



Dear Reader,

Thanks for checking out chapter one of *The Girls with Games of Blood*, the sequel to *Blood Groove*. In it, you'll meet Patience Bolade, a vampire with a unique way of feeding on her victims. She's also one half of a pair of sisters immortalized in a classic country song because of the deadly blood feud between them. When these women, both now vampires, make Baron Zginski the new object of their affections, nothing good can come of it. Add a vengeful Southern sheriff and his racist teenage son into the mix, and you have the recipe for disaster...or a horror novel that continues the story begun in *Blood Groove*. I hope you enjoy this sneak peek. Please feel free to share it with your friends! If you have any questions or comments, stop by my website and drop me a line. I love hearing from readers!

Cheers!

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CHAPTER ONE
Memphis, Tennessee, late summer 1975

“Shit,” the man said as he leaned his chin on his hand. He looked at the girl behind the bar and said doubtfully, “Are you sure you’re old enough to be serving alcohol?”

She smiled as she dried a beer mug and placed it on the shelf in line with the others. Her canine teeth protruded ever so slightly over her lower lip. “Oh, I’m a lot older than I look, I promise.”

“Ah, these days, everyone looks young to me,” he said sadly. He wore his long hair feathered back in the current style, and a wide-lapelled, powder-blue jacket. He was about ten years too old for the look, though, and it seemed more like a costume on him than real clothes. He radiated weary discomfort with his very skin. “I feel positively ancient.”

“I know the feeling,” the girl agreed as she tossed the rag into the sink. In the empty, almost silent bar the PLOP echoed off the wood paneling. The girl’s shiny metal name tag read Fauvette; soft, shoulder-length brown hair framed a face unlined and untroubled. Only her eyes convinced the man that she was indeed over the legal age of twenty-one. They had the haunted air of someone who’d seen awful things and would never fully forget them. The man fluttered the front of his paisley-spotted polyester shirt. “This heat’s murder, too. I guess a summer drought is normal around here, but you wouldn’t think it’d be so humid without actually raining.”

“There’s the big river right down the road,” she pointed out. “And it is the South.”

“Yes,” he said dourly. “The cradle of soul, and rock and roll. And if my luck is any indication, also their grave.”

“So what do you do for a living that’s got you so morbid this afternoon?” she said.

“I’m in the record business. I travel the country to find new talent, then sign them to contracts that suck the life right out of them. Can you believe that?”

“You don’t sound like you enjoy it very much.”

“That’s because I never find what I’m looking for. The song. The face. The voice.”

“Always a new one, eh?”

“Oh, no. I found it once, eight years ago, out in California. Heard the song, saw the face, felt the voice. But I let it slip away.” He paused for a sip of his drink. “I know people always dump on bartenders, sweetheart. But beauty like yours deserves deference, don’t you think? So I’ll shut up if you want.”

She made a face. “I think I heard a compliment in there somewhere. Thanks.” She looked around the otherwise empty bar. It was too late for the lunch crowd, too early for dinner, and she had nothing better to do. Besides, since taking this job she’d found that she enjoyed hearing people’s stories. It gave her a sense of being connected to the world again. “And you can tell me anything. Just don’t think I’m rude if we get another customer and I have to step away.”

“I admire your work ethic,” he said. “Well, this was in San Francisco, back during the days of Haight-Ashbury and the Summer of Love. Does that mean anything to you?”

“I’ve heard of San Francisco.”

He laughed. Pretty girls with wry senses of humor were always his weakness. “The whole world felt like it was changing....”

...and if there was an epicenter, it was there. I had contacts everywhere, in all the clubs and bars and radio stations. I was always on the lookout for the Next Big Thing. But I only truly found it once. It started with a Polaroid snapshot that I held so the marquee's neon light fell on it. "I don't know," I said skeptically. "She looks like a chunky Morticia Addams."

"Oh, be nice," Andre said. As manager for the city's top underground radio station, he had tipped me off to some fairly successful acts in the past: the Thermodynamic Kiwis and Todd Slaughter's Band of Otters were our most recent signees. My reputation at the label, though, would not survive a spectacular blunder made just on Andre's say-so. Besides, as the ranking hippie-in-residence, I knew my job depended on judging not just what was hot now, but what the kids would be listening to in six months' time over their bonfires of draft cards and brassieres.

"It's nothing personal, I'm just kind of burned out on sensitive folk singers," I said. "If I hear one more Joan Baez sermon, I'll jump off a bridge. Besides, I think the trend is fading. I heard Dylan's even playing an electric guitar."

"But this girl is incredible," Andre said earnestly. "I've never heard anything like her. She may not look like much in that photo, but she's the grooviest thing in the world onstage."

I looked at the picture again. The girl was in her early twenties, with long black hair parted in the middle. She had heavy eyebrows and wore dark lipstick. Her face was pleasantly round, and her black sleeveless dress showed pudgy upper arms. There was an appealing black-and-white starkness to her, in direct contrast to the multicolored psychedelia around us.

I checked my watch. The girl's first set began in fifteen minutes inside the Human Bean, the city's trendiest coffeehouse, which is why Andre dragged me down here. I sighed. "Okay, Andre, you win. I'll check her out. But she better be the grooviest thing in the world, or you owe me a nickel bag and a date with that receptionist of yours." It was a time when everything seemed alive, and not just because of all the acid we were taking. The very air rippled with possibility, laced with an energy to which we all contributed, and from which we all partook. And on that night, the streets were even more filled than usual with tie-dyed shirts, bell-bottoms, dilated pupils, and the sense of impending destiny. So what happened shouldn't have been that surprising.

The Human Bean--a tiny room packed with round tables and wooden chairs, a mahogany bar across one wall, and a shallow stage along the opposite one--smelled of java and grass. Multicolored shirts glowed in the black lights, and strobes flickered in the corners. The face of Jimi Hendrix, as big as a Volkswagen, watched beneficently from a wall mural behind the bar. In front of the small stage, several kids sat cross-legged and swayed to music only they heard, or that was contained in the joints they passed around.

Someone handed one to me as we settled in at our table, and I took a sociable toke. Andre did likewise, and I ordered a beer and a bag of chips to offset the munchies I always got if I even looked sideways at marijuana. As the waitress returned with our order, the room grew dark and the stage lights came up.

The crowd applauded as the performer walked to the straight-backed chair placed at center stage. Just as in the Polaroid, she wore a short black sleeveless dress, black boots, and big earrings. She dramatically tossed her long hair behind her shoulders, arranged a capo on her guitar, and finally looked out at the audience with a mischievous little grin.

"They call me Patience," she said seriously as she settled into the chair. Her voice was deep and full, with an unmistakable Southern twang. "Do you know why? Because I've got a lot of it. But be careful." Then she smiled, and something seemed to radiate from her directly into me, like an electrical cord plugged into an outlet. "That's a lot of patience to lose."

The crowd woozily cheered. Then she strummed her guitar and began to sing.

The songs she performed weren't important. The essential thing was that this slightly overweight dark-eyed chick had me, and the whole audience, riveted. In all my years as a passable musician, then as a much better talent scout, I had never experienced anything like it. Not Elvis, not the Stones, not even the Beatles commanded attention to this degree. On an emotional level the performance left me and everyone else drained. But despite this, I noticed two things about Patience.

One was that after her initial comments she hardly spoke to the audience or even acknowledged it. She stayed superfocused on her music.

The other was that despite the cramped, overheated and underventilated club, she did not sweat.

Fauvette's eyebrows rose. "She didn't sweat? How close were you sitting?"

He smiled with the wistfulness of recalled youth. "Ah, you should get out more. The best music is always found in places without air conditioning, where the heat makes you want to undress and the music makes you want to dance."

"I guess I'm sheltered," she said with a wry grin. "But you could really tell she wasn't sweating?"

"Yeah. It was strange enough I still remember it. Anyway, after the show...."

...I knocked on the dressing room door. I was so exhausted I could barely walk, but since I depended on commissions and signing bonuses, I also had a serious work ethic. "Hello?" I said, stifling a yawn, and pushed the door open without waiting for an answer.

I stopped in the doorway. Patience, naked except for a black towel wrapped around hair still wet from the shower, sat with her feet propped on an upside-down trash can. The only light came from scented candles. The dressing room was so tiny her toes almost touched my shins, but like most kids of that time and place, she wasn't the least bit self-conscious about her nudity. It was provocative only in the sense that it challenged the mores of the square world.

She blew a smoke ring from a Mexican cigarillo and regarded me coolly. "Hello," she said in the same throaty drawl.

"Would you like me to close the door?" I asked.

She shrugged. "If it makes you feel less...vulnerable." Then she smiled, cold amusement twinkling in her eyes.

I managed to shut the door behind me, then handed her a business card. "Hi. I caught your show tonight and --" Another yawn struck me. "Sorry, for some reason I'm just beat. Anyway, I really dug it, I thought you were outstanding. Do you have a manager?"

She turned the card over in her fingers. Her nails were painted a shade of dark magenta. "I don't have much to manage. What there is, I can handle." She took another drag on the cigarillo. I was fairly used to being around naked girls--that's why I originally got into music, after all--so I kept my eyes on her strictly from her neck up. Finally she said, "So you want to make me a star, is that it?"

Despite her apparent youth, she had the demeanor of someone older and much shrewder. I mentally shifted from my usual "naïve young chick" spiel to the one I used on other professionals. "No, only the public can do that. But I think I can make you and me some money, and would love to get you into a studio as soon as possible. Do you have demos of any of your songs?"

She stubbed out the cigarillo in an ashtray on the floor, put her feet down, and sat forward until her breasts touched her knees. "I'm not completely sure what I do can be captured on vinyl."

"It can with the right producer," I said, and yawned again. "You could be the next Joan Baez, or even the next Dylan." And I yawned again.

She smiled. "Tired?"

"Very. Your show just sucked all the life out of me. In a good way, of course," I added with a laugh.

She slowly shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I'm really not interested. Music is just sort of a minor obsession for me right now. A kind of experiment." She lightly rested her fingers on the strings of her guitar, propped next to the chair. "But I'll tell you a secret. The first time I saw myself in the mirror holding a guitar was the first time I was able to stand what I saw there in a very long time." She looked back up at me and smiled. "No amount of money or success can really compete with that feeling. Can it?"

Oh, God, I thought, an artiste. If I hadn't been so tired I might have been more persuasive, pointing out that even Arlo Guthrie and Pete Seeger had to eat, but I wasn't up to it at that moment. "Will you keep my card, then? In case you change your mind?"

She nodded. "Yes. But I won't."

I turned to leave, and stopped in the doorway. "Miss...Patience, I just want to say in all sincerity, I think you are a phenomenal performer. I attend concerts for a living, and yours was the best, most intense one I've ever seen. Even if you don't sign with me, I'll still be a fan."

She looked at me oddly, as if this had unaccountably moved her. "Thank you. That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me."

"My pleasure," I said. And I meant it.

Two days later I sat in an exclusive French restaurant, the only guy in the place with hair past my ears, and examined the folder of information that the record label's private detective dug up on Miss high-and-mighty Patience. There wasn't much, and it didn't take long to look it over.

According to the lease on her house, her full name was Patience Bolade. A year earlier, she'd taken some poetry classes at the local university, and worked in an off-campus bookstore. The most amazing thing was that she started performing music in public within two weeks of purchasing her guitar, only four months ago. Wow.

And that was all. He found no information on her family, or where she went to high school, or anything. She simply appeared out of nowhere.

The only other bit was that, in the "emergency contact" blank on her lease, she had written the name Prudence Bolade, but provided no phone number. He said that coincidentally, there was an old country song about two sisters with the very same names, who both died for the love of a scoundrel.

I found the song he mentioned, an old standard recorded in 1957 by Slack Whitside, the Singing Switchman. The album cover showed him seated on a train's cowcatcher with a guitar and a phony gap-toothed smile. Apparently he was as much a comedian as a singer, but he performed the song in question completely straight.

"There was two girls by the name of Bolade
No prettier sisters God never made
One dark like midnight, one bright like the sun
But between them a hate to make Satan hisself run..."

The rest of the song, based on a true story from his native Tennessee, told how Patience Bolade killed herself when she found her lover in her sister's arms. Then Patience's ghost returned, to drive Prudence to suicide. But their restless spirits still haunted the night, and the song concluded with a warning:

"Listen to what I tell you, son, every word is true
The sisters haunt the night, and might fight over you
Nothing can steal your soul and stamp it in the mud
Like being the new play-pretty for the girls with games of blood."

Fauvette said, "I've heard that song. Something about 'She put a bullet through her broken heart'?"

He nodded. "'She put a bullet through her broken heart, to spite the ones betraying her/But her soul, seeking the Pearly Gates, found her hatred was delaying her.'"

"My mama used to sing me that," she said, looking down at a spot on the bar. She grabbed a cloth and polished it clean. "I hadn't thought about it in a long time."

"I take it your mama's not around anymore?" he said sympathetically.

She shook her head, then smiled. "Ah, but that's a dull story. Yours is fascinating. So what did you do?"

“I found out that Patience only played the Human Bean one night a week....”

...and no one at the club had any idea what she did with the rest of her time. She also had no listed phone number. So late that afternoon I drove down her street, parked my car at the derelict church next door, and sneaked through the weed-infested cemetery to get a better look at her house.

I saw no sign of life, or even recent habitation. I scotch-taped a Xerox reproduction of the song lyrics to the front door, along with the admonition to meet me at the Human Bean that night.

I waited at the coffeehouse, breathed its pot-saturated air, and ate five packs of Twinkies, two bags of chips and all the peanuts the waitress could find. And at sunset, just as the college crowd began to drift in, I looked up and saw Patience Bolade next to me.

“Hi,” I said, and stood. She watched me with a neutral expression. “Sorry, if I don’t stand when a lady approaches my table, my mother turns in her grave. Would you like to sit down?”

She wore almost the same outfit, a simple black sleeveless dress and big dangly earrings that looked like Christmas tree ornaments. She sat in the offered chair, back straight, hands in her lap.

I lit a cigarette--a regular one--and offered the pack to her, but she shook her head. “I never smoke...cigarettes,” she said, and after a moment added, “So how did you find out about me?”

“Well, to be honest, I used a private detective.”

She nodded. “I see.” She closed her eyes and her shoulders sagged a little. “I guess I should be relieved. I knew it couldn’t last, that if I did it long enough, someone would notice. Still, I hate to see it end.”

“See what end?”

She gestured at the coffeehouse. “This. This...sanctuary. In the time I’ve been playing here, no one has had to die. If I write the songs well enough, and perform them with enough honesty, I can live off the energy of the crowd. It’s such a relief not to have to be--” and she shuddered at the thought “--bloodthirsty. You have no idea.”

“Apparently not,” I agreed. “Just what are you talking about?”

She stared at me. “I...what are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about signing you to my label.”

She sat very still for a long moment. “Wait...what do you think that song means? ‘The Girls with Games of Blood’?”

I shrugged. “Hell, honey, I don’t think it means a thing. You want to name yourself after a dead girl, dress in black, and sing songs about how miserable you are, that’s great. It might even start a trend. All I know is, your effect on a crowd is amazing, and I think you, and me, and my company can all make an awful lot of money.”

She leaned close to me, and her full lips turned up with just the hint of a smile. “You’re serious, aren’t you? That’s all you’re interested in.”

“It’s my job.”

Now she really grinned. “Yes. It surely is. But I’m afraid my previous answer has to stand. What I do can’t be broken down into vinyl grooves or magnetic tape strips.” She stood and offered her hand. “Thank you for your kind words. I wish you luck.”

I took her hand. It was ice-cold. Then she left, swallowed by the hazy night. And neither I nor anyone else ever saw Patience Bolade again.

The story finished, he watched Fauvette for a reaction. The girl’s face was impassive, but neither amused nor doubtful. He’d expected to be gently mocked, as he was every other time he told the story. “So,” he said after a moment, “what do you think?”

“I think you were probably well shed of her,” Fauvette said.

He looked at his watch, sighed, and put some bills on the counter. “The Next Big Thing waits for no man.”

Thanks for listing to me...Foovette?"

"FAW-vette," she corrected.

"Fauvette. Hope to see you again soon."

He stood and walked out of the empty bar. When he opened the door, afternoon sunlight blasted in, overcoming the air-conditioning with no effort. Fauvette instinctively winced and looked away, even though she knew by now that sunlight was nothing to fear. Old habits died hard, and hers were older than most.

She bent to retrieve a fallen stack of napkins, which took several moments after she dropped them a second time. When she stood the door opened again and a woman carrying a guitar case was silhouetted against the sun, her long hair swaying as she looked around.

"You're letting out the air conditioning," Fauvette called.

"Oh. Sorry," the woman said, and stepped inside. She walked to the bar, propped the guitar case against it, and climbed onto a stool. "Is the manager in?"

Fauvette started to answer, then stopped. The woman appeared to be in her early twenties, with long black hair parted in the middle. She had heavy eyebrows and wore dark lipstick. Her face was pleasantly round, and a low-cut peasant blouse showed white cleavage and pudgy upper arms. And despite the heat outside, she showed no signs of sweat.

The woman frowned uneasily at the scrutiny. "Is something wrong?"

"Did you see the man who just left? In the baby-blue leisure suit?"

"No. Why?"

Fauvette bit her lip thoughtfully before speaking. "This is a weird question, but is your name by any chance... Patience?"

"Yes," the woman said guardedly. "Do we know each other?"

Fauvette leaned her elbows on the bar and rested her chin on her hands. For a long moment the two women looked at each other. What they saw went beyond their mutual gender, and into the realm of unmistakable recognition that comes when one vampire recognizes another.

"Do you believe," Fauvette said at last, "in absolutely out-of-this-world, mind-boggling coincidence?"