admit that beagle could tell a story.”

The big dog regarded her from between his paws, his tail thumping against the mattress. It was a scene that repeated itself often between the two of them. Guide dogs were not supposed to be allowed on the furniture and for the first eighteen months of their relationship, Juliana had strictly followed the rules.

Somewhere along the way, Kofy became more and more to her, less a dog and more a part of her body, her psyche almost. She’d never seen his furry face but he was as clear to her as the faces of her children—faces she hadn’t looked at since they’d lost so much of their sweet baby shape. Kofy was the only being that she knew without a doubt loved her unconditionally and always cared how she felt. Kofy really did have her best interests in his heart.

The hand that wasn’t busy backspacing strayed idly toward a ceramic candy dish on her bedside table. The big dog’s head lifted and she could feel the weight of his concentrated stare.

“Oh, all right!” she grumbled good-naturedly.

Reaching into an M&M shaped ceramic candy dish, she grabbed a few of the sugar-coated, peanut-filled chocolate treats. Taking the smallest one between thumb and forefinger, she tossed it to her best friend.

Kofy stretched and nosed for a second and then became still. She waited but didn’t hear the crunching sound of an appeased Labrador. In fact, she was certain he was staring at her again.

“No way!” she groaned, shaking her head. “What? You want me to hand you the dish and let you pick out the green ones?” Kofy wagged his tail enthusiastically. “I don’t think so, you giant shedding machine! You just eat that one and be grateful! Sheesh!”

With a grumbling canine complaint, Kofy stretched forward and licked up the offending, non-green M&M.

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Chapter Six

With a forced smile, Juliana sat quietly at the table as Levi mingled with his friends and co-workers. Anytime anyone stopped to chat, she was polite and personable. While she wasn't a big fan of these holiday company gatherings, it was important to her husband. Levi had told her that his boss liked to see the spouses when he showed up at them. This year he apparently intended to show up so Levi insisted she join him.

She was afraid to move from her chair. Because Levi didn't like to draw attention she didn't have Kofy with her. She was sitting quietly, listening to conversations around her when she heard someone slide into a chair near her.

"Juliana Gold? Or should I say Jewel Orianna?" a young, masculine voice asked her.

"Please, call me Juliana," she smiled. "Levi doesn't like me to call attention to my alter ego." She hoped her husband wasn't nearby to hear this conversation.

"Certainly, Mrs. Gold, certainly. Although, I can't understand why he wouldn't be crowing it from the rooftops. Your work is among the best horror and romantic fiction published today."

"I think he's alarmed to learn that I think that way, sir. Thank you for understanding and thank you for the compliment." She was relieved and flattered.

"Julie!" Levi walked up and called to her.

She tried not to wince. Julie was a fine name but it wasn't hers. She despised being called by it. Sixteen years ago it was teasing. Now it was more of a dig.

"Julie, I want you to meet someone." He leaned in close. "Stand up and don't embarrass me!" he whispered harshly.

Carefully, she made her way to her feet, trying not to sway. She was so dizzy. *Just one more thing to thank the MS for--I don't even need the alcohol to seem drunk!*

"Leave it to my assistant Paul to find the most beautiful woman at the party," Raiden purred, smoothly taking her hand.

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“And the one woman who won’t run from my ugly face!” Paul chuckled.

“Julie, this is Raiden Wagner, the owner of this company. Mr. Wagner, my wife, Julie,” Levi introduced them.

“I have met your wife recently, Mr. Gold. Solomon Stevens introduced us at a recent author’s gathering. I enjoy horror fiction and consider myself her most enthusiastic fan.”

He still held her hand and she tugged at it slightly. “Mr. Vagner, Raiden, I’m quite surprised to meet you here.”

“The surprise is mine, Juliana. I had no idea your husband, Levi, worked for one of my companies. Please, sample this wine I brought to you. I’m anxious to hear your opinion of its flavor.” He handed her a cool wine glass. The bowl of the delicate crystal glass holding the wine was warm.

“Yes, actually, Mr. Wagner, I work in the Marketing Department,” Levi provided.

She sipped from the glass while Levi chatted happily with Raiden and his assistant, Paul. The first taste had informed her that it wasn’t wine in the crystal glass at all but blood—Raiden’s blood.

Absently listening as the conversation flowed around her, Juliana continued to sip from the glass. Although it was odd to drink it this way, before she knew it, she’d finished it. She felt a good deal stronger.

“Paul, will you dispose of Mrs. Gold’s wine glass as well as my own? What did you think of the vintage, Juliana?” he asked smoothly.

She felt her mouth curve in a smile. “Hmmm.” She licked her lips. “Well, it’s a full-bodied little bouquet with a hint of the barrel.” She grinned, wrinkling her nose at him. “It goes down smoothly but it has a bit of a bite to it.”

Raiden threw back his head and laughed out loud. Paul chuckled and Levi joined in sounding uncertain.

“Mr. Gold, will you allow me a brief dance with your wife? I hope to learn the plot of her next thriller—I’m sure you already know it though, do you not?” Raiden had a smile in his voice.

She heard the sound of one man patting the other on the back or shoulder. Then Levi answered him and she heard his hand slide off.

“Feel free to dance with Julie, Mr. Wagner, I’m sure she won’t mind,” he said eagerly. His voice sounded disapproving when he continued, “I don’t really read the sort

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of thing she and her friends write, but each to his own, I guess. I'll just go and get another drink." Bending to her, he growled, "Just try to act normal."

Raiden slid a hand to the small of her back and he escorted Juliana to the dance floor. He kept his hand at her waist and folded her right hand in his left. She rested her left hand on his shoulder and enjoyed the texture and firmness of his bunched muscles. Neither spoke for almost a minute.

"I wish I could reach up and stroke your chin," she said finally. "I'm afraid you'll get a cramp in your jaw." She felt him start against her as he turned her and followed the flow of the other dancers.

"Why do you fear that I am in danger of a cramp in my jaw, *dragă unul?*" he said after a moment.

"I can feel how tense you are—your muscles are tight. I can hear your teeth grind together. You are angry," she said matter-of-factly.

"How I wish that I could press you against my body and hold you tight!" he said in a low voice. "Yes, I *am* angry! His ill and cavalier treatment of you makes me very angry. How can he not appreciate you? How..." He took several deep breaths. "I squander the precious moments that I have with you, *meu* Juliana. Please forgive me."

"Don't let it happen again," she murmured, stroking the back of his hand with her thumb.

He chuckled. "The wine helped?" he asked her.

"It did. I'm quite surprised. How did you know? No, don't tell me. But I don't ever want to drink..." she considered how best to phrase her thoughts. "I don't want to drink after anyone but you, okay?"

After long seconds, during which, she could hear his throat working, he asked her, "Why, Juliana, would you think that could be possible?"

She blew out a breath. "I know you must drink from someone besides me and I just don't—I think it would be icky, that's all."

"Icky?" he repeated. "As in distasteful?" She could hear the amusement in his cultured, Old World sounding voice. She closed her eyes, wishing she could hide her flaming face from him.

As the heat crept up her neck, he said, "Fear not, *meu dragă unul*, I would never knowingly allow you to be subjected to anything icky." As the dance ended, he leaned

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down and whispered into her ear, "I find the idea of your lips on another man's skin *quite* icky--even that of--*especially* that of Levi Gold."

"My lips don't get all that close to Levi, Raiden, we don't have that kind of relationship anymore," she whispered as he pulled out her chair.

Before he could answer, Levi joined them. "It was awfully nice of you to take pity on Julie and dance with her. I know she appreciates it." Suddenly, Levi clutched his throat and his eyes began to water.

As he coughed and choked, Raiden turned to his assistant, "Paul, please see to the needs of Mr. Gold."

Listening to Paul escort Levi from the room, Juliana observed, "I *knew* there was something I forgot to ask you!"

"I suppose I must release him?" Raiden asked, seemingly hoping that she would say he didn't. She nodded. He sighed. "Juliana," he lifted her hand to his mouth, gallantly placing a kiss on her knuckle, "You know that, given a choice, I would dance with only you, *da*?"

"Thank you, Raiden." He squeezed her hand. "Yes, I do know that, really. I'll be fine here. I'll think of my stories. I have an idea for one I may write."

Reluctantly, he released her hand. "I will see you again soon."

* * *

Having reunited with Kofy and taken him for a longish walk, Juliana lay in her bed, thinking of Raiden and how it had felt to be in his arms. He had to know how she felt about him.

With a half smile she listened as Kofy groaned and stretched and took himself off to the little bathroom adjoining her small suite. With a rattle of his choker collar and a groaning thump, he settled himself on the cool tile floor.

"*Juliana*," she heard and startled.

"*Raiden*?" she thought back to him, her breath catching. She was thrilled to hear his voice.

"*It was good to hold you in my arms tonight meu Juliana*," he murmured to her. "*You felt so good against me.*"

"*Raiden*," she began. She didn't know what to say. She loved being in his arms. There was something primal about him that called to her on almost a cellular level.

"*Make love with me, Juliana*," he murmured across the distance to her.

LOVE LIKE BLOOD

She gasped in surprise and confusion. *“Raiden, how... you know I can't but...”*

“Perhaps, meu dragoste, what I mean to say is, imagine making love to me as I imagine making love to you, hmmm?” His silky smooth voice purred in her head and across her nerve endings and she couldn't find one reason to say no. *“Close your eyes, imagine me with you.”*

He had apparently taken her non-answer as acquiescence and with good reason. She closed her eyes and saw him there, next to her bed, slipping off his suit jacket. She felt the bed dip next to her, but reaching out, found it was empty.

She heard his brandy rich chuckle and then, *“I am vampyr, Juliana, this is but a...a perk for us, hmm? You will break no vows if you imagine loving me as I imagine loving you.”*

Once again she considered that she would be breaking the spirit of her vows but reasoned that even those had been broken long ago. She'd caught Levi in more than one affair even before she'd been diagnosed with MS.

The very first time it had happened, even before she'd begun to lose vision, Levi has sworn to her that it was a moment of weakness on his part and nothing more. But it had happened again when her vision had begun to fade. She had no idea how many there had been in between.

Immediately, she'd asked for a divorce but Levi had refused, daring her in her near blind state, to fight for custody of Erin. Loath to put either of her children through a nasty court fight, Juliana had moved herself out of Levi's bedroom and gotten her guide dog. Now they were little more than hostile roommates.

Closing her eyes again, she felt Raiden lean over her, trailing his fingers over the lines of her face. Reaching up, she felt the hard planes of his chest, the soft curls and his flat, peaked nipples.

“Juliana?” The question remained in his eyes.

“Raiden, is this real? I can see you!” she breathed. *“I can see,”* her voice was a cracked whisper.

“This is in our minds, Juliana. I share with you, my vision. You see me as I have always looked. You see what your mind tells you is there.”

Placing her hands on his shoulders, she leaned up and pressed her lips to his. For so long she had wanted this. No, there was no reason not to imagine what her body, her heart cried out for.

J.J.Massa

He slid his hands into her hair and deepened the kiss, and her mind had no room for wondering, for considering, for anything but him. There was only his warm, solid body, pressed against hers, his soft, moist lips so full of tenderness and passion and his gentle hands, caressing and teasing.

The kiss ended and they drew apart slowly. Raiden carefully, lovingly slid his hands down her body, catching the hem of the weathered t-shirt she wore.

Their lips were drawn together again. Neither knew how much time had passed before they stopped to gaze at one another once again.

Hunger seared her as she touched him, stroked his arms, his shoulders. His muscles bunched and rippled at her touch while the fingers of her other hand slid through his hair.

She moaned as his lips left hers to begin an exploration of her throat. His tongue dipped into the hollow there and sent a jolt of desire through her, but he stopped to look at her once again.

"My body has ached, dreaming of holding you like this," he whispered into her hair. He rocked her back and forth for long moments, pressing gentle kisses to her cheek. Then his hold loosened and he leaned back to kiss warm flesh as he lifted the t-shirt up and over her head.

He tossed it to the floor forgotten, and she turned to help un-tuck and unbutton his shirt. She had to see him, touch him, love him, if only this way, in their minds. In some ways it felt more real, more honest and infinite than if she'd been beside him.

"Once we make love, there is no turning back." His hands closed around her face. *"You will belong to me, as I have always belonged to you. I will not let you go."*

"I don't want you to let me go," she said. Maybe his warning should have scared her, but it didn't. This would indeed be forever and she would see to that. She would push to end her farce of a marriage with Levi. She would do anything to stay with Raiden for as many lifetimes as he would have her.

She slipped her hands into his shirt, splaying her fingers across his bare chest and pressing her lips to his collarbone. The male scent of him surrounded her, so real in spite of their physical distance.

She felt him gasp against her hair, and looked up to study his face. The hungry gaze he turned upon her sent shivers up and down her spine. Her eyes roamed over his bare chest, and she moved to kiss him again.

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He eased her back onto the bed. Raiden slid his lips down her throat and covered her body with his own. His arousal pressed into her belly and she couldn't suppress a moan at the caress of his hot lips against the sensitive skin behind her ear.

Her hands eagerly explored his muscular back and shoulders. From the moment she'd met him she had hungered to feel the heat of him against her.

One of her hands meandered down to his buttocks, the other stroked his hair, and her thigh was pressed tightly against his hip. His hand stroked teasingly up her side, lightly brushing the side of her breast.

Her hand caught his and she laced their fingers together. Their eyes met as she kissed each one in turn. When she reached his index finger she slid her tongue up its length and drew it into her mouth.

Juliana felt bold, daring. She knew she was taking chances again. She held his hand in both of hers, slowly sucking his index finger in and out of her warm, moist mouth. At each withdrawal, her tongue slowly circled his fingertip, and each time she drew it back into her mouth she let him feel the light scraping of her teeth.

"*Meu* Juliana," he breathed. His free hand slid down from her waist, pulling her firmly against him.

A new wave of desire swept over her as she pressed herself into him. It was a struggle to continue to tease. She wanted him desperately. "Do you like that, Raiden?"

"Yes, *meu dragoste*," his voice a strained whisper. "I like that very much."

"Good." She stretched up to kiss him. Her lips sought out his earlobe, nibbling gently until she heard him gasp. The sound had a powerful effect upon her as she savored her ability to cause it.

They kissed again, long and slow, as her hands wandered over his skin and lightly traced the contours of his muscles. Her lips left his to follow the path her fingers had taken and when her tongue found its way to his nipple, he groaned.

She looked up at his face, enraptured by his look of intense pleasure she found there. The passion in his eyes was for her and it excited her, incited her. Her exploring hands discovered the closure on his trousers and opened it with a deliberate lack of haste, her eyes never straying from his face.

Raiden remained frozen as she pushed his pants off his hips. His eyes drifted shut. When her mouth returned to his chest he shuddered.

J.J.Massa

His response made her smile against him. “Finally,” she murmured. Her pulse raced as his hands traced circles on her back. Her body ached with need as she felt the effects of his touch in places he had not yet visited.

She continued to kiss his chest as her hand skimmed over his muscular cheeks. Eventually she could wait no longer to reach her goal. His rigid length moved eagerly in her hand as her fingers closed around him.

“*Meu Juliana*,” he croaked, his voice tight.

She slid down to press wet, open-mouthed kisses to his firm stomach and thighs before wrapping her fingers around his pulsing member once again.

Savoring the erotic feast he presented, she rubbed her thumb along the underside of his throbbing length and then pressed her lips to the base of his shaft. Short silky curls tickled her chin and she heard him groan as her other hand moved to explore further.

Slowly, she placed feather light kisses up his length, drawing nearer to the sensitive tip and finally parting her lips to taste the bead of moisture. Her tongue circled slowly, experimenting, as her hands slid up and down his shaft.

“Stop, Juliana, you must.” His request was at odds with the movement of his hips. Torn between obeying his plea and continuing, she took him more fully into her mouth. His voice was barely audible. “I want to feel my pleasure with you and not before.”

She scooted back up, face-to-face and surrendered to a kiss that left her breathless. She clung to his shoulders for support as his lips wandered down her throat. A breathless moan escaped when his hands finally reached her breasts, his thumbs rubbing her almost painfully erect nipples.

Every touch brought her higher as she lost herself in the feel of his hands, his lips on her body. This was as real as if he truly were in her bed with her

“Beautiful.” His hands roamed up and down her sides as he bent to kiss her shoulder. “So very beautiful.”

She shivered as his lips traveled along her collarbone, and smiled. Nothing she’d ever done with Levi had made her feel this way. No man had ever been this good.

Never before had her desire so overwhelmed her. Her breasts had been aching for attention for what seemed an eternity now, and every nerve ending in her body seemed to be connected to the throbbing ache low in her stomach and between her legs. She ran her fingers through his hair and tried to encourage his hot mouth lower.

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Refusing to be rushed, his tongue continued to tease the sensitive points on her neck and shoulders, moving slowly but deliberately downward.

His hands stroked up her ribcage, his thumbs never quite reaching her taut nipples as they gently caressed the sides of her breasts.

Finally he took them in his hands, learning their weight and shape, just as his tongue slid down her breastbone. She gasped, desperate for more, her whole body quivering.

This slow teasing was driving her out of her mind. Her hands slid from his hair, one clinging to his shoulder while the other traced the shape of his ear.

“Raiden, please,” she begged.

Her capacity for rational thought evaporated as he lowered his head and kissed each of her rosy peaks before sucking one into his mouth. His tongue circled slowly even as his hand crept lower, stroking over her abdomen and then reaching to dance teasingly up and down her thigh.

From someplace deep within her mind she heard herself moaning. Her hands searched desperately for any part of his hot skin she could reach. Flames of desire licked through her body at each gentle tug of his lips.

He paused, and she opened her eyes. He was gazing at her again, a look of passion and possession on his face. She reached to pull his head down firmly, her mouth meeting his in a demanding kiss. She drew his tongue into her mouth, grazing it with her teeth as she sucked upon it.

They were both groaning. He had one hand in her hair, the other on her hip. When her hands left his head to wander downward, he pulled away.

To her frustration, he moved his body out of her reach and continued in his methodical worship of her body, placing hot, wet kisses across her flat stomach while he traced indistinct patterns on the soft skin of her inner thigh.

Tortured ecstasy sent a cry from her lips as his fingers brushed over her remaining garment. Almost sobbing with need, she squirmed beneath him as he dragged his lips and tongue slowly across her belly.

Completely at his mercy, she found herself more aroused than she had ever been. She wanted to plead for his touch, but couldn't seem to find her voice. It was hard enough to draw a breath. Her head rolled helplessly against the pillow as her hands reached futilely towards him.

J.J.Massa

Every touch, every caress, every kiss was keenly felt throughout her body. Her panties were drawn away and his lips began to travel slowly up the inside of her leg.

After an eternity his hot mouth descended, his tongue gently parting her tender, swollen flesh to begin a detailed exploration of the territory. A strangled cry rose from her throat as an intensity of sensation washed over her.

Her concentration narrowed to include only the movement of his tongue as it traced agonizingly slow and gentle circles around her swollen, aching bundle of nerves. Her conscious mind was unaware of the tossing of her head against the pillow, or the sounds emanating from deep within her as she writhed beneath her lover's skillful mouth.

His tongue pressed more firmly against her and her mind exploded as her muscles convulsed, her hips rising as her back arched, her entire body shaking. She was flying, unconnected to anything solid, as she shuddered through a series of exquisite crescendos.

She was again aware of his hot breath upon her as she started to regain her sense of reality, but he wasn't willing to let her rest. He pressed into her with his entire mouth, tasting, teasing, stroking, and sucking gently as he drove her relentlessly towards another climax with fingers, lips, and tongue.

Sobbing his name, she thrust against him, powerless to even consider holding back. All control was gone, and it thrilled her.

His name burst from her throat as a second hurricane of pleasure ripped through her. Then he was between her thighs, pressing emotional kisses to every inch of her face as his hard length nudged eagerly at her entrance.

Her eyes opened and she took in the sight of his face, contorted with need, looming over her. His features blurred as he moved in to kiss her again.

"Raiden, yes," she mumbled into his mouth as she rocked against him. "I need you."

Slowly he slid the tip of his erection through her wet, swollen folds, teasing her before he immersed himself within her, gasping her name. She pushed upwards to press her lips to his as she reveled in the glorious feeling of their merging, both the physical sensation of penetration and the long awaited joy of being as one with the man she loved.

Every detail was branded upon her mind by the heightened awareness of her arousal. The slight rasp of his sparse leg hair against the smooth skin of her thighs; the heat of his breath against her neck; the satisfying pressure of his length encased within her.

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Lost in the sensation of him throbbing deep within her body, she caressed his face, his neck, his shoulders, anything she could reach. One hand wandered downward, enjoying the play of muscles beneath her fingers and marveling at his tight, shapely buttocks.

He began to move and the physical need once again building within her overpowered all else. She wrapped her legs around his waist and thrust against him, matching his rhythm. A moan rattled in the back of her throat.

With some effort she opened her eyes, wanting to see his face, and bore witness to his struggle for control as rivulets of sweat trickled down his chest.

She urged him on with body and voice. He increased the pace. His hand explored their joining, increasing her pleasure and drawing a moan from her throat.

Then she was beyond speech, beyond thought, as an impossible third climax rocked her body. She was thrashing against him, shouting his name, while he shouted hers, as her spasms of release served as the catalyst for his own. He thrust hard, her name on his lips, and shuddered violently as he emptied himself within her.

They were both panting, covered in a sheen of perspiration, struggling for breath as they clung to one another, murmuring words of love. She felt him softening inside her, and he shifted to lift his weight off of her body.

“No,” she whispered, not willing to lose the intimate contact so soon. “Wait.”

He stayed as he was and kissed her, tracing her lips with his tongue before sweeping slowly into her mouth. She returned his kiss, thoroughly exploring his mouth before pulling back a bit to suckle his lower lip.

Her fingers traveled slowly over his face. She couldn't get enough of him. When he shifted to lie down next to her, cradling her against his side, she propped herself up on one unsteady elbow and began tracing circles on his chest.

“Raiden?” her eyes still closed, she felt him solidly beside her. She resisted the urge to reach out physically.

“Yes, Juliana?” his voice was a satiated purr and she struggled with a pleased smile.

“I...That is, we... That was amazing, Raiden. And you say this is a vampire thing?” she was still unsure what to make of what they'd done.

It felt so real. She would have to admit that, in her heart it *was* real. If that was the case, had she cheated on Levi? It was all too overwhelming to think about. She'd

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never *really* felt married to Levi. She really wasn't sure why she'd exchanged vows with him. Perhaps it had been fear. She wanted to do right by her son and had tried to do right by her husband until he'd made it crystal clear that he didn't want her.

She tried to be too smart according to him, and too strong. He'd only married her to please his parents and he wouldn't let her go as long as Erin was younger than eighteen. He wasn't going to pay her alimony or support, he'd told her and she could expect a fight if she thought she'd divorce him and take all his tax deductions with her.

"Juliana, please *meu dragoste*," Raiden pulled her down to rest in his arms. "Do not fret over what we have done. I am with you always in heart and spirit. I cannot deny that. Physically, however, I am far from your bed. Rest in the beautiful dream that we have shared."

"Thank you, Raiden," she murmured, snuggling in. In a matter of minutes, she was asleep.

LOVE LIKE BLOOD

Chapter Seven

Evan followed the two men into the restaurant and sat a couple of stools away from them at the bar. He was meeting friends and would join them when he saw them sit down. For the moment, he'd eavesdrop on the older guys seated near him. Why not? It's harmless and I'll never see them again.

He was seated at the end while the two men were diagonally across from him. The older one, a dark haired man who was a few inches shy of six feet spoke first.

"Are you sure she's going to be here, Paul? How do you know?" he asked.

"I got on an authors and readers' group sponsored by her publisher. Now I get emails every time they post. You've really got to step into the twentieth century, Raiden," Paul joked.

Evan's ears perked up when he heard them talk about authors and publishers.

"So one of them somehow said they would meet her here? Who?" The poor guy sounded hopeless.

"Reya Fortuna is visiting her sister who lives a half an hour away," Paul explained. Reya Fortuna is one of Mom's best friends! "There she is!"

Evan looked up and saw his mother enter the restaurant led by her guide dog, Kofy. He watched with interest as an attractive woman, much taller than his mother's four feet and eleven inches, greeted her.

The women sat down and began chatting and Evan saw something he'd rarely seen in his twenty years. His mother began to relax.

"She looks tired, Paul. Beautiful, but tired," the older of the two men sighed. "Let us go and say hello, shall we?"

Evan watched closely as the older man, an inch or so taller than his companion Paul, led the way to his mother's table. When he stopped by her chair and spoke, his mom was surprised but unmistakably pleased. It appeared that Kofy was pleased, too, and his mother removed the dog's harness so he could greet the newcomer.

J.J.Massa

The older man kissed her cheek, pecked at Reya's cheek and then seated himself in a chair beside his mother. Paul greeted his mother and then sat down next to Reya.

Even continued to watch the small group, fascinated, as his mother interacted and enjoyed herself in a way he'd never seen her do with his father. Stepfather -- Levi Gold is not my father.

After a minute, Evan decided to join the group. Why not? This is stupid. I never get to enjoy my mother, damn it! If she's having an affair with this dude, GREAT! He obviously cares about her and makes her happy.

He slid off the stool and headed over to the table. "Is this a private party or can anyone join?" he asked stopping at the table.

Kofy was in ecstasy wiggling like mad. Evan squatted to pet him. The dark haired man angled himself in front of his mother and the other man seemed concerned.

"Evan!" called his mother and Reya at once.

"Raiden, this is my son Evan. Evan, please say hello to Raiden Vagner and Paul Fieval."

"Pleased to meet you, Evan," the dark haired man, Raiden, obviously recognized Evan as having followed him in and sat at the bar near him. "I find it difficult to accept that one so young in appearance has such adult children."

"She's one of those "forever young" types," Evan grinned.

He decided he'd make it perfectly obvious he was on this guy's side. He was. The older he got, the less he liked Levi Gold. In fact, looking back, it was patently obvious that Levi Gold had never liked him either. Upon reflection, it seemed equally true that he'd never liked Evan's mother either.

Snapping out of his reverie, Evan glanced at the dark man beside his mother. He was disconcerted to see those eerie black eyes fixed on him. Somehow, in looking away and then looking back, he became convinced that the dark man knew what he was thinking.

Maintaining eye contact, Raiden leaned down to laugh with Evan's mother, and agreed with something she had said. His mother turned toward Reya, still talking and laughing, and rested her hand on Raiden's forearm.

Evan smiled and nodded, hoping he'd conveyed the message that anyone who made his mother happy the way that she seemed to be, was welcome any time. When

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they shook hands upon parting, the older man slipped a business card into his hand. He was satisfied that his message had been received.

* * *

It was late evening when Raiden stood in the shadows as the front door opened and Juliana and a young girl came out. That had to be her sixteen-year-old daughter, Erin. He still found it hard to believe she had children that age and older, though he had enjoyed meeting Evan two nights prior.

Mother and daughter walked in silence for a few minutes with Juliana holding Erin's upper left bicep from behind. They didn't move fast and they didn't go far, letting the dog sniff and use the bathroom.

After a short walk, the two turned back to sit on a bench in the yard. They'd gone less than fifty feet altogether but Juliana appeared exhausted.

"Mommy?" Erin said. Juliana seemed to come to attention. It was unusual for a teenager to address her mother that way. "Mommy, I'm worried about you."

Now Raiden paid attention. "Why, sweetie? I'm fine. Not great but..."

"I'm not even talking about your health, Mom. I'm worried about you with Dad."

She paused. "You asked him for a divorce again today, didn't you?"

Raiden started. A divorce. AGAIN? That suggests that she's asked him before. When?

"I've found over the years that there's just no "best time" to ask for a divorce, Hon. So, yeah, I did. Did you hear us or did you just figure it out?"

Over the years? She's been asking him for a divorce over a span of years?

"I heard, Mom. He seemed more violent this time—more abusive. I was afraid he was going to try to hit you. Kofy was snarling and looking mean. I think that's why he didn't hurt you," the girl said.

In the shadows Raiden felt anger wave over him. His eyes glowed blood red.

"Honey, I don't think he would really hurt me. He just likes to call me names and talk tough," Juliana reassured her.

The two watched in silence as Levi emerged from the front door and slammed it shut. Stomping and swearing, he wrenched open the door to his car and got in, slamming it shut. Tires squealing, he drove away.

"Why won't he give you a divorce, Mom? He doesn't like you or else he wouldn't treat you that way. And I don't think you like him either, do you?" Erin speculated.

J.J.Massa

“I think he’s like a lot of men—maybe a lot of people in general. He just hates the idea of failure. I’m sure he has other reasons, too, like he loves you and wants you around. I’m not sure what his other motives might be. Let’s go in, okay?” Mother and daughter made their way to the back door and inside.

Raiden was confused and angry. Why hadn’t Juliana told him before now that she’d asked Levi for a divorce? Why had she never told him? What did this mean? Perhaps Juliana didn’t care for him as he did her...

He wandered the area for nearly an hour when she called to him.

“*Raiden?*” he heard her uncertain voice in his head. He stopped walking. “*You’re angry with me. I can feel it. Why?*”

Raiden closed his eyes. Opening them again, he turned toward the house she shared with Levi Gold. “*Why did you never tell me of your true feelings toward the man you are married to? Why have you not told me that you hoped to divorce him?*”

“*I—I didn’t want you to think my feelings for you had anything to do with my relationship with him. Besides...*” she was silent in his head for a moment. “*I’m not free to have feelings for you, am I?*”

“*Do you, Juliana?*” he demanded. “*Free or not, do you have feelings for me? Tell me!*”

“*Yes,*” she whispered. “*I have lots of feelings for you, Raiden.*”

He could tell that he’d upset her. An overwhelming sensation of emotions swept through him and he knew that she was in tears.

He’d traveled some distance from her neighborhood. As he made his way back toward her house, he began to feel very odd. He felt cold in a way that he only felt upon waking up just before his blood began to circulate again. He knew it wasn’t coming within himself. He felt it through their connection.

“*Juliana? Speak to me!*” he called to her.

“*Raiden...*” he heard her weakly, and then nothing.

He quickly made his way into her yard and into the backdoor of her house and stood for a few seconds, trying to locate her. Entering the kitchen, he turned left and saw an entrance to a room that would normally be used as a study. He opened the door and entered.

LOVE LIKE BLOOD

Inside was a large desk with a laptop on it, a large overstuffed chair, and what looked like a wide, high couch, rounded with cushions. Upon closer inspection, one of those cushions was Juliana.

As he stood there, Kofy circled behind him and pushed him forward. When he still didn't move, Kofy butted him again. The dog's distress was evident.

"Juliana?" he moved to the day bed and sat down on it.

She was shivering and tears were running down her face. Immediately, Raiden pulled her into his arms.

"Juliana? I'm sorry, *dragă unu!*. Please don't be upset any longer," he kissed her face.

"D-don't f-feel good. So cold. L-l-love..." Her entire body was wracked with chills and her teeth were chattering. Whatever she'd meant to say trailed off.

Quickly, Raiden lay down with her, spoon fashion and pulled her tight to his body. He brought his wrist to his mouth and bit through the vein, rapidly clamping it to her mouth.

She struggled a little but he held her still. Lowering his mouth to her neck, his lip caressing her skin, his incisors extended and he sunk his fangs into her vein. "Drink, dragoste, drink from me. You will feel better."

He felt her swallow weakly as her blood began to flow into him. In a very few seconds he began to feel lightheaded and even nauseas before his unique physiology began to process out the toxins that had been in her blood. Raiden was no medical professional but he realized right away that she'd been poisoned.

Soon her breathing calmed. "Raiden, what happened?" she asked, still drinking but more slowly.

He sealed the small bite on her neck and then pulled his wrist away from her mouth to close the ragged wound with his saliva. "Rest, Juliana, rest now." A thought occurred to him. "But first, did you ingest anything tonight that didn't taste right? Perhaps drink something..."

She didn't respond right away but shifted against him. He turned her so that he could look into her face. She was still pale but her skin had a hint of pink. She no longer felt cold to him.

J.J.Massa

“I had my shot tonight. That’s all—I ate some cottage cheese and took some Ibuprofen so I wouldn’t have side effects... um that’s it.” She snuggled against him and sighed. “You’re going to leave aren’t you?”

He rubbed his cheek against her hair. “I will stay until you fall asleep. Where is your shot...” he searched his memory for the right word. “...paraphernalia?” he said finally.

She seemed to try to rouse and speak but was still very weak. “The used ones are in that red container over in the corner by my desk. The new ones are in the ‘fridge.”

“Is it possible that your medicine could have been tampered with?” he asked, concerned.

“No, they’re pre-filled,” she answered. Even in his head, her voice sounded weak. She yawned against him.

“Sleep now, meu Juliana,” he gave her a little mental nudge and her breathing slowed, quickly becoming regular.

He lay there for an hour, holding her, stroking her hair, and trying to think rationally about what could have caused her, and later him, to have the odd and unpleasant reaction he’d had. It took a valiant effort to ignore what might have happened if he hadn’t arrived in time.

LOVE LIKE BLOOD

Chapter Eight

“It’s done,” Levi announced, striding into the kitchen of his lover’s upscale apartment.

The knife Barb had been holding clattered to the floor. “It’s—it’s done? You’ve done it? You followed my instructions carefully?” She bent and retrieved the knife with shaking hands.

Levi took the knife from her loose grip and tossed it into the sink, pulling a drawer open and withdrawing another one. “I may not be a chemist or a lab technician, Barb,” he smirked, “But I’m not a simpleton either. She didn’t look so good when she left on her walk.” He began to slice a summer sausage that was on a nearby cutting board.

“You’re awfully cavalier about this, Levi, I mean...” Barb cut an uncomfortable look over at him.

Laying the knife down, he moved behind her and squeezed her shoulders. “Honey,” he crooned. “I don’t mean to be cavalier. It’s just... She asked for a divorce again today, a few times. That dog snarled at me again, too.” He released her and turned, pouring them each a glass of Chardonnay. I just want to be with you—peaceful, happy, nice. I just want a better life.”

Barb relaxed against him. “And she’s sick anyway. She must be very unhappy. I looked her disease up on the Internet. You know she’s got lesions on her brain? No wonder she’s blind! And heat and stress just make her symptoms worse!” She turned to face Levi now. “I bet she forgets words and things all the time. It could take years for a cure to be developed.”

“Exactly,” Levi agreed placing the sausage on a plate with various shaped crackers. “Someone has to take pity on her and put her out of her misery.” He turned her and pressed her wine glass into one hand. “Why don’t we go have a fire in the gas fireplace, hmmm?”

J.J.Massa

“Okay,” Barb smiled softly. “That’s a lovely idea. We’ll toast to freedom. Hers and ours.”

Levi lifted the plate of sausage slices and crackers and followed her from the room, sipping at his wine as he went. “That’s a wonderful idea, Barbie, let’s do that. And afterward, we can celebrate life in our own way,” he leered suggestively as he put his glass and the plate down on the coffee table.

“Oh Levi,” she simpered, snuggling against him as he sat down. “You’re soooo romantic!”

* * *

Paul awoke with a start. After so long, he wasn’t shaken at the sight of the dark man standing over him. In his first years of working for Raiden Vagner, it had been disconcerting at the best of times, but now he was used to his employer’s impromptu visits.

Looking up from his pillow, Paul felt a shiver of unease. Raiden’s eyes glowed red in the shadowed room, he was angry.

“Raiden,” he murmured, trying to move to a sitting position. “Whasamatter?”

Raiden lowered a knee to the bed, pulling Paul forward. Automatically, Paul tilted his head to the side, offering his throat to his friend. The vampire cupped the back of his neck and lowered his head to the pulsing vein at the juncture of shoulder and throat.

Planting a kiss on the sleep-warmed skin, he lifted his head to rest against Paul’s forehead. “You are a true friend, but that has always been so.”

The red fire was gone from his eyes and Paul breathed a sigh of relief. Raiden’s rich chuckle resonated around the room as he pulled back and brushed his lips against Paul’s forehead.

“My apologies for causing you unease, Paul,” he caressed Paul’s cheek and sat down on the bed.

“You were angry, Raiden,” Paul was wide-awake now. He pulled his knees to his chest as if he were a teen at a camp-out and not the forty-year-old man that he was. “What happened?”

“It is Julianna,” Paul tilted his head to the side, knowing that there had to be more. Raiden took a deep breath and continued. “I went to see her tonight and she was ill. I thought at first she was simply upset because of a disagreement we had.”

LOVE LIKE BLOOD

He rose to his feet and stalked across the room, shrugging out of his black leather jacket and tossing it onto a nearby chair. Paul crossed his legs at the ankle and rested his chin on one knee, arching a brow in inquiry.

Not surprising him, Raiden answered his unspoken question. "She has requested a divorce from Levi Gold numerous times." Paul could see points of red flicker in the darkened room. "She became upset and... odd," the vampire sunk back onto the bed, sitting alongside Paul, facing him. "When I returned to her, she was very ill. Gravely so, in fact."

Paul could see him much more clearly now that his face was closer. Lines of worry were evident there.

"But you helped her?" Paul asked. "You gave her blood and made her better?" It sounded absurdly simple in those terms, Paul knew.

Raiden reached out and grasped his foot through the comforter, giving it a squeeze. "Yes, she is resting quietly now. My concern is that ..." he expelled a sigh. "Melodramatic or not, I believe she was..." he struggled with the word. "She is being poisoned."

"Poisoned?" Dropping his knees, Paul leaned forward, a hand on Raiden's shoulder. "How? Who? For God's sake, why?"

"All very good questions, my friend." Raiden slid a hand through Paul's tousled hair, pulling him forward for a brief hug. Scooting to his feet, Raiden strode across the room to his jacket. He pulled something from it, from a pocket, perhaps.

"This is the medicine she has been injecting herself with," he lifted a plastic Ziploc™ type bag that reflected the light from the moon through the window. "These are the last needles she used," he finished, holding something up.

Paul couldn't make everything out clearly because of the deep shadows on one side of his friend and the bright moonlight on his other side. He nodded as Raiden placed the various baggies of syringes on the nearby dresser.

"Let us start with the 'how', shall we? I am convinced this injection is the how. Please have these syringes tested for toxins."

Paul nodded briefly. "I'll do it first thing." He glanced at his clock. "Good Lord, it's nearly six! It's so dark still."

J.J.Massa

“It is the same with you every winter,” Raiden tisked in amusement. “I will go to bed soon. “It was late when I left her, or perhaps it was early. I want to be up early in the afternoon. I find myself worried for her safety while I sleep.”

Pushing himself away from the comfort of his pillows and the warmth of his bed, Paul stood facing the bulk of his dark friend. “You go rest, Raiden, I’ll have these syringes analyzed in our own lab...”

“Half of them only, Paul,” Raiden cut him off, “These came from our labs, I think, so I want you to send half to an independent lab.”

Paul shivered. The implications of that were frightening. Did Raiden honestly believe that someone from one of his own companies had poisoned Juliana? If that were true, it had to be an accident, right? He just hoped his boss was wrong this time.

* * *

Tracey Lynn stepped around the large dog that was settling in underneath a table in her station. She knew who this woman was and had asked that she be seated at one of her tables.

It was Mrs. Gold, her boyfriend Evan’s mother. Actually, they’d broken up. Like a fool, Tracey Lynn had been worried about the age difference between them. She was three years older than he was. After missing him for months, she realized that she’d made a mistake. She’d never met his parents but he talked a great deal about his mother.

She was glad that Evan’s mother couldn’t see the couple on the other side of the big plant near her. They’d been lip-locked since the guy had sat down and showed no signs of awareness of the outside world.

“Hi, I’m Tracey Lynn and I’ll be your waitress today. Can I read the specials? Would you like something warm to drink? It’s so cold out there today, isn’t it?”

Mrs. Gold, Juliana, Tracey recalled her name, tilted her face up and smiled. “Hi Tracey Lynn. Please, hot tea for me. Earl Grey if you have it. I already know what I want,” she flashed an engaging grin.

“Something decadent and fattening?” Tracey teased, liking her instantly.

“Ohhhh yeah,” Juliana nodded enthusiastically. “I’m having a cholesterol, filled, calorie packed, fat-fest! Let’s start with a grilled cheese, cheddar, thank you, with French fries, pickles on the side, and a hot fudge brownie for dessert.”

“Hmmm,” Tracey was fighting a giggle. “I think you might have forgotten something...”

LOVE LIKE BLOOD

Juliana's face became a study in concentration for a moment. "Oh! You're right! Can I have some maple walnuts on that?"

"You, Mrs. Gold, are a true inspiration," Tracey intoned with an attempt at a serious face.

"Thank you, I try," snickered Juliana. "Call me Juliana, please. Um, how do you know me? I'm afraid..." she let the sentence trail off with a vague sweep of her hand toward her eyes.

"I'm sorry, I should have...well, I dated Evan for a while. You and I have never met but I recognized you right away..." she really didn't know what to say.

"Ahhh, Tracey Lynn, I remember now, he's mentioned you." Conflict chased across her face. Possibly she was deciding how much or how little she should say, Tracey mused in the seconds before she spoke again. "He, um, seemed to like you a lot. He isn't dating anyone right now, I don't think." Evan's mother aimed another smile up at her and Tracey grinned, feeling lighter than she had in a long while.

"Can I pet him?" she asked glancing down at the dog, who was studiously looking away. "I love dogs," she smiled, looking longingly at the beautiful animal ignoring from her under the table.

"I'm sorry," Juliana smiled back regretfully. "He's not supposed to visit when he has his harness on. That's his work uniform – also known as the yoke of oppression," she chuckled.

"I'd better get that order in for you or you'll die of starvation," Tracey said around the wide smile on her face. She liked Evan's mother more and more as she talked to her. "I'll be right back with your tea," she promised, turning.

"Could you bring me a glass of ice for my boy, here?" Juliana reached down and patted the large dog at her feet. "When you bring it, I'll take his harness off then and you can say 'hi' okay?"

"Gotcha," Tracey confirmed and headed for the ordering area.

Lost in thought, she prepared Juliana's tea and the glass of ice and brought it to her table. The older woman thanked her and she rushed back to the coffee station to grab a full pot. The lip locked couple behind the Kentia palm could have come up for air by now for all she knew.

Her mind still very much on Evan, Tracey had almost rounded the large when a woman's angry voice halted her. "What's your wife doing here, Levi?" she heard.

J.J.Massa

"I don't know," the man protested, his voice low and upset. "I was sure she'd be sick this morning. It can't possibly be all that long now," he growled.

"What if she finds out we're together?" she sounded nervous.

"How's she going to find out?" the man demanded. "She's blind for God's sake, Barb! Its not like she's going to see us, now is it?"

That was Evan's father! *Stepfather* he'd always insisted with a grimace. Quickly, Tracey cleared her throat and stepped forward.

"More coffee?" she asked in a chipper voice.

The woman Mr. Gold had called Barb answered her. "We'll just take the bill, thanks." She kept her tone low as if she didn't want to be overheard.

They'd only had coffee and not much of that, really. Tracey reached into her apron pocket and pulled out a printed scrap of paper.

"Here you are," she placed it face down on the table with a shaky smile.

The couple was so engrossed in each other and the heated discussion they were having that they ignored Tracey completely. That suited her perfectly. She hurried back toward the payphone talking to the hostess as she went.

"Toni! I need to make a phone call, don't seat me for a couple of minutes, ok?" she said on the way buy. "Everyone's fine and I'll only be a couple of minutes," she promised.

Dropping the appropriate change into the slot, she dialed a number she still remembered. Three rings later, she turned her back as she heard the woman named Barb and Levi Gold leave the restaurant, walking past her.

"Hullo?" Evan Gold finally answered his phone. She was so pleased it was him and not one of his two roommates.

"Evan," tears filled her eyes upon hearing his voice, she had been *such* a fool to break up with him. "Um," she cleared her throat. "It's Tracey Lynn," she finished.

"Tracey?" he sounded surprised and hopeful, then, "Tracey!" his voice was a little harder now, sharper.

"Evan, I really need to talk to you," she said breathlessly.

"I think you've said..." she heard the hurt vibrating down the line. She interrupted him quickly.

"Listen I was wrong and I *want* to talk about that but there's something else..." she said in a rush.

LOVE LIKE BLOOD

“What else could you possibly want to talk about?” he demanded, still firm.

“It’s your mom and... Mr. Gold, your step-dad, I mean. She’s here and he just left but...” she knew she was stringing things together and coming across all garbled.

“Is she all right?” There was an urgency in his voice, real fear undisguised.

“No, I mean yes, they didn’t speak—look something *did* happen. I really need to tell you but I can’t on the phone. I’m at work. Maybe you can just meet me after? Anywhere.”

She ran out of words and hoped he’d say something. She also knew she needed to get back to work. His mother’s order was probably sitting in the window right then.

“Look, if this is just another excuse,” he began and she cut him off.

“Evan, come or don’t come, it is up to you. I have to go feed your mom. Good bye!” she hung up the phone and hurried back into the main part of the restaurant.

J.J.Massa

Chapter Nine

“Marketing, Levi Gold,” he intoned into the telephone receiver.

The average listener would never realize that he had acid churning in his stomach. Today, for perhaps the very first time, he was glad that his wife was blind. He shuddered when he thought of the leverage she would have had if she’d seen him with Barb and only a few feet away.

“Levi,” Barb’s breathless voice jerked him out of his mini daze.

“What are... How can I help you, ma’am?” he smoothed his angry growl to a nice, salesman-like purr.

“Mr. Fieval brought a couple of syringes into the lab to see what had been in them,” she sounded urgent and upset. “I’m sure they’re from your house because...well they have trace...”

“That’s just fine, ma’am,” Levi cut her off firmly. “If you’ll just do everything you can possibly do, miss, I’m sure we’ll do whatever it we can on our end.”

He flashed a “they’re never satisfied” smile at Miles Smith who shared his office. The other man shrugged and shook his head in sympathy.

“Levi, I don’t... Okay, well I changed the reports saying that the tests were negative, I did that,” Barb’s low voice shook with nerves now, and he could tell that she was watching for eavesdroppers.

“Why I always go home after work, ma’am,” he embellished, hoping she’d catch on. “I’ll be leaving early today so you can’t call again and get me. I’m sorry... I have some important business to attend to this afternoon.”

“So you’re going home?” she guessed. “Um... now?”

“That’s right, it’s very important that I take care of this ASAP. So I’ll be doing my personal business before I get home,” he went on.

“Are you saying that...you’re going home or not?” Barb sounded a lot like the bleached blonde that she was.

LOVE LIKE BLOOD

“Yes, ma’am,” Levi answered. “Thank you for your concern.”

“So you’re going home but you want someone to think you’re going someplace else?” she puzzled. It was all he could do to keep from grinding his teeth.

He didn’t understand how she could know which chemicals did what and be such a stupid bimbo at the same time. The simple fact was, however, that her bimbo side was what had attracted him to her. He didn’t want a woman who thought she was smarter or better at anything than he was. *He* was the man in the relationship – at least Barb appreciated that.

“Yes, that’s exactly my predicament ma’am. I always go home first but things are different today. I have that *errand* to run so I have to leave soon and won’t be here.” He looked at Smith and rolled his eyes. The other man laughed and made a circling motion with his index finger pointing at his temple.

“Oh, okay, I’ll just meet you there, is that okay?” Barb went on.

Levi closed his eyes, pressing his fingers deep into his eye sockets. “I think that’s a fine solution,” he murmured.

Sometimes her mental sluggishness did wear him out. He would make her move her car after she got there. Or something. One thing at a time, he decided. First, he had a wife to get rid of—and her damned dog...

* * *

Head down, Tracey headed out to her car, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. She had enjoyed Evan’s mother and hated his father. No surprise there, really.

Not paying close attention, she walked right into Evan, literally. She’d been so lost in thought that she hadn’t seen him standing there. Automatically, his arms came around her. Stunned, she expected him to step back when he was sure she was steady.

“I-I’m sorry, Evan, I wasn’t paying attention,” she murmured.

He reached up and traced the strand of hair that she’d hooked behind her ear. “I wanted to be mad at you, make you sweat.” Her heart was beating a mile a minute. His eyes were studiously fixed on her ear now. “I can’t do it. I must be a fool.” He turned his head now and looked into her eyes. “I’m nothing if not honest, Tracey. I loved you three months ago and I love you now. It broke my heart when you decided you were too old for me. You’re the only one who can put it back together.”

Tears gathered in her eyes. She laid a palm against his cheek, drinking in the sight of him, the feel of his arms around her. How she loved his lean, strong body against hers.

J.J.Massa

“Oh Evan,” she whispered, “I was so wrong. I love you and I was stupid to think a few years was more important than who you are and how you make my heart feel.”

Leaning down, he took her face between his hands and lowered his mouth to hers, tracing her lips with his tongue. She parted her lips on a sigh and his tongue swept in, caressing her mouth, her tongue.

She held on tight, kissing him with all the pent up passion, regret, loneliness that three months had built up in her. Finally he lifted his head, hazel eyes boring into her blue ones.

“Does this mean we’re back together?” she asked him, trying not to sound too hopeful.

“I’d like to be,” Evan began, still holding her but putting an inch of distance between them. “First, Tracey, I think we really need to talk.”

“Talk!” she yelled. “Talk! Your mother—Oh God!” she moaned, covering her face with her hands and shaking her head.

“My mother? Tell me what about my mother, Tracey? Is she okay?” Evan demanded, his demeanor changing somewhat. Gripping her forearms now, he gently tugged her hands from her face. “I need to know,” he insisted.

She took a deep breath. She knew Evan didn’t like his stepfather but this would still be upsetting news. “Okay,” she sighed nervously. “Today before and while your mother was here there was a couple kissing behind that giant potted palm.” He nodded, waiting. “I went to give them more coffee but while I was still kind of hidden by the thing, they started to talk. The lady said, “What’s your wife doing here, Levi?” and the guy answered, “I don’t know, I was sure she’d be sick this morning.” Or something along those lines.”

Evan looked at her for a minute, thinking, she was sure. “Did he or they say anything else?” he asked.

“Ummm,” she thought a moment. “Yes, he said it wouldn’t be long now. I don’t know what that meant,”

“Hell,” he swore. “I don’t know what he’s up to but I need to go make sure he hasn’t hurt her.”

“I’ll go with you then,” she announced, determined not to let him out of her sight.

LOVE LIKE BLOOD

“Tracey, I don’t know what he’s like right now. Here’s how you can help my mom.” She opened her mouth to speak, ready to argue her cause but he resolutely shook his head from side to side.

“Okay, what can I do?” she asked, a little defeated but determined to be of help.

He pulled out his wallet and removed a crisp, linen and parchment square. She could see the texture of it even before he handed it to her.

Raiden Vagner, President and CEO, Vagner Enterprise and Industries. She ran a thumb across the embossed phone number at the bottom of the card and looked up at him.

“Who is this? What do you want me to do?” she asked.

“He’s a friend of my mom’s. He’d want to help her if she needed it,” he told her. “I think she just might need it.”

Tracey opened her mouth to speak and then closed it again. What could she say? Evan leaned down and gave her a sweet kiss. Saying nothing more, he turned and left.

J.J.Massa

Chapter Ten

The cab pulled into her driveway and stopped and Kofy moved off of the seat. He wasn't supposed to be on the seat but the driver sort of knew them and it made her feel good to see the dog comfortable.

"He'll get hair everywhere," Juliana had warned the first time.

"Fuck 'em!" the driver had growled. "That dog's cleaner and better behaved than most what end up in my cab no how. I'll be damned if he's gonna lay in the floor and get gum stuck to his hair or sumpin," she'd declared firmly.

Juliana had laughed but privately agreed. She always tipped this driver extra.

"Is there a car here?" she asked the woman now, wondering if Levi was home yet.

She'd gone out today just because she'd felt so good. Usually, getting around the house was enough of a chore. When she did feel like going out, she didn't want to waste it. She knew it was because of Raiden that she'd felt so much better.

"Yes'm, there is. It's a big blue thing," the driver informed her.

With a sigh, she handed over the fare and the gratuity to the woman and got out, not bothering to put the harness on Kofy. She knew her way around her own yard and she carefully followed the line of the driveway up to the house. She let herself and her dog inside.

"Levi?" she called, "Are you here somewhere?"

"In here," she heard. With a start she realized that he was in her room.

"Levi? What are you doing in there? You have your room and I have mine," she snapped, entering her room with a tense Kofy right beside her.

"I'll go move your car, Levi," a high-pitched female voice announced and someone brushed past her and out the door.

"What's going on, Levi? What are you doing in my room?" Juliana asked, "Who was that?"

LOVE LIKE BLOOD

“Oh, how rude of me,” Levi answered her sarcastically. “That was Barbara. She’s my lover. I’ll introduce her properly when she gets back.”

Juliana was surprised but made no response to that. Her driving thought was to wonder why he wouldn’t give her a divorce if he had a lover.

“Levi, what are you doing in here?” she asked as she heard her desk drawer open and close.

“I’m looking for your insurance policy,” he answered her calmly, rifling audibly through another drawer. She heard him straighten. “It really doesn’t matter, I just need you to sign this one document, really.”

“Sign? What are you talking about, Levi?” she scowled, knowing he was up to something that could only be bad for her. “I’m not signing until you tell me what you’ve got up your sleeve and probably not then either.”

“That’s your problem, Julie. You just never know when to keep your mouth shut and do what you’re told.” He spoke casually enough but he moved closer to her and she stepped back.

Kofy began to growl and it was a menacing sound. She suspected that this might not be the best time for Kofy’s heroic side to show.

“Shh,” she put her hand on his head. She heard one of her desk drawers slam as Levi turned back to her.

“Here,” he growled, thrusting something long and thin at her. A pen, she decided. “Sign this.” she heard paper rattling.

“What is it, Levi?” she asked in her calmest voice. “What have you got there?”

“Don’t talk to me like I am not as smart as you!” he roared at her, backhanding her across the mouth.

Her lip split and she stumbled back against her day bed, sinking to the floor. She heard Kofy erupt into anger as snarling he sprang at Levi. She heard a low popping noise and a soft yelp. Kofy’s snarls ended abruptly. In horror, she heard him crumple to the floor.

“Kofy?” she rasped, fighting to keep her voice steady. Frightened of what she’d find, Juliana crawled to her companion. He was barely moving, barely breathing, but he was alive.

“Levi!” The high-pitched screech came from the doorway though Juliana barely paid attention to it. “I *told* you not to hurt the dog!”

J.J.Massa

“He was attacking me, Barb!” Levi growled back harshly in his own defense.

“Well, now you *will* have to kll him.” The nasal voice complained. “Did she sign? There’s no sense making her suffer this way, watching her dog die and all.”

“Barb,” Levi responded somewhere between affection and exasperation, “She’s blind, she’s not watching anything.”

“Ohhh, you know what I mean,” she tittered.

Juliana was aghast. These people, one of them her husband, were going to kill her. This woman was more offended at the idea of killing her dog than of killing her. She was horrified at the idea of Kofy’s injury or death but at least equally appalled that her life was so cheap.

“Kofy,” she whispered, leaning over him, trying to feel his breathing.

Weakly, he thumped his tail at her proving he was conscious. Unfortunately, Levi noticed the interaction.

“Julie,” he snarled and she heard him take a step closer to her.

“Levi, let me,” the woman said. Juliana heard light footsteps drawing closer and then the swish of fabric. The woman, Barb, was kneeling next to her now. “Honey,” came the nasal twang, “It’ll be easier if you just sign.”

“How could you?” Juliana hadn’t realized she was crying until she tried to speak. “How could you do this to another human being? What about my children?” She said the first thing to enter her mind. Didn’t’ this crazy woman realize that they wouldn’t get away with it?

“It’s okay, hon, honest.” Barb patted her shoulder but Juliana was dazed. She turned her head to the woman, just trying to figure out how she could possibly justify these actions. “You won’t suffer anymore from that awful disease and your dog won’t be put down without you. He’s violent, he’d be put to sleep. And there’s no cure for your disease. Levi will send your daughter to boarding school and your son will get college money. They’ll be fine.”

Juliana couldn’t answer. She just shook her head as she bent over Kofy, bending down and laying her face against his. He moved just a little and licked at her face. She knew he’d get the blood trickling down her chin from Levi’s backhand.

Turning completely away from the woman and from her husband of seventeen years, Juliana laid herself across her best friend and tried to find the wound Levi had inflicted on him. She hoped there was some way to stop the bleeding, save him.

LOVE LIKE BLOOD

“Raiden, I’m calling you Raiden. I need you now,” she thought as hard as she could.

“Come on, Barb,” Levi told his lover. “You come on in here and I’ll be out in a minute. I’ll take care of things in here, okay?”

His voice was gentle. More tender than any he’d ever used on her, Juliana was sure. Had he ever talked to her so sweetly? She thought not. Still, his words chilled her through and through. She hoped that he’d stay and comfort the woman she’d mentally dubbed Miss Adenoids for just a while longer.

Juliana called out to Raiden again in her mind, concentrating, pouring all she had into her thoughts. *“Raiden, I love you. Raiden, please, I want a life with you. Don’t let him kill me! Kofy, he’s shot Kofy!”*

Chapter Eleven

Raiden stood abruptly and stalked to his office window. Both hands shoved deep in his pockets, he glared out at the darkening sky. Something was wrong, of that he had no doubt.

His woman, his Juliana, was being poisoned; possibly such a thing had been going on for years. He'd gotten the report back from his own labs but hadn't felt confident in the information the tests had given him. In fact, he was positive that he was being duped.

He spun sharply when his office door opened. "Paul?" he murmured, agitated to say the least.

"Raiden," Paul strode across the room and grasped his forearm. "You were right. Lancaster Chemical Labs just faxed over the information. They found traces of the drug Rindochomaine in both the used syringe and the pre-filled one. Since our labs are the only manufacturers right now, it had to come from here."

"It had to be that husband of hers. Levi, that *bufon*," he hissed, taking the slip of paper that detailed what had been found in the syringe.

"You're probably right, Raiden but he couldn't be in it alone." Paul chewed his lip, his habit when trying to think. "He knows nothing about chemicals and if he'd been anywhere near the labs, we'd know. Security is pretty tight down there."

Before Raiden could respond, Paul turned to answer his ringing phone. Loath to just stand around and do nothing, Raiden walked to the office door and called his secretary.

"Karen, I'll need a list of everyone who entered the fourth lab today in any capacity. Even if they were just sightseeing, please gather me a list of names. Also..."

His directive was cut off by an agitated assistant, "Raiden, you have to find Juliana!" Paul panted urgently, still holding the telephone receiver.

"She is missing?" he felt remarkably like he was a step behind now.

LOVE LIKE BLOOD

"No, that was her son's girlfriend. You know, Evan?" Raiden nodded curtly. "It turns out that Levi Gold is having an affair," Paul began his explanation only to be interrupted by an unlikely source.

"Oh, yeah," Karen, Raiden's secretary chimed in. Both Raiden and Paul swiveled to look at her, the telephone receiver still dangling from Paul's hand. "Well, everyone knows he's sleeping with Barb Lewis." Apparently uncomfortable under the gaze of the two men, Karen shifted slightly. "Well they aren't very discreet. I mean I guess they figure his wife will never see them. She's uh... she's blind, you know."

"Thank you, Karen," Raiden said firmly beginning to turn away.

"Oh, Mr. Vagner," A buried recollection had surfaced, "Barb Lewis works in the forth lab," she told him, hurrying away before he could stop her.

"Paul?" Raiden verbally nudged his friend, voice low.

"Uh, yeah." Paul shook his head as if confused for a moment. "Yeah," he said brusquely now, "This young lady," he brandished the instrument in his hand, "she heard that woman and Gold say something that suggested they would or had hurt her."

"I will meet you at her home Paul," Raiden clipped, moving toward his private exit that would lead to the roof of the building.

"Wait, Raiden," Paul hurriedly hung up the phone and tried to stop him but Raiden's strength was far superior. Used to this by now, Paul grabbed him and held on.

"What, Paul?" Raiden snarled, "I must go!"

"You have to feed, Raiden, you haven't eaten since you got up. If you don't..."

"I know what happens, Paul," Raiden growled, not angry as much as impatient. He looked around but Paul was right, he had to have sustenance. If not, he would use all his strength getting to Juliana and not be able to help her once there. And he felt certain that she would be in great need of help. "I don't have time to hunt, Paul," he said low, his voice warm.

Paul looked at him steadily for a moment. Without a word, he loosened his tie and pulled it off. Still looking at Raiden, he unbuttoned his shirt down past his sternum. Tilting his head to the side, he closed his eyes, waiting.

"Take what you need," he murmured.

No need to answer, Raiden gathered Paul against him, nuzzling his collar away from his neck. Leaning in, he trailed his warm tongue up Paul's throat tracing the thick pounding artery just below the salt tangy skin.

J.J.Massa

If his secretary had chosen that moment to return, she would have been convinced that Raiden was making love to his assistant. Up, he traced the throbbing vein, and down and opening his mouth, he extended his fangs and penetrated, burying them deep.

“Uhhh,” Paul moaned and Raiden could feel his body harden against him.

He knew Paul would be embarrassed later, knew that it was a double-edged sword for the younger man. Raiden had always appreciated that the endorphins released into the bloodstream from his fangs had strong effects on humans. He’d always been aware of the erotic side effects from his feeding. It was very intimate.

Pulling out, he stroked the flushed skin with his tongue, closing the small punctures. He kissed his now faint and shaky friend’s brow, lowering him to the office couch.

“You will rest?” he asked him, waiting for the answer.

“I- I should...” Raiden arched a brow at him. “Yes,” Paul relented feebly. “I’ll sit here for a little while—half an hour?”

“Yes, Paul,” he stroked the pale cheek with a finger.

“Go,” Paul croaked, “go and take care of Juliana.”

With a curt nod, Raiden made his way up the hidden stairwell and out onto the roof. In the blink of an eye, he was over the edge of the building, less than a blur in the cooling twilight.

“*Raiden, I’m calling you Raiden. I need you now,*” he heard Juliana’s plea whisper across his mind making his blood run cold. If only he could wish himself there where she was.

Moments later, and still many miles from his destination moving at top speed, he heard Juliana once again. “*Raiden, I love you. Raiden, please, I want a life with you. Don’t let him kill me! Kofy, he’s shot Kofy!*”

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Chapter Twelve

“Alright, Julie,” sneered Levi, returning to the room. “Get up!”

“To hell with you, Levi Gold,” she spat, arms around her badly wounded dog. She’d rather die with Kofy than live with whatever Levi wanted, though she was sure her survival wasn’t in his plans.

As if aware of her thoughts, Kofy’s tail thumped feebly. She leaned down, her face close to his. The big dog angled his head and licked the still trickling blood from her chin.

“Don’t be an ass, Julie,” Levi sneered at her. “You are going to die. That damned bastard dog is going to die, too,” the satisfaction was clear in his voice. “Don’t you want your kids to be looked after? Sign the goddamned form!”

“*Juliana, meu dragoste!*” she heard Raiden, and expelling the breath she’d been holding, she leaned into Kofy as he licked her bleeding lip again.

Heavy footsteps and rattling paper alerted her that Levi had moved away and was now returning. “Sign,” he began, disgust for her heavy in his voice.

Kofy’s low and menacing growl seemed to resonate from deep inside him and for a moment, she wondered if he Raiden was talking to him somehow.

“*Yes, my own Juliana,*” she heard him again. “*I speak to him, your champion and mine. I speak to him now.*”

“*I thought you weren’t going to read my mind,*” she admonished Raiden, more to keep him talking to her than with serious intent.

“I’ve had it with you, woman, I’ve had it!” Levi screeched.

Juliana heard Kofy yelp in pain as he wrenched abruptly away from her and then she felt what Levi must have delivered to the dog. Something hard and blunt, the side of a shoe, or the toe possibly, landed on her mouth, tearing the cut lip still more and jerking her sideways.

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Outside of the din, away in her head she heard Raiden, felt his love, his strength reaching for her. *"We are one, Juliana, one love, one life, one blood. All of us, you, Kofy, your children, Paul, myself, we share. Share it now, your blood, from me, you recall? Give it to him, it makes Kofy stronger."*

Forever or just in that moment, she saw the memory of her babies one and the other, suckling at her breast. She remembered and she felt the memory of her drinking blood, Raiden's blood, from the cut he'd made on his chest. There, she remembered--no he was showing her the memory--It was Paul handing her the wineglass full and thick with Raiden's still-warm blood. Now, she saw, clearly saw Raiden, it had to be Raiden, mouth on a blonde man, it was Paul's neck. Paul stood placid and giving in his embrace as Raiden supped his fill.

"The love, it flows, Juliana," she heard in her mind and clapped her hand over the cut that oozed and flowed with rich nectar, with life and love. She wouldn't waste a drop.

Lurching forward, she groped on the floor, finding Kofy's furry bulk, shivering with pain and probably in shock but alive. Falling onto him, she found his dry nose, his sweet, doggie lips and lowered her face to him, wiping her chin against his stiff whiskers.

She heard what could only be the sound of a hammer cocking back on a tight cylinder, but she felt Kofy weakly lick at her dripping chin. The blood, she knew, the blood would keep him alive, maybe lend him strength. Raiden's blood, possibly Paul's at first, flowed through her to her companion, her guide dog, and her eyes, in a continuous river of love.

"This is taking too long," that was Barb, Miss Adenoids. "Levi, I think someone else is here."

She heard Levi stomp to the window and swear as he looked out. "Son of a bitch!" he snarled. "It's that little bastard, Evan." Juliana felt ice in her veins. Evan. "Get rid of him, Barb, or I'll have to kill him, too," Levi's voice shook in a warning.

"I'll kill him, too?" Barb jeered. "I sound like a *Lifetime* movie, *"get rid of him or I'll kill him, too"*. Come on, Levi," she made a sound like a giggle. "Besides he's your son."

"I've never liked him," Levi warned, "Just tell him his mommy isn't home. He's not *my* son, anyway. He's hers."

"Fine," Barb sounded exasperated now. "What about the mailman? How do you feel about him?" she mocked, her voice growing faint as she moved off down the hall.

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"Minutes, Juliana," Raiden murmured, *"Less, even,"* he promised.

She did her best to shut out all the noises around her. The sound of Evan's voice at the door, raised in agitation was hard to ignore, though Levi's low-voiced threats compared to the annoying buzz of a deadly mosquito.

* * *

A number of things were taking place just as Raiden burst through the backdoor of Juliana's house. He heard a woman arguing with Evan just as he heard the low pitched winding spring noise of the trigger being pulled.

Human actions were so much slower than his. Years of refinement, strength honed and used over the centuries put him on almost a different plane than mortals. Before his explosive entrance could so much as register on the people nearby, Raiden had Levi's forearm in the air.

The shot went wild, shattering a tall floor lamp in the corner. Levi's mouth gaped open, maybe to form an objection, a curse. Neither was forthcoming as he gazed into Raiden's blazing red eyes.

Fangs fully extended, he hissed a mental threat to the domineering oppressor of the woman he loved. Fury blazed through him as he showed Levi Gold the monster he kept in check.

The other man would see images of blood flowing down, wall, furniture, everything he touched covered in his blood, all as payment for the precious blood of love he so cavalierly intended to spill. Dragging him forward, Raiden forced his head to the side, sinking his fangs into the other man's throat, bloody rips left evident after he sucked in just enough blood to keep Levi's mind under his control. Crimson rivulets of blood flowed then trickled down his throat as Raiden lifted his head, turning toward a sound at the door.

"Levi, what... Ahhhhhharrrr!" the woman who'd come through the doorway screeched now.

"Miss Adenoids is here, um I mean Barb," Juliana clarified, confusion chief among her emotions, Raiden could tell, followed by fear for Evan and Kofy.

Raiden dropped the bleeding whimpering man to the floor, turning and grabbing Barb by the neck of her tight shirt. He pulled her to him and grabbed a handful of stiff, sprayed hair, he angled her head enough to sink his still-dripping fangs into her carotid artery.

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Seconds later and only an ounce or two of her blood and he dropped Barb atop her lover. Stepping over the heap of human refuse, Raiden squatted down, a hand on Kofy as he pulled Juliana into his arms.

“*Meu Juliana, dragă unul,*” he groaned, “Are you injured?” He knew she wasn’t really hurt but the idea that anyone would try to cause her pain ripped at him.

Before she could answer, her son’s voice echoed in the room, upset, almost hysterical. “Mom? Mom!” his voice rising and thinning as he surveyed the chaotic collection of bodies, shattered belongings, and blood.

Raiden turned, looking intently, compelling the young man. “Evan,” he kept his voice even, melodic. “You must call the police. Levi and Barbara have taken some drug, they must be in an odd cult...”

Subliminally, he kept the idea firmly in Evan’s mind, that the two had done a drug, that they’d been about to sacrifice his mother and her dog. He made sure that Evan remembered arriving with him and preventing more violence, the young man would recall that he’d restrained a struggling Barb while Raiden had been just in time to force Levi’s shot up and into the lamp and away from Juliana.

“Yeah, God, he’s always been a little out there,” Evan shook his head, winded now, as if he’d been running—or as if he’d been in a struggle. “I’ll call emergency and get the cops.” Hurriedly, he rushed from the room.

“I’m okay, but Kofy, Raiden,” Juliana was hanging on by only a thread as Raiden finally held her against his body, reassuring himself that she was safe, she would be fine.

“The small amount of blood from your cut, Juliana, it will have strengthened him. We will get him to the vet very soon.” Another voice joined Evan and Raiden was satisfied that Paul had arrived.

* * *

Within seconds of Paul’s arrival, Erin, Tracey and simultaneously, the emergency crew and the police all converged on the house at the same time. The situation was chaotic and not for the first time, Paul appreciated the advantages of working for and being friends with a vampire.

With his usual suave aplomb, Raiden made sure that everyone was in agreement about the facts, although not too much so. He’d once reminded Paul that no two creatures saw the same events unfold in the same way. It didn’t take much consideration for Paul to realize the truth of that.

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Now hours after the upheaval, Paul waited with Evan Gold in the emergency veterinary hospital. Kofy was undergoing surgery and Juliana had been required to stay in the hospital overnight. She would have been fine but her doctor and the emergency room physician felt strongly about it. The only way to ensure her calm had been for Paul and Evan to stay with Kofy. In light of the day's events, neither man really minded.

"He loves green M&Ms," Evan murmured.

"I'm sorry?" Paul enquired politely.

"I'm not sure there's really a difference but mom eats M&Ms a lot, especially when she's got a deadline. She swears he likes the green one's best," Evan grinned at Paul and Paul chuckled, shaking his head.

He liked the young man, he decided. He liked the entire family, really. He was relieved that Levi Gold and Barb Lewis would be detained indefinitely for psychiatric incarceration and treatment. In his opinion, prison wasn't harsh enough for them but at least the dangerous couple would be unable to harm anyone ever again. He couldn't decide which of them was worse. Levi with his hate for his own wife because of her abilities and disabilities was deplorable. But, in her own way Barb who justified killing as having a soft heart was worse.

"Isn't chocolate bad for dogs?" Paul asked, bringing his attention back to the matter at hand.

"Well, Kofy is a *huge* dog and she only gives him one M&M now and then. No more than two or three in a week. Really it makes it easier to give him pills later," Evan was blushing now and Paul was sure he wished he hadn't brought it up.

"Ahhh, medicinal chocolate," Paul grinned. "I think we can *all* understand that."

"Well," another voice joined them, a woman in her mid thirties, wearing blood spotted scrubs. "I, for one, *certainly* understand the need for medicinal chocolate. Kofy, however, won't be needing it."

The two men shot to their feet. "Is he..." Evan choked.

"He isn't..." Paul began.

"Oh, hell, I'm sorry. That didn't sound right, did it?" She smiled at them and Paul had to assume she wouldn't smile if the big dog had died. "He's going to make it, please forgive me. He's going to be fine. He can go home in a day or so. Why don't you two come back and see him for yourselves so you can report back. His companion must be out of her mind."

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Paul followed behind the other two as they discussed Kofy's treatment plan. Seeing the big dog, finally, Paul breathed a relieved sigh.

Laying a hand on his velvety brown snout, Paul sent a message. "*Raiden, tell her he's fine,*" Paul thought to his friend and boss.

"*Ahh, thank you, Paul,*" he heard. "*Now perhaps Juliana will rest, finally.*"

Paul smiled, amused. Once again reflecting on the events of this crazy day, he considered how big his family had grown though he was a single man with no relatives. Erin, Juliana's daughter had reluctantly gone off with Tracey, Evan's girlfriend. And there was that young man right in front of him, sharing a grin with him.

Raiden loved Juliana, who loved the others. He could love them too.

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Chapter Thirteen

“At long last,” Raiden breathed, gathering his wife, soon to be his mate against him. He’d already removed his suit jacket and shoes and unbuttoned his fitted shirt leaving it open. She fitted so beautifully against him.

Two very long years had passed since that fateful evening in the house Juliana had shared with Levi Gold. In all that time they hadn’t consummated their relationship. He reminded himself that they would have an eternity together but the wait had been interminable, nonetheless.

During the last twenty-four months, he had done his best to help Juliana with divorce, depositions and trials all relating to her ex-husband and his lover. They’d also settled both her kids into colleges after Erin’s high-school graduation this year. Finally, in one of Raiden’s many homes, the newly married couple prepared to seal their relationship for all eternity.

“It *has* been a long time in coming, hasn’t it?” she answered him, knowing his thought though she couldn’t read them on her own. Pulling away a little, she shrugged out of the satiny robe she wore over a new negligee. “So?” She twinkled up at him. “Do you like it?”

“It is an interesting color,” he answered, nervously. He hadn’t had a woman in his life whom he really cared about in centuries.

“It’s green, Raiden. What do you mean interesting?” her brow furrowed and she bit her lip, a hand skimming down the length of the short skirt to the brief hem.

“Who picked it out for you, *meu deget mic dragoste*?” he asked almost nervously. He was sure there was no easy way to get through this minefield.

“Why? Kofy and I got it in the lingerie shop while Erin was getting linens for her dorm room,” her sightless eyes narrowed as she nearly “looked” him in the eyes. “What is the problem with my apparently-not-very-sexy, green negligee?”

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“I’m sorry, *meu dragă unul*,” he tried valiantly to keep the smile out of his voice. “The color is perfect for Kofy’s favorite candies but it rather clashes with your lovely dark eyes.”

Brow furrowed for a moment longer, she suddenly burst in to laughter. “Are you saying I look like a giant green M&M?” she asked him, giggling.

“I expect that is what I mean to say,” he chuckled along with her, relieved that she wasn’t angry with him. “Although, under no circumstances would I refer to you as “giant”,” he amended quickly.

“Good save,” she murmured, planting a soft kiss on his jaw. “I’d have to say you’re ready to be married for sure. You’ve passed the acid test.”

“Acid-green test, you mean,” he mumbled back, amusement chased away by desire now.

Shrugging a thin satin strap off of her shoulder she scraped her other shoulder against his furred chest, parting his unbuttoned shirt. The straps of her nightgown rested lightly on her upper arms and he covered them with his hands.

“Raiden, I’ve wanted you for so long now. It seems like forever,” she whispered, trying to press closer.

“For me, *meu Juliana*, it *has* been forever. An eternity.”

He lowered his face to hers and she stood on her tiptoes, reaching up to kiss the corner of his mouth. Slowly, he nibbled his way across her lush lips, smoothing the satin scrap of bright green silk down her body and off.

Lifting his head he looked at her, his wife, standing in front of him, only the briefest strip of silk and satin hiding any part of her from his hungry eyes. He heard himself moan, or was it a growl? He didn’t care, scooping her up and striding toward the enormous bed where they would begin their forever together.

Gently laying her down, he shrugged out of his shirt and kicked off his confining pants, hard and anxious as he hadn’t been since he was human. He couldn’t remember feeling so eager for a woman even then as he was right now.

“Juliana,” he pulled her against him, pushing the filmy panties off of her hips and down. “We will be as one for centuries and longer. I do not know...” He hesitated. They hadn’t really discussed her illness in a very long time.

“Go ahead, Raiden, what is it?” She looked so trusting, so accepting of whatever he had to say.

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He pulled one of her legs over his hip, just to feel her there, to feel her moist warmth against his painful, hungry erection. How he wanted her. He knew she trusted him as he did her. He was loath to let her down. They should have talked more, he berated himself internally, he should have made sure they discussed her health.

"Juliana, when we... When we mate, when I drink from you, as you from me...I don't know what will happen to you," he forced out.

"Um, are you saying you don't know if I'll wake up a vampire?" she nipped at his throat playfully. "Or are you saying you don't know if I'll wake up?"

"Juliana!" he gasped, then noted her mischievous smile. "That is not funny," he growled, wanting to be annoyed but falling a little short.

"Okay," she said, unrepentantly, "I'm sorry." She hesitated. "I know that wasn't funny. I guess it was my backward way of showing you that the worst possible thing wouldn't probably happen."

He expelled the breath he'd been holding. "I'm so glad you think...well, now I can no longer articulate my thoughts," he chuckled at his own clumsiness. "I was concerned because, while I know the illness will be cured, I do not know if your sight will be restored."

He'd said it. Foolishly, he'd waited until the very last minute to bring the subject up, perhaps realizing that Juliana would not change her mind. Still, he'd been worried, nonetheless—irrationally perhaps but he had been.

"Oh, Raiden," Juliana cooed, rocking her pelvis against him.

He hissed as her slick nether lips caressed his burning length. His body was shaking with the need to bury his fangs and his cock deep within her and stake his claim. Somehow he held himself in check.

"My blood will keep you strong and when you change, I believe the disease will be gone, Juliana. It is only that your eyes...no blood flows to them..." She stopped his explanation with the tips of her fingers over his lips.

"Its okay, Raiden. I've been blind for years and I'm quite used to it now. If you love me and my family loves me just as I am, I don't need anything else."

"I would have you any way that you will come to me Juliana. I love you as you are. I love you as you will be in days, weeks, in years." He couldn't say anymore, his strong emotions overwhelmed him now.

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“Make love to me, Raiden, show me how you feel,” Juliana whispered to him, reaching down to caress his thick shaft, stroking and touching, making him desperate for more.

Rolling her beneath him, Raiden bent down and covered her mouth with his own, kissing her deeply, hungrily, reaching down to pull up a thigh, opening her to him more fully. Pulling back just a little, the round head of his thick length poised at her entrance, he slowly pushed in. He knew it had been possibly a decade since she’d had intercourse and he was mindful.

Juliana was having none of that. “Don’t tease me, Raiden,” she growled softly, pushing a heel against the mattress, she forced herself onto his heavy, throbbing cock.

“Mmmmm,” he groaned, buried deep inside of her now, keeping still and trying to calm.

Supporting himself on one hand, Raiden reached with his other and tore the flesh about his heart with two fingers. Quickly, he cupped her head, guiding her to the wound. She clamped her mouth over it and began to suck lightly.

As he’d done many times over the past months, Raiden nuzzled Juliana’s soft throat, loving the warm and light smell of her skin. Tracing her pulse with his tongue, he savored her taste. Closing his eyes, he buried his fangs in the pounding artery, pumping his hips slowly at the same time.

Thrusting slowly, his body pressed tightly along the warm length of her, his fangs buried deep in her as she suckled at his chest, Raiden moved inside Juliana’s body. The slick heat, the tightness of her, the sweet taste of her love, her blood, filled Raiden’s entire world. Hot satin around his turgid cock, Juliana’s warmth, the soft sweet sounds that she made as Raiden loved her with tender and unhurried strokes, this was all he’d ever wanted and all he’d ever need.

The heat was building in Raiden, pushing him higher. He could feel the tightening in his sacs as he steadily plunged and pulled out and plunged again. Delicious friction drove him closer to the apex as he moved within the clinging depths of his wife, his mate. He groaned, deep and hoarse, so close to coming. So close, but holding back. Holding back desperately. He didn’t want it to end. Not yet. Not ever.

As she fed from him, Juliana snuck a leg around his, groaning sweet sounds of fulfillment. Hearing her, feeling her helplessly lost in pleasure, stripped Raiden of any control. He felt his balls tighten sharply. The pressure in his sex built swiftly to a

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powerful crescendo, a moment of almost pain, before exploding outwards through his flesh in wrenching waves.

He gripped her hips in both hands, both still supping as he plunged hard and then roared against her throat in triumph and ecstasy, emptying himself deep into the clenching heat that still gripped him as Juliana's orgasm pulsed through her.

Stunned by the power of the shared experience, Raiden carefully closed the pricks on her neck. Levering himself carefully off of her, he used his own saliva to close the tear she'd been sipping from on his chest.

He clumsily made his way to the bathroom, returning with a warm, damp cloth. Though she was cold now, essentially dead, he was gentle as he cleaned the sticky evidence of his love from between her legs. He returned the cloth to the bathroom and crawled into the bed beside her, cuddling her close.

"I love you, *meu* Juliana," he murmured, kissing her cooling cheek.

"*Mmmhmm*," he heard faintly, in his mind.

Smiling now, he mentally checked on Kofy, closing his eyes and relaxing into the soft mattress. His breathing slowed, his heartbeat slowed, and then both stilled.

Her love and his flowed like blood between them. Whatever happened, they would face life and death together.

J.J.Massa

Author Bio

J.J. Massa lives on the Jersey Shore with her husband and children and yellow lab. For many years, she taught and wrote for various periodicals but never seriously considered writing books. When she was laid off at her last job she decided to finish writing a story she'd begun for her own entertainment. When it was finished, she took a chance and submitted it to one of her favorite Electronic Book publishers. She hasn't stopped writing since.