

JUST RELEASED:

NEVER UNTIL NOW

by Joanne McLaughlin

Chloe Hart can't escape her birthright. Not the celebrity spotlight cast on her as daughter of the much-mourned Sebastian and Emilie de la Coeur, rock monarchs of the Court of Cruelty. Certainly not the swath of horror her father has unleashed. If she stands loyal to her vampire heritage, does she betray all she cherishes?

Sample the sequel to "Never Before Noon," now available in print and ebook:



Chapter One

Switzerland, November 2011

All my senses are on fire. I am aflame with a poison that burns from within. Pain tears at my limbs, rips through my ears and nose and eyes. I face east purposely, to speed awareness of the dawn, to own the anguish and embrace the irrevocable truth that no antidote exists for this venom inside me.

I squint through the rays of freshly risen sun that infiltrate my corner of the railway station, just enough to observe the platform across from this bench I dropped onto uncomfortably an hour ago. Recorded announcements in French and German herald the train's arrival for no one but me, given the hour and the isolated locale. Brakes shriek, wheels spark against steel; cars slow to a stop on the far track. I have mere minutes to board. I can make it if I hurry. I drag considerable baggage behind me, hoist it up two steps; wrestle it into an empty compartment and onto the seat next to me. I close the door and hope for quiet, some calm, finally. I must sleep. I've been awake for days.

A conductor slides the compartment door open. "Bonjour," he says, but does not look up from the scanner he holds. "Billet, se vous plait. Fahrkarte, bitte."

I have no ticket. If I play this right, I'll have no need for one.

"Bonjour, monsieur. My French is not the best," I lie, in a fatigue-roughened

timbre that sounds sultry even to me. “My German is worse. English, please?” I brush a finger across the back of his hand. He raises his eyes to me, shocked by the contact yet not displeased by it.

“Pouvez-vous m’aider?” I whisper, seeking his assistance, thumbing the skin of his soft, not-quite-middle-aged knuckles, conveying my message in a manner he feels more than hears. “Je m’appelle Chloe. Your name is Paul, yes?”

He glances down at his nametag uncertainly, swallows hard, his Adam’s apple pronounced against the pale skin of his neck. “I can help you, yes, miss. Un billet simple, that is to say, one-way to Zurich? It is the terminus of this trip, perhaps a three-hour journey, with many connecting routes possible.”

“Oui, Zurich,” I say, lifting his hand to my lips, “but I don’t want to buy a ticket, and I don’t want to show you my passport. No one need know but us, mon amour.”

Pupils dilate in his watery blue eyes. He fixes on my mouth and every place I put it, watches as I suck on each finger, as I run my tongue along his thumb then tease the graying blond hair on his forearm. He witnesses the moment at which my teeth sink into his wrist, just a shallow wound, a little taste, just enough to ignite his desire, to ensure he remains in my thrall through this trip. My green eyes flash in his, the red wig I wear reflects back at me. He stares, not fully believing what he sees, not fully comprehending anything beyond a longing that I continue. Were I not so exhausted, I might put a little more into this seduction, maybe take him in my hand to reward him, pleasure him for his service, isn’t that what I’ve been taught? This morning, he is destined to be shortchanged, poor man.

A moan distracts us both. I ease away from Paul’s vein, thank him, press a fierce kiss to his lips, nibble a bit until he opens them to taste my tongue as it glides suggestively along his before I bid him au revoir. “You should take a minute to compose yourself,” I urge, pointing to his obvious erection. He inhales raggedly, adjusts his trousers, backs out of the compartment into the corridor, turns in the direction he came, oblivious to everything but the memory of my touch.

The man lying on the seat beside me, hemorrhaging, has escaped Paul’s notice. I lower the door’s privacy shade and reach over Will to tug the cord on the window blind, to shut out the sunlight that wants to seep in.

Energized by the familiar scents of spilled blood and sexual arousal, my companion shifts awake, struggles to sit. “Juliette, who is Chloe?” Will licks my cheek like a big sloppy puppy, leans in and reaches for me, his own stiffening cock guiding him like a compass needle pointing north.

“Somebody I knew a long, long time ago.” Who’s to say it isn’t true?

Will pulls me onto his lap, settles his head against my shoulder, dozes off again, amazingly serene for a man who should by rights be dead. My eyelids flutter closed. I long for some of his peace, and to be, instead, in Jackson’s arms.

* * * *

His fever startles me awake. We are two hours into our trip, and I am saturated with Will’s sweat. I feel it through the leather of my jacket, which sticks to him even as I try to maneuver away from his chest. The heat rising from him is stifling, makes me want to retch. He has lost so much blood; I have overindulged my new appetites. Fresh air beckons, rushing against the side of the train, but I dare not open the window, dare not experiment here with the before-noon sun’s new potential for toasting my epidermis.

Like him, I am wearier, weaker, as if a tap has been turned and I am draining, drop-by-drop, from this self I call Chloe Hart into some other receptacle. Perhaps back into my original self, Clothilde Juliette de la Coeur, princess of the rock-and-roll realm, spawn of the now-departed Emilie and Sebastian de la Coeur, musical monarchs of the Court of Cruelty—my parents, the vampires. Their progressive-rock band sang of medieval torture and misery, and also of those opiates of the people, religion and love and hope.

Correction: They still sing about torture, et cetera. Sebastian and Emilie are not dead, not truly, reports of her cancer fueling their suicides notwithstanding. These days, the world sees them as a couple of second-rate Swedish musicians fronting a Court of Cruelty tribute band, Matins and Vespers, though Lord knows that’s not all they’re involved in. Illegal commerce in weapons and organs, human trafficking maybe, I wouldn’t put anything past their rechristened selves, Katarina and Teppan Nilsson. Well within their power to arrange, if not participate in directly, were the deaths of one art gallery owner and four women who carried my father’s dead babies.

I’ll give them the benefit of the doubt regarding two victims of a tour bus bombed at Castle de la Coeur, the family fortress. As for their abducted-and-assaulted only daughter, the less said about her, the better. I am an accident of birth, apparently, a freak of nature even by vampire standards. Inexplicably begotten, misbegotten nonetheless. The responsibility for me lies squarely with them, as do the lies they have told me all my life.

Just thinking about Teppan Nilsson, the arrogant blond Adonis my father now styles himself as, makes me shudder. I am here because of my vain, impetuous sire; here in a rail car with a virtual stranger whose survival much longer is hardly assured. I should never have gone to Edinburgh, should never have listened to Teppan. Ought not to have allowed what occurred in that hotel room, or, rather, what did not occur. Either version seems a perversion.

No, wait, that lets me off the hook. I asked for this, didn't I? Such a coward, Chloe. You demanded a share in your vampire birthright. You got what you wanted.

So what am I running from except my own bad choices? Even intoxicated by the blood, I knew it wasn't smart to let Will follow me from Edinburgh to Paris. Instead of scaring him off, I've sucked blood from him and screwed him until he can barely remember who Will Baumann is, let alone care about C.J. Hart's existential crisis. I all but carried him across the Swiss border. How much longer before I take it too far? Before I lose my fiancé, my art gallery, everything I treasure, and to prove what? That I can handle whatever challenges my father throws down?

More important, isn't it, to prove that I won't let this vampire self obliterate the human me? If I value everything I've been until now, and Aspect Ratio and Jackson—dear God, Jackson, what must you be thinking—don't I have to turn back?

Will shivers, the sweats of his fever giving way to chills. I wrap him in the blanket we swiped off a hotel bed somewhere in France, clutch him to my side to get him warmer. Rock him to comfort him, though he is almost surely unconscious and unable to be comforted. I'm the one being soothed, through a searing ache that rips through my gut and pounds in my head and threatens to tear the soul from my body. If death doesn't feel like this, I'll be surprised. Who expires first this morning, Will or me, might well be a toss-up. Have I dragged us so far that retreat is no longer an option? I'll never know until I try.

Time to make a run for it. I won't let Will die, even if it kills me.

I stand unsteadily, loop my courier bag around my neck, pull Will upright, wedge my body under his armpit, and boost him and the blood-dampened blanket off the seat. I half-push, half-pull him to the passage between train cars, to the steps that would lead to a platform if there were one. I pull the corner of the blanket up and over my head, down across my forehead. I close my eyes against the sun and jump.