



Nightfall

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Description: When a desperate scientist injected her with a serum developed to kill vampires, Jillian Conrad's blood became death-at-first-taste to the undead. But this also meant a death sentence for her...and time is running out.

Declan Reyes, Jill's dhampyr protector and former lover, contacts a vampire-hunting friend who brings them to a secret research laboratory, one with the potential to develop a cure based on a sample of Jill's poisoned blood.

Declan trusts his friend. And Jill trusts Declan. And one day very soon, she holds tightly to the hope that they can be together without any deadly obstacles standing in their way. The only question is, will either of them survive that long?

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CHAPTER ONE

“You smell so good. What perfume are you wearing?”

In my previous life, all of eight short days ago, I would have taken the woman’s comment as a compliment. I had a variety of designer perfumes and body sprays I’d collected over the years and took pride in smelling as delicious as possible on a daily basis.

But I wasn’t wearing any perfume tonight.

She looked normal enough. Thirties, brunette, athleisure outfit, a definite soccer-mom vibe. I’d noticed her earlier, moving down the aisles of the mostly vacant grocery store.

She didn’t have a shopping basket like I did. She didn’t carry a handbag.

No. She was definitely stalking me.

I twisted a finger through my long black hair. “Yeah, it’s called Poison. Ever heard of it?”

“It’s amazing,” she breathed. As she took another step closer to me, her light gray eyes shifted to black.

I’d been hoping I was wrong about her.

I wasn't wrong.

"Look, I'd love to chat," I said, my voice tighter now. "But I'm in a bit of a hurry."

She glanced down at my basket, taking note of the contents: wash clothes, diapers, baby bottles, baby formula. Kind of a theme, really.

"Where's your baby?" she asked.

"Not here," I told her.

"Clearly." She laughed at that, and the chilling sound made the fine hair on my arms stand up. "How lovely, though. I had a baby once, a long, long time ago."

"Great," I replied, now eyeing the exit. "Anyway, I'm going to be on my way now."

I knew it wasn't going to be that easy, but it was worth a try. These purchases were essential, so, first, I headed toward the self-checkout, quickly scanning and bagging the baby stuff.

Soccer-Mom followed me. Because, of course, she did.

"What's your baby's name?" she asked. There was an eerie flatness to her tone now, and her eyes were fully black under the fluorescent lights of the store.

"Good question. Currently, she doesn't have an official name. I've mostly been calling her Baby." I shrugged a shoulder. "Maybe it can be an ode to Dirty Dancing? It's one of my favorite movies of all time."

"How odd that you haven't named your baby yet," Soccer-Mom said.

“To be fair, she’s not really my baby. But I promised her father that I’d keep her safe.”

“Where is her father now?”

“Dead,” I said simply, ignoring the shiver that went through me at saying it out loud.

“Oh, dear,” Soccer-Mom replied. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

The memory of Matthias’s deep voice echoed in my mind.

“Promise me you’ll look after my daughter. Don’t let any harm come to her.”

I’d made that promise. And I’d damn well keep that promise.

“Actually, to be honest, I’ve been playing with the name Sara,” I said.

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“That’s a lovely name,” she agreed.

I didn’t share with her that it meant “princess,” and that I thought it a fitting name for the daughter of a king.

I grabbed the plastic bag full of baby supplies and turned a tight smile toward the woman. I’d stalled for as long as I could. “Anyway, great talking to you. Have a lovely evening.”

I headed for the store exit and glanced at the clock above the door. Declan told me he’d be here at nine-thirty to pick me up. But it was still early, still ten minutes to go.

He had the baby—well, Sara—with him, and had insisted that he give me a short break from playing the part of Insta-Mommy, a position I had very little experience with, or interest in, before a few short days ago. But I was doing my best for Matthias’s daughter. My own safety had officially taken a backseat to hers.

And I had to admit, the thought of someone like Declan Reyes looking after an infant all on his own for a couple hours was incredibly amusing to me, like a sitcom titled “The Assassin and the Baby.” Amusing enough that I finally agreed to give him the chance while I took care of a few chores.

Soccer-Mom followed me outside.

I’d hoped she wouldn’t. But here we were. This was going to end one of two ways, and I was hoping very much for door number one. That was the door with the least amount of blood behind it.

“I know what you are,” I said to her evenly.

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

“And what am I?” she asked.

“A vampire.”

Soccer-Mom’s lips stretched into a cold smile, and I finally saw the razor-sharp tips of her fangs. “What do you know of vampires?” she asked.

“Enough. I’ve had a bit of a crash course when it comes to your kind,” I told her.

“Literally, actually.”

“If that’s so, you seem so calm. You really shouldn’t be.”

“I’m not calm at all,” I replied. “I’m not a big fan of getting bit.”

“You’ve been tasted before?” she asked.

I nodded, repressing my shudder as best as I could. “A few times. I’m starting to lose count.”

The vampire approached slowly, but I knew she could move much quicker than that, so I didn’t bother to attempt to run away from her. She swept the long hair back from my shoulder to study my throat, which still bore the fading marks from my handful of fang-induced injuries.

“Are you a blood servant?” she asked.

“No. I’m nobody’s servant.”

“Then what are you and what makes you smell so good?” she whispered, her face drawing closer to mine. The scent of my blood had quickly become her entire focus.

“I’ve been called many things lately,” I said, clutching the handle of my shopping bag, and tensing up as she brushed her mouth against my throat.

Monsters like her had absolutely no respect for personal space.

“Oh? Such as?” she murmured.

I felt the tip of her fangs graze me, and I braced myself to accept that door number two was the only way this would be going down tonight.

“Death,” I told her. The warning was clear in my voice, but she was too far gone to hear me now.

Before the vampire managed to pierce my skin, she suddenly lurched back from me.

Declan stood behind her now, with a handful of the vampire’s hair in his grip, and he tossed her to the side. As she scrambled to return to her chosen prey of the evening, he drew a silver stake out from beneath his long black coat.

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“Meeting new friends, Jill?” he asked.

“Everywhere I go,” I agreed dryly. “You know me. I’m a people person.”

“Who are you?” the vampire snarled at Declan, her black-eyed gaze moving over all heavily-muscled, six-foot-four of him—from his scarred face, black eye patch, and leather duster, to his steel-tipped black boots. And, of course, the deadly weapon in his grip.

Definitely not the boy next door.

“Death,” he told her.

“I just said that,” I muttered.

“I heard,” Declan replied.

The vampire ignored him and instead lunged at me, hands extended like claws, her lips peeled back from her razor-sharp teeth.

There was a flash of silver as Declan landed his killing blow. The vampire let out a hollow screech as the wound in the center of her chest ignited and the fire swiftly expanded over her entire body. A moment later, she turned to a pile of ash that scattered away to nothing at all with the cool evening breeze.

“Thank you,” I said, as my heart slowly returned to its normal pace.

“You’re welcome.” Declan sheathed his weapon. “You’re supposed to be keeping a low profile. How’d that happen?”

I shrugged a shoulder. “It’s after sunset, and...well, she liked how I smelled.”

His jaw tightened, and he raised his dark gaze to mine. “Yes. Your scent is...distracting.”

My breath caught. Declan hadn’t looked at me like this since he’d been forcibly given a final dose of behavior-modifying serum—a serum meant to permanently repress his dark side.

AKA his vampire side.

The result was a dhampyr—half-human, half-vampire—who was now perfectly in control of his emotions, with no uncontrollable urges. None at all. And this included the good urges that, for most people, were essential to life itself, like desire, passion, and lust.

But that look, that edge of predatory hunger in his gaze for a split second before it vanished, made me wonder if there might be some wiggle room in the permanent-serum rules and regulations. This wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, in my personal opinion.

When I took a step closer to him, he tensed.

“Car. Now.” Declan’s tone was sharp. “We need to talk.”

Considering that I wasn’t sure if Soccer-Mom had been at the grocery store alone, or if any of her vampire clan—and a vampire always had a clan—might be lurking nearby, I immediately did as he suggested, even though I wasn’t thrilled with his

commanding tone.

Once in the car, I turned to check the backseat, expecting to find Sara there. I'd purchased a baby seat for her three days ago, after escaping from the military compound where they'd attempted to use me as a poisoned lab rat.

But there was no baby seat. And there was no baby.

"Where's Sara?" I asked, my chest tightening.

Declan frowned. "You decided on a name?"

"Answer the question, Declan. If she's not with you, then is she?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about." He started the car, then gripped the steering wheel as he began to drive out of the grocery store parking lot. "We spoke about this already, so this shouldn't come as a complete surprise to you, Jill."

My heart clenched. "She's gone."

He nodded. "Yes."

"Where is she?" I demanded.

"She's safe. Completely safe, I promise you that. I've arranged for her to stay with a guardian, where she'll be out of harm's way."

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My mind reeled as I processed what he was telling me. Sara was gone, he'd taken her somewhere else this evening while I'd been shopping.

He was right, we had discussed this before—the possibility of finding Sara a safe and secure location where she'd be looked after by trustworthy people. I'd even agreed with him that it was the best decision going forward.

But it was a decision I wanted to be a part of when the time came.

“You should have told me this was happening,” I said as calmly as I could, even though my throat had become painfully tight. “I would have come with you. Where is she right now?”

His attention remained fixed on the road. “It's best that you don't know her location.”

I shook my head. “I need to know.”

Finally, Declan flicked a glance at me. His expression held no guilt, no shame, only a steely determination in his single gray eye. “The baby is safe where she is now, that's all I can tell you. She was both a distraction and a burden, and you know it. To keep her with us another day would have put her in unnecessary danger. We have too many other problems to deal with right now.”

“I get that,” I growled. “I do. But why won't you tell me where she is? I promised Matthias I'd take care of her. It was his dying wish.”

“I don't give a damn what he wished for.” He hissed out a breath. “You want to know

why I'm not going to tell you where she is? It's because some vampires have the ability to get in your head, to manipulate your thoughts. While I know you're fully dedicated to keeping that baby safe, had a vampire like that cornered you, questioned you on Matthias's daughter's location, and asked you to hand her over, you would have done it in a heartbeat. And you would have hated yourself for the rest of your life for it."

I began to argue with him that I wouldn't have done any such thing, but my words fell away.

I'd already experienced a vampire's mind control firsthand, only a few short days ago. Matthias himself had gotten into my head and had psychically influenced me into a sense of serenity while in his presence. He'd wanted to test himself by being close to a woman whose blood was laced with the deadly and enticing poison specifically created to end his life. And "test himself" meant sleeping with me while successfully resisting the desire to bite me.

And, I had to admit, at the time I'd felt more than my share of desire for the vampire king, a real "lust at first sight" kind of thing, and I still wasn't sure that was only because of his vampiric influence over me. Still, I'd told him to stop before he'd gone much further than a passionate kiss and a little heavy petting. And, thankfully, he'd stopped, offended that I'd called him out on his shady seduction attempt. Shockingly, no one else had ever put the brakes on when given the opportunity to share the vampire king's bed.

I hadn't mentioned anything about this experience to Declan yet. There were a few other things I hadn't mentioned to the dhampyr, as well, that had been weighing heavily on me, while I tried to determine the right time and place. But this moment was definitely neither.

"Jill?" Declan prompted when I'd gone deadly silent, my hands fisted in my lap.

“You can hate me if you want to, but I stand by my decision.”

“I don’t hate you,” I replied.

“You don’t?” He actually sounded surprised by this.

“No, of course not. You’re right.”

“I am?”

“It kills me to admit it, but, yes, you were right to do this, and you’re right to keep her location a secret, even from me.” I hissed out a breath. “Do you swear to me that she’s safe?”

“On my life,” he replied. “I swear it.”

I’d known the dhampyr for a single week of my twenty-eight years of life, but I’d quickly come to trust him—even this emotionally-dampened version of him—more than anyone else I’d ever met. I hated that I hadn’t known his plans for tonight, but I understood why he’d done it and why he wouldn’t reveal Sara’s location.

“Fine,” I said softly. “But next time, please give me a heads up so it’s not such a surprise, okay?”

He nodded. “Agreed.”

“Now what?” I asked.

Declan was quiet for a moment as the streetlights blurred past us. “I got a message from an old associate of mine. A hunter named Jackson Gale. We trained together back when we were barely out of our teens. He’s here in the city and I’ve arranged to

meet him in an hour. He was already aware of the Nightshade program, so I think he might be worth talking to.”

Having blood that could kill a vampire might sound like an excellent built-in defense mechanism—like a porcupine’s quills or a squid’s ink. And, for the most part, it was. But Nightshade was volatile, and my body had tried to reject it every step of the way. I’d endured countless waves of pain, each of which I’d been certain would kill me. They hadn’t, but there were some bumpy moments along the way when I’d literally wished for death. Becoming death incarnate had been a truly humbling experience, and not one I’d wish even on my worst enemy.

I’d been lured with the promise of a blood cleanser by an evil, deceptive woman named Dr. Monica Gray. But the injection had instead been a fusing serum and had bonded my blood cells to the Nightshade, making my blood a permanent and unnaturally shade of dark crimson. No pain since then, but I had it on good authority that it was a temporary solution, and not exactly the happy ending I’d been searching for.

A happy ending would be a cure.

A happy ending would be to see my sister and my nieces again.

A happy ending would be the chance at a normal life, one with a future that didn’t include death and mayhem.

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A happy ending would include Declan in that life, without anyone trying to kill us.

“Sounds promising,” I said slowly.

“I’ll drop you off at the motel first,” Declan replied.

“No,” I replied. “If he has information that might help me, then I should be there too.”

For a moment, I thought he’d argue with me.

“If you like,” he said.

“I like very much,” I agreed, then settled back in my seat.

A chance to get more answers about my current issues and also meet someone from Declan’s past. While still unsettled about Sara being under someone else’s care now, and recovering from a brush with a vampire’s fangs, I knew I wouldn’t give up this opportunity for anything.

CHAPTERTWO

We parked outside the dive bar, next to a long line of motorcycles. A few people wearing a whole lot of leather hung around outside in a cloud of cigarette smoke. A few of the men eyed my dhampyr companion without a shred of friendliness as we moved past them and entered through the front doors. Declan didn’t seem to notice. Or, more likely, he didn’t give a damn.

Inside the small bar, it was almost too dim to see much other than a wooden bar top, behind which was a wall lined with liquor bottles. A couple people sat at the bar with glasses of draft beer in front of them. The shells from discarded peanuts, a gift-with-purchase for the local boozehounds, littered the floor by their feet.

“Nice place,” I said dryly. “Come here often?”

“Every time I’m in Los Angeles,” Declan replied.

“How often is that?”

“Far too often.” He scanned the interior of the bar, then nodded. “He’s here.”

I followed him deeper into the bar, past a pool table surrounded by a few players. The crack of the cue hitting the balls made me tense up. To the left were a few dart boards, with small, sharp weapons being violently hurled at them.

Sure, they were just darts. But anything that pointy made me extremely nervous these days.

A man watched our approach from his seat at a black vinyl booth, the edge of his mouth turned up into what I assumed was a welcoming smile. As he slid out and got to his feet to greet us, I could see he was almost as tall as Declan, every bit as muscular, but fair-haired and blue-eyed.

He made me think of a military tank. An attractive, blond military tank who slayed vampires for a living.

“Declan Reyes,” he drawled as that grin of his grew wider. He stretched out his hand. “It’s been a long damn time.”

“It has.” Declan grasped his hand. “Jackson Gale, this is Jillian. Jillian Conrad.”

Jackson’s gaze flicked to me. “Well, well. So this is the woman with the vamp-killing blood. Good to meet you, Jillian. Grab a seat.”

I got into the booth, and Declan took a seat next to me, and across from Jackson.

“First, drinks, and a toast,” Jackson said. He had a pitcher of beer already on the table, and he poured three glasses from it. He raised his glass. “To doing what has to be done, and spilling the blood that needs to be spilled.”

“Always,” Declan agreed, clinking his glass with the other man’s. He glanced at me. “It’s an old toast.”

“I’ll take your word on that,” I said, and took a sip of the beer. It was room temperature, but there was alcohol in it, and that made it good enough for me.

“I’m glad Declan brought you along,” Jackson said with a nod. “Get to put a face with the reputation.”

“What reputation is that?” I asked.

“That you single-handedly took out the vampire king. That the infamous King Matthias is dust because he got a taste of you.”

I shot a look at Declan. “Did you tell him that?”

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He shook his head. “No. How did you know that, Jackson?”

Jackson explained. “The vamp community is in a tizzy about Jillian here paying their great leader a visit, sparking a full-on uprising when Matthias didn’t kill her on sight. A couple blood servants got their hands on some security footage from your dad’s research facility that showed them enough to make an educated guess on Matthias’s fate. By your reaction, I’m guessing they’re right.”

“You are,” Declan replied. “He’s ashes in the wind.”

Jackson raised his glass. “Good riddance. Of course, now the only problem is that pesky brother of his potentially reappearing to take the throne that Matthias stole from him three decades ago.”

“Kristoff,” I said, the name sounding and feeling like a dark curse at the back of my throat.

He nodded. “The one and only. But, that’s a problem for another day, isn’t it?” Then he shifted his gaze to Declan. “By the way, you’re buying the next round.”

“Am I?”

“You stole some money from me.”

Declan frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“Last month, there was a small clan holed up in San Jose—two males, two females.

By the time I arrived, there was only a pile of dust left. A neighbor said he saw a scary-looking dude with an eyepatch leaving after midnight the night before. That was you, I assume?"

"Sounds right," Declan allowed. "Some rogues who'd been feeding on locals. I didn't know that was your territory."

Jackson shrugged. "Doesn't really matter to me. Just confirming it. I'll take a triple vodka as payment and we're good."

I knew Declan did this kind of thing as an occupation, but it was still unsettling to know that he put himself in danger so often and brushed it off like he was only taking out the trash.

"So what is this, the two of you?" Jackson asked, waving his index finger between us. "Can't say I've seen Declan coupled up with a babe like you in...well, ever, really."

I couldn't say my first impression was incredibly favorable toward this guy, but I'd tried my best to reserve my judgment. However, my judgy side was poking her head out and wanting to label Jackson Gale with a variety of unpleasant nicknames.

"What we are, Jackson, isn't an important topic at the moment," I told him. "But thanks for asking."

His smirk was back, and his gaze went to the dhampyr. "Are you doing her?"

My cheeks heated, and I wasn't normally the blushing type.

"Enough, Jackson," Declan said. "That isn't what I came here to talk to you about."

"You are doing her." He shook his head. "Shit. Times sure have changed since the last

time I saw you. Good for you.”

The stunned look on my face must have amused him since Jackson spread his hands. “Sorry, I’m just proud of my boy, here. Ten years ago when we spent a lot more time together, my kid sister had a huge crush on him. Like, massive and embarrassing. Declan didn’t give her the time of day, which was probably a good idea because if he’d touched Jennifer, I would have broken every bone in his body.”

“You could have tried,” Declan said, and I was surprised to hear an edge of humor to his normally flat tone. “How is Jennifer, anyway?”

Jackson’s smirk faded. “Like usual. Got herself involved with the wrong guy last year. When I freaked out on her, she disowned me and ran off with him. Haven’t seen her since. Family, am I right? Can’t live with them, can’t live without them.” A shadow crossed his expression. “Sorry, Declan. I heard that your dad’s gone.”

“You’ve heard a lot,” Declan replied.

“Only bits and pieces, but enough. Carson had his faults, no question about it, but I know he cared about you, even if he had a shitty way of showing it. May he rest in peace.”

Declan and Jackson drank to that without further comment.

I was a little less mournful when it came to Carson Reyes, Declan’s adoptive father. As the men drank, I absently played with the side of my neck, my fingers brushing against what remained of the fang marks there.

I was sure that the ones I touched, still tender, were Matthias’s. He’d bit me, knowing full well what my blood would do to him. He’d been cornered by Dr. Gray, who’d decided to use him as an unwilling sperm donor to fuel her plans for a dhampyr baby

factory. She believed a deposed vampire king with a track record of fathering a strong and healthy dhampyr baby girl—aka Sara—would be essential to her nefarious plan.

He'd chosen death instead.

Dr. Gray was also dead now, a victim of one of those dhampyr babies. A mindless, bloodthirsty monster, so very different from a dhampyr like Declan who leaned far more to the human side.

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Carson died that night as well, but not before he'd given Declan the permanent serum to restrain his vampire side. He may have been acting out of fatherly concern to some extent, but it didn't change the fact that he'd forced his will upon Declan without giving him a choice to control his own life.

I'd always hate him for that.

Jackson signaled to the waitress and ordered us more drinks, including his triple vodka.

"You said you were aware of the Nightshade project," Declan said, "before you heard what happened to Jill."

"I was." Jackson shook his head. "Damn, that went down hard with Carl Anderson in San Diego, didn't it? Sorry you got in the way of that, Jillian."

"Me too." I flinched at the name of the chemist who'd grabbed me as a hostage when he'd found himself faced with Declan's gun, just before he'd shot me full of the Nightshade formula and Declan had shot him.

Only one dead paracheimist in the world who kept the recipe entirely in his head. And only one dose of the top secret formula in existence. And here we were.

There hadn't been a single mention of what happened in the lobby of my office building that I'd found yet. Not on the news, in the newspapers, or online. It was like it never happened.

Oh, but it had. It definitely had.

Carl Anderson worked for Carson Reyes. And Carson Reyes worked for the government. And when the government wanted information locked down, especially about the real existence of vampires in the world, then apparently it stayed locked down. Tight.

Since Jackson Gale was somebody who seemed to know everything already, I didn't bother to recap any of this for him.

Surely, there was a reason he'd wanted to meet Declan, more than sharing a few drinks with an old hunting buddy. It took another pitcher of beer and Jackson regaling us with tales of his last few girlfriends—one of which was a stripper he met in Las Vegas whom he'd almost married—before something happened.

And it had nothing to do with Jackson.

A man and woman passed by our booth. They paused, glanced at each other, and then their gazes moved to me in perfect sync. The woman was blond—even blonder than I had been before my hair turned black right after the fuser bonded my blood cells to the Nightshade. She was rail thin and pretty, wearing a crocheted boho dress and multiple beaded necklaces. The man's face was gaunt, his hair jet black, and he wore a denim jacket with metal studs along the collar.

"Good evening," the woman said. "I don't think I know you. What brings you to our fine establishment tonight?"

"You own this bar?" I asked.

"We do." She hooked her arm through the man's. "I'm Olivia. This is Ian. We're very happy to welcome new patrons, especially ones as lovely as you. Aren't we,

darling?”

“We are,” Ian confirmed. His nostrils flared and I saw the chillingly familiar indication of hunger branching across his face as his gray eyes shifted to black. “Very lovely.”

“Enjoy your drinks,” Olivia said.

“Thank you, we will,” I replied tightly, as they walked away.

Declan and Jackson shared a look.

“New owners?” Declan asked.

Jackson nodded. “They killed the previous ones a few weeks ago.”

“Is that why you wanted to meet here tonight? You wanted backup?”

“Nah, I’m not sharing this contract. Sorry. It’s more of a ‘kill two birds with one stone’ sort of thing tonight for me. Plus, they have cheap beer here, no matter who the owners are. Don’t worry, I’ll take care of them. No time like the present.” He got up from the booth. “As for you two...I know someone who might be able to help you. He’s a scientist named Dr. Victor Reynolds and he used to be Anderson’s business partner until a few years ago. They had a falling out and went their own ways. But...” He tapped his temple. “The knowledge is there for him. This Nightshade, there might be a way to get it out of your blood, Jillian. If there is, Dr. Reynolds would know how. He works out of a top-secret laboratory that’s not all that far from here.”

The words “top-secret laboratory” weren’t among my favorites anymore. Not that they ever were. But I’d sat up straighter in my seat with every word he said.

Anderson's former business partner. A scientist who might know enough about the Nightshade formula to be potentially helpful.

It was a reach, sure. I knew that. But it also might be the miracle I'd been hoping for.

Before I could say anything, Declan beat me to it.

"When can we meet with him?" he asked.

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Jackson kept the vampire couple in his sights before he turned back to us. “Is tomorrow morning too early?”

Declan eyed me. “How’s that sound to you.”

I drew in a shaky breath. “Sounds like I’m meeting Dr. Reynolds tomorrow morning.”

CHAPTERTHREE

Twelve hours and a restless sleep filled with sharp-fanged nightmares later, as well as a whole lot of second-guessing about what I’d agreed to this morning, Jackson arrived at our motel room door ready to direct us to the scientist.

It was a forty-minute drive across Los Angeles to what looked like a large, run-down warehouse on the edge of the city, in the middle of a deserted neighborhood. Declan did the driving, and he parked a hundred yards away from it, shielding the car behind a Dumpster.

We exited the car and began to walk toward the building.

“You’re sure this is the right place?” I asked as I warily eyed the unfamiliar location.

“Right as rain,” Jackson replied.

I shrugged. “Doesn’t look like much.”

“Were you expecting a neon sign with an arrow that says ‘secret research laboratory here’? That would kind of defeat the purpose, wouldn’t it?”

I normally rolled right along with sarcasm, but I didn’t have the patience for it today.

“It would,” I allowed tightly.

“It’s all underground,” he explained. “The place goes twenty stories down. It looks like this on the surface to keep the riff-raff away.”

“Do they keep vampires on site here?” Declan asked, scanning the area, his eye narrowed.

Jackson smirked at him. “Of course.”

I shot him a look. “Wait. There are vampires here and nobody told me that already?”

His grin widened. “Don’t worry. I promise nobody’s going to get bit. They’re locked up nice and tight like good little guinea pigs. Which is a good idea, since most of them are kept in a starvation state so they make better test subjects.”

“That doesn’t ease my mind in the slightest,” I replied. “But thanks for giving me more nightmare fuel.”

“You’re welcome.”

Old friend of Declan’s or not, I still wasn’t a big fan of Jackson Gale yet. But I had to remember that vampire hunting was a daily—or, rather, nightly—activity for someone like him, and he could find the humor in a subject that I found utterly unfunny. Gallows humor, I supposed.

However, I would be more than happy to upgrade my first impression of him if we found some valuable information here today. This was a vampire research facility that contained a doctor who could potentially help me cleanse my blood of the Nightshade. While ominous and nightmare-inducing, it sounded far more productive than a trip to the local library.

Suck it up, Buttercup, I told myself. Let's go get you cured.

We walked around to the front of the building, and Jackson pushed open the large, metal front door, which was unlocked.

I grabbed Declan's arm before he went inside. "Can I talk to you before we go in?"

"Sure," he replied.

"Privately?"

He flicked a glance at Jackson. "Give us a minute."

"Sure, I'll be inside. Have fun." Jackson smirked at him, then entered the warehouse and closed the door behind him.

Declan turned to me. "What?"

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“You sure you really trust this guy?” I asked, watching his expression carefully.

His brow furrowed. “Yeah, I do. Jackson can be a dick sometimes, but he’s one of the good guys.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “If you say so.”

“You don’t believe me?”

I shrugged. “I’m just remembering the last experience we had in a research facility that experimented on vampires. Pardon me for being wary.”

“Yeah, I understand. I do. But Jackson...it’s hard to explain to someone who hasn’t lived the kind of life we have. I never had a brother, never had a real family, but Jackson and his sister...they were damn close to it for a few years.”

“His sister,” I said, nodding. “The one with the crush on you.”

“According to Jackson, she did.” Declan shrugged. “I never noticed.”

He had already been on his serum by then. “Of course not.”

“That was back before I earned most of my scars.” He rubbed his hand over his cheek. “And my eye...” He frowned. “Jackson was with me when that happened. We’d gotten over our heads, both cocky and thinking we were the shit. That there wasn’t a vampire strong and smart enough to take us out. This one nearly did. He took me down hard, moved so fast I couldn’t keep up. Desperation makes them

stronger, and this one was desperate as hell to survive. Tore my eye out with his fingers, and I couldn't see. There was a lot of blood. I figured that was it, the end. But Jackson was there, he handled the situation. Without him, I would have lost a hell of a lot more than an eye that day."

I didn't think I'd taken a breath during the entire story. "Declan..."

"So when you ask if I trust Jackson?" He gave me a grim look. "Yes. I trust him with my life."

I was quiet for a moment as I silently thanked the younger version of Jackson Gale for saving Declan's life. "You know, he kind of reminds me of somebody," I said.

"Who?"

I raised an eyebrow. "You."

Declan snorted humorlessly "You mean if I wasn't all scarred up and pumped full of drugs that make me into a sexless robot?"

That was definitely not what I meant. I guess I wasn't the only one dealing with a regular dose of paranoia in this roller coaster of a relationship.

"Don't say that," I told him firmly.

He shook his head. "Why not? It's true. You and I both know it. Hell, you'd probably be better off with someone like Jackson. He could protect you just as well as I can, and he definitely has no issues when it comes to his libido."

Where was this coming from all of a sudden? I wanted to say that they were both brave as hell and loyal to the people they cared about.

Now we were talking about Jackson's libido. Great.

"That's crazy talk," I told him as patiently as I could.

He shook his head. "Not crazy. Just facts."

Declan and I had been together once when he'd briefly gone off his original emotion-and-desire-repressing serum for the first time in his adult life. I still couldn't believe it, but the twenty-eight-year-old dangerous assassin standing in front of me, who oozed testosterone and kicked vampire ass on a regular basis, had been a virgin only a week ago.

Despite his inexperience, he'd been an incredibly quick learner. And I meant that as the very highest of compliments.

"That's not why I'm with you, Declan," I told him firmly. "And it's highly unlikely I'm going to toss you aside for the next macho alpha douchebag that strolls along."

He raised a brow. "Thenextone?"

I shrugged. "Seems like I attract them into my life like flies. But you're the only macho alpha douchebag I'm currently interested in. Got it?"

Declan chuckled darkly under his breath. "Fine. Understood."

"Good." I pressed my hands against the hard planes of his chest and looked up at him. "For what it's worth, I haven't given up entirely on your currently AWOL libido. You never know what might happen with a little dedicated time and earnest experimentation, if you're willing to be my research partner."

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He searched my face. “You’re looking for a miracle, Jill.”

I nodded. “Every damn day, actually.”

His expression darkened, and any trace of humor that had previously touched there vanished to nothing. “You know very well that Carson said this serum’s effects are permanent.”

“And Carson never lied about anything else?” I pointed out. “Because I think he lied to you about pretty much everything for your entire life.”

He hissed out a breath. “I don’t know.”

I took it as a small win. “Exactly. You don’t know what the future holds, and neither do I. For the record, though, I don’t believe anything’s ever completely permanent. Especially not this.”

With that, I went up on my tiptoes and pressed my lips against his. He didn’t push me away, but he didn’t allow himself to fully kiss me back, either. I could taste him, I could feel him, I could touch him. But I couldn’t really be with him.

At least, not at this very moment.

But I had plenty of patience when it came to Declan. And a generous splash of optimism.

For such a tough-looking man, one you might not want to run into in a dark alley, one

who looked like he could kill someone with his bare hands—and Declan definitely could—I literally ached for him. But it was an ache that would have to go untended. Like he said, he was like a robot right now—virtually emotionless and without the distraction of lust or desire. Too bad. They were very worthy distractions.

His gray eye held an edge of regret when I pulled back from him. “I’m sorry, Jill.”

“Don’t be sorry,” I told him.

“Fair enough.” He nodded curtly. “And try not to doubt Jackson too much. Even an alpha douchebag like him can be an asset when he wants to be. Now, let’s go see this scientist and get a cure for you, so you can forget all about this nightmare once and for all, and finally get back to your normal life. Okay?”

I tried to meet his gaze again, but he’d already turned away from me.

“Okay,” I replied softly.

Without another word, Declan pushed open the warehouse door and walked through to join Jackson on the other side. But his message had been clear. He meant that I could forget about him. Because Declan Reyes, dhampyr vampire hunter, someone with scars deeper than only physical, fully believed that he had no place in my regular human life.

And that realization completely broke my heart.

But that was a subject for another day. For now, it was time to get on with this one.

I wasn’t sure what I expected to see on the other side of the nondescript door that allegedly led to a secret research facility, but I couldn’t say that I was terribly impressed.

It looked like nothing more spectacular than an abandoned warehouse the size of a football field. Cement floors. Piles of boxes—cardboard and large wooden ones. Strewn garbage. Steel pillars reached up to the roof three stories above my head. And a whole lot of empty space.

“No guards?” I asked, and my voice sounded so loud and echoey that it made me jump.

Damn paranoia.

“Not up here,” Jackson replied. “But there are security cameras everywhere and all areas are monitored. Not very many people know this place exists, and anyone authorized to work here is thoroughly screened and background-checked. The elevator only works for those who know the code.”

“You know the code?” Declan asked.

“Got it memorized.” Jackson tapped his temple and then raised his brow at me. “Feel better now?”

I scanned the empty warehouse, unable to locate a single security camera, but I knew that didn’t mean anything. They could be well hidden. “Not really,” I admitted.

“You’re free to leave,” he said, gesturing toward the door. “Exit stage left.”

That was definitely an option. But it was an option I knew I wasn’t going to take.

“No, we’re good,” I said. “Lead the way.”

“Follow me.” Jackson walked toward an elevator to our right, partially hidden behind a stack of cardboard boxes. There was a keypad to the side of it and he punched in a

code. I tried to see it, and memorize it, but his fingers moved far too quickly.

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There was a whirring sound and after a short wait, the doors opened up.

“Ladies first.” Jackson gestured toward me with a grin.

I gave him a tight smile and stepped inside the elevator. Declan silently stood by my side, his arms crossed over his muscled chest. Jackson joined us, leaning his shoulder against the wall of the elevator as the doors closed.

“Shouldn’t take long,” he told us casually, as if he hung out in secret laboratories every day of his life.

While the elevator began to descend, I focused on slowing my breathing and trying to find my courage. Focusing on the positive would definitely help.

My answer could come today. The end of this nightmare.

My cure. A ticket back to a life that I’d formerly taken for granted, but I sure the hell would never do that again.

There were so many things I’d do differently this time, so many things in my life—normal, everyday things—that I missed. My introduction to death and monsters had shaken up every one of my previously held beliefs about the world, and I knew that darkness lurked in the shadows, darker than I ever thought possible. But this knowledge had only worked to make me hold tightly onto life, to see it as precious and temporary, and to value it more than anything else.

Where there’s life, there’s hope.

Jillian Conrad: Positive Thoughts Only.

Who knew? But it was true. Under my veneer of pessimism and paranoia, there existed a shiny layer of hope. And I had more than enough of it to share with Declan, whether he wanted it or not.

The elevator doors finally opened to a long white hallway that reminded me of a hospital. And this hallway wasn't empty like upstairs. There were people there, a few men, and a couple women, wearing white lab coats. They took little notice of us as we exited the elevator and began to follow Jackson down the hallway.

So far, this felt much more like a secret underground research facility than the upstairs portion had hinted at. With each step I took I felt more courage, more resolve, and more of that bright and shiny hope, now glowing softly at my core.

Jackson led us to a room at the end of the hallway with a white, windowless door. He didn't knock, he simply twisted the door handle and pushed the door open.

"After you," he said to me, gesturing for me to go inside.

I took a deep breath and did just that.

CHAPTERFOUR

Inside, a man was seated at a large white desk that held a computer monitor, a keyboard, and a stack of file folders. He was fiftyish, with fine features, and dark hair that was salt-and-pepper at the temples. Wire-framed glasses perched on his nose. Combined with the white coat and the stethoscope that hung around his neck, my first impression was that he looked like a doctor who'd graduated top of his class.

This was a good first impression.

“Jackson,” the man exclaimed. “You’ve arrived.”

“As promised,” Jackson confirmed. “Dr. Victor Reynolds, this is Jillian Conrad and Declan Reyes.”

Dr. Reynolds stood up from his desk and came to face us. He pushed his glasses up with his index finger before he slowly scanned Declan from leather boots to eyepatch, his expression tense. Then he reached his hand out in greeting, and Declan hesitated only a moment before shaking it.

“Carson Reyes’s son,” he said.

Declan nodded stiffly. “That’s right,” he replied.

“I know how very painful it is to lose someone you love in such a violent and unexpected manner, Mr. Reyes. My condolences.”

Declan nodded stiffly. “Thank you.”

The doctor extended his hand to me. “Miss Conrad.”

“Dr. Reynolds,” I replied, shaking his hand. “Please, call me Jill.”

“Very well, Jill.” He didn’t let go of my hand, instead turning it over to inspect my palm, my fingernails, and my wrist. “Fascinating.”

I couldn’t help but laugh nervously. “Is it?”

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“Yes. Jackson gave me a very brief overview of the situation, but it was enough that I expected that you would be far worse off than you initially appear.” His gaze met mine. “I apologize for putting it so bluntly.”

I shook my head. “Not at all. I’ve been worse off, trust me. Today is a good day so far.”

The doctor glanced at Declan and Jackson. “I’ll speak with Jill privately for now. You can wait outside.”

“Sure thing,” Jackson said, and he was gone from the room in an instant.

Declan stayed put, his arms crossed over his chest.

“Mr. Reyes?” Dr. Reynolds said.

“I’m staying,” he replied.

“It’s okay,” I told him.

“I’m staying,” he said again, firmer.

I nearly smiled. My personal bodyguard didn’t take too many breaks from his current job.

Dr. Reynolds cleared his throat but didn’t protest Declan’s decision. “Very well,” he said. “How long ago were you injected with the formula, Jill?”

“Nine days ago, almost to the hour,” I told him.

“And the side effects?”

“Mostly pain.”

“Pain that you would describe as cold, hot? Searing? Piercing?”

“All of the above,” I said grimly. “Depending on the day.”

“How long has each episode lasted?”

“I don’t know, maybe a couple minutes each, at the most? Feels like much longer than that, of course. And they’ve stopped, it’s been three, actually, four days since anything bad happened with the side effects. That was when I was injected with the blood fuser.”

“I see.” He nodded as he scribbled down notes on a pad of paper. “Your hair and your eyes...their color has changed.”

I nodded. “After the fuser, my blond hair turned black. My eyes were blue before.” I watched him scribble faster as he bit his bottom lip. “I’m getting the feeling that you have the urge to say ‘fascinating’ again.”

“I must admit, I do.” He met my gaze directly. “How many vampires has the Nightshade taken?”

I needed to think about it for a moment since I’d all but repressed the violent experiences to keep them from haunting my every waking hour.

“The first was the vampire Dr. Gray wanted to observe with me from behind a two-

way mirror,” I muttered, half to myself. “Then the vampire that Ma—” I stopped myself before I said the dead vampire’s king’s full name, even though I was sure if Jackson knew what had happened to Matthias, then Dr. Reynolds also knew. Matthias had handed me over to a vampire he believed was a traitor to see what would happen immediately after our introduction. “That’s two,” I said.

“And the woman at the diner the first night,” Declan said.

I glanced at him. “She didn’t get a chance to bite me. You got to her first.”

He nodded. “Right.”

Killing vampires may have been commonplace for him, but that woman had been the first I’d ever seen turn to ash right in front of me. It was a sight and an experience that had been permanently seared into my memory.

“There was a third,” I said, remembering with a shudder that there was another vampire who’d gotten a taste in Matthias’s underground lair. Again, the vampire king had used me as a distraction as we made our escape from a sudden uprising of his disgruntled followers and blood servants.

Dr. Reynolds now inspected my neck. “If these marks are eight days old or less, it seems that you are healing slightly more rapidly than one would expect.”

“I’ll take that,” I told him. “May as well be a slight benefit to all of this, right?”

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“Indeed.” He squinted at my neck. “There are four sets of fang marks that I can see.”

The last, and most recent, of course, was Matthias himself.

“Four,” I whispered. “Yes, of course, you’re right.”

“And all four vampires were killed from a mere taste of your blood.”

“Fire and ash, nothing left,” I agreed softly. I chanced a look at Declan, to find his expression troubled, his fists clenched at his sides, as I related my woeful tale of assault-by-fang.

If he felt nothing, if he was so emotion-free thanks to his serum, he couldn’t be having a visceral reaction to any of this. It was only more proof to fuel my theory about him.

More hope to hold on to.

Dr. Reynolds moved to an examination table to our right. “Please, Jill, take a seat. With your permission, I’d like to do a quick check of your vitals.”

“Of course.” I dutifully sat on the exam table, as if this was a regular visit to my family doctor, which is what this suddenly felt like. Thinking of it like that made it seem much more straightforward.

Dr. Reynolds used his stethoscope to listen to my heart. “Eighty beats per minute. A bit elevated, but certainly within the normal range.”

He peered inside my open mouth, up my nose, and in my ears. Then he checked my blood pressure.

Again, he proclaimed that all were normal.

“May I take a sample of your blood?” he asked.

“Of course,” I told him.

I watched as prepared the syringe, tied elastic tubing around my right bicep, and then tapped the crook of my arm to find a suitable vein. I glanced away as the needle slid in, wincing at the pinching sensation.

I’d had four sets of razor-sharp vampire fangs in my neck over the last week, but needles still freaked me out.

As Dr. Reynolds drew out the sample, his gaze went wide at the unnaturally dark shade of my blood.

“Dear lord,” he murmured to himself while numbly handing me a band-aid to cover the needle mark.

I chose not to take that as an official diagnosis. I knew it was definitely jarring seeing the visible and undeniable proof of Nightshade for the first time. I was likely the only person in the world with blood this color. At least, the only person still alive.

Declan silently looked on while the doctor scribbled his findings down for a couple of minutes, which felt more like a couple of hours.

“Well, Doctor?” he finally prompted. “Do you think there’s any way to help her?”

The doctor looked up with a frown as if he'd been lost in his thoughts and was surprised that we were all still in the room with him.

His gaze finally locked with mine, and he nodded. "Yes. I do believe I can help you, Jill."

For a moment, I was certain I'd heard him wrong. Despite my shiny layer of hope, I knew my layer of doubt was much thicker and had far more experience.

"Really?" I asked, breathless.

"Really," he confirmed.

My heart skipped a beat, and I was barely able to process the fact that today might truly mark the end of this nightmare. Which meant I had to be eternally grateful to the smug alpha douchebag named Jackson Gale. Actually, I was ready, willing, and able to be just that. First impressions be damned. I loved Jackson. Great guy.

"And how exactly do you think you can help her?" Declan asked.

He didn't sound as relieved as I felt. Instead, he sounded suspicious and not the least bit friendly.

I gave him a wary look. Now he was being doubtful? What happened to him being the optimist when it came to today's field trip courtesy of his old hunting buddy?

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“That is a confidential matter I’ll discuss only with Jill,” Dr. Reynolds said tightly, as he spread his hands. “As I said before, it would be best if you wait outside with Jackson, Mr. Reyes.”

I couldn’t help but notice that Declan hadn’t asked Dr. Reynolds to use his first name.

“And like I said before, I’m not leaving.” Declan stood just out of my reach, his arms still crossed over his chest. Like a leather-clad mountain.

I saw a silver glint from the stake he kept in a sheath on his belt under the edge of his black duster. He didn’t look directly at me, despite his fierce and protective claim.

Dr. Reynolds’s jaw tightened as he glared at the stubborn vampire hunter. “Your reputation precedes you, Mr. Reyes. Beyond your relationship to Dr. Carson Reyes.”

“Oh yeah?”

“I know you’re a dhampyr.”

Declan didn’t reply to that, which was confirmation enough.

“Declan’s with me,” I said, not liking the tension that had been steadily rising in the room. “So, whatever you have to say to me, I’m more than fine with him hearing it, too.”

Dr. Reynolds raised his chin in defiance. “Maybe I’m not fine with that.”

“Let me take a wild guess here,” Declan said. “You have a problem with dhampyrs.”

“Is it that obvious?” Dr. Reynolds replied.

“Yeah. It kind of is.”

The doctor’s narrowed eyes flicked to me. “You know dhampyrs are extremely dangerous to humans, don’t you? Arguably, more so than vampires.”

“I’ve heard that before,” I replied. “But Declan’s different. He’s not a monster dhampyr.”

“Have you ever seen a monster dhampyr before?” he asked sharply.

“Unfortunately, yes.” A chill went down my spine. Monster dhampyrs like the one who’d killed Dr. Gray were as mindless as they were ravenous, like large, pale, humanoid piranha—sharp teeth, soulless black eyes, and an overwhelming need to feed.

The stuff of nightmares, actually. I had the sleepless nights to prove it.

This appointment had been going so well up until now. I watched Dr. Reynolds, whose attention was now focused on Declan far more than it had been on me previously. There was something in the doctor’s demeanor that made me uncomfortable, a willingness to believe the worst. This was what Declan had been dealing with all of his life—people jumping to conclusions about what he was, based on half of his DNA.

Dhampyr, to so many who knew about this world that was hidden from the regular population, was synonymous with “ravenous monster.”

Now that I'd had to remember each of the four vampires who'd tasted my blood, I could easily recall what it felt like to be bit. The icy cool breath on my skin. The disgusting wet swipe of a tongue. The slicing pain as those razor-sharp teeth cut into my flesh. Just because they'd all died quick and fiery deaths didn't make the thought of getting attacked any more pleasant.

Declan wasn't like the monster dhampyrs I'd witnessed. And he was nothing like the vampires either.

He was far better. And I trusted him completely.

"Declan's with me, Dr. Reynolds," I said firmly. "If you have a problem with that, then we're going to have to find someone else willing to help me."

I waited for his reply, certain that I'd just ended my chance for a cure just as it had only begun.

CHAPTERFIVE

It took another tense moment, but Dr. Reynolds's harsh expression finally faded and his brows drew together.

"I...I find I must apologize to you both for my horribly unprofessional behavior this morning." He removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes, then cleaned the glasses on his sleeve before putting them back on. "My wife...she was killed by a dhampyr. I'm afraid it's irrevocably colored my objectivity on the subject."

Immediate empathy surged through me at the thought of anyone facing death at the hands of one of those nightmarish creatures. "I'm so sorry."

"So am I." His jaw tensed. "But this is neither here nor there. Let's move past this

moment of unpleasantness, if you're willing. I would like to take some more samples of your blood. With your permission, of course."

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I waited for Declan to protest, but he remained silent now.

The doctor had lost his wife to a monster. Understandably, that caused him to have certain difficult-to-ignore prejudices.

“May I ask,” I began softly, as I rolled up my sleeve again. “Was your research here triggered by what happened to your wife?”

“My research began a long time ago,” he said with a nod. “But her death has renewed my obsession with it.

Even though he’d already seen it earlier, he still drew in a quick breath of surprise at the sight of my dark blood.

“It is truly incredible,” he mused aloud.

“What?” I asked. “Incredible that I’m still standing. Still breathing?”

A slight smile now played on his lips. “I’d be lying if I said no. Yes, it’s incredible that your body has withstood the Nightshade formula for so long, especially with visible transformations like this. The fusing agent has done what it’s meant to do—bonded your blood with the Nightshade. I’m not sure that it could ever be repeated quite the same as this. It’s...a miracle before my very eyes. One that I believe will make all the difference in the world. You’re quite incredible, Jill.”

“I don’t need to be incredible,” I told him. “I just want to live.”

“You said you could help her.” Declan’s voice cut between us like a knife. “Were you serious?”

By his tone, it seemed that he wasn’t quite as ready as I was to forgive and forget what just happened.

Dr. Reynolds’s pleasant expression tensed. He really didn’t like the dhampyr and wasn’t making much of an effort to hide it. I guess the feeling was mutual between them now. “Yes, I was. I believe that I can use these samples to create a new serum, one that will release the Nightshade from your cellular makeup.”

“Even after the fusing?” Declan asked.

“Yes.”

“Sounds encouraging to me,” I said. And that was a truly massive understatement. My heart pounded so hard and fast it was difficult to appear calm.

If this was really possible, if Dr. Reynolds was being completely serious about having the knowledge and skill to create a new serum to reverse the effects of Nightshade on me...maybe he could help Declan as well.

Given that their introduction hadn’t gone so smoothly, I’d hold onto this incredibly hopeful thought for now without speaking it aloud.

The doctor’s expression darkened. “I must warn you, Jill, that it won’t be a simple process. Once we manage to separate the Nightshade from your blood, we will need to cleanse your blood with intensive hemodialysis. That stage will not be an overly painful process, but I should warn you that the separation process likely will be rather...difficult for you to endure.”

My enthusiasm for my cure immediately ratcheted down by about twenty percent. I'd experienced so much pain since first being injected that it had redefined agony for me. This wasn't something I'd choose if I had any other option. But there weren't any other options.

To be honest, I hadn't expected a magic, sugarcoated pill to cure my ills. It would have been nice, but I knew this wasn't a fairy tale.

I'd get to my happy ending by whatever means necessary.

I nodded firmly. "I understand that it will be a rocky road. And I'm more than willing to take that road wherever it leads."

"Excellent. You'll stay here during your treatment," Dr. Reynolds explained. "I promise we'll make it very comfortable for you."

I assumed that the vampire guinea pigs currently in residence here wouldn't get the same five-star treatment.

This all sounded good to me, despite the promise of more pain along the way, but something needed to be asked before we went any further. "So here's my question: What do you get in return for doing all of this? I'm willing to bet that this isn't covered by health insurance."

He placed his clipboard under his arm and moved to the other side of the examining table, giving Declan a wide berth.

"What I get in return, Jill," he said, "is the chance to recreate the Nightshade formula for myself."

Okay, finally an admission that there was something in it for him beyond helping

yours truly. It was a strange relief since I'd found that very few people ever did anything without some kind of personal gain. And if they said they did, then they were probably lying.

"Jackson says that you knew Carl Anderson," I replied. "That you were partners."

Dr. Reynolds nodded. "We certainly were."

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“What ended that partnership, if I may ask?”

He pursed his lips for a moment, his gaze growing far away. “A difference of opinions. A contrast in personal morals. Let’s just say that I wasn’t terribly surprised to learn about the events surrounding his death.” He glanced at Declan. “And it was at your hand, I believe.”

“My gun, actually,” Declan agreed. “Which, to be fair, was attached to my hand at the time.”

If that was supposed to be a joke, it definitely didn’t land with this particular audience. Dr. Reynolds turned his scowl to me before his expression evened out again.

“I tried to keep myself apprised of Carl’s projects as much as I could, despite his secretive nature,” he said. “From what little I gathered about the Nightshade formula, I knew that it could be an invaluable weapon with more testing, more research. And it still could be. Even though you’ll no longer be a part of it, Jill, I see no reason why the Nightshade program needs to be discarded completely.”

Yes, of course, that made sense. If I had died with the only sample in existence inside me, all that research would have died with me.

But I was still alive. And still fighting to stay that way.

Rogue vampires were out there, and they were a threat to any tasty human who mistakenly crossed their path. Any weapon that could be created to combat that threat

sounded like an incredibly worthy goal to me that went far beyond my utterly self-involved drive to save my own life.

“I totally agree,” I said with a firm shake of my head, and a glowing sense of relief filling my chest. “All right, so when do we get started on this?”

“It could be as early as tomorrow,” Dr. Reynolds replied. “Once I gather the information I need from your blood samples, I promise that I’ll be in touch.”

Tomorrow? I couldn’t believe my ears.

The doctor handed me a tissue.

I looked at it with confusion for a moment before I realized a tear had slipped down my cheek. I touched it with the tip of my finger and looked at the shimmery tear of gratitude.

“Thank you,” I said, taking the tissue from him. “Thank you so much.”

Dr. Reynolds smiled gently. “Don’t thank me yet. But hopefully, you’ll be able to do just that in a few short days.”

I left the examining room with Declan and found Jackson still waiting in the hallway, studying the screen of his phone. He looked up at us, his expression tense.

“Are you done already?” he asked.

“For now,” Declan replied, then frowned. “Everything okay, Jackson?”

“Yeah, sure. Never better. Life is good. How did it go with Dr. Reynolds in there?”

“He hates dhampyrs because one killed his vampire wife,” I said. “Did you know that?”

He didn’t look surprised by that in the slightest. “Yeah, I knew. Why? What happened?”

“Let’s just say, we didn’t leave as good friends,” Declan said. “It doesn’t matter. He might be able to help Jill and that’s all that I really care about.”

“Fair enough,” Jackson replied with a nod. “Then let’s get the hell out of here for now.”

I understood why Dr. Reynolds didn’t like Declan, even if it wasn’t Declan’s fault, but I really would have liked a heads up on his dhampyr issues from the other hunter.

But Declan had seemingly already let it go. And currently, I was feeling a little woozy from all the blood samples the doctor had taken from me to continue this conversation. I stayed silent as Jackson led us back to the elevator and we took it up to the warehouse level.

We got off the elevator and walked through the empty warehouse until we emerged into the sunlight again.

“One complaint,” I said shakily. “No orange juice. I would have liked a little something nutritious after donating half of my blood to the cause.”

“Are you feeling all right?” Declan asked.

“I’m fine,” I replied. “Or, I’m sure that I will be soon enough.”

“I’ll go get the car,” he said, then turned to Jackson. “Wait here with Jill for a

minute.”

“You got it,” Jackson replied.

I leaned against the wall, just outside of the front door, and watched Declan disappear around the edge of the building. I finally noticed the security camera that was trained on the front door. It was installed at the top of a street lamp.

“How did it go down there?” Jackson asked. “Did Dr. Reynolds freak out about Declan being a dhampyr?”

“Weren’t you listening in?” I replied.

“No, I was dealing with some other business. Besides, I’m more of a peeping tom than an eavesdropper.”

“Not surprised by that at all.” I couldn’t tell when this guy was being serious or if everything was a joke to him. “He didn’t freak. It was more of a low-level hatred for all things dhampyr that he was happy to share with the group. Don’t get me wrong, I understand. If a dhampyr had killed somebody I loved, I might be prejudiced against all of them too.”

Jackson didn’t reply to this for so long, that I felt like I had to say something to break the silence. How long was Declan going to be?

I rubbed my fingertips over the small bandage at the crook of my arm. “Listen, Jackson, thanks for pointing us in the right direction. I’m sorry I gave you a bit of a hard time before.”

“No worries.” His smile had finally returned. He was actually quite attractive in a biker-dude kind of way, and the expression helped soften up the rougher edges. “I’m usually a hard-ass when it comes to shit like this, but from what little I understand about your situation...well, I’m really sorry for what you’ve been through.”

His sudden sincerity surprised me. “You don’t strike me as the type who’s sorry for much.”

“I’m not,” he admitted.

I pressed back against the warehouse wall. The air was dry, hot, and smelled like dust. The meeting with Dr. Reynolds had tired me out, and I wasn’t entirely sure if the blood donation was entirely to blame for that. Hope was an exhausting emotion to entertain.

I regarded Jackson for a moment in silence, trying to picture him and Declan fighting vampires side by side.

“You’ve known Declan for how long?” I asked.

“Ten years, give or take,” he replied. “Our fathers knew each other. Well, my dad worked for his dad.”

“Your father was a scientist?”

“No, he was a hunter like me. Still on the government payroll, though.”

“It’s a dangerous life,” I said.

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Is your sister a hunter too?” I asked.

Jackson scoffed. “No. Jennifer hated hunters. Well, except for Declan. She would have made an exception for him if he’d given her the time of day. But, well, I’m sure you know his story by now when it comes to the bedroom.”

I didn’t say anything in reply to that, which only seemed to gain his interest. That was pretty presumptuous of him to even suggest something like that. Not that he was wrong, of course. But still, very presumptuous.

Jackson shook his head. “It’s strange seeing him with a woman like you, Jill.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean by a woman like me?”

He shrugged a shoulder. “You strike me as the type of woman who needs a man in her life who’s able to show her a good time.”

I wasn’t sure if that was a compliment or not. “Is that how I strike you?”

“Yeah. And I saw how you looked at Reyes before.”

“And how’s that?”

“Like my sister used to look at him,” he said.

I’d given Jackson significant bonus points for introducing me to someone who might actually be able to help me, and for saving Declan’s life long ago, but he wouldn’t be going on my Christmas card mailing list any time soon.

“Your sister had a crush on him,” I replied.

“She did.”

“I wouldn’t call what I feel for Declan a teenage crush.”

“Yeah, well...it’s none of my business—”

“You’re right, it really isn’t,” I said flatly.

Jackson shrugged. “Declan’s a machine. A soldier. He kills rogue vampires without a moment of sympathy. It’s all he’s done for as long as I’ve known him. What he isn’t is somebody who’d make a good boyfriend.”

I chose to take Jackson’s words as a well-meaning warning from someone who’d known the dhampyr for a decade, rather than a dumbass observation from someone whose opinion I didn’t ask for.

Maybe I reminded him of his little sister a bit too much.

“I’m not really looking for a boyfriend right now,” I replied evenly. “I’m a bit preoccupied with trying to stay alive with blood nearly the color of tar.”

“Maybe so.” Jackson drew close enough to me that I could smell his spicy aftershave. His gaze swept the length of me with clear appreciation. “But you’re clearly a woman of passion with needs.” He twisted a piece of my long black hair around his index finger before leaning closer to me. “I can help you fill those needs if you want me

to.”

Okay, on second thought, I now hoped I didn't remind him of his little sister. Because...gross.

It was hot out this afternoon—nearly a hundred degrees—and Jackson's body heat only made it hotter. A trickle of perspiration slid down my spine.

“I'm not asking for a relationship here, Jill,” Jackson continued. “Just a bit of fun. Let's call it...a way to let off some steam.”

A bit of fun. It was something I hadn't had in a very long time. Too bad it was Jackson doing the offering. “What about Declan?” I asked as patiently as possible. “I thought you two were good friends.”

“We are. But he'd understand, trust me.” He shook his head. “All I know is he can't satisfy you like I can, even if he wanted to. He knows it. I don't exactly know what the real story is between you two, but I'm sure he also knows that it won't be long before you start looking elsewhere. Despite all you've been through, I see that fire inside of you. And, believe me, I know how to quench it.”

“So, you're saying you want to fuck me. Right?” I wanted to make sure I understood him crystal clear—not that he was being all that subtle about it.

“I definitely do. The question is, Jill...” His gaze met mine. “What do you want?”

“Actually, Jackson...” I put my hand on his chest and slid it down between us, over his rather impressive denim-clad hard-on. Then I grabbed it and twisted. “I want you to fuck off. Thanks so much.”

Pain registered on his face, but he let out a low, throaty laugh. “Message received,

loud and clear.”

“Glad to hear it.” I let go of him, feeling that my point had been made rather succinctly. “No offense intended, of course.”

“None taken.” His eyes flicked behind me as he cupped his hand over his assaulted groin and stepped away from me. “The car’s here.”

I glanced to my left. Declan’s gaze narrowed on us through the open car window, and I wondered if he’d witnessed what just happened between me and his trusted old friend.

“Let’s go,” was all he said.

Very soon I’d start the painful process of cleaning my blood. Soon I’d be back to my normal life—the life that didn’t include amorous—or rather, lecherous—vampire hunters who left me cold, or dhampyrs who made my blood hot and my body yearn for more than they were able to give me.

I’d never been a big fan of disappointment.

CHAPTER SIX

I had a long nap after we got back to the motel room to recover my strength, only waking as the sun began to set. Then I dragged myself into the bathroom and had a shower. Declan went out to get us food. When I emerged with wet hair, after pulling on some clean leggings and a tank top, he was already back.

He held up the brown paper bag. “Burgers. And fries.”

“Running for my life is high in calories.” I leaned my hip against the table and ran my

fingers through my damp hair to get the tangles out. Declan sat at the small table and looked down at his hands. He seemed preoccupied with something.

“What’s the problem?” I asked.

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He looked at me. “Why do you think there’s a problem?”

“You’re quieter than normal. Not that you’re usually a chatterbox, but—”

“I heard you talking with Jackson,” he said.

I’d had a feeling he had. “What part?” I asked.

“A whole lot of it.” He raised his gray gaze to mine, stroking his fingers over his eye patch to adjust it back into its proper place.

I’d been so into the conversation with Jackson that I hadn’t noticed a car pull up only a dozen feet away. So annoying. “He came on to me,” I explained.

“I know,” Declan replied.

“And I told him in no uncertain terms to fuck off.”

His lips curved. “I know.”

But he still looked troubled. “Okay. So, what’s really wrong, Declan?” I asked, concerned now.

He leveled his gaze with mine. “If he’d forced himself on you any further, I would have ripped his head off. Luckily, he took a simple fuck off as an answer.”

I shrugged. “And that’s the beginning and the end of it.”

“Jackson’s very popular with women. Your rejection must have come as a shock considering his track record.”

I still didn’t see the problem here, the one that had caused the haunted look on Declan’s face.

“Do you think I was tempted?” I asked carefully.

He blinked. “Were you?”

“No. But I was surprised that your womanizing so-called friend made a move on me when it should have been clear to him that we’re together. Maybe he was just testing me. Testing my loyalty to you.”

“No, that’s a bit too deep for Jackson. He’s a hedonist, always has been. He goes after what he thinks will give him pleasure, that’s all.”

I searched his face. “Were you jealous? Is that what this is?”

Declan gripped the edge of the table, his knuckles whitening. “I don’t know. With the serum, all I feel is this emptiness inside of me. Where there should be emotion, there’s... nothing, just an empty black hole. I know that’s where all the shit I should be feeling belongs. I never felt it before—never noticed it, anyway—but I do now that I have something to compare it to.”

“Emptiness,” I repeated.

“Yeah.”

My throat tightened at the picture he presented to me. “I know how you feel. I have that too, sometimes.”

“You do?”

I nodded. “It’s hard to deal with that empty feeling, but sometimes we don’t have any choice in the matter.”

His expression darkened. “Jackson gave you a choice.”

For someone who claimed that he had a black hole of emptiness inside of him, he sure was doing a good impression of a jealous, hotheaded boyfriend.

I couldn’t resist rolling my eyes at that. “Yeah, he sure did. He volunteered to serve as your replacement in filling up all my dark and empty places. Really big of him, right?”

Declan’s brows drew together. “Is that why you feel empty? Because we can’t be together like we were...before?”

We were treading into dangerous territory. It felt like trouble, and I already had enough of that to begin with. “Look, Declan, let’s just eat. It’s been a long day. Hopefully, tomorrow Dr. Reynolds will get back to us with some good news.”

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He didn't speak for a long moment, but then he nodded. "He will. I don't doubt it. That doctor's a serious dick with a shitlist of issues, but I do believe he can help you. Then you won't have to deal with all of this, deal with me, with horny assholes like Jackson sniffing around you. You can go back to your regular life and normal men who can be with you when they want to be."

I reached across the table and grabbed his hand. It was currently clenched into a fist. "Just so you know, normal guys are extremely overrated."

His hand relaxed in my grip. "I'm about as abnormal as they get."

"Feeling sorry for yourself tonight, Declan?" I asked, my brows raised.

He gave me a humorless smile. "That's just the problem. I'm not feeling anything."

"Doesn't sound like it to me. In fact, compared to the dhampyr assassin I met after getting stabbed in the neck with Nightshade, you're the emo poster boy for a long list of feelings."

Declan shook his head. "I don't know. I have to admit, it does feel different now than when I was on my original serum." He considered this, his brow furrowed deeply. "It's just, the thought of you with Jackson, even if you weren't into the idea...it bothered the hell out of me. And you're right. He is a womanizer, but it's like he didn't give a damn what I might think. Like he was trying to get to me through you. I don't know."

"Maybe. I don't know, maybe he was trying to distract himself from some other

problems. Everyone's got their drug of choice. I'm guessing his is probably sex."

"You're right about that."

"Anyway, Jackson Gale is not here." I intertwined my fingers with his. "I'm not having a luxurious fast-food dinner like this with him, am I? I'm having it with you."

Declan leaned back in his chair, pulling his hand away from mine. I tried not to take it personally. "Jackson was right about one thing."

"Which is?"

"That you're a woman of passion. A woman who deserves more than this."

I glanced around the small room. "More than burgers and fries at a seedy motel? The hell you say."

He didn't smile at my feeble attempt to lighten the mood. "You said something earlier. I think I want to take you up on it."

"What's that?" I asked.

"What you said about experimenting."

I remembered exactly what I'd been talking about. This was coming totally out of left field.

"If you're willing to be my research partner..." I began.

"I'm willing," he replied.

I was ready to question him further, to really drill down on how this came about, but I couldn't say anything because he stood up, pulled me against him...and kissed me.

I'd kissed Declan a couple of times in the days that had passed since he'd been shot full of the permanent serum, searching for a response, and was disappointed when I didn't get one. But this time he'd initiated it; he was kissing me. And I responded immediately. Earlier I'd decided on a cool shower, but the heat of Declan's kiss warmed me up immediately.

"Do you really think that...you can...?" I whispered against his lips, not wanting to finish the sentence.

"This isn't about me, Jill. This is about you. That is...if you want this to happen." Declan held my face between his hands. "Say yes."

"Yes," I said, without thinking twice. "Definitely, yes."

When he kissed me this time, he picked me up and carried me to the bed.

I locked my arms around his neck. "My hair's wet."

"Do you care?" he asked.

I grinned. "Not in the slightest, actually."

Declan placed me gently down on the bed and began kissing down my throat, filling his hands with my breasts. I could barely believe this was happening.

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First, a potential solution to my Nightshade troubles.

Now, an experimental Declan.

Maybe this was only a dream.

But it didn't feel like a dream. It felt real...so very real. And I didn't want to question it a second longer.

Grasping the edge of my tank top, he pulled it up, skimming it over my skin. I wasn't wearing a bra underneath, which saved some time. I gasped out loud as his mouth closed over my right nipple and he slid his tongue around it in a hot, wet circle.

He looked up at me. "Let me know if I'm doing this right."

I struggled to breathe normally, but it came out like a needy moan. "So far, so good. Actually, better than good. Great, really."

He moved to the other side, making me shiver, goose bumps breaking out along my skin. I helped him to peel my top off over my head, then squeezed my eyes shut and allowed the sensation of his mouth against me to swirl me away.

Experimenting with Declan was a very good idea. Yes, I was so very glad I'd thought of it.

When he kissed me again, sweeping his tongue against mine, I pulled up his black T-shirt, sliding my hands under to feel his skin beneath, down over his hard, muscled

abdomen. I started to unbutton his jeans and slide the zipper down, but he grabbed my wrist to stop me.

“No, Jill,” he rasped out.

I looked up at him with surprise. “Why not?”

He shook his head. “I already told you, this isn’t about me.”

“I want to touch you,” I told him.

Declan pulled my hands away from him and raised them up above my head. “If you can’t play by the rules, then this experiment will have to end.”

He was strong enough to easily keep me pinned, but his grip on me remained loose enough that I could have broken it if I wanted to.

“I’m not sure I like those rules,” I said.

Declan moved his mouth to my ear, and my breasts flattened against his T-shirt-covered chest. “I want to make you happy, Jill,” he whispered.

I believed him. His expression lacked the blazing fire to match what I was feeling but held endless sincerity. He couldn’t make love to me, not completely—not the way I wanted—but he still wanted me to be happy after what he’d overheard Jackson say to me.

Jackson had offered me no-strings-attached sex.

I’d said no because I wasn’t attracted to him. I didn’t want a quick lay, and I didn’t want Jackson. I wanted more than that, even though I knew that wanting more would

only leave me frustrated.

Declan wanted to take away some of that frustration. Here. Now.

Which meant my clothes came off. But his stayed on.

“I can stop.” Declan’s deep voice turned gruff when he spoke quietly. “Or I can keep going. Your call.”

My throat thickened with an odd mix of cool disappointment and hot desire. I could have Declan, but not all of him. At least, not tonight.

“Do you want me?” he asked when I didn’t answer right away.

I nodded wordlessly.

“Do you need me?”

“Yes.”

“Then keep your hands like this.” He pressed them up against the headboard, curling my fingers around the cool metal rails.

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I drew in a sharp breath. “So I can’t touch you at all?”

He shook his head. “Those are the rules.”

I gripped the headboard tighter. “Fine. Your move, dhampyr.”

A shadow of a smile played at his lips, and he sat back on his heels, his feet still clad in his heavy leather boots. He slid the palms of his hands down the front of me between my breasts. His hands were calloused and rough against my skin—the feel of them made me shiver and my nipples tightened. Instinctively, I arched up from the bed to meet his touch.

“You’re so beautiful, Jill,” he said.

“So are you,” I managed.

Declan chuckled deep in his throat. “You’re lying. My scars—”

“Are part of you. And that makes them beautiful. I think we’ve had this conversation before.”

A shadow crossed his expression. “Jill...”

“I wouldn’t be in a situation like this with somebody I found unappealing. Trust me on that, Declan. You make me so hot I can barely sit still.”

He leaned over, his mouth only an inch from mine. “How hot?”

Then he slid his hand under the waistband of my leggings and down between my legs where he'd easily feel the proof of just how much I wanted him. I gasped, and my grip on the headboard tightened.

"You're right," he whispered. "Very hot."

"You're teasing me now."

"Maybe a little." He hooked a finger in either side of the elastic waistband of the leggings and slid them down my legs until they were off. I lay naked on the bed, my arms still above my head, while Declan, fully dressed, swept his gaze over me.

I had to admit, me being naked and vulnerable at the moment and him being fully dressed and totally in control was way sexier than I ever would have thought it would be.

"How's the experiment going so far?" I asked, my voice breathy.

He raised a dark eyebrow. "Good, I think. You?"

"Excellent. A-plus."

Declan kissed me. My lips parted and I slid my tongue against his, which made me groan low in my throat at the chance to taste him deeper. My breath caught as his hand returned between my legs and he stroked me there until I felt utterly boneless with need.

He didn't say another word as he began to kiss his way down my body. I watched him, breathless, as he parted my legs and pressed his mouth against me there. I cried out and let go of the headboard completely so I could grip the back of his head when I felt the wet heat of his tongue slide and flick over me.

“Declan—” But I couldn’t form actual words anymore. His name was barely understandable.

Pleasure crashed over me with my climax, so intense it was close to pain. My body quaked against his mouth and hands, arching up from the bed, but he firmly held me in place until I came again. A scream escaped my lips then, despite my attempt to muffle it with the back of my hand.

He brought his face back to mine and kissed me hard and openmouthed so I could taste myself on his tongue. By this time I was utterly ravenous for him.

“Please, Declan,” I begged. “I need you. I want you so much.”

I wrapped my legs around his fully clothed body and ground myself against him as if he were naked. I desperately needed him inside of me. I wanted him even more now than I had before. He’d given me two incredible orgasms, but I still wasn’t satisfied. The small taste had only intensified my hunger.

Slowly, very slowly, I regained control of myself until I found I was kissing him more than he was kissing me. I held his face between my hands and stared up at him, dismayed to see his expression held some regret.

Immediately, tears began to sting my eyes. “Please don’t look at me like that.”

Declan’s expression held only pain. “It’s not you, Jill. I’m sorry. I just want to be more for you than what I am.”

Every bit of hot, aching desire I’d just felt for him hadn’t been matched. He felt nothing. The mind was willing, but the body couldn’t comply. My skin felt electric, sensitive, as though if he touched me again, he might send me right back over the edge.

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I sat up so we were face-to-face and hugged him against me. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not.”

“For now it is.”

“The experiment...”

I pulled back so I could see his face. “Speaking solely for myself, the experiment was a complete success.”

The edge of a smile finally touched his lips. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“I never knew how big a fan of science I am. Huge, really.”

I kissed him again and was sad that this time he only briefly returned it.

It had been a short detour in my hope to break Declan free from the control of his permanent behavior-modifying serum, but it seemed that we’d been returned right back at square one.

For tonight, at least, I’d grudgingly take the loss.

Luckily, some French fries were waiting as my consolation prize.

CHAPTERSEVEN

I'd had bad dreams every night since I was injected with Nightshade. But this was the first time I'd had one about Declan.

It started off well enough.

We were having dinner, and it wasn't salty, greasy fast food scarfed down in a cheap motel room. We were at a restaurant—one of my favorites, an expensive little Italian place that was just around the corner from my apartment in San Diego.

He placed his hand on top of mine, and I looked up at him.

It was Declan, but it wasn't the Declan I'd come to know. The black eye patch was gone, and he had two beautiful green eyes instead of one gray one—gray eyes being a shared trait of a dhampyr or vampire. There wasn't a single scar on his face that I could see. His dark hair was a bit longer than the short-cropped cut I was used to. And he had an easy grin on his handsome face that was as unfamiliar as the dark blue tailored suit he wore.

"You look like you've just seen a ghost," he said.

"Feels a bit like it," I admitted. "You look really good tonight."

"Better than normal?"

"Well...different than normal," I allowed. "What happened?"

He shook his head. "Nothing happened. That's just the thing, Jill. I'm not a dhampyr. I'm not a hunter. I don't scar every time I get cut or shot. I didn't lose my eye because I never fought with the vampire who clawed it out with his fingernails." He raised an eyebrow. "What do you think of that?"

“I’m speechless, that’s what I think,” I replied, breathless. “You look...”

“Like I could be part of your normal life,” he finished for me.

“Yes, actually. You do.” I smiled and reached forward to entwine my fingers with his on the tabletop. “No more vampires. No more running for our lives. We can be together. It’s perfect.”

Declan’s expression shadowed and he shook his head. “It’s not perfect, Jill. Unfortunately, there’s still a problem.”

“What problem?” I asked, frowning.

“Your blood...”

I felt something warm on my face and swiped my hand under my nose. I was bleeding, dark red blood that looked almost black. My heart sank at the sight of it. “I’m the one who doesn’t fit in now, aren’t I?”

“I wish I could help you. I really do. But it’s not my expertise, none of this is. My life doesn’t revolve around pain and death.” Declan’s gaze moved to the right and his expression tensed. “But maybe he can help you better than I can.”

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There was a man standing in the doorway staring at me so intently I couldn't believe I hadn't noticed him yet. It was Declan—the scarred version with the eye patch. His body ragged and hardened from ten years of hunting vampires. Wearing a black leather duster that had seen better days.

Unlike Declan 2.0, this version wasn't smiling.

“Jill...” he said as he reached toward me. “I thought I'd lost you. I didn't know where you'd gone.”

“Declan, I'm here.” I immediately rose from the table and began to walk toward him, but suddenly it felt as if the air had thickened, making it difficult for me to move.

Declan jerked forward a step as if he'd been hit from behind, and then gasped for breath as he clamped his hand over his stomach. Bright red blood gushed between his fingers from the wound. When he looked up at me, I realized with horror that his throat had also been slit wide open. Blood pumped out of him with every beat of his slowing heart.

I couldn't breathe. I tried desperately to fight through whatever this was that was holding me back.

“Jill, run,” he told me, his voice barely audible. “Get away from me while you still can.”

“Declan, no!” I cried out. “Who did this? Who is trying to kill you?”

I woke up screaming and clutching at the solid form in front of me.

“I’m here,” Declan soothed, stroking my hair. “It was only a nightmare. It’s okay, Jill. It’s morning now. You’re safe.”

I pulled back from him and searched his face, my eyes wide. He was here. He was alive. “I thought that I...I thought that you—that you were hurt. That you were dying!”

“It wasn’t real.” He held my face gently between his hands. “I know all of this has been a struggle for you, but it’s almost over. Try to be strong for just a little while longer. Can you do that?”

I nodded soundlessly.

I gathered myself together, shaking off the bad dream as much as I could, even though it seemed to be haunting me like a ghost. I pushed off the bed and went into the bathroom to splash some cold water on my face. I looked up at the mirror, into my black eyes.

“Just a dream,” I told my reflection. “It was just a dream.”

Declan was fine. He was here with me, as healthy and strong as any 28-year-old dhampyr could be.

I wondered what would have happened in the nightmare if he hadn’t woken me up. Maybe I would have woken myself up. By a quick look at the time, it was already nine o’clock. This was the second morning that I hadn’t been woken by the cry of a hungry baby. A cry that had come every couple of hours without fail.

I missed Sara, despite her noisy diva demands. But I knew that she was safer

somewhere else. And I still had to make peace with the fact that I couldn't know exactly where that was. At least not now.

When I exited the bathroom, Declan stood waiting for me. Frowning.

"What's wrong?" I asked tentatively.

His frown deepened. "That experiment last night..."

I went very still. "What about it?"

He searched my face. "Do you regret it? Do you wish we hadn't even tried?"

"You really want to know how I felt about it?" I asked.

"Yes."

I took a moment to clear my thoughts so I could remember the events of the night before. The feel of his mouth on my body. His hands on my bare skin. "It was amazing, but..."

"But what?" he prompted when I went silent.

I closed the distance between us so I could press my hands against his warm chest. "But...the next time you touch me or kiss me like that, I want you to really, really mean it. And I want you to feel something in return."

"My serum won't allow it," he whispered.

"Screw your serum," I told him firmly. "Like I said, nothing is permanent. Not the Nightshade, not the serum. We will get past this and we will be together, fully and

completely again. I believe this with every fiber of my being. Do you hear me?"

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He held my gaze before nodding firmly. “I hear you.”

I nodded. “And do you believe me?”

Before he could answer me, there was a ringing sound. Declan fished into his pocket for his phone and he held it to his ear. “Yeah?”

He didn’t take his attention off me for a moment as he took a seat at the edge of the bed.

“Got it,” he said, then ended the call, his jaw tightening. “Dr. Reynolds is ready to see you again.”

A surprised breath caught in my chest. “Holy shit. That was fast.”

“It was,” Declan agreed.

“He—he might actually be able to cure me.”

He nodded. “He might indeed.”

“This could be it, Declan.” I swallowed hard. “And if it is, that means I’d have to be grateful to Jackson Gale for the rest of my life.”

This earned me a low chuckle. “Both of us would.”

I shot him a grin. “I’m still not sleeping with him, just so you know.”

“Glad to hear it. So, are you ready for whatever comes today?” he asked.

Despite this encouraging news that should have brightened my mood 100-percent, the nightmare I’d had continued to linger for me.

I was all about dreams and symbolism. I’d even had a very thick book that I consulted after any curious dream or nightmare in the past. What had this one meant? That I wanted Declan, but only if he was perfect and normal, even if I wasn’t?

The only thing I knew for sure was that when I saw the real Declan injured, and dying, all I wanted was to get to him. To help him. To comfort him. But I couldn’t.

And then it was too late.

I guess I didn’t need to hunt too far to find the symbolism there.

However, maybe it was just a stupid dream. Nothing more than that.

I nodded firmly. “I’m ready.”

* * *

We returned to the warehouse without Jackson with us this time. I’d suggested that we contact him, but Declan didn’t feel it was necessary. On the call, Dr. Reynolds had given him the elevator code to get down to the sub-twentieth floor.

I agreed. The hunter had done his part and overstayed his welcome by a few minutes beyond that. We knew the way without his help.

I got the same strange feeling I’d had yesterday as we entered through the main doors, seemingly unguarded apart from the single security camera outside.

“What’s wrong?” Declan asked.

I shook my head. “It kind of freaks me out knowing there are vampires somewhere downstairs that Dr. Reynolds is using as test subjects.”

I was surprised that hadn’t been what my subconscious had latched onto last night. A swarm of hungry vampires deep down belowground sounded like anyone’s literal idea of hell.

“This is how it’s done, Jill,” Declan explained. “If you want to test ways to exterminate vampires, then you need vampires to exterminate.”

I had to remember that this was all new to me. Less than two weeks ago, I hadn’t even known that vampires were real outside of their Hollywood versions.

“I know Carson and Dr. Gray had baby dhampyrs in their basement, but adult vampires?” I absently brushed my fingers over my healing throat and shivered despite the heat of the day.

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“There are a few facilities like this across the country—both government and privately funded,” he explained to me. “The vampires used in programs like this are the most messed up, the ones that can’t keep their fangs out of humans, leaving mutilated bodies in their wake. I used to be one of the hunters who captured them. When instructed, I’d pick some test subjects from the vampires I faced. Brought them to places like this instead of staking them dead.”

I regarded him with horror at being handed this new piece of the Declan Reyes puzzle.

“How many did you capture?” I asked.

“Not as many as you might think. Maybe a couple dozen.”

“That’s...a lot.”

“Only a drop in the proverbial bucket. I only did it for a couple years. Jackson’s kept at it, which is what he likely does for Reynolds here.”

“Does it pay well?” I asked.

“Well enough. The less damage to the vampire from the capture, the better the payout. Jackson was much better than me at being gentle with something trying to tear my throat out.”

“Jackson doesn’t strike me as the gentle type.”

“No. But he likes his money. He supported himself and Jennifer after their parents died. Put her through college on his own dime. He’s always had his eye on the bottom line.”

For every bad thing I learned about Jackson Gale, there was something good to counter it.

“He loves her,” I said.

“Only thing in the world he’s ever loved,” Declan agreed. “He’d do anything for Jenny.”

I eyed him. “Jenny?”

He shrugged. “She liked to be called that when she was a kid.”

“A kid madly in love with you.”

He scoffed. “Yeah, well. Trust me, she moved on to bigger and better things.”

“Glad to hear it. I don’t want you experimenting with anyone else, any time soon.”

I earned a soft snort of amusement for that.

“Noted,” he replied.

I took a moment to steady myself. Vampire test subjects or not, I knew today was going to be a rocky ride toward my bright and Nightshade-free future. “You’ll stay with me today, right?”

“Of course,” he said, holding my gaze. “That is, if you want me to.”

“I want you to,” I confirmed. “Absolutely.”

Declan would stay with me until all of this was over. Through the pain. Through the drama. When everything was pain-free and drama-free, I had absolutely no idea if he’d stay with me beyond that, or if he’d let me move on to bigger and better things, like Jennifer Gale allegedly had. I guess I’d have to just take things an hour at a time. Hell, a minute at a time might be a better plan.

A familiar muscle-bound form greeted us at the elevator.

“Jackson,” Declan said flatly.

“Declan,” the hunter replied, then flicked a look at me. “Jill. Great to see you again.”

“Would it be rude if I didn’t agree?” I asked.

“A little.”

I shrugged. “Oh well.”

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My gratitude toward the hunter would be delayed until I had some real answers. Until then, I chose to be surly toward him.

“Didn’t know you were going to meet us here,” Declan said.

“Me neither,” Jackson replied. “But Dr. Reynolds called me in to take care of a little matter downstairs. First, though, I’m supposed to personally escort you both down to his examining room so you can...well, do whatever it is you have to do today.”

His words were light, but even I could tell that there was something that was keeping Jackson from being his regular, sparkly alpha douchebag self today.

“Problem?” Declan asked as Jackson punched in the code and, when the doors opened, we got into the elevator.

“No. Nothing. Just business.” He turned his attention to the digital floor numbers above the doors that showed our descent.

Yes, he seemed off today, not that I was an expert on the varying moods of Jackson Gale, vampire hunter. Maybe he was pissed about my rejection yesterday. I doubted it. I didn’t get the impression he was actually serious about me in a romantic way. He just wanted to get laid by a woman he perceived as horny enough to say yes, and had been a bit surprised and annoyed when she’d said no. Nothing personal.

I thought about what had happened between me and Declan last night. While it had been rather satisfying, it was also entirely unsatisfying, which is why I said what I had to him. Sex wasn’t just the means to an orgasm for me—although it was a lovely gift

with purchase. I needed to have the emotion to back it up. When I held Declan's gaze, I wanted to see my desire reflected back at me—the kind of desire I had seen when he'd gone cold turkey off his original serum. Otherwise, the one-sided sex experiment was fun and more than enough to get me off, but ultimately hollow.

Once I was cured, my blood cleansed, and with no real reason to stay with Declan any longer, I worried that I'd never see him again. I'd go back to my regular life—my succession of unfulfilling jobs, socializing with friends and coworkers, visits with my sister and my nieces, random dates with entirely normal men—men a lot like the unscarred, non-dhampyr version of Declan in my dream—and maybe that would be that.

And maybe, one day, I'd forget about him entirely.

However, the thought that he wouldn't be close by, watching over me, made me feel something I could only describe as grief. Grief for a man who'd come into my life unexpectedly and might just disappear as quickly as he'd arrived.

CHAPTEREIGHT

On the elevator, I stayed close to Declan, nearly, but not quite, touching him. He was motivated by wanting to help me get better. So was I. I think I might have followed someone into the very depths of hell to get my blood cleaned out. The thought of the potential pain that was to come frightened me, but that fear wasn't enough to stop me from moving forward.

We got off the elevator and moved down the hallway to Dr. Reynolds' examining room where we'd been yesterday. Jackson spoke briefly with Dr. Reynolds at the doorway, and I caught only a bit of what he said.

"I need to see her."

“Soon, I promise,” Dr. Reynolds replied. “There’s work for you downstairs. Go, now.”

Jackson turned to face us, his expression grim. “I’ll see you later.”

“What’s wrong?” Declan asked.

It seemed as if Jackson was about to say something, but then he closed his mouth. “Nothing at all. Good luck in there,” he said.

Then he gave us a curt nod before he disappeared down the hall.

I shared a confused look with Declan.

“What was that all about?” I asked.

“No idea,” Declan replied.

“Please, Jill, come in,” Dr. Reynolds said. “It’s good to see you again.”

“You too,” I replied as I entered the room tentatively. Other than the sparse furnishings of the stainless steel table and metal chair, there were cupboards on the walls, a sink, and a filing cabinet.

Dr. Reynolds’s smile froze at the edges at the sight of Declan.

“Mr. Reyes,” he said curtly. “I’m glad you’re here today.”

“Dr. Reynolds,” Declan replied. “I know we had our problems yesterday, but thank you for getting back to us so quickly. Your help with Jill is greatly appreciated. I hope you know that.”

“It’s entirely my honor,” the doctor said with a nod, and his gaze moved toward the open door. “My assistant will be joining us today. Please, try not to be alarmed.”

I didn’t have to wonder about what he meant by that for long. Another man entered the room—he had dark red hair and was wearing a white lab coat. His skin was very pale, his cheeks gaunt. As his lips parted slightly, I could see the edge of his fangs.

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Declan pulled me against him so abruptly I let out a small shriek of surprise. His silver stake was already in his grip.

“What the hell is this?” he growled.

The assistant smiled uneasily, his gray eyes moving to Declan’s sharp silver stake. “Let me guess. Victor didn’t warn you about me?”

“My apologies,” Dr. Reynolds replied tightly. “This is Lawrence, my research assistant. I’m so accustomed to having him around that I sometimes neglect to let others know beforehand what he is. It’s ceased to be an issue for me.”

“Please relax,” Lawrence said, holding his hands out at his sides. “I mean you absolutely no harm.”

“Wish I could say the same,” Declan growled.

It was one thing to think there were rogue vampires here somewhere, safely locked away. It was an entirely different thing to have one in the same room with me, wearing a lab coat just like Dr. Reynolds. A little warning would have been nice. A little warning and I wouldn’t have shown up in the first place.

“If he gets a whiff of me...” I began shakily.

I didn’t think I needed to finish that sentence.

“I assure you, that won’t be a problem.” Dr. Reynolds moved to stand next to

Lawrence, shielding him in a near mirror image of what Declan was doing for me.

“Victor already briefed me about your case, Miss Conrad,” Lawrence said. “And I promise I’ll be staying well back from you just to be safe. I’m not like most others of my kind, but I still don’t want to take any risks.”

Dr. Reynolds spread his hands. “Lawrence has been my research assistant for five years. He was sired against his will a year ago but retained his good sense and human morals, more than enough for me to trust him to stay on as my assistant. He believes as I do that the vast majority of vampires are a true and present threat to humankind that needs to be controlled by deadly force.”

Lawrence stepped out from behind Dr. Reynolds, keeping a wary eye on Declan, who hadn’t budged or said another word yet, but I could feel the menace coming off him in waves. He wasn’t happy about this little unexpected turn of events. That made two of us.

“Many vampires would never dream of harming anyone,” Lawrence said evenly. “I’m one of them.”

“If that’s so, then where do you get your blood?” I had to ask.

His gray eyes met mine. “There are blood banks. Donors. It’s mostly a black market business, but blood sources are available. Both the human and animal kind. I value my job here, and I would never jeopardize it for anything. After all, Victor and I have a great deal in common.”

I wasn’t letting down my guard quite yet. “Like what?”

“He knows what it’s like to lose someone he loves,” Dr. Reynolds said, nodding at the vampire. “Go ahead and tell them. I think it may help.”

“Very well.” Lawrence’s expression shadowed. “Stacy, my wife...she accepted me after I was sired, and knew I was the same man she married despite my irreversible change. But she disappeared without a trace six months ago. I’ve been searching for her ever since, desperate to find her. So worried that something horrible happened to her...all because of what I am now.”

The pain in his voice was palpable and it managed to penetrate my steely exterior.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Are there any leads on where she went?”

“Few and far between, I’m afraid,” he admitted. “She didn’t leave a note. She hasn’t tried to make any contact with me.”

“Did she run from you?” Declan asked. “Perhaps she wasn’t as okay with you being a vampire as she might have led you to believe.”

I knew he was being logical, but the pain on Lawrence’s face at this suggestion made me sympathize.

Sympathize with a vampire. Right.

I had to remember that this wasn’t Matthias. I wasn’t going to start collecting vampire friends like baseball trading cards.

“Lawrence believes that she was been taken by another vampire in revenge for the work he does here,” Dr. Reynolds said.

“But they haven’t been in touch. No ransom demands? Nothing?” Declan asked.

“No,” Lawrence whispered. “She can’t be dead, though. I can’t give up hope. Anything could still happen. I’m waiting to hear something from the private

investigator I hired, hopefully, he'll have some encouraging news soon.”

I shivered. I knew a lot about hope and how hard it was to keep a grasp on it. But it was possible and sometimes things did work out for the best instead of the worst.

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By the look on Dr. Reynolds' bleak expression, though, I didn't think he held onto the same hope for Stacy's survival that his assistant did.

"You still should have told us about Lawrence upfront." Declan's voice didn't hold a sliver of empathy for the vampire's sad tale. "You having a vampire assistant, no matter what the story is behind it, doesn't make me feel all warm and fuzzy about being here. I already don't trust you as much as Jackson says he does."

Dr. Reynolds adjusted his glasses. The stiffness in his expression made me think he was having trouble speaking cordially to Declan. With his prejudices against dhampyrs, I knew the two would never become best friends.

And yet, he had a vampire as a lab assistant like it was no big deal?

Nice and helpful vampire or not, I couldn't really say that made a huge amount of sense to me, so I had to side with Declan here.

"If I had told you, you might not have returned," the doctor countered. "And that would be unacceptable, given what I've discovered in Jill's blood."

Finally, a welcome change in subjects.

"And what's that?" I asked.

"Initially, when I first heard rumors of the Nightshade formula that Carl Anderson had been hired to develop," Dr. Reynolds replied, "I assumed it was a slow-moving poison that would weaken its victim over several minutes or hours. But it's not like

that at all, is it?”

“No, more like seconds,” I told him. “If it wasn’t that fast, I doubt I’d be standing here today.”

“It’s amazing.”

I almost laughed at that. “I have other words to describe it. Amazing isn’t one of them.”

Dr. Reynolds shook his head. “It’s all such a horrible, horrible waste, then.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, tensing up.

He moved to the other side of the examination room, his hands clasped behind his back. “I’m afraid I can’t re-create it. The original composition has changed far too much since bonding with your blood.”

My heart sank like a stone to the bottom of the ocean. I’d hoped that he had the skill, experience, and intelligence to use my blood samples to determine the original formula. So the Nightshade project, as flawed as it had been from the beginning, wouldn’t be a total loss. It could be recreated and used as a weapon against rogue vampires to keep humans safe. The same humans who didn’t even know vampires existed. It would be in their best interest that it stayed that way indefinitely.

“I’m sorry,” I said, my throat tight.

“I’m sorry too. However, while that realization was a great disappointment, I did discover something else I’d like to show to you.” He nodded at Lawrence. “Go get him.”

Lawrence left the room without a word.

Declan finally tucked his stake away. “We didn’t come here for any more experiments or questions. We came here because we thought you had a solution for us. Do you or don’t you?”

“You must have patience!” Dr. Reynolds turned a fiery glare at him. But a moment later he cleared his throat and seemed to compose himself again. “As an accomplished vampire hunter, I believe that you will appreciate how incredibly important this discovery is. Will you just allow me a couple more minutes to demonstrate to you what I’ve found?”

Declan was silent for a moment but then nodded. “A couple minutes. But that’s it.”

“Thank you,” he replied thinly. “I appreciate that.”

Lawrence returned with another man with blond hair and a heavy build. He wore dark blue jeans and a white button-down shirt. He looked to be around thirty years old. With a less-than-gentle push from Lawrence, the man stumbled into the room.

“Take a seat,” Dr. Reynolds said, and the man sat down heavily in the chair without being asked again.

Uneasiness moved through me. “What’s wrong with him?”

Dr. Reynolds went over to the chair and walked a slow circle around it. “He’s been tranquilized so he won’t cause us any problems.”

A breath caught in my chest as I noticed that the man had gray eyes. “He’s a vampire too?”

“Yes.”

A vampire, at this research facility. One who'd been tranquilized. While Lawrence the vampire was a research assistant, this vampire was a researchsubject.

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The doctor grasped the vampire's chin and squeezed. "Last week this soulless creature killed a family whose car had broken down at the side of the road. Three children and two adults died to feed his hunger."

"I was so hungry." The vampire's voice was weak and reedy. "I couldn't stop myself."

"You're a murderer who took five innocent human lives. You'll receive no sympathy from me." Dr. Reynolds let him go, and the vampire's chin dropped to his chest. The doctor wiped his hand on the front of his lab coat with disgust.

My stomach churned at the thought of it. At the moment he didn't look that dangerous. "Is it safe to have him in here with us?"

"For now. Even the most powerful tranquilizer won't last long when it comes to monsters like this. But don't worry, Jill. This won't take very long at all."

I'd have to take his word for that.

I eyed Lawrence, the helpful research assistant with the missing wife. If he didn't show his fangs, I'd have guessed he was as human as anyone else, apart from his gray eyes and pale skin. He stayed on the other side of the room, a good twelve feet away from me. Most vampires only had a problem with the scent of the Nightshade if they didn't keep their distance. I'd really rather not have any more problems today if I could help it.

"If you're meaning to have this vampire bite Jill," Declan's voice was no more than a

warning growl, “then you’d better think again.”

I shuddered at the suggestion of it. “Oh, hell no. That’s not going to happen.”

“No, that’s not what this is,” Dr. Reynolds replied.

“Then what sort of experiment is this?” I asked.

“It’s an experiment to show you how your blood reacts when it’s outside of your body.”

I shook my head. “I suggested that to someone else, but if it hits oxygen, it’s supposedly useless as a weapon. Something about the air keeps it from working properly.”

“That’s true.” Dr. Reynolds opened a case on the table to our left and removed what looked like a gun. It was small and silver, with a short, thick needle protruding from the end of it. “Inside this is a small sample of your blood, protected from contact with oxygen. Now, allow me to demonstrate.”

He held the device in his right hand and approached the vampire.

I tensed. “What are you going to—?”

I didn’t have the chance to finish my sentence before Dr. Reynolds raised the device to the vampire’s throat, jabbed the needle into his flesh, and squeezed the trigger.

CHAPTERNINE

The vampire gasped as he was injected with the sample of my blood—a near mirror image of what had happened to me. He looked around as if seeing us for the first

time.

“What did you...?” He drew in a shaky breath, and his face began to show distress.

“Please, no...I need to—”

His words broke off, followed by a chilling moment of silence. Then he screamed, rising up off the chair. Before he could get fully to his feet, fire poured out of his mouth and quickly consumed his entire body.

A moment later, just after the stench of burnt flesh filled my nostrils, he exploded in a scattering of fiery ash. It was the usual death of a vampire—one I’d seen several times before this. Quick. Efficient. Scary as hell.

I stood frozen in place, my hand against my mouth, my eyes wide with shock. I’d known what was coming, but that hadn’t made it any easier to witness. It was exactly the same as what happened when a vampire bit me. It was my poisonous blood—but the fast food take-out version.

“Holy shit,” I managed to say.

Dr. Reynolds regarded us with a wide and victorious smile. “It’s amazing. This is the third vampire we’ve tried this dose on. And the same result every single time.”

Lawrence nodded. Considering he, too, was a vampire, I was surprised he didn’t look more disturbed by what had just happened. “Nightshade is a perfect weapon,” he said.

Declan stood stoically beside me as he watched the proceedings. “The Nightshade formula alone is useless, I’ve been told. It has to be bonded to a human’s blood to work properly like this.”

Dr. Reynolds’s smile faded as if he’d forgotten for a moment that the dhampyr was

still in the room with us. “From what I know about the original project, I have to agree with those findings.”

He nodded. “Carson told me that Nightshade was originally tested on several vampire subjects. It weakened them but didn’t kill them. The bond to a human’s blood was allegedly what would make it impossible to resist as well as lethal.”

“Moth to a flame,” Lawrence supplied.

“Yeah, that,” Declan replied.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Allegedly.”

“Yeah, allegedly. It hadn’t been tested on a human subject until that day.”

That day. Yeah, I remembered that day all too well.

I wrung my hands as I eyed the scattering of ashes, all that remained of Nightshade’s latest victim. “So the Nightshade has to be mixed with living blood for it to work as a weapon going forward.”

“There is no going forward for the Nightshade program, Jill,” Declan replied. “Your blood is still compromised and you need a cure for that. Which is exactly why we’re here.”

Declan Reyes was a control freak. I already knew that. I’d seen the evidence in it with what he’d chosen to do with Sara, how she was somewhere else now, a location I didn’t know because of the threat of vampiric influence on my admittedly weak human mind.

I’d hoped that Dr. Reynolds might be able to recreate the Nightshade, but that was off the table. Such a waste of a perfectly good—if frightening as hell—weapon.

“I’m sorry,” I told the doctor. “I’m sorry that you can’t replicate the formula and find another volunteer to take my place.”

The doctor looked down at the silver gun. “Yes, that would make everything much simpler. The only source is your blood itself—and any new blood your body creates is immediately infused with the poison. Your blood, Jill, is both the beginning and the end of the Nightshade program.”

This was one situation where it wasn’t that great to be popular.

It was too bad that the very thing that was killing me could be a huge help to the world. Talk about a lose-lose situation.

“I do...have a suggestion, though,” Dr. Reynolds continued. “One I am hoping you will be amenable to.”

“I’m listening,” I replied.

“We could postpone your treatment for a few days, during which we would take blood samples from you regularly. With enough samples on hand, we might eventually find a way to go forward with this project.”

“You want to bleed her,” Declan growled. “For your own gain.”

“For the world’s gain, Mr. Reyes,” the doctor countered sharply.

“It’s not going to happen.”

I put my hand on Declan’s tense arm. “Wait. Let me answer for myself.”

“Jill...” he began.

I shook my head. “I know this isn’t my world, this isn’t anything I want to be a part of for a minute longer than I have to be, but I’m not naïve. My blood is proven to kill

rogue vampires and I know that's a very good thing. If the Nightshade wasn't also killing me, I'd absolutely volunteer to make regular donations."

"But it is killing you," Declan said.

Apart from the poison, I'd been bitten, bruised, and knocked unconscious too many times to count. This roller-coaster ride sure as hell didn't come with a safety harness.

"I'm still alive, and I feel fine today," I told him.

"That's not good enough for me. For all we know you have only hours left to live." Declan's fierce expression softened a fraction at my wince. "It's the truth," he said.

I shook my head. "Yeah, well. The truth hurts."

He turned to the doctor. "The Nightshade program is over. And this conversation needs to end. Now. You can either help us today or you can't. Which is it?"

Yes. Definitely a control freak. But I couldn't say he was wrong. As much as I'd like to help Dr. Reynolds, I had no idea how much time I had left. And just because I felt almost normal today thanks to the blood fuser, it didn't mean it would last.

Jackson said there were several research facilities across the country, all dedicated to this kind of research. They'd develop another formula. A better and more stable one.

I couldn't let myself feel guilty about this since there was nothing I could do to change what was.

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I mean, I would feel guilty for a while. But I hoped it would pass eventually.

Dr. Reynolds regarded Declan, peering at him through his glasses. “You care about Jill a great deal. I wasn’t sure at first, but it’s true, isn’t it?”

“Her safety is my first priority,” Declan agreed.

Dr. Reynolds eyed him, his lips thin. “My wife and I were opposites, too. Two different worlds, but we made it work the best we could.”

I wasn’t sure how we’d shifted into this area of conversation without any warning, but I thought it best to end it as quickly as it began. I didn’t need my relationship with Declan put under a microscope and studied like a sample of my blood.

“Whatever we are to each other isn’t exactly important right now,” I said.

“You care about him as well,” the doctor countered.

“Of course I do.”

“Even though he’s a dhampyr.” He managed to make the word sound more like an accusation than an observation.

I looked at the dhampyr in question. He had an eyebrow slightly raised, his gaze on me as if waiting for my reply. “I’d be dead if it wasn’t for Declan. I owe him my life.”

Not the most romantic of declarations, I'll admit. But it was still true.

It was more than that, of course. So much more. But that was nobody else's damn business.

Dr. Reynolds pursed his lips. "I met my wife four years ago after I'd decided to accept my confirmed bachelor status. Falling in love with Clara came as a complete surprise to me. My days were spent with test tubes and chemical formulas. Parachemistry, parascience, it's always been my one and only obsession. But Clara..." His voice caught on her name. "She made me see that there was more to life than work."

Lawrence moved toward him and squeezed Dr. Reynolds' shoulder in support.

"She sounds like she was an amazing woman," I said. "I'm so very sorry for your loss. Really, I am."

"So am I."

"You said a dhampyr killed her."

His jaw tightened. "Yes."

It was only a handful of days ago that I'd come face to face with a killer dhampyr. It had been one of Dr. Monica Gray's breeding experiments, technically only a baby, but it had quickly grown to the size of a man and with the hunger of a monster.

Dr. Gray had taken part in another breeding experiment nearly thirty years prior. She personally became pregnant with a vampire's baby, and successfully gave birth to a non-monster dhampyr. That dhampyr was Declan.

Only a handful of minutes after Declan learned she was his mother, Dr. Gray had been the baby dhampyr's final victim that night.

"I haven't seen too many monster dhampyrs," I said aloud. "But the ones I have seen have been scary as hell. It must have been horrible for you, nobody could easily recover from such a tragedy. But I'm sure there was nothing you could have done to save her."

Dr. Reynolds removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose, squeezing his eyes shut. "You're wrong about that."

I was confused. I looked at Lawrence, whose gray eyes flicked to me.

"It wasn't a monster dhampyr," the vampire said, shaking his head.

That surprised me. "It wasn't?"

"Lawrence...enough," Dr. Reynolds said.

Lawrence hissed out a breath. "Victor, it's time you faced this once and for all, as we discussed. I know what happened is still so fresh, but you need to move on. Especially now."

"I could say the same to you," Dr. Reynolds retorted.

Pain crossed Lawrence's expression. "My situation is different from yours. Clara was so different from Stacy."

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I watched them warily. Declan stood like a statue beside me, his hands clasped behind his back like a soldier at ease.

“How were they different?” I asked.

Lawrence wrung his hands and looked at me. “My wife is human—a human married to a vampire. But Victor’s wife...she was a vampire.”

My mouth fell open. “What?”

Reynolds put his glasses back on. His face was still, his emotions now under control. He’d managed to put a lid on his grief for the time being. “Clara was already a vampire when I met her,” he admitted grimly. “It was difficult for her sometimes to control her hunger, but she maintained herself with class and dignity. Right up until she was murdered in cold blood.”

“Murdered by a dhampyr,” I said, my chest tight.

“Yes.” Dr. Reynolds’s expression had rapidly turned from raw emotion to absolute ice. “The very dhampyr who stands with us in this room.”

CHAPTERTEN

My gaze shot to Declan. He watched the doctor carefully, with no outward reaction showing at this accusation.

“You’re saying that I’m the one who killed your wife,” he said evenly.

“Yes.” The word was no more than a hiss.

I waited for Declan to deny it, to say it was impossible that he’d killed Dr. Reynolds’s wife.

But he didn’t.

Declan didn’t move from where he stood, his expression didn’t change, but his gaze grew more intense. Dr. Reynolds had gotten his full attention. “I only kill rogues. I don’t creep up behind every vampire and slit their throat. I face them head-on. They know who I am and why I’m there. That’s when they usually attack me and that’s when I usually fight back. It’s a fight that rarely lasts very long.”

The low-level hate I’d previously sensed from Dr. Reynolds now spilled over like a vat full of acid. I’d assumed he hated dhampyrs in general. I had no idea that his hate had been specifically focused on Declan.

“I’m sure she attacked you in self-defense,” he snarled. “Of course, she did. What other choice would you have given her?”

Declan regarded him patiently, but there was not an ounce of understanding in his gaze for Dr. Reynolds’ naked grief. “I would have given her a choice, like any target. To explain who she was. To deal with me on an intelligent level. If a vampire does that, I might give them the benefit of the doubt.”

His words surprised me. I believed that Declan hated all vampires equally, born from a hatred of his birth father, whom he’d been told had violently abused his mother, ultimately leading to her death.

It had been a lie originated by Dr. Gray herself.

I really didn't miss that woman in the slightest. The world was better off without her.

Matthias had been a dangerous man, one with thirsts that went far beyond his need for blood. He was power-hungry, undoubtedly a narcissist, and every bit as deadly as the poison in my veins. But he was also someone whom I believed had a moral center and no true desire to destroy the world. Under his reign, his vampire subjects followed rules that kept humans safe. Without him...all bets were off.

He was my proof that vampires could be reasoned with. They could be more than mindless monsters who only wanted to kill.

That Declan believed there were vampires like this out there as well gave me some more of that shiny hope that the world was not only black and white, right or wrong, good or evil.

"Lies," Dr. Reynolds said to Declan. "You're nothing more than a cold-blooded murderer."

Still, Declan didn't flinch at the doctor's accusations. "I'm sent out after rogue vampires who cause damage and death, not loving wives of scientists. If I slayed your wife, it means that she was too dangerous to live another day."

"You can justify it any way you want to. It doesn't change what happened last month."

"A month ago," Declan repeated. "Where was this?"

"San Jose," the doctor bit out. "Clara had family there she was visiting."

"We're done here." Declan hissed out a breath from between his clenched teeth.

"This isn't someone with any real plans to help you, Jill. Not today anyway. Let's

go.”

He was right. At the very least, Dr. Reynolds didn't seem focused on the Nightshade anymore. While what he'd said was chilling and turned my stomach, I also believed Declan. If he'd killed Clara, he'd done so because she was a serious threat.

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I took Declan's hand and we began to move toward the exit. Lawrence stepped back so he wouldn't come within smelling distance of me.

I hesitated at the doorway. "How can you be sure it was Declan?" I asked. "From what I understand, there are lots of vampire hunters out there."

"It was him," he said flatly without a single shred of doubt.

"Is this why you told Jackson you could help me?" I had to ask. "You heard Declan's name, knew we were together, and wanted to use me to confront the person who ended your wife's life?"

Dr. Reynold's fierce gaze slid to me and his brows drew together. "I still wanted to help you too, Jill."

"Or maybe you just wanted my blood."

He seemed to be having a difficult time keeping eye contact with me. His gaze shifted to Declan and hardened again. "You're not even willing to apologize to me for murdering my wife, dhampyr?" he asked.

Declan tensed and glanced over his shoulder at the man. "You admit that your wife was a vampire. One who found it difficult not to give in to her hunger."

Dr. Reynolds drew in a shaky breath that sounded more like a sob. "And I feel her loss like a hole in my heart every single day that's passed."

Declan faltered, just a little. If I hadn't been watching for it, I would never have seen it. A microscopic sliver of doubt slid behind his gaze, and his forehead furrowed. "To my knowledge, I've never killed a vampire that didn't deserve death. It's a war out there, one we need to protect humans from. You must know that working at a place like this. You also must know that bad shit happens every day and mistakes happen. If I was the cause of your wife's death last month, and she didn't truly deserve it, then yeah, I'm sorry as hell for that."

Dr. Reynolds stared at him for so long that I wasn't sure if he'd ever speak again. A scattering of emotion played on his face—grief, sadness, pain, doubt.

I knew Declan's life had been filled with violence from practically the very day he was born. His emotion-repressing serum was actually a bonus in that respect. It kept that part of him, the part deep inside that went past the scars, past the damage, relatively pure and untouched. For all the killing he'd done, that he'd undoubtedly have to do in the future, it hadn't broken him. For all the horror he'd had to face in his life, I knew Declan's heart wasn't dark.

He still had a soul. He still had the capacity to care. To love.

I'd seen it with my own eyes. I'd felt it from his touch.

That's why that glimmer of doubt, of regret, in his otherwise emotionless expression troubled me. Just a couple of days off his original serum last week was enough for him to experience emotion—all kinds of it. Once you experienced something you'd never had to deal with before, was that something you could just put behind you and forget about forever?

Declan was right. This was over, another dead end.

I wouldn't find my cure here. Not today, anyway.

It wasn't that I didn't empathize with Dr. Reynold's pain—I did. But the relief I'd felt, the hope I'd allowed myself for my own solution, had faded away to almost nothing. I hated being used, no matter what the motivation was.

I turned toward the door, resolved to leave. Come what may.

“Wait,” Dr. Reynolds said. “I had—I have every intention of helping you to the best of my ability, Jill. The fact that you're aligned with the dhampyr who murdered my wife is only an unfortunate complication.”

There was that hope again, just a tiny spark of it, mixed with a shot of relief. I turned to face him again. “Okay. So what now?”

“My research has always come first. If I would have had to choose between Clara and my work, I would have had a very hard time with that decision. In the end, I think I would have chosen the research over love. She knew this. She accepted how important it was to me. It's everything. My research is me.”

Declan crossed his arms. “I hope you can put your feelings about me aside, Dr. Reynolds, even if it's only long enough to help Jill.”

The doctor nodded, his expression filled with determination now. “Of course. Like I said, my research is everything to me.”

With that, he reached his hand out to Declan.

The man ran hot and cold. One moment he was snarling and furious, full of blame and hate and grief. The next he was willing to shake hands, forgive, and move on.

Declan hesitated only a moment before he grasped Dr. Reynolds's hand and shook it. “If there's anything I can do for you to help in your research while I'm here, I'm

more than willing to do just that.”

“Thank you, Mr. Reyes. As a matter of fact, there is.”

“What’s that?”

“This.”

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Dr. Reynolds pulled a syringe out from his pocket and plunged it into Declan's chest. I watched in frozen shock as Declan immediately ripped the needle out of his flesh, glaring fiercely at it before casting it to the side.

“What the fuck do you think you're doing?” he snapped.

“Research,” Dr. Reynolds said, backing up a step.

Declan fell hard to his knees and braced his hands against the ground. “Tranquilizer,” he muttered, and already I heard the strength leaving his voice. “That was a...tranquilizer.”

I'd stopped breathing. “What in the hell is going on? Why would you do this?”

Lawrence grabbed the back of Declan's leather coat and yanked him up to his feet as if two hundred and twenty pounds of solid muscle weighed next to nothing. Declan's eyes had already glazed over, his limbs slack and useless. Lawrence shoved him down into the chair. Around it was the scattering of gray ash—all that was left from the other vampire, apart from the lingering burning scent.

Dr. Reynolds moved closer to Declan, his gaze flicking to my stunned expression. “Stay where you are, Jill.”

I ignored him and rushed toward Declan, but Dr. Reynolds caught my arm and he dug his fingers painfully into my flesh.

“Did you hear me?” he snapped.

“Explain to me what the hell you think you’re doing with Declan,” I demanded.

“I need him.” There was a steely look of determination in his eyes. The grief I’d seen there when he’d spoken of his dead wife was only a memory now. “I’ve witnessed your blood easily kill a vampire, but I don’t know if it will kill a dhampyr too.”

He snatched up the silver gunlike device and tossed it to Lawrence who caught it easily.

“Do it,” Dr. Reynolds snapped

“Wait, no...” I began.

But before I could say another word, before I could take another breath or even scream, Lawrence stabbed the needle into Declan’s neck and pulled the trigger.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Now I screamed. But it was too late to stop what had happened.

My blood. My poisoned blood...

Declan’s face tensed, and his teeth clenched a moment before they parted and a roar of pain escaped from him.

I shoved Dr. Reynolds away from me with all my strength, then grabbed hold of Declan’s arm. Lawrence stumbled back from me to keep his distance from the scent of my blood.

“Declan, no! Please...”

When he looked at me, I could see the utter realization of what had just happened in his pained gaze. “Jill...”

My name sounded broken, jagged.

Then his single gray eye rolled backward, and his head slumped forward.

I fumbled to feel for a pulse at his throat, scared to death that there wouldn't be anything there. But there was.

His heart was still beating, too erratic and way too fast, but it remained strong beneath my touch. But. it was too soon for relief and fear was still a bitter taste in my mouth.

Declan was half-vampire. Every vampire who'd tasted my blood had died in a flash of fire and ashes like the woman in the grocery store parking lot. So far, there was nothing so dramatic, but that didn't ease my mind. He was unconscious, either from the pain my blood had caused him or from the tranquilizer, but he was still alive.

Finally, I turned from Declan to Dr. Reynolds, a man I'd held in high regard until only a minute ago. “You shouldn't have done that,” I growled.

There was only darkness in my tone and enough of a warning edge that it actually made the doctor take a step back from me. I knew I was far from being a frightening presence, especially compared to somebody tall and muscular like Declan or Jackson, but Dr. Reynolds now regarded me with caution.

“My hypothesis seems to be wrong,” he replied. “He's still alive.”

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“And you’re damn lucky he is.”

“Or what would happen? Would you kill me in revenge?”

I clenched my fists at my sides. “Feeling the way I do right now? All bets are off.”

He raised a brow. “Then who would help you with your unfortunate little problem, Jill? There’s no one else alive who has as much knowledge as I do when it comes to parachemistry.”

“I guess I’d just have to figure it out. Because if Declan had just died because of what your research, when it’s clear to me that it was purely for vengeance...” I hissed out a breath. “I would have taken his stake and plunged it into your throat myself.”

There was a time, not so long ago, that if I’d tried to land a line like that it would have received a look of amusement, not wariness. Not today though.

Dr. Reynolds grimaced. “I thought you were a nice girl, Jill.”

“Maybe once. Not any longer.”

“I am a man of science. Everything I do is for the greater good.”

“Funny, that looked more like straight-up vengeance than science to me.”

“I lost my wife because of your dhampyr lover. Do you blame me?”

“Yes. I blame you.” I sent a look toward the door. “Wait until Jackson hears about what you just did to his friend. He’s going to be furious.”

Before the doctor could reply to that, I heard a cell phone start to ring. Lawrence winced and fished into the pocket of his lab coat.

“Bad timing, I know,” he said. “But I really have to take this.”

The doctor gestured that it was all right, and Lawrence took the call.

“Yes?” he said. “Yes, that’s right. Tell me what you’ve learned.”

The vampire made me nervous, but he wasn’t my first priority. Declan was. Dr. Reynolds had used a huge dose of the tranquilizer on him. The dhampyr was strong both mentally and physically, easily the strongest man I’d ever known, but he was completely out of it right now.

His eyepatch had shifted, so I gently put it back into place before I traced my finger lightly along the scar that started on his forehead and ran down past his patch to his jawline. The scar he’d gotten the day he’d lost his eye.

It was a reminder of how much he’d had to endure in his life. So much blood and pain and loss. Declan Reyes protected me ninety-nine percent of the time since the day we met. Now I would protect him for the remaining one percent. Whatever it took.

“Declan,” I whispered as I stroked his forehead. “Please wake up.”

His eyelid fluttered but didn’t open.

“You’re still alive,” I told him, just in case he needed the reminder. “My blood didn’t

kill you. I'm guessing it hurt like hell, though, and I'm so sorry for that. The moment you wake up, we're getting the hell out of here."

"Jill, it's time we got started," Dr. Reynolds said.

I glared at him. "With what?"

"With the samples of your blood to keep in reserve."

The audacity of his request after what he'd just pulled nearly made me laugh in his face. "After what you just did to Declan? Go fuck yourself."

His jaw tightened. "I see now that I shouldn't have allowed my personal feelings to get in the way of my work."

"You figured that out all by yourself? Amazing. Congrats, on that. But, sorry, I'm not really in the right frame of mind to be all that cooperative today. All I want to know is if Declan's going to survive this."

"If he's survived this long after being injected with your blood, I believe he has a good chance to recover from my experiment. The Nightshade appears to fatally affect only full vampires, not dhampyrs."

His voice held a noticeable edge of disappointment that only pissed me off more than I already was.

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Still, a good chance wasn't a one-hundred-percent chance. And I had no guarantees that the doctor wouldn't try for round number two if Declan recovered completely.

"Do you really, honestly believe that Declan set out to kill your wife just for the hell of it?" I asked. "She must have—"

"Must have what? Deserved it?" he snapped, but then his expression softened again. "I...I don't know anymore. In a war, I admit that sometimes it's hard to tell which side is right. I, myself, have justified doing things that outsiders might consider evil."

"Evil, you say." It was Lawrence who said this. He'd ended his call and was studying the both of us with narrowed eyes.

Dr. Reynolds frowned. "At times, yes. You know as well as I that the line can sometimes blur." He nodded at the phone. "Is everything all right?"

Lawrence slipped his phone back into his pocket. "I wouldn't say that."

"Who were you speaking to?"

"Someone with answers about my wife. Tell me, Victor..." Lawrence didn't take his attention off his boss. "Where is Stacy right now?"

In an instant, his eyes shifted to black and dark blue veins branched down along the sides of his face to his neck. Both were frightening signs of a vampire who had begun to lose their composure and now leaned toward their darker impulses.

Yet his voice remained controlled. Eerily so.

“What are you talking about?” Dr. Reynolds asked.

“My investigator got a hold of some outer security footage from this building. Stacy was seen entering through the main doors on the night that she disappeared six months ago. She wasn’t seen leaving. Where is she? What have you done to her?”

My gaze shot to the doctor.

Reynolds raised his hands. “We can talk about this, Lawrence. Calmly.”

Laurence raised his black-eyed gaze to the doctor. “You’ve been so supportive these last months, helping me to hold onto hope that I’d find her again. I trusted you, never doubted for a moment. You gave me a chance when everyone else wanted me dead. You and Stacy—you were the only ones who gave me that chance.”

“Lawrence...”

“You’re not denying it, are you?”

Dr. Reynolds pushed his glasses higher on his nose. “I’m not denying it.”

“Where is my wife right now?” In the span of a heartbeat, Lawrence’s calm voice had gone ice cold. Enough that it sent a chill skittering down my spine.

“Sit down, Lawrence. As I said, we can talk about this calmly.”

Lawrence clearly disagreed with that suggestion. He grabbed the doctor by his white coat and shook him violently. “You’ve been using her in your goddamned experiments, you son of a bitch. Haven’t you?”

To say that I wanted nothing to do with this confrontation would be putting it extremely mildly. I crouched next to Declan, holding on to his arm tightly.

“Declan, wake up,” I whispered harshly. “You have to snap the hell out of this right now.”

I sensed that Lawrence the self-proclaimed “nice” vampire was about to go full nuclear and I didn’t want to be here for the blast wave if I could help it.

“I knew what you’d do if I told you the truth.” Dr. Reynolds’s voice held firm.

“Where the hell is she?” the vampire snarled again.

“You must listen to me very carefully and not lose yourself, do you hear me? Stacy had heard about my Nightfall project, I can only imagine that she learned it from you—a file, an email, an overheard conversation, I don’t know. She came to me six months ago, desperate and afraid.”

“The Nightfall project,” Lawrence repeated, shaking his head. “Why would she be interested in such a...?” His eyes went wide with shock. “No. It’s impossible.”

Dr. Reynolds regarded the vampire with more concern than fear. “Yes. She was pregnant. Her first trimester was difficult for her, enough that she knew something was very unusual about the fetus.”

“I didn’t know...she said nothing to me,” Lawrence whispered. “If this is true, why wouldn’t she have come to me?”

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“She didn’t want you to worry, to blame yourself, after everything you’d already endured.”

“You took me off Nightfall right after her disappearance. I lost my security access to the eighteenth floor. I assumed you wanted me to focus on other research instead of the breeding program. I never...I never questioned it, not even for a moment.”

“Yes,” Dr. Reynolds replied. “It was best that way.”

I listened to this exchange with growing alarm. A vampire father and a human mother rarely conceived a baby, but when it did happen, that child was always a dhampyr.

The monstrous kind literally clawed its way out of its mother’s womb, leading inevitably to the mother’s horrific death. Births of the more human dhampyrs like Declan were apparently a minuscule percentage.

I didn’t claim to be an expert on the subject, but I knew just enough to make me feel sick to my stomach about what Lawrence’s wife would have had to face.

Dr. Gray had her breeding program and that hadn’t ended well for her. But a whole lot of innocent women had died in her pursuit of research. To think that Dr. Reynolds had something similar in play here made me sick to my stomach.

“Tell me more, Victor,” Lawrence demanded.

“When I explained to Stacy that there was a potential for a normal child—that it’s impossible to tell the outcome until late in the third trimester—she was willing to

wait. To see. She agreed to stay here under my care and be carefully monitored.”

“Without telling me.”

“That was her request. Her demand. I honored it.”

“Why would she do such a thing?” Lawrence muttered. “The Nightfall project...I didn’t even realize it was still ongoing. How many human women do you have downstairs that I’m not aware of?”

“Only one other subject currently remains under observation. She and Stacy became very good friends over the last few weeks.”

“I’ve been beside myself with worry, searching for her in every spare moment I’ve had, and she’s been here, under my nose, this whole damn time,” Lawrence hissed. “The very same place I come to every day, working by your side. And you never said a damn word to me about it. You let me suffer.”

“I made my promise. I always keep my promises. You know that better than most.”

A shimmer of hope finally crossed Lawrence’s pale expression. “Is Stacy on level eighteen right now?”

There was silence for a few very long moments.

“She was,” Dr. Reynolds finally replied.

Lawrence frowned. “What do you mean, she was?”

“I’m sorry but...we lost her late last night.”

My blood ran cold.

Lawrence's expression shattered, and he took a shaky step backward. "No," he whispered.

Dr. Reynolds studied the shiny white floor by his feet. "She went into labor," he explained. "I tried everything in my power I could to save her, but it was impossible. My other patient was with her until the end, doing whatever she could to help us. She held Stacy's hand the whole time until it was...too late."

"What about the baby?" Lawrence asked, his voice ragged.

Dr. Reynolds shook his head. "I'm afraid it was far too vicious to keep for further testing."

"You let her go into labor knowing what she had inside of her?"

"It was the first such pregnancy I'd been able to observe and chart, since returning to this location. To end it prematurely would have been a loss to science. I fully believed I would be able to save her in the end, but it didn't turn out that way. I'm truly sorry, Lawrence. I hope you know I never wanted it to end like this."

Lawrence slowly raised his tear-filled black eyes to Dr. Reynolds. "I know that."

"Good."

"But," the vampire whispered, his voice hoarse, "I'm still going to kill you now."

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Lawrence took a menacing step forward, and Dr. Reynolds grabbed hold of my arm.

I shrieked as he shoved me toward the vampire. Lawrence caught me, and I felt the undeniable strength in his grip. He could easily break me in half, and I wasn't strong enough to stop him.

But strength wasn't my built-in weapon against vampires.

Lawrence inhaled the scent of my blood, and his lips drew back from his sharp white fangs. It seemed impossible, but his already black eyes grew even darker, like shiny, soulless buttons.

Dr. Reynolds edged toward the door. "Bite her. Feed on her blood. Give in to your instincts. You can't resist the Nightshade in Jill's veins."

So much for apologies and commiserating about an experiment gone wrong. He'd thrown me to the wolves without a second thought to save himself.

Son of a bitch.

"No!" I pushed at the vampire, but his grip on me only grew tighter. "You don't want to do this. If you taste my blood, you'll die. You're not like Declan. You're a full vampire. Hear me, Lawrence. Don't do this."

An animalistic growl rolled out from deep in the vampire's throat. "Your scent...it's so powerful. Too powerful."

I knew my bones would snap if I fought him any harder. “You’re a smart guy. You know what will happen if you bite me.”

There was barely any human intelligence left in his gaze. “Maybe I want to die.”

Definitely not the answer I’d hoped for. “Lawrence, no...”

“First, though,” he continued. “I want everyone else in this cursed building to die.”

The vampire shoved me and I flew backward. My head slammed against the side of the examining table and I hit the ground hard.

Out of the corner of my eye I watched as Lawrence pulled open a drawer and drew out a silver scalpel. He then turned toward Dr. Reynolds.

“Put that down, you fool,” Reynolds snarled.

“You’re not the only one who’s kept secrets, Victor,” Lawrence’s voice was not much more than a growl. “Your wife wanted to leave you long before she was killed. She’d fallen in love with another vampire. She hated that you spent all your time here, working on ways to kill her kind. Our kind. If you hadn’t been such a damn workaholic, then maybe Clara wouldn’t have ended up on the wrong side of that hunter’s stake last month.”

Dr. Reynolds’s previously harsh expression now filled with outrage.

“Liar!” he snarled.

“She confided in me a week before her death. Said that she’d rather die than stay with you another day. I guess she got her wish.”

“Careful what you say to me next, Lawrence, or I’ll send you downstairs with the rest of the monsters so you can share their fate.” Dr. Reynolds clenched his jaw. “You ungrateful, foolish—”

I didn’t see Lawrence’s arm move, since the movement was too fast to register. All I saw was the spray of bright red blood as his blade slashed Dr. Reynold’s throat.

The doctor staggered back, slipping in his own blood, and he crashed down next to me in a sputtering, twitching heap.

“Go to hell,” Lawrence told his dying boss. “It’s where assholes like you belong.”

I fought to remain conscious, but I’d hit my head too hard to stay that way for much longer. As my vision blurred, and everything began to go dark, I registered that Declan had begun to rise slowly and shakily to his feet, feeling for the sharp silver stake at his belt.

It was like it had been in my nightmare. Everything slowed down, and the air thickened. I couldn’t seem to move. Couldn’t speak. Couldn’t scream.

The vampire, his face now streaked with Dr. Reynolds’ blood, turned his cold gaze toward Declan...just as my world faded completely to black.

CHAPTERTWELVE

The alarm woke me.

I found myself laying in an awkward position on the cold hard floor, staring straight into the glazed, lifeless eyes of Dr. Reynolds.

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He was supposed to help save my life. He was my beacon of hope. My beacon of hope was now dead as a doornail.

The ear-piercing alarm made it difficult to think. I pushed myself up to my feet and frantically scanned the room, attempting to get my bearings. White walls, gray linoleum floor, empty metal chair, and stainless steel examination table to my right.

Declan lay on the opposite side of the room. From a distance, I couldn't tell if he was still breathing. There was blood—an alarming amount of it.

Stumbling, I ran to his side and fell bruisingly hard to my knees next to him.

“Declan!” I could barely hear my panicked voice above the sound of the alarm. “You’re not dead. Not like this. You can’t be dead. Please...please wake up!”

For a long, tortuous moment there was no reaction at all. But then his chest hitched and he finally opened his eye to meet my gaze.

“Jill...” he rasped out. “You need to get out of here. Now. Get out and run as fast and as far as you can to somewhere safe.”

I nodded. “You’re reading my mind. Come on...” I grabbed hold of his muscled arm. “Get up and let’s get the hell out of here.”

He shook his head. “No, leave me. Save yourself.”

“Not going to happen.” I hissed out a breath. “Stop being a bad movie cliché and get

on your feet. I'm not going anywhere without you."

His jaw clenched. "I'm hurt."

"Clearly. But you'll heal up nice and quick like the strong and healthy dhampyr you are. I'd be happy to throw some water on you to help speed up the process. I'm practically an expert on dhampyr first aid after my crash course, remember?"

"You're not listening to me, Jill. Go find Jackson. He'll help you get out of here, and then—"

"No, you're not listening to me, Declan." This wasn't an ideal time to argue with a stubborn alpha male, but I didn't exactly have a choice in the matter. "We got into this mess together and that's the same way we're getting out."

He glared up at me. "Jill..."

"I'm not leaving without you. If you're going to just give up and die right here, that means I am, too. So if you really want me to live to see another day, then you're going to have to do the same thing. Do you understand me?"

His eye narrowed before he finally answered. "Fine. Help me up, damn it."

I'd take my victories where I could get them.

"That's more like it," I said.

I grabbed his arm and helped him to his feet as much as I could, considering I was a full foot shorter than him. He leaned his nearly six and a half feet of solid muscle against me. His gaze moved toward Dr. Reynolds and the growing pool of blood forming a wet, red halo around the dead man's head.

“You know what this means,” Declan said grimly.

“Yeah,” I replied. “It means I’m definitely going to die. But it won’t be here. And it won’t be now.”

“I’m still feeling the tranq effects,” he growled, and I had to strain to hear him over the loud alarm. “That’s going to make this harder. And I don’t have my stake. Lawrence must have taken it.”

One look at Declan’s current injuries confirmed to me that he’d briefly fought with Lawrence and lost. Several deep knife wounds were in the process of healing. He wasn’t dead, and for that, I was eternally grateful.

“I just got knocked unconscious and I’m pretty sure I have a concussion,” I said. “But let’s try to stay positive, okay?”

“You go ahead and do that. I’m going to be a realist.”

“And what does your realist self tell you?”

“It tells me that I’m in rough shape and healing slower than I’d like.” Declan’s grip on me tightened. “My phone’s set to vibrate—someone’s calling. My arm’s too messed up right now. Grab it.”

Without thinking twice, I slipped my hand into the inner pocket of Declan’s jacket and took out his phone, stabbing at the answer button and holding it to my ear.

“Yeah?” I yelled loud enough to be heard over the alarm.

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“Jill? Is that you?” It was Jackson.

My grip on the phone tightened. “Where are you?”

“A level down from you. What the hell happened on twenty? Why is the alarm going?”

“To sum up? Dr. Reynolds’ vampire assistant, Lawrence, learned his wife died as a test subject here. He went full-vengeance-mode, killed Reynolds, and now he’s off doing some major damage, which triggered this.”

“Reynolds is dead?”

“Yeah,” I replied tightly. “That’s the short version.”

There was silence for a moment.

“Jackson, are you still there?” I asked.

“I’m here. I’m processing all of this and what it means for all of us. Lawrence must be the one who let the vampires out of their cells down here. At least a dozen of them are on the loose, maybe more. You need to get out of here. Where’s Declan?”

I looked at the dhampyr in question. “He’s with me.”

“Good.” I heard relief in his voice. “Okay, here’s what you need to do. Find the nearest stairwell. Don’t try to use the elevator, it’s not working. Don’t let any

vampire get too close to you or you won't have a—"

His voice cut off.

"Jackson? Are you still there? Jackson? Shit. He's gone." I shoved the phone back into Declan's coat.

"Gone where?" Declan asked.

"Just gone. I'm really hoping Lawrence didn't find him." I couldn't let myself worry about what just happened to Declan's vampire-hunting friend too much. Jackson could take care of himself. "We have to move. Lawrence must have gone completely batshit crazy because he released all the vampire test subjects. We have to get outside."

Sunlight didn't kill vampires. However, it did fry their hyper-sensitive eyes, blinding them and making them much easier to kill. Obviously, they preferred the nightlife to any potential exposure to daylight.

"Come on." I pulled Declan with me toward the door before I froze. Something Dr. Reynolds said came back to me. "Wait. Dr. Reynolds mentioned another human woman who's here for his dhampyr breeding project. We can't just leave her behind."

"If we can get to her, then we will," he replied, his voice tense. "But if we can't, my first priority is to get you out of here in one piece."

"But Declan—"

"No, Jill. No more arguments. We're out of here."

Faster than I thought he was currently able to move, he pulled me along with him to

the door of the office. It was already open, the hinges broken.

Dr. Reynolds had chosen his research over friendship and loyalty. He tried to convince himself he was one of the good guys, but keeping a woman locked away—even if she had misguidedly agreed to it—until she gave birth to a monster that ripped her apart...that wasn't something a good guy would do, even if it was in the name of science and research.

I felt Lawrence's pain, but he wasn't right either. I was just thankful he hadn't killed me or Declan yet. All we could do was try to get out of there before he found us again and finished what he'd started.

He'd bite me to end his life and put himself out of his pain and misery. And in his current mood, he'd probably tear out my throat in the process.

I'd already experienced suicide-by-Nightshade with Matthias. I was in no hurry for a repeat performance.

Declan leaned against me as we walked, and that worried me. He was also trailing blood from his more severe wounds. As a dhampyr, I knew he'd heal quickly, but unfortunately not quickly enough.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Never better," he replied.

Emotionless, yes. But not without the natural capacity for sarcasm.

We had to keep moving. The underground facility was huge, with mazelike hallways. The debilitated warehouse on the surface was only the proverbial tip of the iceberg to what lay beneath. And I'd only seen a fraction of it. A fraction was all I ever wanted

to see of this place.

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The lights flickered in the hallway. Suddenly the blare of the alarm cut out, and the resulting silence seemed as loud and as frightening as the noise had been. I strained my ears, trying to hear beyond the sound of our own footsteps, but there was nothing.

“It’s not the wounds that are slowing me down like this, Jill,” Declan said after a moment, cutting through the eerie silence. “It’s something else.”

“What is it?”

His grip at my waist tightened. “It’s your blood. It didn’t kill me, but along with the tranquilizer’s effects, it’s still messing me up. I feel it.”

Shit. “What does that mean?” I asked.

Declan brought his hand to his temple and rubbed it as if he had a headache. “I don’t know. My head’s all cloudy. I can’t think right.”

I was used to Declan being so strong and capable. Seeing him in this weakened condition scared me even more than I already was.

My jaw set. “I’d rather not have to carry you up those stairs, but I will if I have to.”

He eyed me, and if I didn’t know any differently, I’d say he looked slightly amused. “You don’t give up, do you?”

“I’ll let you know when I do, but I’m not quite there yet.”

We kept moving for a few more moments, Declan's weight heavy against me.

"Jill, stop," he growled.

I wasn't sure what was wrong, but then I followed his line of sight. At the end of the hallway, someone stood in our path. It was a new vampire, his glittering black eyes almost glowing under the fluorescent light, the blue veins throbbing on his pale face.

A monster right out of one of my nightmares and it was headed straight for us.

"Don't come closer," I warned when he got within eight feet of us.

But it was too late. The vampire's chest hitched as he inhaled my scent.

Declan had told me once that vampires didn't actually need to breathe. They did it more out of habit from having once been human than out of true necessity. I wouldn't exactly call them undead—they were still a strange and unnatural form of the living—but they were no longer human.

And this particular non-human wanted a taste of me. I guess he hadn't gotten the memo about Jillian Conrad, Nightshade carrier. Tasty death on legs.

The vampire didn't hesitate. He lunged for my throat, no conversation, no explanation, just a need to feed. Jackson had said that the vampires here were kept near starving so they'd make for better test subjects.

This one wanted blood, my blood. Buckets of it. And he wasn't willing to negotiate.

CHAPTERTHIRTEEN

Before I felt morethan the vampire's cool breath on my throat, Declan grabbed him

and threw him against the wall. I heard several bones crack with the impact, but the monster leaped back up to his feet immediately as if he felt no pain.

“I’m so hungry,” he hissed at me.

“Too bad.” I staggered back as he drew closer again. I’d let the thing bite me so my blood would kill him, but then I’d run the risk that he’d kill me, not to mention that a loss of blood weakened me. I knew I needed all my strength if Declan was already weakened.

He didn’t get the chance to bite me. Declan grabbed the vampire’s head and twisted it sharply to the side. There was a sickening crack. He fell to the ground in a heap only inches from my feet, his black eyes staring upward. Cold sweat slipped down my back.

“Is...is he—?” I stammered.

“No. He’d be ash by now if he was dead. It’ll take him a few minutes to recover.”

I gaped at him. “A few minutes to recover from a broken neck?”

“Yeah. Come on.” Declan grabbed my hand and pulled me along the hallway with him.

The fluorescent overhead lighting flickered out completely, plunging us into complete darkness. A couple of seconds later there was a whirring sound as the emergency system came on. There still wasn’t much light, only enough to see the vague outline of where we were going.

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We arrived at the elevator and I jabbed at the up button.

“Jackson said the elevators are out,” I told Declan.

He gave me a look of bemusement. “Then why are you doing that?”

“Hoping for a miracle?” I confessed. That hope faded after only a handful of moments when nothing happened. “Okay, apparently this is not the day for miracles. Stairs, it is.”

Leaving the elevator behind, I followed Declan further down the hall toward the stairwell. It was so quiet now. All I heard was our breathing, the sound of our feet against the floor, and my heartbeat pounding in my ears.

Fear was useless to me at the moment. It was an emotion that only worked to freeze someone in their tracks, like the cliché of a deer in the headlights.

Paranoia, on the other hand, was far more helpful—a survival instinct that kept me moving, kept me holding tightly onto Declan’s arm as we headed toward our only escape route from twenty stories deep in the earth.

“So this is your life,” I said. “Death and danger around every corner.”

He gave me a sidelong glance. “Enjoying yourself, are you?”

“I can barely contain my glee.”

“And you thought I got these scars from having a comfortable desk job?” he asked.

“You might want to consider a change in careers,” I suggested.

He snorted. “That’s doubtful.”

“No interest in settling down?”

“Only when they shove me in my coffin. That is, if there’s anything left of me by then.”

I grimaced. “What a charming thought.”

“This is a regular day’s work for me, Jill. Maybe a bit more screwed up and unexpected than normal, but fairly regular.” His jaw tightened. “You deserve a safe and happy life where your neck isn’t constantly on the line.”

I searched for his gaze. “So do you.”

He shrugged. “This is my life, Jill”

“Says who?”

“Says me. I know where I belong.”

“Two hundred feet underground with a dozen starving vampires running amuck.”

His humorless grin returned. “The pay’s good. Usually, anyway.”

Declan could laugh it off—that gallows humor he shared with Jackson—but my heart still ached for him. He’d never been given the chance to have a normal life. Being a

dhampyr left him with very few options.

“I had a dream about you last night,” I told him.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. We were at a restaurant, on a date. You...well, you weren’t the same as you are now. It was as if you’d never lived this life.” I raised a brow. “You were wearing a tailored suit.”

“Definitely a dream,” he replied. “Any scars?”

“None.”

“How many eyes?”

“Two,” I replied.

“Sounds better.”

“It wasn’t,” I said. “Dream-Declan was untouched, unscarred. He’d never experienced violent battle or pain. He looked like someone I would go on a date with, back in my previous life.”

“How is that not better then?” he countered stiffly.

“Because he wasn’t really you,” I replied. “He was just some guy who sort of looked like you.”

“I’m not perfect. Never was, never will be.”

“Perfection is highly overrated,” I told him.

“If you say so,” he replied.

He’d never believe it, but, for all his struggles, Declan Reyes was already perfect just as he was.

We reached the stairwell, and we were greeted with a disturbing array of screams and crashes coming from the level below us.

Declan looked at me. “Probably not a good idea to go down there.”

“That’s where Jackson is,” I told him tightly. “If he’s still alive.”

He nodded. “I need to get you out to sunlight first. Then I’ll come back for him.”

Fear knifed through my gut. “Like hell you will. You’re injured.”

“I’m not leaving him here.”

“Fair enough. Because I feel the same way about that woman.”

He eyed me impatiently. “The woman you don’t know. The woman you’ve never met.”

I met his gaze, just as impatiently. “Yeah, that’s the one. And I’m going to help get her the hell out of here.”

I stopped climbing after two floors.

“This is where the Nightfall project is,” I said, eyeing the metal door with “18TH FLOOR” on it. I felt Declan’s frown, so I elaborated. “That’s what they call the dhampyr breeding experiment here.”

“Nightshade, Nightfall.” He shook his head. “Is there no originality anymore?”

I shrugged. “Doesn’t seem like it.”

I eyed the keypad next to the door. “Lawrence said he was locked out, so he never knew his wife was a part of the research here. How do we get in?”

“Like this,” Declan gripped the door handle and pulled. It opened.

I looked at him with shock. “How did you know it was unlocked?”

He shrugged. “An educated guess. I figured that Lawrence took out the main power grid on purpose to unlock all the doors so he could let his fanged friends out.”

Sure. Worked for me.

The hallway that stretched out before us seemed identical to the floor we’d been on. It felt a bit like a hospital hallway, and it smelled extremely clean as if it had been recently flushed with antiseptic.

It was dark here and very quiet—too quiet—as if everyone had already escaped. If there had been anyone here to begin with.

I stopped walking and listened hard...and heard something. A steady pounding noise. “That might be her.”

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“Let’s check it out,” he agreed. “Quickly.”

I picked up my pace and moved down the hall until I reached the door from which the sound was coming. I pressed my hand up against it. “Is somebody in there?”

The pounding stopped. There was silence for a moment and then, “Oh, my God! Whoever you are, you have to get me out of here! I’m locked in!”

I tried the handle, which was a regular key lock rather than an electronic keypad, to find that she was absolutely right. I looked at Declan.

He nodded. “I got this.”

“Stay back from the door,” I told the woman through the barrier between us. “We’re going to break it open.”

I watched the injured but still dhampyr-strong Declan as he kicked the door hard. Normally, I knew he could do it in one shot, but today it took three solid hits before the door swung open.

A young woman with dark blond hair, dressed in a pink hospital gown, her face pale with fear, came to the doorway. She stared out at us with wide green eyes.

“Holy shit,” she said. “Declan? Is that really you?”

Declan regarded her with shock. “Jennifer? What the hell are you doing here?”

“It’s a long story.” She wrapped her arms around herself and squeezed, eyeing the hallway nervously. “Like a long, long, long story. And not exactly a happy one.”

“Jennifer?” I repeated, frowning. “You’re not...you’re not Jackson’s sister, are you?”

Her gaze shot to mine. “You know Jackson?”

“Declan, what the hell is going on here?” I asked.

“I’m wondering the same thing myself. Jackson’s here, Jenny.”

She gasped. “Here in this building? What’s he doing here?”

“Currently?” Declan replied. “Attempting to escape with his life, which is what we’re going to do now. I need to get you and Jill out of here.”

I noticed the slight swell of her belly through the thin hospital gown and my eyes widened. “You’re pregnant.”

Her gaze shot to mine, and there was no happiness there, only fear. “I signed up for the program here. I needed the money. I was led to believe it was a surrogate program. I figured, I had a healthy womb, why not use it to help someone who wanted a baby, and I could pocket enough money to last me a couple of years? But it’s not like that at all.”

“No,” I agreed. “It’s really not.”

“Last night, another woman—Stacy...” She drew in a shaky breath. “I thought she was the same as me, but she wasn’t. She was pregnant by a vampire, she said. Her husband. She was so afraid of him that she hid herself away until the baby came. Dr. Reynolds said he’d help her. Even when she was dying right in front of me, he still

said he could help her.” She shook her head, her expression pale and haunted. “There was so much blood. And...and the baby...it wasn’t a baby at all.” She met my eyes again. “Is that going to happen to me?”

I grabbed her clammy hand in mine and squeezed it. “No, it’s not. Because we’re getting the hell out of here.”

There had to be other resources to help Jennifer with a potential monster dhampyr pregnancy that didn’t include being trapped eighteen floors belowground. I didn’t know any off the top of my head, but surely Declan did.

First, we needed to get to the sunlight.

“Where’s Dr. Reynolds?” Jennifer asked.

“He’s dead,” Declan said bluntly.

She flinched. “Dead?”

I flashed back to what happened in the examining room and shuddered. “I’ll explain everything later, I promise.”

“We have to go,” Declan urged.

I grabbed Jennifer’s arm, relieved that she didn’t resist as I pulled her out of the room.

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“Is Jackson here because of me?” she asked.

“To be honest, he hasn’t mentioned anything about you being here,” I told her.

“I’m starting to put it all together,” Declan said grimly as we moved down the hallway again.

“What?” I asked.

“Jackson contacting me when he did. How he asked me about the vampires I took out last month in San Jose, and that he said he wanted that job for himself.” He swore under his breath. “He was confirming it was me. One of those vampires must have been Reynolds’ wife.”

I regarded him with shock. “You think Jackson sold you out?”

“All I know is that he works for a man who was out for vengeance today, and he didn’t say a damn word about it to me first. Sold out? Maybe not, I don’t know. But with his sister in Reynolds’ dubious care, I’d say his loyalties were split.”

“Jackson wouldn’t do that,” Jennifer said. “You’re like a brother to him.”

“Not by blood,” Declan replied. “Not a sibling like you are, Jenny. I know you two had a falling out, but you’re the most important person in Jackson Gale’s entire world. He’d move the earth and the stars for you, especially if it meant ensuring your safety. If he found out about your situation here...”

“Shit,” she whispered. “He’s going to kill me.”

“It’s a theory,” I said to Declan. “But you don’t know for sure that Jackson would hand you over to Reynolds, knowing the guy wanted you dead.”

“Defending him now?” Declan asked.

“No. Only trying to help you not jump to any distracting conclusions about someone you said you trusted.”

We’d reached the stairwell again, and Declan swung open the door. Before I had the chance to go through, pale hands grabbed the front of Declan’s shirt and dragged him over the threshold. The door closed behind him with a click.

Jennifer shrieked.

I stared at the door with shock, my breath locked in my chest before I grabbed for the door and pushed it open so hard it bruised my hands.

Inside the stairwell, I watched with horror as Declan fell down a flight of stairs, hitting the cement wall hard at the landing. Blood streamed down his forehead.

Two vampires stood over him.

“Declan!” I screamed from the top of the stairs.

His pain-filled gaze locked on mine, and he must have seen the terror in my eyes. “Go, Jill! Take Jennifer and get out of here! Now!”

Normally, I had no doubt Declan could take the vampires on without any difficulties. My blood hadn’t killed him, but it had weakened him. Along with his other injuries, I

knew he could fight for a while, but it wouldn't be long before they tore him apart.

He wanted me to leave him, to save myself and Jackson's sister. And maybe I would have done just that—in a previous life.

I shot a tense look at Jennifer. "Stay right here. Don't move."

She regarded me with horror but nodded her agreement with a jerk of her head.

There wasn't any more time to explain, to figure out a plan, to think things through. I had only a few seconds to save Declan. And I had only one weapon at hand. The same weapon I always had at hand. The one that flowed through my veins.

I took the stairs two at a time until I landed between the vampires. Declan was down a few more steps, and he sent a fierce look my way. I noticed his leg was twisted in an awkward position, and a chill went down my spine. He'd broken it in the fall. It would heal just like the rest of him did—quickly. But that was only if he lived.

"What the fuck are you doing, Jill?" he snapped at me.

I didn't have time for a Q&A at the moment.

"Hey." I tapped the vampires on their backs. In unison, they turned to me, their nostrils flaring, their lips curling back from sharp white fangs.

I was surprised that I recognized them. They were the new owners of the bar where we'd met Jackson. The woman, Olivia, with her now-tattered boho dress, and the man, Ian, still wearing the same studded jean jacket as the other night. Jackson had left us to go take care of them. I assumed he'd meant to confront them and bring a swift end to their monstrous lives.

He hadn't.

Clearly, he'd brought them here to become test subjects for Dr. Reynolds.

"I know you," Olivia purred, cocking her head. "I recognize your scent. Ian...it's the woman from the other night."

"The one with the hunter," Ian replied.

Two hunters, actually. But I didn't bother to correct him.

"I'd say it's great to see you again," I said, "but I'd be lying."

I tried to see past the monstrous veiny exterior, the sunken cheeks, the black eyes. They were human once. For all I knew they could have been an accountant and a journalist; a teacher and a lawyer. Whatever. I didn't know where they came from or what their backstories were. And I really didn't give a shit.

All I knew was that they were a threat—to Declan, to me, to Jennifer whom I'd fully committed myself to rescue. And I knew they were drawn to the scent of the Nightshade inside of me like every other vampire was. Since this pair wasn't well fed like Lawrence, they wouldn't have his control—the control that had kept him from sinking his fangs into me to get a taste of my irresistible blood.

At least, that was my hope. And, frankly, that was also my worst fear.

"Jill!" Declan's pained roar echoed in my ears.

I staggered back a step as the ravenous vampires started moving toward me.

CHAPTERFOURTEEN

The decision had been made. And now, all I could do was hope these vampires didn't rip me apart before they tasted my blood. Declan grabbed a step and wrenched his broken body closer to us, but he wasn't fast enough to stop what was about to happen.

"Delicious, right?" I said. Fear wasn't something I could control at the moment, so I gave in to it, wrapping myself in it like a thick blanket. "You need to drink my blood."

"Yessss," Olivia hissed.

She had hair so pale blond it was almost white. I think it was a bleach job since nobody had that color of hair naturally. Her skin seemed even paler in contrast to the dark veins that branched along her jawline, and her lips were deep red as if she'd already been drinking her fill of blood before they got to this floor. I could barely see the whites of her eyes, her irises were so large and black. She looked like some sort of angel, actually. An angel of death.

She grabbed hold of my hair, fisting it so tightly that I let out an involuntary cry of pain. Ian drew closer. I shuddered as he slid his hand over my stomach and pressed me back against the wall.

"It's even better up close." He sniffed along my neck. "I've never smelled anything so good in my life."

"You should know something about your hunter friend," Olivia whispered. "The one who stole our life away from us and shoved us in the trunk of his car..."

“What about him?” I asked.

“He’s dead. I tasted his blood myself.”

My chest hitched. “You say that like I should care.”

“Don’t you? Or perhaps you only care about this one,” she nodded toward Declan.

“Doesn’t matter, really. You’ll all die now.”

My heart pounded so fast it made me dizzy. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see that Declan was trying to get to me. I shuddered with fear and disgust as Ian slid his tongue over my jugular vein.

Olivia had a tight hold of my hair and she wrenched my neck to the side. Her other hand grasped my chin and she nipped at my jaw, not quite hard enough to break the skin. Her fangs were as sharp as the scalpel that Lawrence used on Dr. Reynolds’ throat.

This was typically the part in the movies where the good guys would arrive, stakes in hand, and make mincemeat out of the monsters, saving the damsel in distress who’d been foolish enough to wander off into danger and get herself eaten. But my life wasn’t a movie. And this damsel had chosen this distress with full knowledge of the potential consequences. I didn’t have nightmares every night because my life was big fun.

“Do it,” I managed. “Bite me. What are you waiting for?”

As the saying went, be careful what you wish for.

I thought I had properly braced myself, but the pain was a horrible shock. And they weren’t taking turns. Olivia was at my throat, her fangs slicing into my flesh. Ian had

moved down to my wrist and I winced as he pierced my skin so deeply I was sure he'd hit bone.

It hurt like hell, but I couldn't move or struggle anymore. Something about a vampire's bite rendered the victim paralyzed while they were being fed upon. I could feel everything, see and hear everything. But I couldn't try to protect myself or fight back, which made it even more dangerous and frightening.

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Hot tears splashed down my cheeks as I looked past Olivia's pale blond hair and met Declan's horrified gaze. It was strange, I wasn't sure I'd ever seen so much emotion on his face. His serum shouldn't allow it, even in a situation like this. Maybe it was only an illusion.

It felt like forever that they fed on me, but I knew it was only a few short seconds.

Olivia gasped first, pulling back from me and touching the dark red blood on her lips. The male was next, his eyes wide, his brow furrowed.

She gasped. "What is this?"

I glared at her as the feeling came back to my limbs and I was able to speak and move again. "It's heartburn, bitch."

When she opened her mouth to scream, I could see the fire rising up from deep inside of her. Before she could make another sound, she exploded in a fiery, ashy cloud. I tried to pull back from it so I wouldn't be burned, but I was already up against the wall. All I could do was wave at the scattering ashes to keep them from hitting my face.

Ian turned his stunned gaze to mine, mouth dark with my blood. I saw both grief and fury in his black eyes. Olivia had been important to him and now he'd lost her forever.

He grabbed my throat, hard enough to crush me, but his hands had already caught fire. When he looked down at them with shock, I shoved him away from me as hard

as I could. His growl of anger turned into a scream of pain as the inferno consumed him. A moment later there was nothing left of either of them except for a pile of ashes.

I brought my shaky hand to my throat, which was tender, raw, and bleeding, just like my wrist. The phantom stench of burnt flesh hung in the air, and I wiped the fine coating of ash off the front of my tank top and arms.

So close. Too close.

He would have killed me if he'd had more time. Luckily for me, he hadn't.

Declan had managed to rise to his feet now, favoring his left leg. He wrenched himself up the remaining stairs and grabbed hold of my shoulders. I expected him to yell at me for being so careless, for nearly getting myself killed. He gently turned my face to the side and then took my wrist in hand so he could inspect the bite wounds.

"Damn it, Jill." He held my face between his hands. "Are you okay?"

I smiled genuinely, so happy I was still alive, that he was still alive. When I'd seen the vampire grab him when he opened the door, I'd thought that was it. We were living on borrowed time anyway. I'd thought our meter had just expired.

I nodded. "I'll live."

He met my gaze. "You saved my life."

"I actually think I owe you a few of those."

His jaw set. "Don't let it happen again. When I tell you to move, I want you to move."

“Yes, sir.”

“Let’s get Jennifer and get the fuck out of here.”

“But your leg—” I began.

“It’s healing as we speak. I reset it already. I’ll be fine, just slow.”

Declan had reset his own broken leg before it healed wrong. I wasn’t sure if I should feel sorry for the pain that must have caused him or be utterly impressed.

Both. He was a serious badass.

“Declan,” I touched his arm. “Did you hear what they said?”

He shook his head. “What?”

“They said that Jackson’s dead. They know what he looks like since he went after them at the bar the other night.”

A different kind of pain crossed his single gray eye, and he nodded. “Let’s go.”

I pulled the door open, relieved that Jennifer was still there, sitting on the ground in the hallway, pressed up against the wall with her legs pulled close to her chest.

Her fearful gaze moved to my throat. Whatever damage she saw there made her gasp out loud. “They bit you.”

“Yeah,” I replied.

She shuddered. “I hate vampires. I hate that Jackson followed in our father’s footsteps and puts his neck on the line every damn night.”

A shiver went down my spine. I exchanged a look with Declan, an unspoken decision not to share the news with her about her brother until we got to safety. There was no time for grief.

She let out a shuddery breath. “What’s your name again?”

I gathered my long black hair, pulling and twisting it to the side to keep it out of my face. “Jill.”

“Good to meet you, Jill.”

I nodded. “Likewise. Now, let’s get the hell out of here, shall we?”

“Good idea.”

We went back to the stairwell and started climbing. We were deeper than I thought. I was in decent shape from being a bit of a gym rat back in my regular life, but this was rough going, especially after being knocked around and fed upon. Declan brought up the rear, but he kept pace with us, which was pretty impressive considering his growing list of injuries.

“Where’s Jackson?” Jennifer asked. “You said he’s here?”

“Yeah,” Declan replied. “Don’t worry about him, right now. Just keep climbing.”

“Doing the best I can,” she grumbled.

I watched her warily. “How far along are you?”

“Six months,” she said, placing a hand on her belly and casting a worried glance at me.

“Six months? Dr. Reynolds made it sound like you’d only been here a couple of weeks, long enough to get to know Stacy.”

“That’s true. They did the procedure on me six months ago but asked me to come in for 24/7 observation last month. I didn’t like it, but they were paying me well enough that I didn’t argue.”

Declan made a sound of disgust and she shot him a look.

“What?” she asked.

“How could you be so stupid?” he growled.

Her expression shadowed. “I needed the money.”

“You could have gone to Jackson. He would have helped you.”

“I wasn’t speaking to him at the time.” She hissed out a breath. “I’m twenty-three now, I’m not thirteen, which is what he always treated me like. I wanted my own life, without my big brother breathing down my neck all the time.”

“So you volunteered your body to a man who experiments in dhampyr births,” he

said.

She bit her lip. “I didn’t know.”

“You should have done your research.”

“Yeah, well, thanks for making me feel worse than I did to begin with, Declan. I really appreciate it.”

I had to say, I respected the fact that she wasn’t overly cowed by a talking-down from our resident dhampyr.

We made it to the fifteenth-floor landing, each of us struggling to keep up the pace we needed to put distance between us and whatever was rising up from the sub-twenty levels.

“What’s your story?” Jennifer asked me, as Declan stayed a half flight of stairs behind us just in case anyone tried to join our trio.

“Oh, you know,” I said. “Normal girl, boring life, got on the wrong side of a scientist with a top-secret vampire-killing formula and hooked up with a dhampyr assassin along the way. Same old, same old.”

She blinked. “You and Declan hooked up?”

I eyed her. “That’s your takeaway from that summary?”

“Like, literally hooked up?”

“Let’s save this conversation for a time when we’re not trying to escape with our lives intact, shall we?” I told her.

She glanced over her shoulder at Declan.

“He was never very nice to me,” she said. “But I didn’t really care. I always fell hardest for the bad boys, you know?”

“Oh, I know,” I agreed.

“Jackson always told me that he wasn’t the right guy for me, that I should look somewhere else if I didn’t want my heart broken.” She laughed then, a humorless sound. “Still haven’t met a guy who hadn’t broken my heart yet.”

“Well, you’re only twenty-three. There are a lot more guys out there, Jennifer, trust me on that. And I know one of them will be the right one for you.”

“Is Declan the right guy for you?” she asked pointedly.

I was silent for a moment, focusing on putting one foot in front of the other as I found the next stair and the next. Floor twelve now.

“Have you ever noticed there’s never a thirteenth floor in buildings?” I asked.

“You’re changing the subject,” she pointed out.

“Good catch.”

She looked down at her stomach. “What am I going to do, Jill? What happened last night plays in my head, over and over. Stacy...she didn’t want to die.”

“Did Dr. Reynolds try to save her life?” I asked.

“He did. I mean, I think he tried as much as he could.” She shuddered. “The baby looked so wrong, like it wasn’t human. It had talons for hands, and it sliced off a nurse’s finger before they took it out of the room.”

My stomach lurched. “I’m sorry you had to see that.”

“Jackson’s never told me anything like that exists,” she said.

“He’s tried to protect you. That’s what big brothers do for their kid sisters.”

This statement made her fall silent, her tense expression turning pained. “I love him, you know. Despite him being an asshole to me most of the time. I shouldn’t have run away. When I see him again, I’m going to make things right between us.”

“Good,” I said softly.

I didn’t know how I was going to tell her that her brother was dead. That he was only here because he worked for Dr. Reynolds and clearly, to me, knew she was here and wanted to ensure her safety by any means possible. Maybe I’d never know the true story behind Jackson’s employment by the scientist, but I had no doubt that he’d

cared deeply for his sister.

I'd promised Matthias that I'd look after Sara and keep her safe. That was now out of my hands but I had to believe that Declan had done the right thing and handed her over to a trustworthy guardian. Given our current situation that didn't have a clear outcome just yet, I had confidence that he'd been one hundred percent right to do what he'd done.

But now Jackson's sister needed help. And if we managed to make it to sunlight—still another seven floors to go—then I wasn't going to abandon her. I didn't know what she carried within her. It was a monster dhampyr or a dhampyr like Sara, like Declan. Either way, I promised myself that I'd do everything I could to ensure that she got help and wouldn't end up like Lawrence's wife.

Helping Jennifer would make it easier to forget that I'd placed my remaining hope in Dr. Reynolds to help me survive the Nightshade in my blood. And now he was dead. But if I had the strength to climb up twenty floors—nineteen, really, since there was no thirteenth floor...

"Bad luck," I muttered.

"What?" Jennifer asked.

"No thirteenth floor because so many people think it's bad luck." I had to laugh at that, just a little. "I'll take an unpopular number over a thirsty vampire any day."

"Me too," she agreed.

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Finally, we reached the main level, which still appeared to be nothing more than an abandoned warehouse sitting on top of a full horror show.

It was dark in there. A hundred feet ahead of me was the exit. I could see the line of light around the large door through which we'd entered.

Finally, our escape to the protective sunlight.

What remained of my hope flickered inside of me like a tiny candle flame, refusing to be extinguished forever.

But, then, a voice froze me in my tracks before I could take another step.

“Leaving so soon?”

CHAPTERFIFTEEN

Lawrence came far enough into the dim light for me to see him. His eyes were still black. The crazed look in those black eyes seemed worse now. Bigger. Scarier. Mostly because he was smiling, drawing my attention to his mouth stained with blood right down to his chin.

Declan moved to stand in front of me and Jennifer. “Get the hell out of our way.”

Lawrence shook his head. “Can’t do that.”

Despite the fangs and sociopathic actions of today, I still believed Lawrence wasn’t a

bad guy down deep. I'd seen him before he'd received that phone call from his hired investigator. He was smart, helpful, and reasonable. I hoped I could appeal to that side of him now.

I mean, I'd known him for all of a half an hour, but I was going with my gut here. And my gut was rarely wrong.

"This can end here," I said as gently as I could. "You don't have to do anything else today that you're going to regret for the rest of your life. And, as a vampire, I know that life is going to potentially be a long one if you start making better decisions."

He laughed, and the icy, soulless sound sent a shiver down my spine. "I don't regret anything. This was meant to happen. I've been Victor's pawn all this time, a willing traitor to my own kind. Looking back on it now, it disgusts me. I disgust me." His voice broke and his bloody smile disappeared. "So many vampires have died here because of Victor. Because of me."

"Those vampires deserved to die," Declan told him.

I groaned. He clearly didn't receive the memo that the smartest plan was to humor a homicidal creature of darkness.

Lawrence glared at him. "Are you God? Do you have the right to say who lives and who dies?"

"Not God," Declan growled. "But you're debating life and death with the wrong person. The chaos you've created here ends now. No more violence is necessary."

"And you'd let me walk away?"

Lie, Declan, I tried to project the thought to him telepathically.

“I don’t kill vampires who keep to the shadows,” he replied. “But I kill rogues who cause harm and threaten everyone they come in contact with. You made the wrong choice and switched sides today.”

Shit. So much for trying to tap into any dormant psychic abilities. That would have been really helpful.

“I stayed to the shadows,” Lawrence replied tightly. “And it got my wife killed.”

“She wouldn’t want this,” I told him. “Stacy believed in you.”

“She didn’t believe enough in me to tell me the truth.” Lawrence’s expression grew pained. “You...” he regarded Declan. “You may be a hunter, not a scientist, but you’re just like Victor, playing with other people’s lives and using them for your own gain. It makes me sick.”

I couldn’t read Declan’s expression past his black eye patch. Mine, however, must have been clear. I was scared to death, but I wasn’t ready to give up yet.

I pressed my hands together to keep them from shaking. “Please, listen to me. You’re not thinking straight right now.”

Lawrence laughed again and it sounded sharp, like breaking glass. “Wrong. Blood brings clarity, and I’ve drunk my fill today for the first time in my new life. Why have I resisted for so long?”

Okay, fine. Maybe I was wrong. I had no idea how many people he’d killed in the basement after he’d ended Dr. Reynolds’ life. A lot, probably. Enough to change him from a conflicted research assistant to a single-minded mass murderer. There was no coming back from that, and it didn’t seem as if he wanted to. I wasn’t going to waste my breath trying to reason with someone now beyond reason.

When Lawrence took a step toward me, Declan nudged me behind him, next to Jennifer. I shared a tense look with her.

“Don’t come any closer,” he snapped.

Lawrence’s brows drew together, and his head cocked to the side. “You care what happens to these women, don’t you?”

Declan’s expression was dark. “Of course I do.”

“Jillian is poison to my kind.”

“Jill can’t be blamed for what’s in her blood.”

“That doesn’t change anything. Blood is something that should never be tainted. It’s a sacred communion.” Lawrence’s black eyes glittered. “I’ve tasted blood today, felt it hot in my mouth while a heart ceased to beat beneath my touch. I’ve never felt anything so amazing in my life. It was primal. Incredible.”

Declan’s expression didn’t change. “Like I said, don’t come any closer.”

“Or what?” A smile snaked across Lawrence’s face. “I could have killed you earlier. I should have, but I was still soft then. Much has changed over the last hour. But I know this much, you’re weakened by the Nightshade. And injured. Even the stronger hunter, be they dhampyr or not, can’t recover in such a short time. If you had, you would have already made your move on me.”

Declan didn’t flinch at this to show Lawrence that his guess was right, but he didn’t have to. I could see it, just by looking at him. Declan was in bad shape. He’d recover from the injuries in a matter of hours, but the Nightshade he’d been injected with was

a wildcard. He wasn't at full strength, and I knew he hated that.

Jennifer trembled next to me, and I reached down to grab hold of her hand.

"How many have you killed?" I had to ask, knowing I needed to keep Lawrence talking for a bit longer. "Guards? Researchers?"

His eerie, wistful smile returned. "All of them, I think. I lost count."

"What about Jackson?" Jennifer spoke up. "Jackson Gale?"

Lawrence regarded the girl fully, his gaze scanning her from head to foot. "I don't know you."

"I'm Jackson's sister," she said.

His gaze scanned her hospital gown and the curve of her stomach. "You were a patient here in the Nightfall project."

"I was," she confirmed. "Although, I didn't know the details. If I had, I never would have agreed to it."

"I'm sure." His forehead furrowed. "You were you the one with Stacy last night."

She drew in a sharp breath. "I was."

He swallowed hard. "Did she suffer? In the end?"

Jennifer glanced at me, and I silently urged her to lie.

She shook her head. "No, she went peacefully. No pain. She just...slipped away." She

was silent for a moment, as the vampire studied the ground, his chest shaking with quiet sobs. “You’re her husband Lawrence, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” he whispered.

“Stacy loved you, Lawrence. She hoped you would be reunited soon.”

I held my breath and waited, knowing that this was a well-delivered lie. Jennifer had already told us that Stacy had been frightened of her vampire husband, which was the reason she’d turned herself over to Dr. Reynolds, hoping for a positive outcome from her pregnancy.

“I wish she would have told me the truth,” he managed.

“About Jackson?” Jennifer ventured. “I know he’s here, somewhere. I hadn’t spoken to him for quite some time. I want to see him again.”

Lawrence raised his brows. “I’m starting to understand why that hunter did anything Victor asked him to.”

“He sold us out,” Declan said. “Didn’t he?”

“Is that what you think?” Lawrence quickly composed himself again, pushing aside his grief, and clasped his hands behind his back. It was a true sign that he didn’t see Declan as a current threat. If Declan had some strength and energy in reserve, this is when he would pounce.

But no pouncing happened.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that blood steadily dripped to the ground from the dhampyr's many injuries, and in the shadows of the warehouse, it looked nearly as dark as my blood. He should be healing by now. Maybe the Nightshade was what was preventing that.

"All I know is Dr. Reynolds wanted me dead for killing his wife," Declan said. "And I would be dead right now if his unexpected experiment had gone according to plan."

"Jackson has been a good little hunter for Victor these last months. It was an exclusive contract. He collected research subjects and dropped them off here. Along the way, he learned that his sister had been caught in Victor's web of lies. That she had been successfully inseminated, and that he'd take extra care of her if Jackson did as he was told without any questions asked. He'd heard of you, Jill, through the grapevine, and that you had been seen with Declan that day in San Diego. He already suspected that Carson Reyes's son was the hunter who'd taken Clara's life, but he wanted confirmation."

"And Jackson provided that," Declan said.

"No. In fact, he tried to put doubt in Victor's mind. A mind that had already been made up when it came to your guilt."

"So he didn't say anything," I said, surprised.

"To my knowledge, no. He said nothing that would implicate Declan directly."

I couldn't see a change in Declan's expression, but this news had to be a relief. His brother-in-arms hadn't sold him out, not even with so much at risk.

Jackson Gale, alpha douchebag, had possessed a streak of integrity. Who would have guessed it?

Not me, that was for sure. Lesson learned.

"Where is he?" Jennifer asked again, her voice pitchy now. "Where's my brother?"

"Dead," Lawrence replied coolly. "Last I saw, four vampires were gnawing on his bones. I would have joined in, but I was already full."

Shit. I hadn't wanted her to find out like this.

"No," she cried. "He can't be dead. Not like this."

"The life of a hunter is a dangerous one," Lawrence said. "Jackson knew that better than most. He should have escaped when he had the chance. I guess he was searching for you."

He said this like he wanted to hurt her. It worked.

Lawrence looked down his nose at her. "Do you think I believed you when you said that Stacy didn't suffer? I've read accounts of dhampyr births before. No one ever goes gently."

Then, without warning, the vampire lunged for Jennifer, inhumanly fast, and clamped his arm around her neck so that they both faced us. She screamed and clutched at his sleeve.

“Let her go,” Declan snapped.

“If I asked you to choose, which young woman would you save?” Lawrence asked.

“Go to hell,” Declan growled.

“That’s not an answer. Choose one, and maybe I’ll let you leave here with her alive.”

“This isn’t a game,” I snarled.

“Isn’t it?” Lawrence raised his gaze to mine, but he didn’t look as rational as I’d hoped. “Earlier, I believed that Victor was right. That vampires are monsters, and that I was one of the very few that deserved to live. Funny how quickly opinions can change about such important matters.”

“Let Jennifer go. I know you want to die, to join your wife. Bite me, get it over with.”

“I’ve changed my mind about that.” He pulled the silver stake he’d stolen earlier from Declan out of the back of his pants. “I’ve drunk as much blood as I can today. Now, I only want to watch it spill.”

“I will kill you,” Declan growled. “I promise you that much.”

“No, you won’t. Not today, anyway.”

“Please,” Jennifer managed. “What I said about Stacy...I only said it to ease your pain.”

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“You failed,” he snapped.

“She told me about you, how kind you were. How you had a difficult time when you were sired. You wouldn’t have chosen this for yourself, that’s why you fought so hard not to be a monster. Even in the end, she still had hope.”

“Hope for me?” he asked.

“Yes. Even now, I know she’d feel the same. There’s always hope for new beginnings. For second chances. Even now, Lawrence.”

He released his grip on her and turned her to face him. “You really believe that, don’t you?”

“With all my heart,” she whispered, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“How sad for you.” With that, he shoved her away from him with such strength that she flew through the air, hitting a support beam hard enough to knock her unconscious.

I turned a venomous look at him. “You son of a bitch.”

I started to move toward Jennifer to check on her.

“Stay where you are,” Lawrence growled, pointing the silver stake at me. “I’m not going to drink your blood today, but I am going to end the Nightshade program right here and now. You’re too dangerous to my kind to be allowed to go free.”

I suddenly couldn't take my eyes off that sharp stake.

"It doesn't have to end like this," Declan hissed.

"With death?" Lawrence asked. "Everything ends with death. I would have done anything for my wife, but I wasn't given that choice. Stacy chose to keep a horrible secret from me. And then Victor chose my destiny. Together, they made me who you see before you right now."

Declan's gaze met mine, then flicked toward the door thirty yards away from where we stood. I took it as a silent order for me to make a run for it while he tried to hold Lawrence back.

Again, he was ready, willing, and able to sacrifice himself. The mighty vampire hunter faced with yet another bloodthirsty vampire.

But he was still weakened, still injured. And if he thought I was leaving him behind—and Jennifer too—to save my own neck, then he better think again.

"Stacy would be horrified by what has happened today and the fact that you're blaming her for this," I said instead. "Jennifer says she still loved you. She accepted you even after you were sired. There's still time to stop this. You're not really a killer."

The vampire's black-eyed gaze tracked back to me. "Wrong. The more I kill, the better it feels." He looked at Declan. "I'm sure you know how that is."

Declan shook his head. "I've never taken pleasure in what I have to do."

"Never?"

“One one single damn day.”

“That’s too bad,” Lawrence replied. “I almost feel sorry for you.”

He’d embraced the monster within him. And that monster was the only one in the general vicinity with a very sharp, very deadly weapon in hand.

Lawrence fell silent for a long, uncomfortable moment. “I’ve seen you protect this woman. You’d kill for her—anyone who’d threaten her life. Am I right?”

“Would I kill for her?” Declan glared at him. “In a heartbeat.”

Lawrence didn’t look away. “Would you also die for her?”

Declan didn’t hesitate. “Yes.”

My breath caught. Despite our many issues, I knew that Declan put my life before his. I just hadn’t heard it stated so bluntly before. He wasn’t lying or trying to buy us time. This was the raw, honest truth.

He’d kill for me. He’d die for me. In a way, that made everything easier, since I felt the same way about him.

Lawrence nodded. “Then you know how I feel.”

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“There’s a difference,” Declan replied. “Your wife is already dead, and nothing you do now will bring her back. The man responsible for her death is gone. You killed him. You had your revenge. It’s over now.”

For a moment, I thought Declan had finally gotten through to him, showing him the futility of what he was doing here.

“It’s not over,” he finally said. “It’s only just begun.”

Whatever life, whatever hope, I’d seen—or imagined—in Lawrence’s black eyes was gone. This was a man who had nothing to live for anymore, fueled only by rage and pain. And he wanted to share that pain with anyone who crossed his path.

“I know you’re an unwilling pawn in all of this,” Lawrence said to me. “I promise that no vampire will ever bite you again. But your blood is too dangerous for you to be allowed to live another day.”

He came toward me, silver stake raised. Instinctively, I stumbled backward only to trip over a cardboard box. I hit the ground hard.

Declan caught the vampire’s arm, stopping the sharp stake only a few inches from it being a death blow to my heart. He wrenched the snarling vampire away from me.

I shook off my fear and panic and scanned my surroundings. There wasn’t much in the warehouse—nothing useful, anyway. Cement floors. Large metal crates stacked against the wall by the door. The scent of sawdust. That was it. If there was another security camera in here, it was hidden. Not that it would do us any good. Whoever

monitored the feed downstairs was likely already dead. We were on our own.

Lawrence's stolen stake arched through the air and stabbed into Declan, piercing his shoulder. Declan let out a sharp snarl of pain.

"First I kill you." Lawrence pulled out the bloody stake. "Then I kill her. I can resist the Nightshade enough to do it. You both need to die."

He kicked Declan hard in his already broken leg, and Declan crashed to the ground. Blood gushed from the stake wound.

Lawrence turned toward me, moving so fast I didn't have a chance to take another step back. He grabbed my shirt and pulled me closer. I fought against him, slamming my fist into his face, my knee into his groin.

Bleeding and injured, Declan grabbed hold of Lawrence's ankle. The vampire kicked him hard in the face, which propelled Declan backward. Lawrence crouched down over his form, his silver stake now aimed for Declan's heart.

I launched myself at him. Normally my blood was my weapon. This time it was my entire body. Not quite as deadly, but effective enough as a diversion.

I grabbed his shoulders and used every ounce of my body weight to pull him off Declan. We both hit the ground hard. The stake skittered away on the cement floor.

Lawrence snarled and rose up above me. He clamped his hands around my already injured throat and squeezed hard enough to cut off my breath. I reached out for the stake and felt just the edge of it against my fingertips, but it was out of reach.

It was too late, anyway. I was going to die.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Jill! No!” Declan yelled.

Black spots appeared before my eyes, and my hands dropped to my sides.

“There’s no other way this can end,” Lawrence growled. “The moment you were injected with the Nightshade, you had a death sentence. Victor lied. He couldn’t help you, not even if he wanted to. But I think you already know that.”

He was right. I’d been grasping hold of sand with every solution I’d chased after, watching as it slipped through my fingers each time. I wasn’t sure why I hadn’t given up yet and accepted my impending death without continuing to waste energy trying to fight the inevitable.

The Nightshade was a lot like Lawrence. It wasn’t letting go until I finally stopped breathing. Until my heart stopped beating. Until my dark, poisoned blood stopped pumping through my veins.

Something about being with Declan had been enough to keep me going, keeping me fighting and hoping. He was a warrior, this kind of thing was his life. He didn’t know any different.

Dream-Declan, the glimpse I’d had of him if he’d never been touched by death and darkness and violence. He was clean and handsome and unscarred.

But I would never choose him over the Declan I already knew. Not in a million years.

It was my last thought before more darkness spread across my vision.

Then there was the sharp sound of a gunshot. Lawrence jerked backward, and his grip

on me loosened. I tried to focus enough to see that there was now a spot of red on his shoulder.

He jerked again as another bullet hit him squarely in the chest.

Someone came into my peripheral vision—it was Jackson, with a gun held in his right hand. He was covered in blood from head to foot, trailing crimson behind him as he moved toward us. And there was something terribly wrong with his left arm. It hung awkwardly at his side, as though no longer fully attached to his body.

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Lawrence regarded him with shock. “You’re dead.”

Jackson shrugged his good shoulder. “Nearly dead isn’t really dead, asshole.”

Then he pulled the trigger again, but the chamber rang empty.

Despite his fresh injuries, Lawrence rose quickly and easily to his feet. “Regular bullets don’t kill vampires, you idiot. As an accomplished hunter, you should know that by now.”

“You’re right, they don’t kill vampires,” Jackson agreed. “But bullets do distract monsters like you well enough.”

I watched through half-closed eyes as Declan rose up behind Lawrence, his silver stake back in his possession. As the vampire turned, Declan sliced the weapon into Lawrence’s heart.

Lawrence staggered back, staring down at the shiny stake sticking out of his chest, his wide-eyed gaze meeting Declan’s.

“See?” Declan said. “I told you I’d kill you. I was right.”

And then Lawrence was gone, his fiery ashes scattered in a horrible cloud, some drifting down to land on my face.

Declan crashed down to his knees next to me and grabbed my hands. “Don’t be dead. Goddammit, Jill, don’t you dare die on me.”

I almost smiled, but the expression wasn't possible for me at the moment.

"Not quite dead," I managed to rasp out. "But...almost."

Declan let out a shuddery sigh of relief. "Damn it, Jill. You scared the shit out of me."

I had to snort softly at that. "Declan Reyes scared? I don't believe it."

"Believe it."

"Vampires, am I right?" Jackson shook his head. "I fucking hate vampires. I mean, just look at my arm. I seriously need an ambulance."

Declan shot him a dark look. "How the hell did you escape? Lawrence said that four vampires were feeding on you."

"Never underestimate the power of positive thinking." Jackson finally noticed Jennifer, who was beginning to rise, her hands braced against the cement floor. He closed the distance between them in a heartbeat.

"Jen," he said, his voice shaky. "You're alive."

"Jackson..." Her eyes were wide as she touched his face. "He said you were dead."

"He was wrong. Damn it, Jen, I was so worried about you. Reynolds wouldn't let me see you."

"And you took no for an answer?"

"First time in my whole damn life I did. I shouldn't have."

Declan pushed up to his feet to face the other hunter. “Lawrence said you didn’t sell me out when you had the chance.”

Jackson glanced toward him. “Didn’t make any difference. He knew what you did anyway, didn’t he?”

Declan nodded. “He sure did. For the record, his wife was a monster.”

“To doing what has to be done...” Jackson began.

“And spilling the blood that needs to be spilled.” Declan finished.

The toast from the other night, shared between hunters. Or maybe just between Declan and Jackson.

“Still,” Declan continued. “You could have warned me, you asshole.”

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The smug, alpha douchebag façade fell away and a shadow of regret slid through Jackson's gaze. "You're right, I should have."

"At least you admit it."

Jackson hissed out a breath. "First time for everything. Now let's get into the sunlight before the vamps I didn't kill decide to get their cardio in by climbing the rest of those stairs."

It wasn't a victory parade as we dragged ourselves to the exit, but it would do. The hot sun felt so good on my face that I nearly cried with relief. My throat hurt, I was woozy from the loss of blood, and it would take a good long while for me to get over the morning of horror I'd just experienced.

But I was still alive. And so was Declan.

And so were Jackson and his sister. I fully agreed with Declan that a little inside information on Dr. Reynolds' motivations would have been incredibly helpful, but in the end, the hunter had saved our asses. Both of us—and Jennifer, I was sure—would have died if he hadn't intervened.

Jackson had his arm protectively around his younger sister as he glanced at the warehouse exterior. "I'll call for containment. Luckily those vamps aren't going anywhere during daylight. I can get a few guys to come in and do a sweep, and take out the rest of them. We'll check if there are any human survivors. Hell, what a fucking mess." He eyed Declan. "Can I borrow your phone? I think mine got eaten."

Declan silently tossed Jackson his cell phone.

“What are you going to do now?” I asked Jennifer.

“Good question,” she replied, and gave Jackson a searching look.

“I know people,” he replied. “We’ll resolve this, one way or the other, don’t worry.” He gave Jennifer a stern look. “If this happens again—”

“It won’t.”

“You need money, you ask. If I don’t have it, I’ll steal it. Got it?”

“Got it,” she agreed. “I forgot that it’s good to have a killer and a thief for your big brother.”

“Don’t forget it again. Come with me, Jen, as I go bleed over there,” Jackson nodded at the parking lot, “and let’s leave these two alone for a minute, okay?”

“How’s your leg?” I asked after the siblings gave us some space, gently placing my hand on Declan’s jeans-clad knee. We sat side by side on the ground just outside the warehouse door.

He raised an eyebrow. “Healing. How’s your throat? And your concussion?”

“I need ice cream. Band-Aids. And a bucket of Tylenol.”

A shadow crossed his expression. “I’m sorry everything didn’t work out, Jill.”

I laughed a little at that, then stopped when it hurt. “Not working out is a bit of an understatement, don’t you think?”

“You’re right,” he replied. “I’m sorry that in our search for a solution to your problem we were nearly torn apart by bloodthirsty vampires.”

“That’s better.” I grabbed his hand and squeezed it, tracing my thumb over an old scar that ran across his knuckles. “We’re still alive, so I’d say the day was a success.”

“But your blood...” He frowned. “Nothing’s changed.”

I shuddered at the still-fresh memory of Declan being injected with a sample of my poisoned blood.

“If it had killed you, I’m not really sure what I would have done. I think I might have lost it on Dr. Reynolds even before Lawrence got to him.” I searched Declan’s battle-weary face. “I know it knocked you out for a few minutes and probably hurt like hell, but...do you think the Nightshade did anything else to you? Or was your human side enough to counteract the poison? I’ve been wondering if it messed with your healing ability.”

“No, I’m healing like I normally do.” His brows drew tighter together. “But it definitely did something else to me.”

“What?”

“My emotions . . . they’ve been all messed up ever since I came to. And that made it even harder to think straight down there.”

I knew I’d seen raw emotion on his face before. This was the confirmation.

My blood killed full vampires, but was it possible that the same blood could cancel out Declan’s serum?

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“How do you feel right now?” I asked, and I couldn’t help but hear the glimmer of hope in my voice. I guess I had some in reserve deep inside of me. “Is this change permanent?”

He was silent for a moment, his expression thoughtful. “I thought it might be, but I can already feel it fading, and my control returning. I think it was just a glitch.”

A lump of disappointment formed in my throat. “So you’re back to normal?”

“Nearly there.” He met my gaze and shook his head. “I’m sorry, Jill.”

I touched his face. “No. Don’t be sorry. It just goes to prove my theory...”

“Which is?”

“Nothing worth having is easy,” I said.

“You’re right about that.” Declan’s brows drew together. “You said something earlier...about our experiment last night.”

The memory of Declan’s mouth on me, his hands on my skin, of how good it felt despite my disappointment that it couldn’t be more, was still fresh in my mind.

“Declan...” I began.

“No, hear me out. You said that it wasn’t unpleasant for you to let me...do that.”

I couldn't help but laugh lightly at that. "Trust me, it was far better than 'not unpleasant,' Declan."

"Yeah, but you also said you didn't want me to touch you or kiss you again if I wasn't feeling something in return."

I swallowed at the reminder. "That's right."

Declan nodded, his gaze moving to my lips. "That means I better do this now while I still have a window of opportunity."

"What?" I asked.

He took my face between his hands and kissed me. This wasn't a one-sided kiss, one that lacked true feeling on Declan's part. Even with the salty taste of sweat and the faint copper tang of blood, this was incredible, amazing. Passionate. And utterly real.

A shiver of pleasure coursed through me.

When he finally pulled away, my cheeks were flushed and my entire body tingled. I stared at him with surprise, and he rewarded me with a grin.

"How was that?" he asked.

I couldn't stop the smile from spreading across my face. "Not bad at all."

"It was way better than not bad." His grin widened for a moment before it faded, and pain slid through his gaze. "Shit, I can feel it. The serum's effects...they're coming back fast."

"Then kiss me again while we still have the chance," I told him.

He did as I asked, but already I felt that it wasn't the same as only a moment ago. Instead of disappointment, I found that fresh well of hope within me growing larger and more intense.

He'd kissed me, and it had been passionate and incredible and everything I wanted it to be. And if it had happened once, it could—and would—damn well happen again.

He stood up and held out his hand to help me up. "Let's get the hell out of here."

I felt shaky, my body ached, and my throat was tender. I'd lost a whole lot of blood. I hadn't found a solution to my Nightshade problem. The scientist who claimed he could help me was dead, an act of vengeance for the sins of his past. There was a nest of vampires beneath our feet that had extermination to look forward to rather than a juicy, human jugular to snack on.

I'd nearly died, but I was still alive. I had a chance to heal and to figure out what my next step was going to be.

And surprisingly enough, my hold on optimism had returned, stronger than ever, and armed for battle.

One amazing kiss from Declan had proved to me that nothing was permanent—there were always loopholes or glitches. If his so-called permanent serum could be brushed aside once, it could be again. And permanently, next time.

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And if he could be cured, then so could I.

It was far from a perfect plan, but I was okay with that. Perfection was highly overrated anyway.

* * *

Thank you so much for reading!

If you enjoyed *Nightfall*, please leave a review or rating to help other readers decide on the book. Word of mouth is an author's best friend.

Turn the page for the first chapter of *Nightshade*, book 3—**BLOODLUST**, or get the full book now!

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BLOODLUST

Nightshade – Book 3

* * *

Chapter 1

Ravenous was the perfect name for a place like this.

I'd arrived at the seedy North Hollywood bar a half hour ago. Noah had sent an email earlier today asking me to meet him here tonight at ten o'clock because he "had to talk to me about something very important." So here I was—ready, willing, and able to talk.

But by ten-thirty he still hadn't shown. And I was getting worried.

Maybe he's dead, a little voice in my head whispered.

My chest tightened at the thought. No, he was too smart. Too wily. Too young and cocky. I refused to allow myself to believe he'd let himself get killed. Tonight he could possibly have the information that would help get my life back to normal.

Where are you, Noah?

My attention shifted to a blond guy in a leather duster approaching the far left of the small dance floor. A heavy metal tune had begun to blare through the speakers, making it difficult to concentrate. Even in the dim light of the club, his skin was so pale it seemed to faintly glow, easily making him stand out from the rest of the crowd. He scanned the few dancers, coming to rest on a petite redhead wearing a micro-short leather skirt.

When he smiled I saw the subtle glint of fangs beneath his upper lip.

She noticed him looking and smiled back at him, thrusting her ample chest forward—the universal signal for "Come and get me, bad boy."

The girl had no idea this bad boy was a vampire.

Only two weeks ago, I didn't know vampires really existed. But they do. Most preferred to keep their distance from humans, but others like this one, well . . . they

were just really hungry.

The redhead was going to die.

I wasn't psychic. I had no special supernatural powers, no super strength, no otherworldly abilities—but I knew her fate. I saw it in the vampire's pale gaze as he flicked a smug look at his friend, also standing at the edge of the dance floor.

A large part of me didn't want to get involved. I had my own vast and varied problems to deal with. Plus, girls like this one, seemingly alone and vulnerable at this kind of dive, would likely find trouble sooner or later. If she couldn't protect herself, if she had no one around to keep an eye on her, then I didn't think her future was a bright one.

But it didn't mean I was just going to let this monster make her his nightcap.

After another quick scan for the missing-in-action Noah, I slid off the tall stool and began weaving my way through the rough-looking crowd toward the exit. The vampire and the girl were now dancing together, if you could call it that. His hand closed on her ass, pulling them tightly together as he pressed his lips to her throat. It looked sexy—kind of romantic, even—but I knew it wasn't. Or it wouldn't be for long.

I froze in place as a horrible thought occurred to me. He was going to bite her right in front of everyone.

I wanted to walk away, pretend I hadn't seen the vampire, leave this club, and contact Noah another night, but I couldn't do that. I'd never be accused of being a sweet and softhearted woman who wanted to help the helpless, but if there was a problem that was standing right in front of me and I might, possibly, be able to do something about it, then I had to. My conscience wouldn't allow otherwise.

“I really don’t want to do this,” I whispered to myself.

But I did it anyway.

I forced myself to walk close enough to brush against the vampire. He immediately caught my scent and released the girl.

I kept walking. I didn't have to look over my shoulder to know he was now following me. He was the mouse and I was the cheese. It didn't really matter what I looked like, how I filled out the white tank top I wore, or how long my legs were under my skirt. I was irresistible.

Believe me, I wasn't saying it to be vain. I wished like hell I didn't have this particular effect on the bloodsuckers.

I exited the club. Even though it was warm air that brushed against my bare arms and legs, I still shivered. I picked up my pace, ignored my racing heart, and walked toward the parking lot out back of the bar.

"Hey beautiful," the vampire said from close behind me. "What's your name?"

I forced myself to look coyly over my shoulder. "Sorry, I don't talk to strangers."

"Oh, come on, don't be like that." He was right next to me now, and he stroked a long strand of black hair off my forehead, pausing to roll it between his fingertips. He held it up so he could inhale its scent and his eyes darkened with lust and hunger. "Damn, you smell good. Where are you going, honey?"

I shuddered. "Back to my motel room."

“We can keep you company.” He glanced at his friend—dark hair, sallow skin, and a slow smile stretching his gaunt cheeks. He bared his sharp fangs as if he didn’t care who saw that beneath his human facade he was a monster.

I’d just wanted to lure the vampire away from the girl. I didn’t want this, but it did come with the territory. I tried my best to stay calm. “I don’t want company. Really, just leave me alone.”

“And what if we don’t want to leave you alone?”

“Then you’re in serious trouble.”

He grinned at that, then inhaled deeply, and thin, dark veins branched along his jawline and down his neck. Each vampire showed their hunger slightly differently—it was like a fingerprint, and along with their fangs it revealed them to be much different from human. The black of his pupils spread out to cover the pale gray of his irises.

His hand shot out and he grabbed me by my throat. I clawed at his arm as he dragged me around the corner into an alleyway, and then he threw me roughly at his friend.

“Hold her still,” he snapped.

I tried to struggle against him. I’d hoped very hard it wouldn’t come to this, but I’d overestimated how much control a hungry vampire had. Fear laced through me as the blond’s lips peeled back from his fangs.

“No, wait—” But I wasn’t able to finish my sentence. I gasped as his fangs sliced into the soft flesh of my throat.

“She tastes incredible,” the blond growled as he slurped at my blood.

A moment later, he was the one who gasped as he pulled back from me, his black eyes registering surprise now that he realized that my incredible-tasting blood came with a bit of a nasty aftertaste.

“What’s wrong?” his friend asked.

“I don’t know.” The vampire’s mouth gaped open and he touched his lips, looking down at the unnaturally dark crimson color of my blood on his fingertips. His brows drew together in confusion before he staggered back a few steps from me.

When he screamed, fire poured out of his mouth. In mere seconds, the only thing that remained of Thirsty Vampire #1 was a fall of fiery ash, turning the hot July night into a Christmas card from hell.

The paralyzing effect of the bite disappeared and I clamped my hand to my neck to stop the flow of blood. I felt weak and my legs threatened to crumple beneath me. I had to struggle to remain standing. The vampire’s friend moved his shocked gaze to me. His hunger showed along his hollow cheekbones, the sallow skin etched with a spiderweb of dark blue veins, his eyes soulless and black as pitch.

“You’re the one I’ve heard about, aren’t you? The one with the poisonous blood.” His voice was a whisper, but his hands were clenched, his jaw tight. Anger and grief flashed through his eyes as he came at me, not waiting for my answer.

He wasn’t going to bite me. He was going to kill me.

Before his hand did more than brush against my throat, someone grabbed him, spun him around, and a fist slammed into his jaw, knocking him backward.

“Don’t fucking touch her,” the man attached to the fist growled. His gaze flicked to me, resting on my injured throat for a split second, before returning to the vampire.

I pressed back against the cold wall as the vampire recovered quickly and launched himself at his attacker. Silver flashed, too fast to fully register. The blade sank into the vampire's chest right up to the hilt. He attempted to pull it out but didn't have enough time. His hands burst into fire along with the rest of his body and he exploded outward into another ashy cloud.

The knife clanged to the pavement and the man crouched to snatch it up and slide it into the sheath he wore at his hip. Then he glared at me through his right eye. The left was covered by a black patch. He'd lost the eye a long time ago in another fight with a vampire in which he hadn't fared quite as well as this.

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He was well over six feet tall, heavily muscled, and covered in ragged scars, including those on his face, branching out from where his eye patch sat, down his cheek and jaw, and along the left side of his neck. His dark hair was cut very short, almost shaved. He wasn't the type of man you wanted to meet in a dark alley like this. Not if you valued your life.

Declan Reyes was scary as hell.

My hero.

I finally allowed myself to let out a long, shaky sigh of relief.

Declan came toward me and roughly brushed the hair back off my neck. "Let me see," he demanded.

I reluctantly pulled my hand away from the bite wound.

His lips thinned. "What the hell did you think you were doing just now, Jill? Trying to get yourself killed?"

"They were going to kill a girl in there," I explained. "Right in front of everyone."

"So you offered yourself up as a willing sacrifice instead?"

"I thought I could distract them without getting bit."

"You thought wrong." Declan pulled a clean rag from his pocket and held it against

my throat. “Where’s Noah?”

“He hasn’t shown yet.”

“Then you shouldn’t have stuck around.” He glanced over his shoulder in the direction of the bar. “You need to stop trying to protect others all the time. You have to focus on protecting yourself.”

Declan had a tendency to see me as way more altruistic than I actually was. “So I should have just stood by and watched them tear her throat out?” I asked.

“Next time come find me first before you decide to play the Pied Piper to vampires.” He touched my face gently. “Are you okay?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“We need to go,” he said.

“But Noah—” I began.

“Isn’t here. Something must have gone wrong. We’ll wait for him to contact us again.”

“Don’t you think we should wait just a little while longer?”

“No. Best to cut our losses and try again later.”

I felt the thud of disappointment push away the small amount of hope I’d allowed myself to feel earlier. Declan had chosen to remain outside when we’d arrived just before ten o’clock. While it wasn’t the classiest bar in Los Angeles, the way he looked—like death incarnate, which as a vampire hunter he came by honestly—might

have gained us a bit too much attention.

Declan was a dhampyr—human mother, vampire father. While this gave him a great deal of extra strength, it wasn't nearly the same as being fully vampire. He healed much faster than a human, but every time he received a flesh wound it left a scar behind as a reminder of the horror he'd been through.

It was Declan who'd kidnapped me, kicking and screaming, from my normal life two weeks ago. It may as well have been two years by how different I felt and looked. It was the Nightshade formula I'd been injected with that had changed my blond hair and blue eyes to black. It was the Nightshade that meant any vampire who drank my blood would die a horrible, fiery death.

Declan stopped a dozen feet away and glanced over his shoulder at me. "Are you coming?" he asked.

When I moved closer to him he turned his face away so the scarred side would stay in shadows, away from the light shining down on us from the street lamp. The undamaged side of his face showed the man he could have been in a different life—a handsome, if a bit rough around the edges twenty-eight-year-old. Same age as me. Very different lives.

I wanted to touch him, but I stopped myself. "Don't hide from me."

"I'm not hiding."

"You asked me how I was feeling, so now I'll do the same. How are you feeling right now?"

His jaw tensed. "I'm fine."

“The new serum is . . .”

“Holding strong. Much better than before.”

Better. It wasn't exactly the word I'd use to describe the experimental drug he'd been pumped full of a week ago.

His now-deceased adoptive father, Carson Reyes, had been very concerned about Declan's dhampyr nature. So much so that he'd developed a special serum that had to be injected every three hours since Declan was a child. This serum was meant to curb any vampiric tendencies he might have—violence, bloodlust, erratic behavior of any kind. The serum also restrained his emotions so much that he appeared to have none. This made him the perfect weapon who could follow orders to the letter and not give his father or anyone else any problems. He'd been an effective killing machine who felt nothing apart from getting the job done.

Shortly after he'd met me he'd been forced to stop taking his serum regularly when it was stolen. I'd been worried that the need for blood might overwhelm him, but it hadn't. Instead, I'd met a different Declan, one who felt emotions strongly and wanted more from life than merely being a blunt instrument sent out to kill monsters.

Carson was still convinced he was right, that dhampyrs like Declan were dangerous and unpredictable. He'd been developing another serum—one that was meant to be permanent. He'd forcibly injected Declan with it, hoping it would save his son from giving in to any bloodlust. Ever. But that also meant that his emotions—including love, compassion, and sexual desire—would be permanently dampened.

I needed answers. “I’m going to check the bar one more time.”

Declan shook his head. “Not a good idea.”

I felt the resolve flow through me. It helped me to ignore the stinging pain from the vampire’s bite. “Five minutes, I swear. Wait for me here.”

“Jill, no—”

Before he could stop me, I turned and quickly reentered the dark and musty interior of Ravenous. Keeping a close eye on my surroundings, wary of anyone who looked suspicious—and, admittedly, a lot of people did—I made a beeline to the bar where I’d been sitting earlier. The newspaper I’d been flipping through still lay closed on the scarred wooden bar top. On the top of page twenty-two, I’d seen a small black-and-white picture of me and a heartfelt plea from Susan, my sister, asking anyone who knew my whereabouts to please contact the police immediately.

I forced myself to look away from the newspaper toward the bartender.

“Have you seen a guy in here tonight?” My words came out in a rush. “Early twenties, about five-ten, sort of thin. Light brown hair. Looks a bit like a frat boy?”

He eyed me as he ran a wet rag along the countertop. “Not a lot of frat boys come in here.”

I hissed out a sigh of frustration.

“But, yeah, I think I’ve seen the guy you’re looking for.”

My breath caught in my chest. “Really? Where?”

His gaze moved over my shoulder. “Right behind you.”

I spun around to see Noah standing ten feet away after coming out of the restroom on the right side of the club.

A wide smile spread across his boyish features and he closed the distance between us in a few steps. “Jill, I wasn’t sure if you were here or not.”

I hadn’t realized until this very moment how incredibly worried I’d been that he was hurt . . . or worse. The last time I’d seen him he’d been recovering from a bullet wound.

“Where the hell were you?” I asked. “You said you’d be here over a half hour ago.”

Noah’s smile widened. “Good to see you, too.”

I hugged him tightly. “I thought you were dead.”

“I’m not. But, ouch.” He flinched. “Be careful. I’m still recuperating.”

“Sorry.” I released him, and he placed a hand over his chest wound hidden under his dark blue shirt.

“Don’t worry about it.” His amiable expression faded and he touched my face. “You look like hell.”

I’d take it as an insult if he didn’t look so concerned. “I feel better than I look, believe it or not.”

“You’re paler than last time I saw you. Maybe it’s just the new hair color. I mean, don’t get me wrong. You’re still hot. You’re a hot chick who looks like she hasn’t

slept in about a decade.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at that. “I’ll go heavier on the under-eye concealer the next time I enter polite society. Promise.”

“Are you in any pain?” he asked.

Having poison in my veins came with an unwelcome side effect of spontaneous bouts of excruciating pain. I’d been given another drug, a fusing potion, meant to bind the Nightshade with my blood on a cellular level. Since then, things had been better.

“Other than feeling headachy and weary, kind of like a constant low-level hangover, I haven’t experienced any more pain since taking the fuser,” I told him.

“Not yet, you mean.”

I cringed. “Thanks for the reminder.”

“I got more fuser for you so you can take it regularly,” Noah said. “I know it doesn’t exactly go down easily, does it?”

“It sure doesn’t,” I said with a grimace.

The fuser ramped up the agony I felt about a hundredfold before it started to work. As the saying went, it was always darkest just before the dawn.

“A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down,” he said.

“Thank you, Mary Poppins.” I reached for his sleeve to draw him closer when some other rough-looking bar patrons moved past us. “Is that what you wanted to see me about tonight? The fusing potion? I thought you might have some other answers.”

His expression tensed. “Not yet, I’m afraid.”

I felt a stab of disappointment at his answer. “Oh.”

“Where’s Declan?” he asked.

“Waiting vigilantly outside,” I replied. “Armed to the teeth.”

Noah glanced at my neck as I twisted a lock of hair around my finger. “Making new friends?”

I touched the fresh fang marks. Luckily for a newly designated pincushion like myself, a vampire’s bite healed in a matter of a day or two, leaving no scars behind. It was a small comfort since they stung like a bitch. “You kept me waiting too long. I met a couple guys who liked the way I smelled.”

He grimaced. “Sorry. I take it they’re gone now?”

“Yeah, permanently.”

“So, Jill . . .” Noah looked nervously over his shoulder. “There’s another reason why I needed to see you tonight. And it’s not because I enjoy the dulcet tones of Black Sabbath and the smell of sweaty leather.”

“What is it?”

Noah shot another look over his shoulder. “He wants to see you, but he didn’t want me to mention that until you got here.”

My heart sped up. “Who?”

Noah met my gaze and held it. “Matthias.”

There was a long moment of stunned silence before I gathered my thoughts together enough to answer him. “He’s alive?”

Noah nodded.

Fresh panic raced through me. “And he’s here? Right now?”

“In the flesh.”

I had the sudden urge to turn and run, to escape this bar as fast as my feet could carry me. But my legs felt like lead.

Matthias was alive. It couldn’t be possible. It shouldn’t be possible.

I turned as if in slow motion to see the vampire king in question step out of the shadows to my left, his pale gray gaze trained on me. My mouth fell open in shock. I couldn’t help but be stunned to see him again—alive and well and standing right in front of me.

After all, I’d been the one who’d killed him.

* * *