

CHAPTER 1

I'VE BEEN SINGING IN CHURCH my whole life, which made sense, given I was a pastor's kid and all that. As a result, I was pretty familiar with feeling nervous about getting up on the stage in front of other people, even if they were people I had known my whole life. It used to be really bad when I was younger, but even now, when I'm a twenty-four-year-old woman, I still got nerves every now and then.

But one thing I never dealt with growing up was a large, pale-skinned man bursting through the stained glass window above the baptistery behind me and plunging his teeth—fangs?—into my neck right in front of the whole congregation.

It all happened so fast. One moment, I was putting my microphone back on its stand while my dad, the pastor, stood up to begin a prayer. The next, I heard shattered glass and felt two large hands close around my shoulders and then two thick teeth sink into my neck. What made it even worse was that it felt like the man was *drinking* my blood, as if he was drawing my blood out of my neck with his teeth.

I screamed and kicked back at him, but my kicks did little to hurt him. His legs felt solid as stone and his fingers gripped my arms like iron. I cried to God to help me, but I wasn't sure my cry for help was even intelligible over my own screams.

Through my bleary eyes, I could see the rest of the congregation running out the doors, screaming their heads off. It pained me to see everyone so afraid, but there was nothing I could do about it, because I couldn't even save myself. I reached behind myself and pushed at the man biting into my neck, but it was useless. He was huge and solid, like my gym teacher back in seventh grade, only he was infinitely creepier than my seventh grade gym teacher ever was.

Suddenly, I heard a gunshot go off and the man let go of me. He gasped in pain—a strange hissing noise more like a snake than a human—and let go of me. I immediately stumbled forward and leaned on the altar, feeling my bloody neck, which was hot and sticky from the exposed blood. I shook and found it hard to stand even with the help of the altar. Nonetheless, I looked over my shoulder to see what had happened to my attacker, probably because I was too stupid to take advantage of this moment to just run away.

My attacker was clutching his shoulder, where he appeared to have been shot. Black blood was leaking out of his shoulder; at least, I *assumed* it was blood, but human blood was not black, so I had no idea what it actually was. Maybe it was my own blood loss that was making me see things.

“Tara!” a voice cried out below. “Get down!”

I looked down to see Dad standing below the stage, aiming a pistol up at me. Dad was a middle-aged guy who was usually pretty mellow, but right now, he looked like he was ready to

go to war. His eyes were wide and alert, while he held the gun steady and true. I knew that Dad liked to shoot, but I was amazed at how he had managed such a clutch shot without hitting me.

“Dad?” I said, my voice dangerously weak. I winced at the pain in my neck. “Where did you —”

“I’ll answer your questions later,” said Dad. He climbed up the stage to join me and said, “Are you all right? Your neck—”

A loud hissing noise behind us made us both look toward the choir seats. My attacker was still clutching his shoulder, but now he was glaring at Dad with the most intense hate I had ever seen on another person’s face. He hissed in a very inhuman way and lunged toward us.

Dad shoved me out of the way and I fell to the floor just as the attacker stopped before him. Dad aimed his gun at the attacker, but my attacker slapped the gun out of his hand and punched Dad in the chest. Dad slammed into the altar, knocking both him and the altar off into the empty front pews below where they fell with a crash.

“Dad!” I screamed, clutching my bloody neck as I tried to sit up. “No!”

My attacker turned his attention back to me. That was when I noticed his deep red eyes. They were actually blood red, the same shade as my own blood even, and they weren’t human. They actually reminded me of the bats I once studied in biology class, except its inhuman eyes reflected an evil intelligence behind them.

I tried to crawl away, but my attacker pinned me to the floor with one heavy foot and grabbed my neck with its hand. It forced me to look into its face. I could smell death mixed with blood on its breath and I wanted to choke on the stink.

“I was given orders not to kill the daughter of the Hunter,” said my attacker in a low, raspy voice that sent shivers down my spine. “But your blood is so delicious, so pure, that I simply cannot help myself. Just a little bit more and—”

Without warning, two strong hands appeared on my attacker’s shoulders and ripped him off me. My attacker cried out in shock as he was thrown away from me and landed on the other side of the platform, where he lay with a comically stunned look on his face.

At first, I thought that the man who saved me was Dad, but when I looked up at the man who now stood over me, I realized that he wasn’t Dad at all. For one, Dad wasn’t nearly that handsome. Maybe it was the blood loss making me go crazy, but the man who saved me looked as handsome as a movie star, with the most kissable lips imaginable.

He was a tall and imposing man, broad shouldered, but not as thick or beefy as my attacker. His skin was very pale and his hair was dark, but while those features made my attacker look like a beast, they served only to enhance this guy’s handsomeness. Even the long scar across his right cheek didn’t take away from his attractive features.

But the blood red eyes that looked down on me certainly did, because they were nearly a match for the blood red eyes of my attacker. Yet there was a hint of compassion and concern in them, none of that malevolent animal intelligence that was evident in the eyes of my attacker.

“Are you okay?” said the man. His voice was rich and smooth, though a little dangerous. “Aside from your neck, that is.”

I blinked. “Uh, who are you and why are you so handsome?”

The man opened his mouth to answer, but at that moment he was tackled by my attacker. The two of them fell onto the stage, grappling and biting at each other like two cats fighting in an alley. They somehow managed to avoid rolling into me, but I moved away from them anyway

as best as I could. I couldn't get far, however, because of my neck, which was still bleeding out. I was finding it harder and harder to retain consciousness.

But then I remembered Dad and looked over into the pews of the congregation. Everyone was gone now, except for Dad, who was lying unconscious on the now-splintered altar below. Blood leaked from his forehead, but given how his chest was rising and falling, I knew he was still alive. Thank God.

But then I heard a loud snapping sound and looked back over at the two men fighting. My attacker was on top of my savior, snapping at him, but the man who had saved me was holding him back with his claws. It looked like the man who had saved me was on the losing end of the battle, and with Dad out cold, I would be at the mercy of my attacker if he managed to kill the guy who had saved me. Yet how was I supposed to help my savior when I was bleeding and injured myself?

That was when I noticed Dad's gun lying a few feet away from me. Dad must have dropped it when my attacker punched him earlier and remembered how the gun had harmed my attacker, even though my attacker didn't seem to be human. I wasn't much of a sharpshooter, but Dad used to take me out to the gun range when I was younger, so I reached over, grabbed the gun, and aimed it at my attacker.

But then the two men flipped, with the handsome one on top and the monstrous one on bottom. It didn't help that my consciousness was rapidly fading in and out, making it harder for me to aim well. I knew I would lose consciousness soon, but I needed to hang in there just a couple of minutes longer.

"Handsome guy!" I shouted. "Move!"

Luckily, the handsome guy seemed to hear me, because he rolled off my attacker and out of my range. At the same time, my attacker jumped to his feet, growling and snarling, but I took that moment to aim at his head and fire.

My attacker's head exploded. Black blood and strange organic tissue flew everywhere as my attacker's corpse collapsed onto the stage. At the same time, I dropped the gun to the floor and clutched my shoulder more tightly than ever. Darkness was rapidly appearing in the corners of my eyes and soon I would lose consciousness entirely.

Suddenly, the handsome man appeared over me and said, "Tara, can you hear me? Are you all right?"

I tried to speak, but then the darkness washed over me and I slipped into unconsciousness.

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