

Dead Before Dawn

The Vampire Curse

by
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Dedication

To all vampire lovers out there, thank you for enjoying the genre so close to my heart.

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My thanks go to my sister Sophie and my husband Rob, without whom I could never do this writing that I love so much.

Thanks also go to:

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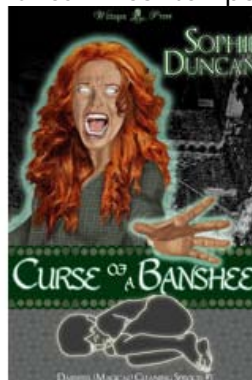
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Chapter 1 Cat and Mouse

Max was lost, as in very, very lost. He wasn't sure how he'd managed it. He'd been walking down a perfectly normal street in Moscow on his way to meet the rest of the cast of "In From the Cold 2: Rogue Agent". On Thursday it was the Russian premiere and everyone who was already in town was meeting up for dinner. Since he'd had a few days down time he'd flown in early to meet up with old friends.

Why he had taken the dingy side street he had no idea. By the time his brain had caught up with the fact that he was walking in the wrong direction it had been way too late. Where he was, was, frankly, a mystery. It was dimly lit and full of inky black shadows; an alley with a chain link fence blocking his way forward. He had never seen it before. As he looked around he felt the first tendrils of fear creeping up his spine.

He liked Moscow and the Russian people, even if he didn't agree with all their politics. Having a Russian grandmother he spoke the language passably and he'd visited several times, but he definitely didn't want to meet the shadier side of the capital. He might play a spy on the big screen, but he was more of a pacifist in real life. Elicit deals and back allies were totally not his scene.

"You have a strong mind, Kitten," a voice said from behind him and he span to see a man standing half in shadow; "I almost couldn't ensnare you."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" he demanded, as cold daggers of shock lanced through him.

He could only hope that a little ire might make the man think twice about coming anywhere near him. The man's accent was thick, but he was pretty sure he had heard correctly and it sounded deranged. He licked his lips as he scanned the area looking for any possible bolt holes. Now his eyes were adjusting he could see his surroundings, but it seemed to be an alley with many locked doors and not a lot else.

"So pretty," were the unsettling words all but whispered at him.

When the man stepped forward, Max stepped back; he knew it was a sign of weakness, but he did not want the man any closer than necessary. If he had to run he wanted as much head start as possible. There was something about his stalker that set off alarms in Max's head, and it wasn't just the fact the man was a creep.

"I had to work very hard to keep that pretty mind occupied while I enticed you here," the man said, smiling and showing very white teeth that almost looked pointed in the dim light. "I enjoy a challenge."

Clearly the man was short of a full deck, but he was tall and broad shouldered. Max knew, if it came to hand to hand, he was well out matched. If only he'd been like some of his co-stars, all muscle and taller than god, he might have had a chance, but he was five ten and wiry. His stalker had, at minimum, four inches and twenty pounds on him.

At least it didn't look as if the other man had a weapon.

Max was an athlete; he'd been a gymnast before he went into acting, he could run fast when he had to. His shoes weren't exactly made for running, but he was pretty sure he could make a dash for it.

His stalker laughed at him, as if the man knew what he was thinking.

"You can run," and suddenly the man wasn't ten feet away anymore, he was right there in front of Max, "but you can't get away."

Every muscle in Max's body froze as a primal terror invaded him. The small backpack he was carrying slipped off his shoulder uselessly and hit the floor. It was as if someone had thrown a bucket of ice water over him. All his senses lit up as adrenaline flooded his system. He could smell the man's aftershave, something deep and spicy over the smell of garbage from the nearby dumpster. He could hear cars in the distance. Every part of him tried to show him the way out. Yet he could not move.

The man smiled again. Max could see long, sharp fangs and, this close, the red gleam in his stalker's eyes. His mind screamed at him to run, but his limbs were rigid in fear. The primitive part of him that was still scared of the dark knew this was no human being.

"So delicate," the creature said, touching the side of Max's face with nails that were far too sharp, "and yet so strong."

Max's breath came in short sharp gasps as the creature ran the other hand over his chest and under his coat.

"I'm going to enjoy you," his assailant said, licking his lips; "I might even enjoy you enough to keep you. Would you like that, Kitten? Would you revel in the killing?"

Max wanted to say no, to protest what was happening, but he could barely breathe, let alone speak. This couldn't be real; vampires didn't exist. Someone had slipped him a pill or he was feverish, that had to be it. He was lying in his hotel room dreaming.

But if it was just a nightmare, why did it feel so real?

He finally regained control of his body when his assailant reached out to him again, but it was too late; the grip that settled on his upper arms was too strong. He struggled, trying to wrench himself away, but he could not free himself. The vampire drew him in, pulling him closer and closer before half letting go and using the now free hand to push his head to one side.

All he could hear was the rushing of blood in his ears as his heart beat wildly in terror, his system soaked with the need to flee. He was completely helpless. When fangs sliced into his neck, he finally screamed. The pain was incredible as if somehow magnified by the hyperaware state the fear had put his body into. But it lasted only a few seconds before he felt himself go limp and pleasure flooded his system.

He didn't want to respond; his mind was still screaming in denial, but the bite was like the sweetest lover's caress. It lit up centres of his brain he had hardly known were there. He grunted and sagged against his attacker.

His logical thoughts shouted at him to resist, to push away the creature assaulting him, but his physical shell seemed to be in some sex soaked haze. He felt himself getting hard even though the fear should have robbed him of that ability. His mind and his body felt completely separate.

When he was released and the pleasure was suddenly cut off, he had no way to respond. His legs crumpled and he fell to the ground, just about managing to avoid taking a header into the concrete.

His vision swam as he tried to look around. He could hear growling and shouting, but none of it made much sense. About all he could make out was that there were other people in the alley now as well. Someone was cursing in Russian and then there was a hideously loud, animalistic screaming sound. Max tried hard, but he could not focus on anything to figure out what was going on.

In the back of his mind a little voice urged him to get up and flee, but his body just laughed at the idea. He could barely lift his head, let alone stand. Only when hands touched him again did he try to get away. His stomach twisted in fear as the bite flashed through his mind and he panicked.

"Hold him," he heard someone say.

The hands that grabbed him firmly this time were not as inhumanly strong as before, but he was so weak and uncoordinated that they didn't need to be. Someone pushed his head to one side. He struggled, but he was slow and pathetically feeble.

"No," was all he could manage in desperation; he didn't even know if it came out in English or Russian.

"He's been bitten," said the same voice as before.

"Look at his eyes," a second said; "he's half gone."

"But not completely," a third added, this one a woman.

"Just kill him and be done with it, Michal," the second voice said with callous disinterest.

He struggled again at that, terror giving him a little strength, but he was held firm.

"You would make us as bad as them," the female voice countered.

"We'll take him with us," the first voice finally spoke again. "Kirill, hold him tightly, I'm going to purify the wound."

The person behind him wrapped an arm around his chest and pulled his head to one side, very firmly this time. He heard something being opened and then liquid was being poured onto his neck. At first it felt like water, but then it hit where he had been bitten. It was as if they were pouring acid onto his skin. He couldn't even scream; the pain was that encompassing. It was all too much for his overtaxed body and he moaned before everything went blissfully black.

* * *

A thud and jolt that threw him against something metal was what woke Max up, at least a little bit. It was strange, because he still felt as if he was dreaming. Everything was vaguely blurred at the edges and his brain didn't seem to be quite connected to his body correctly. He could smell diesel and hear the growling of an engine that had seen better days.

He was in the back of a moving van. As far as he could tell he was propped up in one corner of it.

For a little while he just stayed exactly where he was, blinking down and trying to make something, anything make sense.

It eventually dawned on him that he was looking at his own hands. Around his wrists there were some sort of manacles, but they didn't look very sturdy. They were silver and had strange designs on them. In his half awake state they almost seemed to glow as light from street lamps hit them. For a few minutes he just stared at them, vaguely hypnotised.

He concentrated for a while, trying to bring things into better focus. Only when he realised that the fuzziness at the edge of his vision was not going to go away did he finally lift his head.

It was then he felt something cold around his neck as well. That pushed him out of his stupor a little more. He realised, with a shot of alarm, there was a chain running from between the manacles on his wrists, all the way up to what had to be a collar of some sort. The chain jangled as he moved. As he blinked, he found himself looking at a dark haired young woman who appeared to be watching him intently.

"Who are you?" he asked, since it seemed like a sensible question.

All the other thoughts in his head seemed to be too fanciful to start with.

"Zhanna," the woman said, still looking him over very carefully.

"Don't get attached, Zhanna," the man sitting next to her said, and Max recognised the voice as the one that had suggested killing him; "he'll be dead before dawn."

Zhanna didn't seem impressed by that and actually gave Max an apologetic smile. At least someone seemed to be on his side.

"That's Anton," she said, leaning forward; "ignore him; he enjoys looking on the dark side. The man driving is Michal and the one sitting next to him is Kirill. What's your name?"

"Max," he replied and tried to shift a little where he was sitting.

Unfortunately he only managed to upset his balance and he started to slide. He tried to stop it, but his body didn't want to play ball.

Zhanna leant forward, gently putting him back in place as he totally failed to help himself. He seemed to be as feeble as a newborn.

"You will feel very weak," Zhanna told him, "I would not recommend trying to move. Do you remember what happened to you?"

The memory flashed very clearly into Max's head; it was not pleasant. He shivered at the distinct recollection of fangs sinking into his skin.

"I was bitten by a vampire," he said, even though it sounded ridiculous to his ears.

"At least he's not in denial," Anton said.

Max decided he really didn't like the man much. Anton looked to be somewhere between thirty and forty, and he had a face that did not smile easily. For a second the idea of beating that face bloody seemed amazingly appealing.

He shook his head to get rid of the mental image; it was shocking and not like him at all. In doing so he almost dislodged himself again.

"It might be better if you just sat still," Zhanna said, giving him a small smile.

He doubted she would have done that if she'd known what was going through his head.

"What happened after I was bitten?" Max asked, trying to focus on something else.

"We killed the monster that attacked you," Zhanna replied, sitting back once she was sure he was secure in his seat; "it's what we do, we're vampire hunters."

Of course they were; Max decided his night couldn't get much more bizarre.

"And me?" he asked, even though he wasn't sure the answer would be a good one.

Zhanna looked kind of sad and apologetic at that; Max was afraid he knew what she was likely to say.

"The bite begins the change," Zhanna told him; "you've already started to turn. We're taking you somewhere to get you help. Usually vampires kill those they bite before they can turn completely, and if they choose to create more of their kind they reinforce the change over a series of nights with more bites. Since you have only been bitten once, there is a chance it can be stopped."

Anton snorted at that; clearly it was not a big chance.

"And if it can't?" Max asked.

He had to, even though he already knew the answer; after all vampire hunters killed vampires. Zhanna inclined her head just slightly, clearly she realised that he understood already.

"Would you really want to be a monster?" she asked. "The change takes away all humanity; you would kill your own friends for their blood or for one night of sex."

Max couldn't imagine being like that or feeling like that. It sounded horrible, and he realised the truth of her question. He did not want to be a monster, but he didn't want to die either. With such heavy thoughts it was hard to find anything else to say.

"Do not give up hope," Zhanna told him seriously.

He wanted to believe her, he really did, but Anton's reaction had been so obvious. Putting his head back against the van he closed his eyes and tried to pretend this wasn't happening, at least for a little while.

The movement of the van was gentle and soothing, unless they hit a pot hole again. He let himself concentrate on that, rather than the thoughts that threatened to overwhelm him.

"Max," Zhanna's voice pulled him back.

It was only as he realised they had stopped that it dawned on him he had been drifting completely in a world of his own. He had barely been aware any time had passed at all.

Zhanna was on one knee in front of him. His eyes zeroed in on the syringe in her hand.

"I'm sorry," she apologised, making sure he was listening to her, "but it is too dangerous for us to transfer you inside while you are awake. This will put you to sleep for an hour or so. When you wake up you will be where people can help you."

He would have objected, but she was already pushing the needle into the undamaged side of his neck before his slow moving brain caught up.

"If I don't make it," he said desperately, even as he felt the drug begin to kick in, "my family ... please ... tell ..."

The world faded out before he could get the words out.

Chapter 2 Body and Blood

The second time Max woke up he was on his back. The first thing he realised with any clarity was that he was very firmly strapped to the trolley on which he was lying. He could barely move.

As best he could, he looked down at himself. There were reinforced leather straps over his chest, pelvis and thighs and there were cuffs on his wrists and ankles. He had also been stripped to the waist. One of his arms was strapped down to his side and the other was at about 45 degrees to his body. It was on some kind of padded board, apparently for ease of access because there were tubes sticking out of the crook of his arm. The tubes appeared to be carrying blood.

"Welcome back," said a voice that sounded far too cheerful for the situation, "Zhanna tells me your name is Max."

He turned his head, about the only part of his body he could move, and found himself looking at a woman in a white coat. He barely remembered to nod.

"I haven't had a long term patient for a while," the woman said in impeccable English and smiled, "so my bedside manner is a little rusty, I'm afraid you'll have to forgive me."

"What's going on?" Max asked.

It was hard to speak as his voice cracked with fear.

This was not what he'd imagined; crosses and holy water had been more like it, not machines and mad scientists. The room was tiled white on all walls, and he couldn't see the floor, but he could see the camera looking right at him.

"I'm Dr Ivankova, but you can call me Yulia," the woman told him. "We're giving you a complete transfusion at the moment to try and get as much of the contaminant out of you as possible. The vampire infected your blood and it has started to infect the rest of you as well, but the less of it there is the better."

"It is working?" he asked, desperate for some sort of hope.

"You're not rejecting the new blood, which is a positive sign," Yulia told him as she walked up beside him and checked the machine.

Max didn't feel quite so fuzzy this time, but everything still had a kind of surreal edge to it. He also felt rather hot even though he wasn't wearing a shirt. Yulia had a jacket and a roll neck sweater on; it clearly wasn't warm.

"How long will I be here?" he asked, since he couldn't think of any other question that wouldn't have a bad answer.

"It's impossible to tell," Yulia said, not unkindly, but the woman seemed to be a little short on empathy, "it differs from individual to individual. You appear to have a very strong will and, I'm not going to lie to you; what I'm doing is only an aid to your own body. This is ten percent scientific and ninety percent metaphysical; a lot of it will be down to you. Whatever you do, do not give up."

It was hard to have hope when the world had just gone mad, but Max gave a little nod.

"How long have you been doing this?" he asked, trying to distract himself a little from his own position.

Being forcefully strapped down was not his idea of fun; he hated being confined.

"Twenty years or so," Yulia replied, checking the readout on another machine that Max neither understood nor recognised. "I was in medical school when my brother was taken by a vampire. Michal and his team saved the rest of my family, and when I qualified I offered them my services. I have been studying vampire contamination ever since, although I very rarely have a chance to see a patient before it is too late."

Not exactly the greatest prognosis.

"Ever saved anyone?" Max asked next, even though he knew it was probably a bad idea.

"Just one," was the straightforward and honest answer, "a young girl, she was five at the time. She had been bitten by her mother, little more than a scratch really, and she responded well to the treatments."

Max could feel the wadding on his neck; his wound was anything but a scratch.

"How many others have you treated?" he said.

He was almost sure he didn't want the answer, but he was the kind of person who liked to know the odds.

Yulia gave him a long look then.

"Seventeen," was the eventual answer. "Vampires are messy eaters; their victims are usually dead before I see them and the ones that are brought to me are often too far gone. The one who took you must have wanted to turn you, but he was not careful about where he did it."

For a moment Max flashed back to the alley.

"He told me he had trouble with my mind," he said, needing to pull himself out of the memory, "maybe he didn't have a choice."

That made Yulia's eyes light up with interest.

"Another mark in your favour," the doctor told him with a smile that didn't really fit the occasion; "there are very few with the ability to fight off a vampire mind, at least those from the Russian bloodlines. As far as we can tell vampirism originated in this part of the world, no one is sure how, but the bloodlines become weaker the further away they are from the source. Russian vampires are a lot stronger than American ones, or so I have been told."

Vampire 101 was all very well, but Max was having trouble with just the basic facts. His brain was still screaming this had to all be a terrible dream and he half expected to wake up at any moment.

"How can this be real?" he asked almost desperately.

He pulled against his bonds, needing to feel something that didn't make his head spin.

"Sssh," Yulia soothed, at his side almost instantly, stroking his hair like his mother had done when he was small, "I know this is hard, but you must not give in to the fear. When my brother came at me out of the darkness, fangs bared, ready to kill me, I did not want to believe it either, but I did not let it break me. Your mind is your greatest weapon, do not allow it to weaken."

Max wanted to cry, he wanted to scream, but instead he took a deep, shuddering breath and tried to bring himself under control.

"You and I together," Yulia told him, "we will beat this."

All Max could do was nod and let himself believe, in the other direction lay madness.

In the end Yulia spent what had to have been hours completing the transfusion. They talked a little, but Max found that the procedure was making him woozy and he dozed for some of the time. Yulia was moving around doing whatever she had to do and Max just drifted; he only really came back to himself when Yulia walked over holding a needle.

"The transfusion is complete," Yulia told him with a smile. "You seem to be responding well, so I'm going to make you more comfortable. Unfortunately I can't take the risk of doing so when you're awake, so I'm going to put you out for a little while. When you wake up we'll see about getting you something to eat, okay?"

Max did not like drugs and he did not like needles, but it wasn't like he had a choice, so he nodded. He didn't even feel the needle go in and he welcomed the empty blackness that reached up for him as soon as the drug hit his system; at least he didn't have to think at all for a while.

* * *

When Max woke up the next time, he was on a proper bed and not a trolley. The straps were gone and the bed was over by one of the white tiled walls of the room. Instead of the other restraints there were chains similar to those he had been wearing in the van, only these were attached to the wall rather than each other. The one good thing about them was that they were loose and he could move. Testing his new freedom, he slowly sat up.

Someone, he assumed Yulia, had given him a shirt as well, which made him feel less like a lab rat and more like a human being.

He examined the chains. They really didn't look like they'd hold a determined man, let alone a vampire. Max didn't know anything about vampires or how they could be

contained, but there were tiny designs all over the manacles. Instinct told him that their strength was not totally in their metallic content.

Turning he tried to see how the chains were attached to the wall. However, on closer inspection, they were not fastened at all, they went through the wall. From the looks of the scuff marks on the steel pipes embedded in the tiles, the chains moved in and out of the holes. It made Max wonder how far they could be retracted.

"Hello again," Yulia's familiar voice interrupted his investigation.

Somehow he had totally missed the door opening.

"You are looking much healthier now. I've brought you some soup."

Yulia was carrying a tray and, when the doctor uncovered it, the scent of food reached Max's nostrils. It smelt delicious and Max's stomach managed a low rumble, but that wasn't the strange part. Most of him wanted the food, but there was a little bit of him shying away. In fact he was bombarded by the mental image of grabbing the tray and throwing it as far from him as possible.

"Your stomach's going to feel a little delicate," Yulia said and Max realised his dilemma must have shown on his face, "but just eat as much as you can. Natural human processes slow down the rate of vampire corruption, so you're going to feel a little at war with yourself."

It was an adequate description of how he was feeling, so Max did not question the information. He scooted back a bit so that he was leaning against the wall and then accepted the tray.

"Thank you," he said, feeling hungry even though he would have expected the situation to have taken away his appetite.

"Zhanna is a very good cook, the only one better is Anton..."

"And he thinks I should be put down," Max filled in.

"He is a very pessimistic man," Yulia agreed. "But anyway I believe the soup is Zhanna's mother's recipe," Yulia continued with a smile, "I will pass on your thanks. Now eat up, you need your strength."

Yulia was right, the soup was indeed delicious and full of chunky vegetables and meat. Even though he had to convince himself not to spit it out half the time, Max did enjoy it. He felt more than a little schizophrenic as one second he appreciated the flavours and the next he wanted to pitch the bowl across the room.

At least he did feel a bit better with food inside of him. It was such a good feeling after everything that had been happening, no matter how slight, that he actually managed to give Yulia a smile when the doctor took the tray away.

"That is better," Yulia told him and smiled back, "I think we are going to be very good friends."

Max hoped so, he really did, because the moment Yulia was his enemy, he was a monster. It was a sobering thought.

"Now," Yulia said after putting the tray down on the side, "I need to examine the wound on your neck. I'm going to retract the chains a little while I do it, vampire instinct can be overwhelming and I need to make sure you cannot bite me."

That sounded improbable, but then he wouldn't have believed the trouble he'd had eating until he experienced it. Those difficulties had shown him more than enough to realise where Yulia was coming from. He nodded his acceptance.

"If you sit between the holes in the wall," Yulia told him, "this will be easier."

Max did as he was asked. He was still feeling weaker than usual, but it wasn't too hard to reposition himself. Yulia picked up what looked like a remote control and pressed a button. Max felt, more than heard a low pitched hum and then the chains on the neck and arm restraints began to shorten. Before long he was basically pinned against the wall. He was very glad the leg ones remained extended.

"These don't look like normal chains," he said, trying to head off the panic he could feel building in his chest, "how do they work?"

Yulia walked over with a small dish in one hand and lent down over him.

"They are reinforced with ancient spells," the doctor told him while gently pulling off the gauze on his neck. "The world of vampires is as much about belief as it is about anything scientific, more so really, and the belief behind the spells makes them unbreakable for a vampire. Even the strongest of them could not break them."

"Met many?" he asked, doing his best not to think about the whole water feeling like acid experience of the last time someone had looked at his neck while he was conscious.

"A few," Yulia told him and gently began to clean his neck with something. At least it didn't burn. "This is healing very fast; it will probably be gone by tomorrow night."

From the frown on the woman's face, that probably wasn't a good thing.

"To be expected I suppose," Yulia said, frown clearing, "not to worry. At least it will not cause you discomfort. Now I have a few tests I would like to run, I hope you are feeling up to it."

Nodding, Max accepted the inevitable; after all, Yulia was his only hope.

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