

An Untold Tale

After Hours

This is a story about the first time that Bonnie met Damon—the real first time. And don't worry if you're not a Damon fan. There is something about Elena coming to the Stories section soon.

Damon shimmered out of being a crow, and felt his feet gently deposit him the last quarter inch of an inch on the ground. Absently, he brushed away a few stray feathers, not bothering with his hair because it was so fine it would soon flop back into his eyes on its own.

He was in Fell's Church at last and it was everything he had heard about. Ley lines, straight as spears piecing the ground in all directions and forming pockets of wild magic here and there, mostly concentrating in the heavily forested state park that almost surrounded the town.

This was going to be . . . fun. Little brother had chosen a marvelously wicked little village to pretend to be human in.

But something was bothering him, niggling to get his attention. He had changed just downwind of two beings whose smell was unique. And if the wind switched direction, they would most likely try to savage him, thinking in their instinct-directed way that it was two against one. It would be a massacre, yes, but not of him.

He was about to change into a crow again, dive-bombing them and regaining his form at the last second, when he notice a third faint pulsing aura in a dark building up ahead. It was *very* faint, but he was certain it wasn't his imagination. Perhaps the smell of the werewolves lying in wait gave him a clue.

A maiden. A young girl inside the dark building in which nobody lived and slept. The werewolves were, for some reason, not breaking in to attack her. Damon puzzled over it for a minute or so and finally gave up. The hour was perfect, the darkness palpable, the girl-child was either alone or with a human who did not radiate on the aura spectrum at all. A dud.

As easily as if it were daylight, Damon's vampire eyes read the words on the building. Robert E. Lee Library.

Shrugging- Damon didn't understand werewolves and never would, he almost turned and walked away. But the girl was so young, and the library would all be so pristine. The thought of the innocent books being splattered with blood and other things- did not appeal. He turned.

If not one kind of fun, then another. He stretched his senses to their very utmost. Yes, a human maiden- very young.

Damon smiled.

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Bonnie McCulloch laboriously typed into her laptop, while reading from a pink Post-It note covered with neat round handwriting that included little circles over the *is*: *The Conscience of A Queen*.

It was her history report, which would determine thirty-percent of her first semester grade in European History. And she had a good idea for it, a really good idea: original, easy to understand and thought-provoking. What, so her theory ran, would have become of England if Catherine of Aragon had had not been so obedient to the husband who had disowned her, and had allied herself with Spain (where she came from) and then led these forces combined with the English who were still loyal to her and had fought Henry VIII's army. She had been advised to do so often, and only her refusal to take up arms against her husband had stopped the army from rebelling against Henry. Catherine might have been able to establish her little daughter, Mary, successfully as the heir, instead of letting Henry have his way in everything; and Henry's *second* daughter, by Anne Boleyn, who became Queen Elizabeth, would never even have been born.

No Queen Elizabeth! No Sir Walter Raleigh! No British Empire- probably no United States of America! Nothing would have happened the way it had down to modern times.

A ferociously huge pile of history books loomed over Bonnie on her right. An equally formidable pile leaned over her from the left. Most of them had Post-Its stuck in them, where she had found evidence to bolster her theory.

There was only one problem, Bonnie thought, her strawberry-curled head drooping almost to the library table. The report was due the day after tomorrow and all she had written was the title.

Somehow she had to combine the facts from these books that held evidence to uphold her theory. Other facts were waiting for her out there on the Internet, represented right now by the cheerfully lit computer screen in front of her. But how, how to make a coherent paper out of them in only two days?

Of course, she could ask for an extension. But she could just imagine the look on Mr. Tanner's face if she did so. He would embarrass her mercilessly in front of the class.

I can go without sleep for two days, Bonnie thought resolutely.

As if triggered by her thought, the lights of the library went off and then on and then repeated the cycle.

Oh, no! Ten o'clock already? And she seriously needed some caffeine. Bonnie reached toward the bag beside her, then hesitated.

Her hunches, as always, were good ones. Mr. Breyer, the part-time librarian, came walking down the aisle, glancing at the study carrels left and right.

~~Why~~. Bonnie! Are you still here?+

~~Apparently~~,+Bonnie said with a nervous laugh. Everything depended on her acting abilities right now.

~~Well~~, but, the library's closing. Didn't you see the lights?+ Bonnie had heard that Mr. Breyer always whispered inside the library, even before opening and after closing time. Now she could confirm that it was true.

~~Mr. Breyer~~, I want to ask a favor,+Bonnie said, looking up at him as soulfully as she could through her brown eyes.

~~What favor?~~+Now Mr. Breyer wasn't smiling anymore.

"I want," Bonnie said and stood up, which at least allowed her to see Mr. Breyer's face, "to stay in the library overnight."

Mr. Breyer was shaking his head.

"I'm sorry, Bonnie. But the library closes at ten, no exceptions. Think you're the only one who's asked me?" Mr. Breyer drew himself up, and murmured for a moment, as if counting. "Why, you're the twenty-fourth student to ask that very question." He seemed to take some comfort in precision. He was picking up her backpack to hand it to her. Bonnie hastily took it, worried it would slosh. "And I told each of those who asked the same thing I'm telling you: 'The library closes at ten, but tomorrow is another day.'"

"Not for me it's not!" Bonnie felt genuine tears flood her eyes and flow over her cheeks. "Oh, Mr. Breyer, I won't go outside until morning. I'd be locked in here, with all the ghosts and the spooky shadows, her mind added involuntarily. "Safe as safe as anything, until tomorrow morning. Nothing can get me."

"But think of your poor mother."

Bonnie shook her head. "She thinks I'm at my friend Meredith's house."

"Oh, my," under the brightened library lights, Mr. Breyer seemed to be considering. He even smiled. "We used to do the same thing ourselves as children," he murmured. "Tell one parent one house and another the first house. 'Double alibi,' we called it." He was almost beaming.

"So you'd let me stay?" Bonnie gazed up at him pathetically.

"What? Oh, no. No. *Never*. It was a most reprehensible thing to do and we were caught and thoroughly punished for it," Mr. Breyer said, looking as if this reminiscence were as pleasant as the other.

"No, Bonnie," Mr. Breyer added firmly. "I'm sure you can do some research when you're at home. There's more on the Internet than there is in all these books together," he said, waving a hand at the books Bonnie had scattered with Post-It notes in favor of her theory about Catherine of Aragon. "But you yourself have to be out of the library *now*. Pronto! It's six minutes after ten o'clock anyway!" He sounded horrified at his own lateness.

"Great. Well, as Elena would say, when Plan A doesn't work, go to Plan B. Okay, Mr. Breyer. You can't blame a girl for trying. Let me just get my pencil, and my lucky Elmo doll— this was a small suction-cup doll that Bonnie always took with her on studying expeditions, and exams— and I'll go to the bathroom, and then go home."

"The bathrooms are closed." Mr. Breyer eyed Bonnie's tear-streaked face uncomfortably. "But they don't lock. I suppose you can go."

"Thank you, Mr. Breyer," Bonnie said, looking up at him as soulfully as if this favor was as important as letting her stay overnight. She swung her backpack over one shoulder and left the study carrel. She also left a mess of crumpled papers, stubs of pencils, and old Styrofoam cups she knew Mr. Breyer wouldn't be able to resist taking to the trash in back.

A few minutes later, Bonnie's cheerful, "Good night, Mr. Breyer," echoed through the library, followed by the sound of the small library's door shutting. Mr.

Breyer himself called back, "Good night, Bonnie." He made sure, however, as he shut the library's front doors, that the bright green Volkswagen Bug Bonnie always drove was gone from the parking lot. Bonnie McCullough and her friends had a reputation for mischief.

Bonnie, who had crept back into the library after loudly leaving to perch with her feet on the seat of a toilet in the girls' restroom, waited until the lights went out. This took a kind of courage she was seldom able to achieve. Shivering, with tears still leaking out beneath her eyelashes, she immediately broke Rule 1 of Plan B by turning on the powerful flashlight she had in her backpack without counting to a hundred. Then the darkness was bearable—almost. But at least she wasn't afraid of being caught anymore. Everyone knew that Mr. Breyer left the parking lot and went straight home like clockwork.

As soon as she got the flashlight on she tumbled out of the bathroom stall and turned on the bathroom lights. That made her feel a lot better. And when she switched on the lights in the computer wing of the library, she knew she was safe.

Go away! she told a worry that wouldn't leave the back of her mind. I've done it! I'm fine! Now all I need is some caffeine! She scabbled around in her backpack for a thermos flask that was entirely filled with the strongest coffee she'd been able to make from heaping tablespoons of instant— and popped two No Dozes just to make sure as she took a swig. Now, she was ready for a long, long night with these reference books. Bonnie took her shoes off, unlatched her computer determinedly, and went to work.

* * * * *

Outside, there were two dark shadows hunched on the ground. One was delicately crunching on something small with whiskers.

%You see?+the other said in a guttural voice. %It's best to come where the lines of Power cross in the ground. The meat is sweeter.+

%do see,+the second one said, and its voice was thick because a mouse tail was being slurped into its mouth. %The ley lines give Power to the life-force.+

%But there's far sweeter meat- human meat- waiting inside *there*,+ chuckled the guttural voice. %I know all the rules of this library. That little redheaded girl must be locked inside until morning. What a bonus! And then tomorrow morning along comes the Lady Librarian and they're both alone inside. Gotta love the ladies!+

There was a slavering sound that stopped abruptly. %After these kills we'd have to go away,+the second voice whispered. %They'd hunt us with dogs; they'd find our scent.+

%They will not,+the guttural voice replied. %They may get our scent but we'd take the library lady's car and lose them on a freeway. We'd get away, all right.+

The other voice let out a grating laugh. %You should know, brother! You should know about dogs!+

%Now shut up and let me sleep in peace. Wake me at dawn tomorrow and we'd have two nice, tender females- and a head start.+

The grating voice shut up. Its owner did not want to say that there was a feeling of unease· of worry· at the back of its mind.

To say that would be stupid. They were werewolves wandering footloose in the human world, in a town where nobody knew them, no one had cause to fear them, and above all, no one had any reason to suspect what they really were.

They were invincible.

And, sure of that, they both completely failed to notice a shadow just below and downwind of them. That, actually, was understandable, since it was virtually impossible to sense Damon when he was in hunting mode. His aura was drawn in skin-tight, he wore clothes as black as the night, and he kept to the deepest shadows where ebony would not be spotted.

This plan now, to kill two people in the library tomorrow· he really should be ignoring it. They were hunters, just as he was . . . *like hell they were!* Damon Salvatore found himself bridleing at the thought. They preyed on the weak and the young· and, inevitably, they killed. Damon knew many proud, disciplined werewolves and shapeshifters· and these drifters were not among them.

Well, then, perhaps it was time to check out a book or two . . . his way.

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Despite the luxury of sinking her toes into the thick pile of the plush carpet (just under a sign that said SHOES MUST BE WORN AT ALL TIMES), Bonnie had a faint feeling of unease that wouldn't go away.

She didn't know what it was. She knew she could *feel* somehow that there was nobody in the library. But still, at the back of her mind, she was tense.

At the back of her mind she knew, that was it! All that darkness behind her. Bonnie really, really hated darkness.

You should never have read that book on palm-reading, her mind scolded her. It's given you all sorts of ideas. Now somewhere inside you really believe that you're psychic.

Thank God she hadn't told anyone so. What would Caroline and Meredith say? What would Raymond, her current boyfriend, say? Most important, what would *Elena* say?

But Grannie MacLachlan, who had always known where to find lost keys and missing TV remotes and who had always known when the phone was going to ring she had looked gravely into Bonnie's hand the last time she had visited Bonnie's family.

A life full of excitement, she had said, slowly and thoughtfully, but not a life of stability. And you have the Sight, my girl. Far more so than any MacLachlan before you. Add to that talents of the McCulloughs, and She had looked sharply up at Bonnie, who at age thirteen would much rather have been playing with her friends, or checking out boys. Do you know what I'm talking about at all, girl?

Bonnie had shaken her flyaway red hair, looking up into the grave, gray old eyes that usually were twinkling with delight over her grandchildren, or gazing

peacefully off into some distant landscape. Now those gray eyes were troubled, worrying about Bonnie.

No, Grannie had said, you ken nothing about it now. But you will, my girl. While you're still a lassie, you will.

Well, Bonnie interrupted her own musing, I don't have time to ken that now. I have to ken Catherine of Aragon. And I have to work fast. She picked up a book and turned it to the first pink Post-It note she found.

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The figure that belonged to the guttural voice and the figure that belonged to the grating voice were lying back, trying to sleep, but bothered in their minds.

I'd like to see the girl inside that building right now, the grating voice whined.

There was the sound of a sharp blow.

You wanna ruin everything, after all my research? demanded the guttural voice. You wanna break a window- maybe set off an alarm? Well, go ahead- you won't get any help from me. I'll just be a face in the crowd. You'll take the whole rap for the girl.

The higher voice whined, I didn't mean to do anything to the girl. I only wanted to sniff at the doors and windows.

There was the sound of another sharp cuff, and a whimper. I know your sniffings, snarled the guttural voice. They end in pawings and prying and broken glass, and then you say, Well since the window is already broken, I guess I'll go in. Idiot! Imbecile! I should never have invited you!

For a while there was no noise except the soft whimpering.

And dis way we wodqged indo drouble?+the higher-pitched voice asked finally. The blows to its owners nose had been not only painful, but disabling. Who could smell with a nose full of clotting blood? The owner rubbed it tenderly.

Weve told you and told you! Wed be in the next county- hell, in the next state before anyone else comes to the library. Wed have plenty of time to run!+

There was a pause and then the higher voice said slowly, And de sweed lady librarian will oped de door.+ It giggled.

Yes,+the guttural voice said smugly. The woman opens the door. Then we force her and the girl into her car. Dead or alive, they come with us, and wed be snugged up safe somewhere long before anyone misses them. Who goes straight to the library on Friday morning?+

There was a pause. Then, almost timidly, the other said, But whad if subone comes wid de woman?+

Divide and conquer. It wond be the first time weve taken on three. One a little girl!+

But . . . +

But, but, but! This better be a good one or Id kick *your* butt!+

A moment pause, then, slowly But . . . I know a lod about alarms. I maybe could turn this one off. Then we could have the girl for+ there was a sucking, slurping sound, like a straw reaching the bottom of a glass- for hours. Ride now. We could play . . . games.+

There was a long pause and then the guttural, growling voice spoke again. But it seemed less annoyed, even somewhat less rasping as it replied, ~~It's~~ not a bad idea. It might even help when the woman comes in the morning. +

~~And~~ the girl! ~~She'd~~ be so sweet . . . and the games we can play in the dark . . .+

~~All~~ right! All right!+the guttural voice growled. ~~First~~ we have to check the alarm, see if it's one you know.+

~~Okay~~,+The second voice gasped triumphantly. ~~Should~~ we Change?

~~We~~ stay like this, half-changed,+the growler said. ~~When~~ she sees us like this ~~she'd~~ go crazy from fear.+

~~We~~ can play good wolf, bad wolf. ~~She'd~~ run right into our arms.+

~~She'd~~ scream,+rasped the growler, ~~Scream~~ and beg. No help will come. No help.+

Together, he and the other werewolf slithered through bushes, heading for the library.

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Downwind, Damon smiled a very sharp-toothed smile.

* * * * *

Tick.

Bonnie could see nothing, could hear nothing now from the front of the library, but she was sure ~~she'd~~ heard a *Tick*.

What could it mean? There was no illumination in the main room of the library from either overhead lighting or flashlight, and that would be the first thing a teacher or janitor would do, wouldn't it? Turn on some kind of light.

Unless the person wasn't coming to ensure obedience to the school rules. Unless the person- the *thing*- had come for *her*.

Bonnie didn't believe in ghosts, not really. But inside her mind were hundreds of locked doors, each of which held behind it a boogeyman. They were bogeymen she had shut firmly behind doors when she was a child, but at night- at night they had a tendency to come out.

And so did Bonnie's own instincts, like those of a cat. In fact, when the bogeymen unlocked their doors and came out at her, she became more animal than human. She simply let her own instincts take her where they wanted.

The overhead light in the computer wing went out.

And Bonnie's instincts, in two bounds, took her ten feet to the right. Bonnie landed on palms and tiptoes, feline, as she heard a crash.

Something had landed on her chair. And- it had splintered the chair to pieces.

"Hey, girl- come this way. There's an exit!" whispered a human-sounding voice. In fact, it sounded like a nice boy, not much older than Bonnie. But Bonnie had an instinctive distrust of the voice. It was too much of a coincidence that a nice boy should have come in with a monster.

Rapidly, on hands and knees, she began to scuttle away from the voice and the chair. She found a dark corner in the children's section to defend herself in. Lightly and softly as a spring leaf she slipped under a child-sized table.

"You- you monster," the nice voice was saying. "Take me! Just leave the girl out of it!"

"The meat is sweet," chanted a guttural voice. "And so is the smell of fear so near." It began to laugh insanely.

"Don't be afraid of you," the nice voice said. Then another whisper. "Come on, kid. I'm not going to hurt you, I promise. Head to my voice."

Bonnie didn't move. Not simply because she didn't trust the nice voice. She didn't move because she couldn't. Her muscles were frozen in place, while her mind whirled.

Meredith was right Meredith was right *why* was Meredith *always* right? By the time someone found Bonnie, Bonnie would be a pile of cracked and polished bones. and Meredith would only know then that Bonnie had just pretended to be convinced that spending the night at the library was a really stupid idea.

Bonnie was good at talking fast- even to herself. All that went through her head before the echoes of the nice voice had faded.

She was wedged into the corner now, under the table, protected on three sides but wide open on the fourth. And she had no weapon at all.

Timidly, like spiders that she sent out scurrying on missions in opposite directions, she tiptoed her fingers away from her. She knew Mr. Breyer and Ms. Kemp kept what they could see of the library spotless. She also knew that they

were both short-sighted and that there was a whole treasure trove of garbage underneath the library tables.

After a moment her terrified left hand came into contact with something that rolled slightly and was high and curved and- oh, God, it was only an old plastic cup, a big one, sure, but what was it going to do against an enemy?

Beware! Or you will feel the wrath of my dread fast food cup!

But her trembling right hand came across a real find. A ruler. And not just any ruler, a *steel-edged* one. Hurriedly, she switched the objects in her hands, since she was left-handed, just as the nice voice reached the end of the table on her right. ~~Quick,~~ it whispered, ~~reach~~ for my hand *now.*

There was no way Bonnie was going to reach for his hand *ever*, but especially not now that his voice had taken on a glutinous, sticky quality, as if he were trying not to salivate.

~~Wee~~ heeeere, said a lower-pitched voice from the left. It seemed to be coming closer and closer, just at the same pace of the nice voice.

And then there was a sound from the table.

Tick.

The noise sounded on her right.

Tick.

The noise sounded on her left.

Like a piece of sharp bone or claw being tapped on the table top.

Tick.

Okay. There was no way for Bonnie to avoid the truth now. There were two *things* in the dark with her, and they were getting closer and closer, and she could barely see out between the two child-sized chairs she had scuttled past before getting beneath the table. Something was weird, she realized suddenly. When she had dashed under the table, she hadn't been able to see at all. It had been a blind, instinctive rush. Now she could see, if just faintly, from the library's high-up windows.

But she had bet that the two things could see much better in the dark than she could. They knew exactly where she was. And this hunch was terrifyingly confirmed when the next **tick** came from the back of a chair—lower than the table.

They've found you.

Tick. Tick.

Lower still.

They can see you. In one minute they'll cut off your only means of escape.

Tick. Tick. Tick . . .

"Come on out," the nice voice said, and now it was no longer pretending to be nice, but slavering and slobbering. "Come out and play . . . or should we come in and get you?+

GET OUT! Bonnie's mind screamed at her.

"Know some fun games we can play together. +

NOW!

Bonnie shot out of the opening between the chairs like a rabbit across a field. As she did, she flung out both hands- wildly, hysterically, not knowing what she hoped to do with the objects but striking out with them anyway.

Meredith had once tried to explain to Bonnie that panic responses like this had a purpose. When a conscious mind doesn't know what to do, it resorts to panic- trying behaviors that no sane mind would come up with. That occasionally resulted in the discovery of a new and useful behavior, Meredith said. Bonnie had never quite understood this, but now she was seeing it in action.

When Bonnie rocketed out of the space between the chairs, she thrust the plastic cup with all her force to the right and it happened to catch the slavering werewolf with its long muzzle closed. The force of Bonnie's thrust jammed the cup all the way up to the animal's jaw.

With her dominant left hand Bonnie slashed out with all her strength with the steel ruler, catching the other werewolf directly across one eye. It gave a screaming howl and reared back.

Then everything went white.

It went white because somebody- one of the two monsters, Bonnie thought- had turned the lights on. They had nothing more to gain by darkness so they might as well show their true forms.

Bonnie couldn't help- no she really *couldn't* help- but take a glance back to see what their true forms were.

They were hideous. And they were very clearly werewolves. Bonnie thought that all wolves were beautiful and that some people were beautiful, but the creature you got when you combined them was absolutely hideous. Besides being lank and hairy with too-long paws for hands and feet, their beautiful wolf-faces were horribly combined with round human-like skulls, and eyes that faced forward, like a person's. They stood in a kind of crouch, but Bonnie could tell with one look that they were sinewy, built for speed. For hunting. For killing.

Just at the moment though, they were still.

"How did you do that?" one demanded. It was looking with its good eye at the overhead light.

The other could say nothing, although a foam of white slather bubbled around its mouth. Its long muzzle was stuck deep into the plastic cup, and although its jaw muscles had tremendous leverage going the other way, to crunch *down*, they were not nearly as effective in opening up. It looked a little silly with its nose in the cup, trying to snarl and bite at the plastic, but it was still scary enough that Bonnie saw a shimmering grayness before her eyes.

Oh, no, no . . .

It was all over. She was . . .

She was going to faint.

"Take it off this way, idiot," the bleeding werewolf said and strode over to the other. He closed his front paw around the cup and pulled. It took a little time since the cup had become slippery with saliva from the first werewolf's pawing.

Bonnie saw the people she loved pass before the twinkling grayness that was her field of vision: her parents and her sister Mary, and Meredith and Elena of course, and Caroline- sort of- and her boyfriend Raymond, and Matt Honeycutt, who made such a cute quarterback with his blond hair, and Stefan, that gorgeous new guy that Elena was trying to get, and the boy who sat behind her this year in sociology. . .

%Too bright,+cried the werewolf who had been released from the cup.
%Who turned on the light?+

%Shut up,+growled the other one. It had black claws instead of fingernails and now it tapped one of these against a metal bookshelf to produce the sound Bonnie had heard before.

Tick.

Its face was horrendous because of the wound that had cut one eye almost in half and covered it to the muzzle in blood.

%Go ahead and look,+it said to Bonnie in its deep slow guttural voice. %an already healing. You've done nothing but make me angry, and I promise you that was a bad mistake. You are going to die . . . slowly. You are going to *beg* me for death before you die.+

%Yes, yes, it's time to start games,+said the other werewolf, sounding not quite sane in its bloodlust.

Although all of Bonnie's instincts told her running was useless, she turned to run.

And instantly was caught about the waist and held immobile.

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"Now, now," Damon said and caught the fleeing red-haired maiden as she started to dash beyond the bookcase where he was standing, letting his own night-adjusted eyes get used to the light. They were fine now, but it had taken a while. "There, there."

He stepped out, still holding the girl, and then he gave everyone all round a brilliant smile, which he immediately turned off like a candle being doused with water. "Three may be a crowd," he said to the terrified, swooning girl in his arms, "but four is enough for a round of bridge, yes?"

"You bloodsucking tick-" began the guttural-voiced werewolf, as Damon slid the fainting girl carefully into a chair. Head injuries could be dangerous and might interfere with her ability to admire him.

"Now then, let me just train these two for a minute," Damon said to the girl, adding, "Bad dogs! No! **Sit!**" to the werewolves. He then gracefully got behind the creatures before they could move and grabbed each of them with one hand by the scruff of the neck. The next instant he was dragging them out of the door, where he settled for one quick crunch at the back of the neck for each. They turned back into their human forms after this, and disreputable, lowlife humans at that. Their odor as humans was almost as bad as their rank scent as werewolves, and that was saying a lot. Damon spat a few times, wiped his mouth, and straightened and brushed his black cashmere sweater before going back inside to see his maiden.

She was weakly trying to get up, her eyes on the bloody steel ruler on the floor.

Now, now. There, there. There, now,+Damon said, preventing her. You did some very nice work with that but you don't need it anymore. They're in puppy heaven now. Well, puppy hell, more likely, but you don't need to worry about them, is the point.+

The maiden, who was exceptionally dainty and pretty and had, to a vampire, the most exquisite feature of all, a particularly long and delicate column of a neck, was looking up at him soulfully. It was nice to see that she was short. Damon didn't care that much for tall girls because he wasn't very tall himself. She also had- you couldn't help but notice- extraordinarily large eyes in her small heart-shaped face, giving her the appearance of a kitten. They were clear brown eyes, with a dark ring at the outer rim of the iris, then a very light brown ring, as if light were shining through them in the middle, and then another dark ring around the pupil. Her hair was the color of a strawberry and curled softly all over her head in a way that made you think pixie.+

Altogether, she was a lovely little ornament, with fine blue veins in naturally translucent skin.

Damon smiled at her, not bothering to hide elongated canines.

Ooh,+the maiden gasped, taking Damon in from dark, silky hair to neatly booted feet in one heart-rending glance. Ooooooh. *Gorgeous.*+

an sorry?+

meant: ooooh, *you saved me!*+

%Well, I helped,+Damon said with a very deep and a very false sense of modesty.

%Ooooh, they were monsters.+

%Well, they're no danger now,+Damon said.

%Ooooooh, they were going to *eat* me!+

Damon wondered if he should moan before speaking the way the girl did. Maybe it was some regional dialect thing. He wanted to make her comfortable.

%OH!+he said, a bit more violently than he meant to, and the girl jerked in his arms, her brown eyes becoming enormous. %Yes, they were,+he agreed heartily.

%Oh, my God,+said the girl, forgetting to %oooh+at all. %Who are *you*? You wouldn't take advantage of a helpless girl at a time like this, would you?+she added, and shut her eyes, tilting her head back slightly, with the tiniest puckering of her lips.

%Oh, well, perhaps only a little,+Damon said jovially, eyeing the lovely lavender veins in her arched neck.

%Ooooooooooh.+

Damon stood looking helplessly down at the girl, noticing uncomfortably that she weighed almost nothing on his arm, that her skin still had the luster of its first baby-glow, and that altogether she seemed much more like a child than like a maiden at all.

He cleared his throat.

The brown eyes opened. They were not only unusually large but rather wide apart, imparting a childlike look to the owner.

%Yes?+she said, looking disappointed, which did nothing for Damon's
canines.

%Ah,+he said. He tried to impart some of the velvet of the night into his
voice. %Hm. Do you know what those two things that wanted to attack you were?+

%Ooooooh, yes. The were ooooooh *werewolves!*+ She shuddered.

%So you get a lot of werewolves around here?+

%Ooooooooooooo-OOh! No!+

%Ah,+said Damon, who had jumped a little himself at the end of this moan.

%Well. They were definitely creatures of the- +

%o ooooooh, night!+

%And, ah, do you know about any *other* creatures of the night?+

%Oooooh: werewolves and vampires and witches and ghosts and demons
and ghouls and ooooooh- +

Damon leaped at the strategic moan. %Okay, take that, go back to the
beginning and name the second.+

The brown eyes went wide and the pupils dilated with fear, then the girl
darted quick looks around the room and toward the ceiling. %Uh-witches?+she
faltered. %I know one- knew one- that wasn't wicked at all. She was my
grannie and she knew when she was going to die because she sent me my
birthday present a whole month early and the- +

%Stop!+said Damon. The girl had a melodious voice and listening to her
was no great trial- it was rather like listening to a nightingale or a curlew, but he

had to get his point across. Witches was third on the list, actually. There was something before it.

No, the redhead said. Werewolves and witches and vamp. She stopped, put a small, delicate-fingered hand over her mouth. Vampire? she finished, with a small gulp in the middle of the word.

Damon felt instant relief. They had got somewhere! He smiled again, brilliantly.

The strawberry-haired girl looked at his smile. She looked at it very carefully. Damon was happy to have overcome the linguistic challenges and held the smile for a long time, almost a whole second.

Just as he turned the smile off, the redhead stopped examining it. Damon knew when she did, precisely, for her eyelashes fluttered in a manner her great-grandmother would have approved of, her face became white as marble, and her body folded and went limp, sending her curly strawberry head on a crash course with the wooden floor.

It would have taken superhuman reflexes to catch her before her small frame hit the ground, headfirst, but fortunately Damon had those. He snatched up the little red-haired songbird almost the instant she began to fall, catching her around her tiny waist and . . . once again they were back to square one, with him holding her, but this time with the addition of her unconsciousness. He looked around for something to put her on and was beginning to make use of a study table when her eyelashes flickered again, she moaned softly, and then awoke.

"Ooh, thank God it's just you. It's you!" she exclaimed, going from reassurance to terror in about a tenth of a second flat. She struggled feebly to get out of his arms. Since her goal would have landed her on her backside on the floor, Damon didn't let her achieve it.

The redhead was also fumbling at her long delicate neck. A ballerina's neck, if he'd ever seen one. Perfect for *Swan Lake*. "Am I . . . ? Did you already . . . ?" she implored.

"Never. I'd never take advantage of a sleeping maiden." Because I don't care for cold, unreceptive flesh, Damon thought. The warmth, the vibrant pleasure, as well as the life-force of an exquisite treat like this were to be treasured, not squandered as she lay unconscious.

The girl was panting in his arms now like a wounded stag, with the hounds very near. "At least. . . you saved me. . . from those monsters. They would have tortured me."

Looking at her, at the way she clasped the tiny gold cross at her neck, at the way she looked up to a window that was still lit only by moonlight, the way she held one hand toward it as if to grasp an unreachable savior, Damon was bewildered. There was something . . . unreal about the entire moment.

And then he realized that that was exactly what it was. Unreality. She was setting up a tableau, a picture for the canvas. One could even think of names for it easily: The Maiden and the Vampire; or, more poetically, The Last Reach Toward Light. If only, he thought, enthralled by what he saw in his mind's eye, she had been wearing a billowing white nightgown that was sliding off one

lucent shoulder, and they had been outside so she could reach for the moon itself. What a moment! What a portrait! What a maiden!

The only problem was that she was two or three years too young. Emotionally. Mentally.

Even, he realized, with her slimness pressed against him so firmly, physically so.

He didn't dine off children. And in any case . . .

Just what is it you're imagining that I do? he asked her wryly.

She shut her eyes and crossed her hands over her breast. A born actress and a coquette if ever he'd seen one. To take my blood, she said in tones of heartbreaking humble acceptance.

And just how much were you imagining I need?

Oooh . . . well, how much blood do people have? His maiden forgot to look like a virgin sacrifice and put a knuckle to a dimple in one cheek, as if to grind it in deeper. Meh, she said embarrassed, the mood broken, I don't know.

Well, I scarcely need a dram for supper. a dram an old word for a small amount, Damon said, feeling rather that this particular maiden might need this explained to her. But in any case, I wouldn't take it from you.

You wouldn't! the maiden exclaimed indignantly, forgetting to oh at all. And why not, might I ask? Just because Meredith and Caroline and Elena all have more more . . . she was tracing a sort of formless roundness with both hands as if squeezing ripe peaches. More on top, already? I'm getting it, too! I turned *seventeen* two days ago! If you'd seen me dressed properly, you'd know!

Now the mood was completely ruined for Damon. And yet he'd be- he'd be *damned* if he'd let any *other* random creature of darkness make a meal off her now that he'd saved her. Who knew how many clans of werewolves there were around here? He- somehow- couldn't just leave her in the middle of the night, far from her home.

"Get your things together," he said crossly.

"Why?" the maiden snapped back, tearfully defiant.

"Because I'm taking you home, you silly little nitwit. What were you doing all alone in a great building like this that no one lives in?"

"I was studying! I have a paper due!"

"Well, if it hadn't been for me, you would have been studying in the afterlife right now- and don't you forget it."

"Well, I don't care!" the maiden- no, the *little girl* said, beginning to cry in earnest. "You don't- sob- know my teacher- sob- for European History!- sob- He laughs at me in front of everyone!"

"Those are the worst kind," Damon said, remembering his humiliations across the years at the hands of Signore Lucca. "And always after you've been to a late party and your head is pounding."

"Oh, you *do* understand," the girl turned to him, still weeping, and put her head on his shoulder.

"Did you say this man teaches history? European history? What time frame are you looking at? And what country?" Damon said, with a sudden tiny quirk of his mouth.

England and Spain, around 1533. the years before, the years after.
Well, what do you know? Damon said, once again flashing his most brilliant smile. the one that turned girls to quivering puddles. around the room. believe I might just be able to help you with that. You see I was around then. more or less. and what I didn't see I heard through gossip. I always say if it's not worth gossiping about, it didn't happen in the first place.

* * * * *

Dawn. Bonnie, more or less sleepwalking, was being helped out of her Bug and a backpack was being pressed into her arms.

Now remember to be surprised when they find two dead drifters at the back of the library.

Bonnie shuddered and her eyes opened brown and soulful. You saved me from them. I'll never forget. She looked like a small red bird, with bedraggled plumage standing straight up all over her head.

Well. never mind about that, Damon said, once again attempting to look modest. And remember to type up all the bits I wrote, but not to wonder why you're doing it. That's imperative. He sent out a surge of Influence to impress this on the girl's mind.

Very imperative, Bonnie agreed in a mumble, and then they were at her front door. Thank you. oh, so much! After she spoke she went on tiptoe, shut her eyes and aimed pursed lips at point-blank range.

There was a long pause and then the lightest, warmest, moth's brush of lips over hers. It was the sweetest kiss she'd ever had. and the sexiest.

Well, goodbye, then. little bird, a voice said and Bonnie opened her eyes to look long and deeply into fathomless black pools, and then she was alone. Totally alone. For some reason she looked around and confirmed it. There was her car, neatly parallel parked. wow! she was getting a lot better at that. but she was alone and . . . and . . . well, of course she was alone! She managed to pull it off. to study all night in the Robert E. Lee library, and not a thing out of the ordinary had happened. She even found a side door ajar to slip out of and so avoid a confrontation with Ms. Kemp!

Now she couldn't wait to tell Elena and Meredith and Caroline about what she done, and how the report was almost finished, all but some typing she do tonight. She done it all by herself. even she could hardly believe it! Bonnie patted her backpack. But in here was the proof. *The Conscience of a Queen* was the best history paper she would ever write in her life, full of strange little facts and curious quotes. It might even get her an A!

An A . . . that would be almost supernatural.

Something deep down in the very back of her mind told her to look behind her.

She did, but saw nothing but a magnificent black crow flying from a branch into the dawning day. Poor thing, it seemed to be shedding, though. Two black feathers fell to the ground as it disappeared. Bonnie's heart swelled up into her throat, almost as if she was going to cry as she stared at those feathers, which were so black that they shed rainbows in the breaking light, but then she braced

herself. She really didn't know much about crows. Maybe it was something they all did. Anyway, this one was gone.

* * * * *

Damon soared up and out, watching the neighborhoods become a patchwork below him, and below that, to eyes attuned to the Power, the ley lines that crossed and re-crossed here, luring in all sorts of drek, from those disgusting werewolves to little brother Stefan.

The reason for Damon's circling now was simple: he was hungry. He hadn't been able to tap the little red songbird's veins. She was just too young, too innocent to be punctured randomly like that.

And, damn it all, despite ha! having spent a night with her, he had never asked her name. He would probably never know it no, wait! She'd written it on that first piece of paper, the title page. The last name had been Scottish or Irish or something that he couldn't remember, but the first name he did.

Bonnie.

Sweet songbird Bonnie, thought Damon, making a turn and circling the other way. His little Redbird.

What a pity that he'd never be seeing her again.

The End

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