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ERICA
HAYES

*One drop can kill you—
or thrill you...*

BLOOD
CURSED

THE SHADOWFAE CHRONICLES

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For information address St. Martin’s Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

ISBN: 978-0-312-62471-2

Printed in the United States of America

St. Martin’s Paperbacks edition / August 2011

St. Martin’s Paperbacks are published by St. Martin’s Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

1

“Where do you want it?”

Hot vampire lips caressed my shoulder in a fall of sweaty nightblack hair, and his salty breath burned me. I swallowed, sick. *Please, just let this be over quickly.*

Smoke and nightclub lights dizzied me. Bass vibrated my lungs, guitars and a screeching electric violin, the raw melody of fairy desperation. Around us, dancing bodies writhed, rainbow limbs and wings and glazed faestruck eyes. Sparks shimmered in the air, the glassy fairy glamour that hides us from human eyes, and the scent of flesh and kisses fired sweet temptation into my blood. A typical midnight at Unseelie Court, the dark and notorious club where Melbourne’s shadowy underworld came to play. But tonight, I had an unpleasant job to do.

The vampire licked sweat from my collarbone, searching with his iron-pierced tongue for my pulse, and my guts twisted.

It’ll be easy, Emmy, Jasper, my boyfriend, had whispered. Show him some skin, tease him a little, give him a quick taste, and he’s yours. Just get me my gemstone.

I didn’t want to. Not vampire bait, not me. No matter

how Jasper charmed or persuaded or disarmed me with his dazzling fairy smile.

But saying no to Jasper was a trick I'd never quite gotten the hang of.

The vampire nipped at my chin, playful, and I shivered. He wore black leather and lace, diamonds flashing, and behind ragged sable-dyed hair, his eyes glinted, drunken sapphire blue. His white shirt lay half-open, glowing purple in ultraviolet rain, and on his chest a fat scarlet gemstone glowed on a chain, shot through blue and green by wicked nightclub lasers.

My wing veins swelled. There it was. My prize. All I had to do was say yes.

Just one bite, and the gem would be mine.

I grabbed his coarse locks and tugged his kisses onto my throat. He groaned and crushed me against the mirrored wall, licking a warm wet trail up to my chin. The glass slicked my wings, warm and clammy, offering no comfort. I squirmed inside, but I didn't wriggle away.

He nipped at my bottom lip, stinging. He tasted of meat and bourbon, salt and fire. "I said, where do you want it?"

I let my lips part, my breasts heave and swell. My long crimson hair tumbled invitingly, showering him in my spell-lured scent. I'd dressed for the occasion in silver stilettos and a glittery dress with a tight skirt, a scooping neckline, and no midriff. Plenty of succulent bloodfae flesh on show, my dusky skin beading with scarlet-tinged sweat.

Vampires love bloodfairy juice, see. Bloodfae are special. To vamps, it's like the smoothest, slickest drug, heady and fragrant, sliding down their throats like opium-laced honey. What's more, the phases of the moon rule us, and the near-full moon that lit the sky silver

outside only made me tastier. It dragged like a tide in my pulse, igniting my blood with excitement and intoxicating flavor. Vampires can't resist.

And unless they've had the vampire virus long enough for their bloodfever to reach equilibrium, they're always hungry.

Always.

Which made a pretty bloodfairy like me the perfect bait. This guy—whatever his name was, kinda cute if you liked emotrash bloodsuckers—didn't stand a chance.

I gave him a sultry whore's smile, my nerves thrumming tight with danger. *Look, vampire. Candy. Come get it. "Anywhere you like it, baby."*

He growled like a hungry beast and drove hot fangs in hard.

Pain clawed my throat. I squealed, but no one heard. Lights flashed, uncaring, and deafening music rolled onward, wire grating on steel. My blood splashed the mirrors, running in a sticky ruby glow. No one cared. Just another bloodfae slut, taking her medicine.

God, it hurt. My own bloodscent made me retch, but I couldn't break free. Couldn't get away from his steely grip around my waist, his hot tongue pressing my skin, his crunching teeth forcing ever harder into my throat.

He sucked, and faintness washed my head bright. My skin tore off in his mouth, agonizing. He groaned and rubbed against me, tense and hard, a gruesome parody of sex. He swallowed, sucking harder, dragging the blood out against the current, a horrible suction that pulled all the way down to my guts.

Dizziness stuffed my skull like cotton wool. His heartbeat thudded through my chest, alien, stealing my

body's rhythm until we throbbed together as one. He shuddered, helpless, and drove deeper, swallowed faster, a tortured cry spilling out like he couldn't take any more.

My rubyshine blood gushed from his mouth, over my breasts, a hot sticky mess. His body jerked against mine in release—okay, that was gross—and I fought crippling nausea and forced cramping fingers under his neckchain.

His hot wet body sickened me, the guttural growl in his throat as he came disgusting. At last I found the little metal knot, and I flicked the spring open and pulled the chain free.

Got it.

He didn't care. Didn't even notice I'd ripped him off. He'd gotten what he wanted, and he slumped panting against the bloodspattered couch with a groan of pure pleasure. Sweaty black hair fell in his face. Glowing fairy blood—my blood, hot and fresh—splashed scarlet down his chin. He'd orgasmed sharp and hard just from my spellrich taste, and his leatherclad thighs gleamed black and shining from the feverpink mess we'd made.

My head swam. I stumbled, and hid the bloody chain behind my back. Blood trickled between my breasts and clotted there. Drowsiness tugged my eyelids, but I fought it and gave my glamour a clumsy kick. Whiteblue spellsparks glittered the air between us, invisible to anyone but me, my innate fairy magic messing with his mind. *Don't see me, scumbag. Don't see what I did. Only the blood, hot and rubysweet . . .*

Spellwrought confusion swirled green in his eyes, and he gave a dripping crimson grin. Panting, he searched

in his pocket and tossed me a folded wad of cash. “Thanks, darling.”

“Any time.” I fumbled the catch, shaking. The money slicked foul in my hand. I wanted to throw it back, scream, claw his face off.

But I forced myself to fake another smile, wink at him, turn. *Don't let him see. Never show them how they've hurt you.*

I pushed through the shimmying dance floor crowd. Heat stifled me, thick with sweat and blood and sex, and I burned to scrub my claws over my skin, rip away the horrid feeling of being fed upon like a dumb beast.

Shaking, I dug a handful of tissues from my bag and wiped at the blood, over and over until my hands were a wet red mess. A hot lump crawled up my throat to choke me. I could still taste the vampire's fleshy breath. Still feel his lips creeping on my skin, his teeth slashing my muscle, blood's dizzy surge away from my head.

The ragged hole he'd made in my throat burned. Soon it'd be healed, his vampire spit already thickening my blood like sticky acid. But the humiliation mushrooming inside me flamed hotter.

God, I hated this. I'd sworn I'd never stoop this low. I'd seen firsthand what selling your blood did to you: Always light-headed, always sick and dizzy like a permanent blacksparkle comedown. Desiccated skin, brittle hair snapping, rabid thirst that never ceases, hallucinations, waking nightmares, gnawing on your own fingers for protein. It's an addiction, cruel and sweet and deathless, and eventually, it kills you.

Once, I'd had a friend who bloodwhored. Now he was dead. I should know better.

Yet here I was, prostituting myself on my dark fairy-boy's say-so.

Rage burned my eyelids, and I flung the stinking money aside. The notes spilled on the floor, and colored fairy hands scrabbled for them, claws scraping, voices squealing their delight. Sickness bloated me like rotten food. They were welcome to it. After all, I had Jasper, didn't I? To keep me, feed me, dress me in nice clothes. All I had to do was say yes to everything.

You liked it, Ember. The unseen moon's warm whisper pierced my heart. You liked that vampire's kiss. You wanted his mouth on your skin, those slick fangs digging in, splitting your delicate flesh, tearing you open, sinking deep inside. It felt good to be wanted. So dreamy and free. So right. Isn't this what you're meant to be, bloodfairy girl?

My stomach heaved, and I covered my mouth and ran.

Music cackled accusation like a witch's laughter. Lights glared, flashing on my luminous ruby bloodstains, showing me up for everyone to see, and though I was lost in a perfumed crush of bodies and wings, I'd never felt more exposed. Like everyone stared at me, a muscled green troll's black-eyed stare, a blue waterfae girl's disdainful glitterpainted lashes, the scornful flicker of a firefairy boy's flaming wings. *Look at me, everyone. Look at the worthless bloodwhore.*

I stumbled on shaking legs. I felt hot and sick inside, like a scolded little girl. I needed to pee. I wanted a shower, to take a scrubbing brush to my filthy wet hide and scrape those greasy vampire fingerprints off my skin forever.

Not yet. Jasper first. I clenched determined fists, and the vampire's chain sliced my knuckles. I shook it free,

and the crimson gemstone flared, as if coals ignited within.

I eyed it warily. It dangled from its chain, strobes flashing blue and yellow, but something definitely glowed inside.

A trick of the light? Surely.

I leaned closer, the gleam attracting my covetous fairy eye. Pretty, all shiny and sugarynice. Jasper and his mates were businessmen—selling fairy drugs and collecting protection money is business, see, and you don't say the word *gangster* around here, we're all businessmen or entertainment professionals or security consultants—and part of Jasper's business was getting things that didn't belong to him. He and his boss, a cocky glassfairy freak called Diamond, worked for the city's ruling vampire ganglord, and ran all sorts of shit in and out of all sorts of places. But I didn't know why Jasper wanted this. Childish envy warmed me. Maybe, once he'd finished, he'd let me keep it.

I peered into the gem's center, mesmerized by the tiny dancing flame. An eerie whisper slid into my head, ghostly and cold like mist. *Free meee . . . ssspare meee . . . take mee awayyy. . .*

Mmm. Pretty thing. I hummed softly to it, and the light flared brighter.

The air juddered, and erupted with a jagged scream of agony.

I yelped, and jerked backwards, letting go. The vile thing clattered away, and the scream slashed to silence.

Shit. I scrambled for the gem on the dirty floor, dodging high heels and bare clawed toes and boots. At last, my clawtips brushed cold facets. I grabbed the chain and hopped to my feet, glaring at the dangling gem with suspicion licking my nerves cold. "Shush, nasty."

It sparkled at me, threatening, and something black and forbidding swirled deep inside.

I glanced around. No one was looking at me. They hadn't heard a thing.

I sniffed, doubtful. I'd hallucinated that. Jewels don't scream. Or light up by themselves. Right? Just because I'm a fairy doesn't mean I believe in ghosts and woo-woo.

A dry murmur wormed into my ears, cold like rustling leaves. The glow inside swirled, flaring like a firestorm, and swiftly I stuffed the nasty thing into my bag before it could scream at me again. Where the hell was Jasper? He'd promised to meet me here once I was done.

A cold hand clamped my aching shoulder and spun me around.

My wings sprang taut. I stumbled, pierced by pale green eyes shaped with golden glitterliner.

A tall blond woman smiled, fangs sharp on scarlet lips. "You for sale, pretty?" She wore a short red dress over long pale legs, her faded eyes hard. Beside her, a dark-eyed fangboy in leather pants and no shirt winked at me, his tangled dreadlocks a shock of dusty blue. Sharp studs glinted in the collar that chained him to her wrist, and he sniffed in my direction like a hungry dog.

Great. Paris Hiltonvamp and Tinkerfang the Chihuahua. More horny vampires out for bloodfae candies. Story of my life.

But I was alone, with no Jasper to protect me, and my throat shriveled.

I cocked my hand on my hip, faking nonchalance. "I'm sorry, do I know you?"

"You smell nice." Tinkerfang ghosted his damp palm

up my cheek, a feverwarm caress. He smelled sour, of meat and sweat.

“Look, don’t touch me, okay? I’m not selling.”

“No need to be shy.” Paris grinned and grabbed my elbow.

I struggled, but she was too strong. Vampires were all too strong. “Let g—”

“We watched you feeding our friend,” cut in Tinker. His black-smudged gaze draped over me, relishing the bloodstains, the sweat, the clotting fangwounds. He leaned over and licked a hot slick trail up my cheek.

Yuck. I squirmed, my wings thrumming tight with dread. Had they seen me steal their friend’s gemstone? Was I busted?

Tinker’s whisper burned my ear, bittersweet with cigarettes and lemon-drenched sparkle. “You were so fucking hot. I wanna drink you dry, baby. I wanna slice you all over and lick it up. Come play?”

I shrank back, disgusted, but Paris held me, and suddenly I was trapped in a cage of hot vampire limbs and invading fingers. Tinker stroked me, licked me, nuzzled my neck where the blood still trickled. Flesh-scent stuffed my nostrils, and my pulse pumped harder. Unseen moonlight tempted me, dragging on my fluids like a swelling tide, drawing me to wild fairyspelled desire. Blood throbbed between my legs. Let them feed on me, eat me, suck me dry. . . .

I jerked away and ran, horrid vampire laughter scraping in my ears like sandpaper.

I forced through the packed crowd on the dance floor, where fragrant sweat slicked on rainbow muscles and wingdust glazed the air like candy. Glamours clashed and sparked, the air alight with the dazzling fairy magic that made us look normal to humans. Lights glinted on

jeweled earrings, shining fangs, glowing fairy eyes smeared blue and green with glitterpaint.

Sweat slid down my neck. My hair stuck to my bloody chest. I glanced over my shoulder, my pulse burning. Couldn't see them following. Didn't mean I was safe. The sooner I found Jasper, the better.

Above, the mezzanine loomed, dark and backlit in ultraviolet. Pounding music shimmered like heat haze as I forced beneath the iron railing into the shadows. A drooling blue fairy sprawled head downwards on the stairs, violet curls dangling, eyes gleaming dully like dead orbs from too much cheap sparkle. Telltale green dust still sprinkled his face, and a scrawny green sprig-gan girl licked it up eagerly, slurping her long black tongue over his nose, his lips, his pointed blue chin.

Drugsmoke shone in eerie purple light, green lasers flashing shadows from bodies, crawling wingbones, limbs contorted in pain or delight. Back here, the floor lay littered with crunched foil and dusty mirror shards, the sickly gleam of broken syringes smeared with green-metal fluid. My sharp fairy ears twitched, and even in the crunching din I heard sighs, heartbeats, wet rasping breath.

I sidled into flashing blue dark, stretching onto my tiptoes to look for Jasper. The tip of my nose whiffled, searching for his distinctive honeycomb scent amongst cologne and candy and the dark flowery cream of fairy-dust.



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