

CHAPTER ONE



1926: CRUEL ANGEL

Violette Lenoir, *prima ballerina assoluta*, was not proud of her ability to inspire terror.

Of course, it has its uses, she thought as she watched her *corps de ballet* daintily traversing the mirrored studio. *I need their respect; without it, I'd have no authority. Perfection requires discipline.*

Sometimes, though, she would go too far. If she involuntarily let her vampire nature show through the human facade and frightened some poor girl or boy, afterwards she would feel mortified. So she was always on guard. It made her a ruthless taskmaster, never cheerful, never relaxed.

Violette stood at the barre, supervising rehearsals for *Coppélia*. She was dressed like her dancers in practice clothes: leotard, skirt and tights of grey wool. She was of average height but appeared taller, being very slender and long-limbed. And she looked like Snow White, with alabaster skin and black hair – now gathered in a loose bun – and her claret mouth and large, knowing eyes. Their colour was startling and changeable, from deep blue to violet, like the iridescent wings of a butterfly.

As a human, she had been as beautiful and graceful. Adored for her talent and notorious for her perfectionism, she'd always commanded respect. Outwardly, nothing had changed.

No one has guessed, she thought. *None of my dancers, musicians or staff, not even Geli, has any suspicion that a few months ago I became a vampire, or something worse...*

I can see it in my own eyes, she thought, but they can't. Thank goodness vampires cast reflections after all, or I really should be in trouble.

The ballet was still her life. So, if she was to continue working in the human world, the truth must remain secret. Such a struggle, though, against the blood thirst, the raging entity within her. A perpetual strain to keep it in check.

Pushing these thoughts aside, she watched the dancers with intense concentration. Their synchronisation was imperfect. One girl, Ute, usually flawless, had been making mistakes all afternoon.

"No!" Violette snapped. The pianist stopped abruptly. "We changed that step. Can't you remember anything? Like this!"

Moving to the centre of the studio, she demonstrated *en pointe*, her blocked shoes barely making a sound. The girls watched raptly, desperate not to fall short of Madame's expectations.

"Try again," Violette said crisply.

She knew they were tired, but she felt no pity. Her own teachers had never shown her any. "If you cannot stand hard work, leave," she told any dancer who dared complain. Harsh, but realistic.

This time, the *corps de ballet* was perfect... until Ute went wrong again.

Violette felt like shaking her. Such feelings were dangerous, threatening to unleash the floodgates of vampire thirst. She must always hold herself like stone against emotion.

"Ute!" Her voice made the mirrors ring. "If this is your best, perhaps you'd better give up your role to someone who can concentrate."

The girl, thin and elfin with honey-blond hair, looked at the floor. She was a fine dancer and should make a prima ballerina one day. Violette saw that something was badly wrong. The long curve of Ute's neck held her attention...

"What is the matter?" she asked more gently.

Ute's reaction was to flee the studio in tears. The others shifted uneasily. Madame Lenoir had reduced them all to breaking point at some stage. They were better dancers for it, but never forgot the pain. Violette knew they nearly hated her sometimes.

"Continue," she said, and the long-suffering pianist began again.

She knew she pushed them too hard. She'd forgotten how it felt

to battle with aching muscles, to rehearse until she was near-blind with exhaustion. Now her limbs were always strong and supple, and she could have danced for days if she'd wished. That made her impatient with human frailty.

A few months ago, she'd been fighting arthritis that was slowly eroding her joints and spine. *Would I still be dancing now, if not for Charlotte? No, I would have been facing life in a wheelchair. But the price I'm paying...*

Rehearsal over, she went to her office and found Ute outside, her face drawn and eyes bruised from crying. Violette took her inside, sat her down on a hard chair, and gave her a handkerchief. Lamps under blue glass shades cast a harebell glow.

"I don't mean to upset you," Violette began. "Anyone can make mistakes. But with three weeks until we sail for America, and two ballets to perform, we can't afford to be less than perfect. You understand why I am so strict."

"Of course, Madame," the girl whispered, her head bowed. "It's not the discipline, I'm used to that."

"What, then? Are you ill?"

"No, Madame. It's my father... he wants me to go home. He insists I give up my career to look after him."

"Why? Is he sick?"

"No, he's in perfect health. He misses me. He doesn't think a girl should have a career, especially not on the stage. He always disapproved of me coming to you, Madame. I don't know what to do."

"It's simple. Stay here."

"But, Madame, you don't know him!" Sobbing again, Ute explained her father's arguments. Utterly ludicrous and selfish, they sounded to Violette. But the girl was weakening towards his demands. Her weakness made Violette furious.

She felt herself becoming Lilith, regarding the young dancer through cold and ageless eyes. *Ute must be forced to face her own stupidity.* Violette could not suppress the impulse.

"Are you mad?" She walked around her desk and gripped Ute's shoulder. The girl's head jerked up in shock. "You would sacrifice a career as magnificent as yours will surely be, deprive the world of your talent, just to satisfy the whims of a selfish old

man? What do you want to be, when you are sixty?”

“Madame?”

“An embittered old woman, living in obscurity in some Bavarian village – or sitting behind this desk in my place?”

Violette saw the pulse jumping in Ute’s neck, felt it accelerating under her fingers. She caught the scent of fear. And then she committed the sin. Gave in to Lilith’s thirst.

That night Violette stalked the deserted rooms, a creature condemned never to sleep. She was still in her practice clothes. Clawing her arms like an abstracted Lady Macbeth, she stared into the darkness, stricken.

Her apartment above the studio was no longer a place of refuge and sleep, merely somewhere to keep her possessions. Space to be alone, yes, but she felt alone everywhere, so it made no difference. Her maid, Geli, must have noticed the changes, and wondered why she no longer suffered backache or demanded ice packs on her knees. Violette had made no attempt to explain, and Geli was too meek to ask.

Charlotte had insinuated herself into Violette’s life without invitation. Unwelcome at first, she became irresistible. A strange and lovely creature, sweetly old-fashioned with her demure manners and a gorgeous wreath of tawny-bronze hair. Deceptive Charlotte; a demon who drank blood. And who, for all her promises of restraint, had eventually slaked her thirst from Violette’s veins. It had seemed a violation, a betrayal of trust... *but I encouraged her*, Violette thought. *I was as much to blame. And afterwards, we still couldn’t leave each other alone.*

Violette had not consented to becoming a vampire – not until the very last moment, at least. It was Charlotte who insisted. Violette had fought, though not too hard, because it felt inevitable. Her fate, if such a thing existed.

In the moment of transformation she’d become someone else. Someone who knew too much, whose talent was to corrupt and ruin and transmute.

That other being’s name was Lilith.

Now Violette’s life was one of conflict with her other-self. She

found the state of vampirism hateful. Her desire for blood was agonising, the bliss of sating it, loathsome. Violette fought for creativity, to preserve her ballet, and never to take a sip of blood from any member of her company.

Lilith’s intentions were the opposite.

You cannot be a vampire and live like this, Lilith would whisper. *You cannot resist your instincts. Listen to me. Oh, the seductive whisper in the night. Listen, and you’ll know everything. Look into their pitiful souls and show them the truth!*

Violette tried to turn away, but when the hunger rose, she *was* Lilith. At those times, to protect her dancers, she would usually leave the premises and wrestle with hideous urges alone in the darkness. Until today, with Ute...

Now, her blood thirst guiltily sated, restlessness brought her to the empty studio. On the polished floor, lit by long rhomboids of starlight, she began to dance in meditation.

A chill washed over her, as if someone were watching.

She sensed human presences in the building, asleep. She perceived inhabitants in houses along the riverbank, and across the river, where the domed and spired city of Salzburg slumbered. Sleeping mortals. Lilith’s prey.

What can I do? she thought. *How do I find a way to bear this?*

Ute, too, lay in her little attic room, perhaps troubled with bad dreams. Violette would never forget the flat astonishment in her eyes, or the searing tang of her blood. She could only pray that the girl would forget. Ute had been dazed, stunned... wide open to the suggestion that nothing had happened.

I drank only a little, Violette told herself. *The physical harm will pass – but what have I done to her mind?*

However strict and aloof she appeared, the truth was that she cared passionately for her dancers. She would lay down her life for them.

When Violette-Lilith took a victim, it was not just to satisfy thirst. There was a deeper compulsion. Her bite was transformative, forcing her victims to see themselves all too clearly. The results could be disastrous. Violette hated the responsibility, but Lilith would have her way.

Outside, the river flowed softly and a cold breeze off the Alps

ruffled the forests. Violette thought of entering the Crystal Ring, but the other-realm of immortals held no respite. Wherever she went, Lilith went with her.

So she danced slowly, her hair flowing loose.

If Lilith existed only in her imagination, this might be easier. She could accept herself as mad. Nothing could be that simple, however: others had seen Lilith in her, too. Three enigmatic vampires had captured and delivered her to Lancelyn, a human and self-styled magus. He'd addressed her by many titles: the Black Goddess, Sophia, Cybele. He had offered hope that she was not evil. *We can empower each other*, he'd said. *Your darkness is the veil of Wisdom; let me lift the veil and become immortal through you. Then we will both find the truth.*

She'd almost succumbed. In her despair, Lancelyn seemed the only one who could help. But in the end, his desires had been selfish. He wanted to possess her, to marry her and achieve magical communion by consummating the marriage.

Everyone wants to control me, as if the force inside me is too terrifying to be let loose.

Violette had always rejected men, from her father onwards. Many had wanted her, several had dared to try, but she'd never given in. She found their lusts repulsive. It was a matter of pride to stay forever immaculate and self-contained.

So Lilith had risen up and destroyed Lancelyn, before the violation – magical or not – took place.

I had to do it, she thought. *Could he have taught me anything? He was the only one who even partly understood what I am. However, because he chose to put his own selfish whims before true understanding – he paid the ultimate price.*

One thing helped her cope: the self-discipline of her lifelong ballet training. She forced herself to think of nothing but her steps.

As she danced, she became aware of shadows solidifying around her. Watching her. Judging.

The three angels again? She thought she'd seen the last of them. Anger rose in her chest. *No*, she thought. *You can't return to haunt me again! Your power over me is gone. You no longer exist.*

She danced wildly, as if to repel them, experiencing a sense of danger so extreme that at last she stopped dead.

Blending partway into the Crystal Ring, she saw the intruders vividly. Five elongated, jet-black demons, glittering dimly against the distorted cobweb walls. Vampires.

Not her three former persecutors... but who were they?

As Violette slipped back into the solid world, they came with her, taking human form in the studio. Four men and one woman, with radiant skin and the mesmeric stillness of cobras. Violette recognised two of them: Charlotte's friend, blond Stefan, and his mute twin Niklas. Stefan had assisted Violette's transformation. She was unsure whether that made him her friend or her enemy.

Facing her, they gave minimal nods of respect. Their eyes were guarded, impassive and accusing all at once, like those of a hostile jury. She was intimidated, outraged.

"Violette?" Stefan said softly. He had the grace to look apologetic, at least. "Please forgive the intrusion. My companions wish to speak with you. I don't think you've met Rachel –" he indicated the woman, a tall, thin creature with hair like apricot flames – and this is John, and his companion, Matthew."

John and Matthew were small, slight and pale, with dour faces and dark hair cropped short. They had the look of monks from medieval portraits, and they stared at her with suspicion and loathing. *Witch-finders*, she thought.

"What do you want?" There was no courtesy in their invasion, so she showed none in return.

"Madame Lenoir," said Rachel. Her polite tone was razor-edged. "You don't know me, but you knew my closest friend, Katerina."

A flash of ghastly memory. The screech of train wheels, sparks, blood smeared on a steel rail...

"You killed her," said Rachel.

"I don't deny it," Violette said thinly. "But she was trying to kill my dearest friend, Charlotte. Have you come for revenge?"

"No." Rachel's face was like ice, translucent, her lips vivid scarlet. "Only justice. We want you to do the right thing."

"Which is what?"

"To give up your ballet and your public appearances."

Violette laughed in astonishment. "Why in the world should I do that?"

“You are breaking the laws,” Matthew said harshly. He was smaller than John, more belligerent.

“What laws?”

“The laws of God, of Satan, and of our nature.”

“Oh, do tell me about Satan!” Violette said with rising anger.

“As vampires, we are possessed by the Devil,” stated Matthew. “You must know this! We are being tormented for sins we committed in life. As Satan’s instruments, therefore, we serve and appease our master until it pleases God to release us – because, you understand, even the Adversary is part of God’s great plan. We submit in humility to our role. But you, Lilith – you serve neither God nor Satan. You are outside. You are too arrogant, too dangerous.”

“Females of our kind are more deeply corrupt than males. They lack humility or a sense of duty,” said John, his voice quiet yet harsh. “But you are the worst, Lilith. It ill befits our kind to make lascivious displays in public.”

“Immortals should vanish from mortal eyes and prey upon them at night,” said Matthew. “You are not like us.”

“Of course I’m not like you,” Violette said contemptuously. “You two haven’t left the thirteenth century.”

Rachel said, “You may think John and Matthew old-fashioned, but they have a point. Vampires are designed to be discreet, yet every other person in the world knows your name. Your photograph appears in newspapers. How long can you sustain this charade? Someone is bound to notice that you are not growing older, or that your nocturnal habits are strange. Some sharp-minded victim will recognise you.”

“None of this is your concern.” She gazed at the golden-haired twins. “Stefan, you don’t agree, do you? I thought you were my friend!”

“I am,” he said softly. “But they have a point. You can’t go on trying to live a human life.” Although he had the grace to look shamefaced, he held her gaze steadily.

“It is our concern,” Rachel said coolly. “You could bring disaster to all of us. We’re not infallible. You cannot go on flaunting yourself.”

“Can’t I, Rachel?” Rage filled her. Their impudence! “Who are

you to come here uninvited and dictate how I behave? I don’t believe you’re frightened of humans. We can disappear; what can they do to us? No, it’s something else.”

“You killed a vampire.” Rachel compressed her lips.

Violette moved closer to her. “Are you afraid of me?” She looked hard into each face in turn. Their nervous response both excited and alarmed her. Provoking them was unwise, since she was outnumbered, but she had to speak her mind. “Do you think I’m trying to be another Kristian? Is that what this is about?”

“Kristian also broke the laws!” Matthew exclaimed. “He, too, was arrogant! That was why he had to die.”

Rachel turned and glared to quieten him. Then Violette knew for certain. They were afraid of her. So afraid that they wanted her dead. Even kind Stefan!

“How dare you assume I would want to emulate Kristian! Or that I’m remotely interested in your concerns!” As she spoke, Violette-Lilith was filled by strange energy. Their primitive fears and threats inflamed her.

“You must obey God’s law,” said John.

Violette shivered. Talk of God made her ill. It brought back memories of three dark shapes standing over her, the wings of cruel angels beating around her.

“So, you want me to disappear, but what if I refuse?”

No one answered. She sensed their combined will weighing her down. Did they speak for all vampires, even for Karl and Charlotte? Lilith would not submit. She rose like a great shadow in Violette’s soul, ready to fight or flee.

Lilith did not need to ask why they dreaded her.

“Well, you’ve asked and my answer is no,” said Violette. “Now if you would kindly leave?”

Matthew looked at the ceiling, his face ghastly in the starlight. “Sweet mortals, sleeping peacefully above. Have you never partaken of their blood? You must have been tempted.”

She thought of Ute. Painful shame suffused her. “I’ve sworn not to touch them.”

“You can protect yourself, but you cannot protect them,” Matthew said softly.

“What?”

“Matthew,” Stefan chided, but it was too late, the threat had been uttered. Violette felt her fury gathering in a great wave.

“I can disregard threats to myself,” she said, “but not to my company.”

The wave of fury broke, exploded through her.

She lunged and seized Matthew by the throat. He tried to slip into the Crystal Ring but she went with him, dragged him back. His sombre expression flashed into hideous panic as she squeezed his neck, shook him, pierced the skin with her nails.

John, Rachel, Stefan and Niklas grabbed her. She threw them all off with one hand, heard them spinning across the floor, colliding with the mirrored walls. Lilith’s strength seemed limitless.

Tightening her grip on Matthew’s neck, she snapped his spine, wrenched back his jaw until the skin ripped. Muscles and fibres tore, blood oozed from the wound. Vampires clung to life like cockroaches. She strained until the vertebrae parted and the spinal cord finally broke with a dull, moist popping sound. Then she bent and drank from the stump of his neck.

Blood flowed through her like sexual pleasure – only for a second or two. Her victim was dead.

Violette flung him aside in disgust. Lifting her head, she saw the others staring, their eyes glazed with horror. Stefan put his arms around Niklas, as if to protect his mute and near-mindless twin.

Then Violette realised what she’d done. Decapitated a vampire with her bare hands.

But Lilith had not finished.

She went after Rachel next. The woman tried to flee but Violette was too fast. She snagged the flame-red hair and wound Rachel towards her. Biting into the white neck, she sucked hard. Scarlet light filled her. Rachel thrashed in helpless terror.

All the time, Violette moved with the weightless grace of her art. It wasn’t that she felt unnaturally strong, more that the others seemed as fragile as paper in her grasp.

John ran past her. Still feeding, she grabbed him one-handed. Over Rachel’s shoulder she saw Stefan flee into the Crystal Ring. Dragging Niklas with him, he glanced back in horror – then they vanished, as if the mirrors had swallowed them.

If they hadn’t fled she would have attacked them too, friends or not. Lilith had no pity.

Now she held Rachel and John together, one in each hand, writhing helplessly against her. Both were spattered with their own blood. She did not bite John, only ploughed his flesh with her fingers.

Then Violette found herself descending from fury into shock. As the fever subsided, she emerged shaking, aghast at herself. *What have I done? Dear God, it was so easy!*

She shook her two captives. They were like sacks of flour in her hands.

“Now leave my property,” she hissed. “If ever you return, or threaten any human associated with me, if I so much as *see* you near this place, you will think Matthew fortunate.” She raised her voice. “Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Rachel gasped. Her face hung with fear, colourless.

Then Violette flung her and John on top of Matthew’s body. “Get out. And take that thing with you.”

John’s eyes lanced her with venom. Now she’d slain his friend, as well as Rachel’s. Now she had two mortal enemies. It would have been safer to decapitate them too, but her killing frenzy had subsided. She couldn’t do it.

“We can’t take a corpse into the Ring,” Rachel whispered.

“Then leave by the back stairs. Just go!”

They obeyed. John hefted Matthew’s body over his shoulder, his face a mask of blood and tears. Rachel took the head, a grisly burden. And with blank looks, like two demons carrying a soul to hell, they fled.

Violette listened to their soft footsteps descending, an outside door opening and closing. Their auras dwindled along the riverbank until she could no longer sense them.

She was alone. Silence settled like snow around her.

She wanted to weep, but couldn’t. Her reflection showed not a winged and clawed monster, but a young ballerina: composed, beautiful, incapable of harming a soul.

Violette went to the mirror and stared at her *doppelgänger*. Their fingers met and trailed across the glass; their faces bore the same cool expression. The mirror held no answers.

“Help me,” she said to no one in particular. “Help me.”

Her gaze moved to the smears of spilled blood on the floor, thick and luscious as berry juice. She caught a succulent aroma. *Oh God, blood...*

As if pulled by puppet-strings she knelt, arching down to breathe the scent, to touch the blood with her tongue...

Movement made her freeze. A large black-and-white cat strolled into the room and began lapping at the same deep red stain. Suddenly Violette saw herself as a beast, part-serpent, part-wolf... She leapt up in horror, panting for breath.

“No,” she gasped, digging her nails hard into her own arms. “No, I am not an animal!”

The cat lost interest in the blood and came to Violette, mewing and weaving around her legs. Violette bent down and scratched the top of her pet’s head.

“Magdi,” she whispered. “Tell me it didn’t happen.”

Then Violette went to the dressing room and filled a bucket with water and detergent. With the same diligence she applied to perfecting her ballets, she dropped to her knees and began scrubbing the bloodstains out of the smooth, varnished floor.

CHAPTER TWO



FRIENDS AND STRANGERS

On clear cold nights, when a full moon hung over the Swiss Alps, Karl and Charlotte often walked for hours through the magnificent peaks. In temperatures no human could endure, they climbed impossible slopes with ease. Anyone seeing them would think they were ghosts.

As compensation for the darkness of immortality, Charlotte reflected, this was among the greatest: to stand on a mountain summit with the world rolling away in white silence below, Karl’s arm around her, their coats blowing in the icy wind.

Below the peak on which they stood was a straight two-hundred-foot drop. Irresistible. Detaching herself from Karl, she went to the very edge and hesitated, drunk with euphoria. Then she spread her arms, and dived into space.

Freezing air made a banshee wail in her ears. She felt weightless and completely at peace. *This is what it means, to be mortal no longer...*

She landed in deep soft snow. Plumes of white powder rose and blew away on the wind. She lay on her back, staring at the sky: a glorious arch of black velvet clustered thickly with stars. There was another explosion of snow nearby; Karl had jumped after her. Finding his feet, he waded towards her.

“Charlotte!”

She accepted his hand and stood up, shaking snow from her coat. The spark of anger in his eyes startled her.