

Prologue

When we look into our past, we always need to distinguish between history as the common people know it and the real truth as it is recorded in red ink in the ancient chronicles of those of The Noble Blood.

Most commoners will know that the Medici family flourished between the 15th and 18th century AD, having acquired its wealth from the textile trade. This Italian dynasty with its origins in Florence didn't only produce the arch dukes of Tuscany, but also several popes and two of the queens of France.

Our ancestors achieved this through their excellent politics of marriage which constantly increased their influence without having to submit to the dictates of fickle love. The first written record from the founder of The Noble Blood dates from the year 1533, when Umberto de' Medici came into contact with a rare but all the more valuable plant in the course of his import business.

The plant in question was a tree whose blossoms were said to possess powerful magic, so Umberto de' Medici had it planted in a secret location in Florence where it soon thrived in the sunny Italian climate. Umberto firmly believed that this tree was of divine origin, since its flowers never blossomed alone or in pairs, but always in sets of three, which he equated with the Holy Trinity. The three wineglass-shaped flowers always grew together, one black, one white and one red. Their shape reminded Umberto de' Medici of lilies.

The name that Umberto gave this tree is unknown, but we do know that he brewed a potion from each of the three flowers, a potion that elicited wondrous powers in people. Drinking the extract of the white flower could turn a commoner into a Bright Blood, bestowing on him the ability to give life.

3 Lilien, Das erste Buch des Blutadels

3 Lilies (Vol 1): The First Book of The Blood Nobility

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Ingesting the extract of the black flower turned someone into a Dark Blood, henceforth possessed of the power to take life.

To this day, the exact function of the red flower extract has not been conclusively determined. However, our historians surmise that the juice of the red flower had the power remove the abilities of both the Bright Blood and the Dark Blood and thus cast them out of the company of The Noble Blood.

During the ensuing centuries, our ancestors used the power of the lilies to help their allies and eradicate their enemies, thus gaining strength and influence all the time. But it was only a further gift from God that bestowed onto those of The Noble Blood the kind of independence we were longing for, which is that our children were now able to inherit the gifts of the Bright Blood and the Dark Blood without ever coming into contact with the extract of the flower. As a sign of gratitude, those of The Noble Blood took up the insignia of the lily of Florence and still continue to do so, although our fertility is diminishing with each successive generation. Unfortunately, the mysterious tree has disappeared and all our efforts to locate it have so far been unsuccessful. In the end, we have to conclude that it no longer exists in this world. But the gifts of our Blood still do.

And it is our task to protect their magical powers, today, tomorrow and for all eternity.

Excerpt from the secret papers

“The Historic Origin of Those of The Noble Blood”

Translated by Frederike von Sutter, March 2003

Chapter One

If a family of The Noble Blood is blessed with a third female child, the family pledges to offer up that girl on the completion of her eighteenth year of life to the ruling couple, the Prince and Princess of their Blood Line, for the purpose of marriage. In this case, the Prince can claim her for one of his descendants or for himself.

If he himself desires that third female child, he is entitled to dissolve his current relationship with his Princess Wife.

*Paragraph 3 of the Red Rules from
The Scarlet Book.*

The slightly bitter scent of chrysanthemums wafted into my nostrils. It smelled of autumn and I loved that smell, mixed in with the scent of other flowers in our shop. It smelled of the fragrance of life, of sweet love, of warm happiness, a wealth of freshness and diversity that illuminated and brightened up any day, however dark.

“Who is this for?” Romy asked, narrowing her eyes. My little sister’s legs were dangling from the work bench. Her cheeks had a reddish glow like the blossoms of the pink oleander.

“Don’t be so nosy“, I said. “And also, don’t sit on the work bench, there’s lots of sharp knives lying around here. You know how mum freaks out when she sees you up there.” I gave

Romy a stern look which she returned innocently from her big round eyes. Then I inserted the florist's wire into the head of the gerbera and wound it around the stem.

"Why are you doing that, Lori?"

I raised an eyebrow. "You're still sitting up here."

She grinned. "And you still haven't answered any of my questions."

"Ok. I'll answer one of your questions if you hop off the bench", I offered. Romy responded by wrinkling her little pug nose and shaking her head, her dark blonde pony tail swinging wildly back and forth behind her.

"That's a bad deal."

I shrugged, brushing a black strand of hair off my forehead with the back of my hand.

"Then leave it."

Now she grinned again, even more broadly. "Two greeting cards and one explanation. Then we'd *maybe* have a deal."

I raised an eyebrow and pretended I had to think about it. "Alright then", I conceded after a few moments. Romy got what she wanted most of the time anyway. Sweets from my mother or new fluffy toys from my father, whatever she wanted she usually managed to get. I didn't even want to imagine how successful she would be when she was my age. In nine years' time, when she was almost eighteen, she would definitely wrap everyone around her little finger.

Well, *almost everyone*, I inevitably corrected myself. An ugly thought crept into my head. Romy wouldn't be able to get what she wanted from the Bright Prince. As the Third Born she was quite special, after all. A little too special. I took a deep breath and cursed the old rules.

"So? I'm waiting" Romy declared with a broad smile.

I pointed to the pink flowers. “The heavy flower head of the gerbera has to be wired so that it doesn’t break off. And the bouquet I’m creating right now is for a certain Mrs Castano.”

“And?”

“And... the cards are next to the cash register out there”, I continued while I arranged the flowers, alternating them with green foliage. Romy immediately jumped off the work bench and skipped out into the sales room.

I watched her with an amused smile and then looked at the colourful bouquet in my hand. After a brief moment of hesitation, I stretched out my fingers and gently stroked the tender petals. My heart started to beat a little faster and I briefly caught my breath while I was waiting for the flowers to react. But nothing happened and my chest grew heavy with disappointment.

It was irritating that my Blood Gift had still not shown up although my older sister Sophie had already been able to activate her ability at the age of fourteen. And even though I knew that I still had a few weeks’ time left, the waiting was wearing me down, along with the constant worry about the lethal seizures.

Somewhat frustrated, I wove a green leafy wreath around the flower arrangement and fastened it all with binding wire. To finish it off, I shortened the stems with a knife and put the bouquet into a vase alongside the other pre-orders. Altogether, eight bouquets and a funeral wreath had been ordered for today which was absolutely ok for a normal Saturday.

“*Dear Peter*”, Romy read out aloud. She’d just come back to the work room and she loved reading other people’s greeting cards just as much as I did. They allowed me a brief glimpse into a different life, a life that was perhaps a little less complicated than my own where two very different worlds were constantly colliding. “*All my best wishes for our birthday. I hope*

we will meet again soon and you can forgive me the whole thing with Nils. Yours, Brigitte.”

My sister snorted. “Bah! There’s no romance here, totally boring. But luckily I found one from Grottengras. She held up the white card with its golden rim. “He never disappoints.”

“And?”

“*I sing soft songs to you at night*”, she declaimed, “*to you, into whose eyes I poured my soul, and from whose dark well I drank with eternal longing for you to make me whole.*” She paused briefly and sighed. “Grottengras sends flowers and a poem to this woman every week. He must still be totally in love.”

I nodded and threw the plant waste into the rubbish bin before sneaking a look at my watch. It was already after nine o’clock. “Don’t you have a theatre rehearsal to go to?”

Romy curled her lips into a pout. “Yes, but I don’t want to go. Why do I have to rehearse at the weekend for a stupid play like that? I should never have applied for theatre studies. And why do we have to perform a dumb fairy tale like that? It’s totally ancient.”

“It’s not as bad as all that. And besides, you’re not playing the main character.”

“True”, she agreed. “Luckily. I’m only one of the evil stepsisters. And because of that, at least, I don’t have to kiss that stupid Benjamin.”

I suppressed a smile and took a sheet of green paper from the shelf. Then I walked over to the big work bench in the middle of the room that received a lot of daylight from the wide windows at the front. “Could that be the reason why you’re ticked off? Because you *don’t* have to kiss him?”

“Never.” Romy’s voice didn’t sound quite as affronted as it should and I smiled to myself. She inclined her head a little and moved to the counterattack. “So have you kissed your Dominik yet? Or have you done more than that already?”

“Nice try, but that’s not working. Now go to your rehearsal”, I retorted. Grumbling a bit, she said goodbye and disappeared from the shop.

After she had left, the morning was uneventful. I didn’t mind helping out in the shop now and then since I loved working with flowers, and I’d learned how to do it when I was small. While my older sister Sophie had followed in my father’s footsteps and decided to study medicine, I could easily imagine studying botany after my A levels, and then take over the flower shop.

My mother had inherited the business from my grandparents when she was young and we now lived on a huge plot that included our greenhouse. I loved that enchanted building with its herb gardens and winding paths. It had always been my true home.

I was just preparing an arrangement for a new order back in the work room when the door bell rang. So I quickly ran into the bright sales room, where a dark blond guy was looking around among the countless flower vases and pot plants. His back was turned to me but I could see that he was tall, his wide shoulders covered by a grey leather jacket.

“Can I help you?”

The guy turned to me and for a moment he took my breath away. I hadn’t expected him to be that good looking! Although he probably wasn’t much older than me, he already had the strong facial features of a mature man. His fringe swept smoothly over his forehead, partly covering a small scar above his eyebrow, which gave him a rebellious air. His light three day beard and a graze on his cheek that looked quite fresh both contributed to his daredevil look. He checked me out without saying a word. I could hear my heart beat faster when his eyes finally drilled deep into mine.

“I can’t tell you that.” His voice sounded raw and far too sexy.

I wiped my wet hands on my apron. “What is it that you can’t tell me?”

“Whether you can help me.” He looked at me searchingly and I pushed my long hair nervously behind my ear. When I realised what I was doing I stopped mid-gesture. We were running a flower shop here and not a dating show.

“Depends on what you want”, I said and took a few steps towards him, trying to sound professional and not let myself be distracted by his attractive appearance although that wasn’t so easy.

He checked me over once more and I had the awful feeling that he could detect every single one of my thoughts. A gentle smile lit up his face.

“Surprisingly, I need... some flowers. Do you happen to have any?” His dark eyes sparkled, throwing out a challenge to me, and I could feel cold shivers run down my back.

“Well, you’re in the wrong kind of shop for that”, I claimed in a straight voice. Although I wasn’t exactly short, I had to look up to the stranger who was at least a head taller than me.

“No, I think I’m exactly in the right place”, he answered confidently, staring at me. I thought I could hear the air around us sizzle with tension. And that was the moment when the shop door opened and Dominik breezed in.

“Hi Lorelai, Romy told me I would find you here”, he started but fell silent when he saw the guy. “Oh, you have a customer.” The door snapped shut behind him and Dominik’s voice suddenly sounded decidedly chillier than I was used to.

“Yes, she does“, the dark blond guy remarked with a tight smile. “You’ll need to join the queue.”

Dominik crossed his arms in front of his well-muscled chest and coolly raised an eyebrow. “I don’t think I have to join the queue when it comes to my girlfriend.”

I briefly considered adding something to the conversation but since the situation could probably get quite embarrassing quite quickly here I decided to focus on my sales.

“So what kind of occasion are the flowers for?” I asked in a business-like manner.

“They’re for a birthday”, the guy replied, leaning a bit closer to me. “I need them for a very special lady.”

I felt a hint of disappointment when he said that but duly tried to ignore it. While I was trying to keep a neutral expression, Dominik didn’t take his eyes off the guy and walked over to the sales counter. With his short black hair and tense muscles he looked like a bodyguard, ready to protect me at any price.

“Ok“, I said, pointing to the many colourful vases in the shop. “Do you have any idea of what you are looking for?”

The dark blond guy nodded and pointed purposefully at three wide-bellied vases, all filled with white flowers. White chrysanthemums, white hortensias and white lilies.

I stepped over to one of the vases and shook my head. “Is this intentional?”

He wrinkled his forehead and looked irritated. “What?”

“That you chose three death flowers. You did say it was for a birthday, didn’t you?”

Dominik leaned back onto the counter. “Maybe his best wishes are for someone to die.” His blue eyes drilled into the other guy’s and I wouldn’t have been surprised to know that Dominik was in truth a member of the Red Guard. With his muscular figure and cutting gaze he would have made a perfect officer who knew how to intimidate others. But the dark blond guy didn’t seem to be very impressed by Dominik’s display of dominance.

“Yes, maybe“, he conceded. He looked back at Dominik, cool and challenging. I could feel the tension between the two boys rising and quickly cleared my throat.

“Of course it’s up to you which flowers you want to buy”, I said, pulling a lily from its vase. “But these really are not appropriate for a birthday, even if they are very pretty.”

The dark blond guy turned away from Dominik and looked at me, unimpressed. “I would still like to take them.”

“Alright, as you wish“, I said although I did find it inappropriate to give flowers that represented death for a birthday. “What kind of size are you thinking of for the bouquet?”

He looked at the three vases. “Are these all the flowers you have right now?”

I nodded. “Yes. Why are you asking?”

“Then I would like to take all of them.”

“But that’s going to be really expensive.”

“Doesn’t matter”, he replied. “The lady is worth it.”

“Good“, I said, fetching the vases and putting them on the counter. I noticed that Dominik was still looking at the guy as if he was a potential enemy although he normally wasn’t at all like that. When their eyes locked for a moment I felt quite guilty because of the sizzling energy between me and the stranger before.

I quickly focused on the flowers again and tried not to think about why the guy had called his girl friend *the lady*. And maybe she wasn’t his girlfriend anyway. And maybe none of this was any of my business.

“I would add a few pistachio branches.” I pointed to the green plant in a vase next to me. “They’d make great decorations for this bouquet.”

The dark blond guy gave me a charming smile. “Cool.”

I cautiously smiled back and started to combine the flowers into a bouquet. There had to be more than forty lilies, chrysanthemums and hortensias altogether.

“You’re good at this”, the stranger said after a while and strolled over to the counter without being in the least deterred by Dominik’s presence. “How long have you been doing this?”

“Since I was five.” I wound a white ribbon around the stems of the bouquet and then shortened them with a sharp knife. “My mother owns the shop and I’ve always found flowers fascinating.” “And why?”

“Why do I find flowers fascinating?” I retorted, irritated.

“What kind of question is this?” Dominik interjected. He sounded annoyed. “Are you so obsessed with talking to her that you just question anything she says?”

“Dominik“, I mumbled. It was embarrassing.

But the stranger remained very relaxed. “I was talking to *her*. I’ll let you know when I want to talk to you.”

“Wow, the prize for the most arrogant customer goes to you!”

The guy gave him a cold smile. “Still better than the one for the jealous boyfriend.”

“Do you have a problem?” Dominik asked tensely and built himself up even taller than he already was. The dark blond guy still looked back at him calmly.

“No, I don’t. But maybe you do.”

My heart was beating loudly in my chest as I looked up from my work, wishing they would both stop antagonising each other, when the door swung open and an older woman entered the shop.

“I still need a moment here. Could you please look after her?” I asked Dominik. His facial expression grew a little softer when I spoke to him. He hesitated just for a moment and then went over to the customer.

“You’ve got him well trained”, the stranger said, resting his hands on the counter.

“Don’t talk about him as if he was a dog.”

The right corner of his mouth twitched briefly. “You didn’t answer my question just now. What is it that fascinates you about flowers?”

“I think they’re gorgeous”, I answered and wrapped the bouquet in green paper. “To me, they represent vitality and joy and I like their fragrance.”

Our eyes briefly met. I wasn’t prepared for the fiery look he shot at me. Enthralled, I pressed the bouquet into his hands. Our fingers met briefly and my skin started to tingle under his touch.

The stranger took the flowers without taking his eyes off me for even a fraction of a second. “Gorgeous”, he said. His voice was raw. Small bursts of electricity shot through my stomach when I heard him speak, but I tried not to let anything show.

“That’s 148 Euros”, I said in a matter-of-fact tone.

He pulled two notes out of his trouser pocket and put them on the counter. As he did so, I was enveloped by his cool scent of pine needles. I had to resist the urge to take a deep breath. “No change, flower girl”, he said, looking amused. “See you.” And then he left the shop without deeming Dominik worthy of even a look.

But although he was still talking to the older customer, Dominik couldn’t stop himself from looking after the guy. As if he needed to make sure that the stranger had actually left the shop.

“I thought that guy would never clear off”, Dominik grumbled after I had sold the woman a pretty autumn bouquet and we were alone together again.

“And here I was thinking you were about ready to hit him.” “I would have if he’d stayed any longer.” I shook my head. “You can’t do that, Dominik. This is a flower shop and not a boxing ring.”

Supporting himself on his arms, he swung himself up onto the counter. “If you say so, but it’s also not a hook-up bar. Don’t think I didn’t see how that guy gobbled you up with his eyes.”

“No, he didn’t.”

He turned part way towards me and gently stroked my shoulder. “And I can’t even say I blame him. You look super hot, even in this apron.”

I looked at him incredulously. “This green apron here? Are you serious?”

“It perfectly matches your green eyes. And your silky black hair, in perfect harmony with your beautifully delicate face.” He paused for a moment. “Alright, I that still needs a little work.”

“I’m glad you noticed.” I smiled and started sorting the greeting cards.

Dominik leaned back on the counter and looked at me. “But for how long are you still going to resist me, Lorelai? You know we’re destined for each other.”

“We are?”

“And how. You’re a Bright Blood and I’m a Bright Blood. And we’ll have delightful children.”

I stopped sorting the cards. “Just a moment. Isn’t that all a bit too fast?”

He gave me a disarming smile. “Hey, I’m just being real. You know there aren’t many of the Bright Blood left. It would be terrible if our abilities died out with us. After all, it’s our duty to pass on our fabulous Blood Gift.”