

Prologue

This is a tale that has been told time and time again; the battle of good versus evil, light versus dark. There are as many versions as there are stars in the sky.

And it's all true.

The story, however, is only half-told.

Thousands of years ago, one of the most favored archangels challenged the highest power of heaven. Jealous of the freedom accorded to newly created humans, he demanded free will for all angels. The confrontation fractured heaven, creating a legion of upstarts. But far from denying them, heaven granted these angels what they so desired.

But the gift came at a terrible price. Almost immediately, the angels felt a dark presence, born of greed, stir within. Fear rippled throughout the ranks, but it was too late to beg forgiveness. For their blasphemy, their bodies were torn asunder and reborn in fire, the blood in their veins cursed for all time. Their wings were torn from their monstrous bodies, and they took on the look of beasts.

The accursed beings were cast out of heaven, made to wander Earth for all time. Humans were given the sanctuary of Eden to protect them from the encroaching evil, but free will once again proved to be both blessing and curse, and they began to travel far and wide beyond the haven. Eventually, Eden became no more than a mirage, its location lost in the sands of time.

The fallen angels quickly discovered men, and it was then that they felt the first pull of bloodlust. The seeds of their revenge were sown, and they fed upon humans, integrating themselves into society. Vampirism spread slowly, giving foul birth to a demon race that called itself the Telave.

Eden is now lost, and no place on Earth offers shelter as those of the Telave continue to build their army of undead soldiers, biding their time to wage war on heaven and Earth. They move virtually undetected, cloaked in the shadowy mantle of human ignorance and denial.

But heaven has not forsaken the weak and defenseless. The most faithful of angels were sent to mate with human females, giving rise to a race of holy warriors strong enough to withstand the unholy invasion of the vampiric virus.

However, the warriors are spread thin as the demonic plague escalates. Their victories are few; the casualties many.

A savior to lead them has long been promised.

But the centuries have passed, and no savior has arrived . . .

When she does, the fate of the world will rest in her hands.

Chapter 1

Jesse Burke crouched beside the grave of Candace Ackerman. Her gaze raked the freshly turned soil, her grip tightening around her flashlight. Its weight felt solid, reassuring in her hand. A good thing, too. Her heart pounded so fiercely, she could barely think straight.

Her breath caught as a wild thought popped into her head. *What the hell am I doing?*

Most people didn't sit in cemeteries after dark waiting by a grave the way someone would wait for a bus. Most people, even bereaved family members of the recently deceased, had the good sense to go home after the sun set. And most people didn't believe the dead would awaken; return to walk again. After all, the deceased were no longer alive.

Jesse believed. Because she believed, she'd traveled to the Metairie Cemetery to do one thing and one thing only—to slay her first vampire.

No matter if she died in the process. As far as she was concerned, she'd passed away months ago and just didn't have the sense to stretch out in a coffin herself. No matter if she had to endure a lot of pain to make it happen. She wasn't leaving until one of them stayed put.

Permanently.

She'd already examined the temporary metal plate marking the grave several times with the beam of her heavy Maglite, reading and memorizing the brief stats of the occupant.

CANDACE DENISE ACKERMAN. BORN 1984. DIED 2006 The girl had been only twenty-two years old. Found wandering in a delirium, she appeared to be uninjured save for a few bruises and ragged punctures dotting her throat and arms. Feverish and vomiting, she'd died shortly thereafter. The source of her strange wounds and sudden onset of illness was unknown. Whispers about the plague were beginning to spread among the population.

Remembering the newspaper's retelling of events, Jesse felt chills scrape up her spine. Beneath her feet lay Candace's body, occupant of the nice satin-lined coffin her grief-dazed parents had recently purchased.

"All the signs are there," she said aloud, as if saying the words made them true. "This means only one thing." The cult that had taken her and her twin was on the move again, recruiting new members to its ranks. Barely a month had passed since the identical death of a twenty-one-year-old man.

Memories she couldn't easily suppress rose to the forefront of Jesse's mind. Bitter acid welled in the back of her throat as strange, distorted faces swam out of her mind's dark corners. Soulless eyes stared; they were empty, terrible things. Taut, ruby red lips were drawn back over sharp white fangs.

Unwilling to let the beasts out of the cage locked tight in the back of her mind, Jesse closed her eyes hard. A thin film of sweat coated her skin. Icy fingers grasped her spine, holding on tight. Like the girl in the grave, she knew how it felt to be taken, her blood sucked away drop by precious drop to feed an unholy hunger.

Unlike the girl in the grave, she'd survived.

At this point in her life nothing scared her—nothing at all. She'd spent almost a year preparing for this moment, waiting for the chance to be something more than a victim. She had to get it right this time.

Opening her eyes, Jesse blinked several times, wiping beads of perspiration off her clammy skin. Refocusing on the freshly filled grave, she strained in an attempt to see through the dirt. Although not quite full, the moon provided sufficient light, bathing the beautifully manicured cemetery in an unearthly silver-blue glow. The night air smelled clean. The wandering breeze stirred stray leaves and tugged at her hair, tousling the strands around her face and shoulders.

She heard the vampire before she saw it. The muffled sound of a strange wail cut through her like a knife. Hands braced against the cool ground, she lowered her head and stilled her breath, listening. She easily detected the distressed scrabble of fingernails tearing through wood. The beast had awakened and was beginning to dig itself out.

Heart hammering in her chest, Jesse pulled herself to her feet. As her gaze darted from side to side, she saw all; yet at first she comprehended nothing. At last she saw the ground heave upward as though the corpse below were attempting to take great, gulping breaths of air.

"I can do this," she murmured.

Dressed in jeans, a T-shirt, and army boots, she'd filled every pocket of her secondhand Levi jacket with her meager arsenal. Her research had narrowed down the weapons best used for slaying vampires: garlic, a cross, and, of course, a wooden stake, its end sharpened to a deadly point.

Suddenly, the stone-walled cemetery wasn't so peaceful or calm. The temperature dropped significantly as the breeze kicked up, winnowing among headstones.

A voice, a grating whisper, echoed on the breeze, caressing her ears. The fine hairs at the nape of her neck rose. "Get the hell out . . ."

Was it her imagination . . . or something more sinister?

Fingers wiggling like pale worms unexpectedly jabbed up through the soil. The tips were shredded; the nails ripped away. Groping hands came next, followed by a head shrouded in wisps of blond hair, and then shoulders. The earth had rejected the demon-tainted corpse, giving birth to a foul and terrible thing.

A torso and legs followed as the newly risen cadaver broke free of its grave.

Shaking off the dirt the way a dog would shake off water, the girl-cadaver climbed to its feet. No more than a slender wisp standing perhaps five feet tall, it was dressed in a frilly pink confection, the kind of dress perfect for a senior prom queen.

The demon once known as Candace Ackerman looked pale, frozen, as if its features were chiseled from ivory. Fathomless eyes burned with inhuman recognition. A twisted grin split parched lips, revealing fangs. The girl-cadaver had fangs—big fucking fangs. They looked pretty damn sharp, too.

A smile curled one corner of Jesse's mouth. This was what she'd been waiting for. Her hand dipped into her coat pocket. Her fingers closed around the solid length of her weapon. "Gotcha."

Her daddy always told her if she planned to attack someone, to do it first and do it fast. It seemed like good advice.

Unfortunately for Jesse, the vampire didn't plan to be put back in the ground any time soon.

The girl-cadaver stared with a gaze lit by an evil spawned in the deepest pits of hell. The low, feral growl of a predator emanated from its throat. Uncoordinated limbs were pressed into motion.

The beast charged, striking Jesse with a full-body tackle.

Jesse flailed helplessly. She hit the ground hard, knocking the breath from her lungs. The back of her head smacked the headstone marking a neighboring grave. Bright shards of color zipped past her eyes. A gush of air, mingled with a groan, rushed past her lips. The feeling she was ten feet tall and bulletproof vanished like a wisp of smoke.

Oh, shit! Candace Ackerman was strong—and heavy. Despite its diminutive size, the demon bitch weighed a ton, maybe two.

Fighting to keep the vampire from straddling her, Jesse lashed out, determined to stake the beast. The projectile struck her assailant squarely in the center of the chest. Silky material ripped. Fragile flesh tore.

The stake, however sharp and expertly aimed, did not penetrate the vampire's rib cage. Skidding across bone, it barely made a dent.

Giving her a half-quizzical look, the undead girl plucked the useless weapon right out of Jesse's grip. No blood flowed from the gaping tear she'd inflicted all the way down the vampire's breastbone.

"Imbecile," the creature snarled, tossing the stake aside. "Fool." The vampire's borrowed human vocal cords gave its speech a guttural tone, its words spoken as if the language were wholly unfamiliar.

Astonishment flooded Jesse. Panting and light-headed from her effort, she felt tremors course through her.

Strike one.

The vampire reached for the cross around Jesse's neck. A jerk snapped the chain. Mutilated fingers closed around the silver ornament, crumpling it into an unrecognizable mass of metal. Pale lips lifted into a crazed grin. "You lose."

Strike two.

Jesse tensed. She'd pretty much bet the garlic might be good for spaghetti sauce. Past that, it probably wouldn't be much help in warding off the evil undead. Her investigation obviously had a few serious flaws. She'd believed herself strong, ready for the battle she'd chosen to pursue.

Wrong. So wrong.

She stared into the creature's fathomless eyes, letting it see that she wasn't afraid. "If you're going to kill me," she panted, "make it fast. I haven't got all fucking night."

The vampire's gaze glittered with menace. The smile it offered wasn't pleasant. "I do."

Jesse swore under her breath. It occurred to her she was going to die—really die.

Maybe it was better this way. The life she'd been attempting to hold on to seemed futile now, wasted on the revenge she'd envisioned herself delivering with a terrible and swift justice. She had to remember where she stood in the grand scheme of this world. To society, Jesse Burke was nothing; a transient drifter.

Nobody would miss her. Nobody would mourn.

Jesse's heart shifted into overdrive. Adrenaline seared her veins. There was a low throbbing throughout her body, but it was all far away, as if she stood outside her own body watching the scene unfold. Helplessness only added to her panic as her senses reeled. "We really don't have to do this," she said, backpedaling.

Catching a handful of Jesse's hair, the vampire grinned. "Oh, but we do. Painfully." Mouth ratcheting open, its lethal fangs hovered.

A faint whimper escaped Jesse's lips. Holy cow. She'd really screwed up—the latest mistake of many she'd made during her poor excuse of a life. A wild thought zinged through her mind. *No way I'm going to live through this.*

Certain she was about to be toast, Jesse caught a quick rush of motion out of the corner of her eye. A shadowy blur moving at top speed charged in, knocking the creature off her. Candace Ackerman went akimbo, arms and legs flying.

Immediately taking advantage of freedom, Jesse rolled onto her stomach and pushed herself to her feet. She knew she should run. She wanted to run, but her legs felt like lead stumps. Fighting to control her uncooperative limbs, she forced herself to take a step, then two.

Climbing back to its feet, the confused vampire rounded on her. Heart lodged in her throat, Jesse froze. The time to bend over and kiss her ass goodbye would be about now.

Like a hummingbird coming to rest midflight, the blur reappeared, positioning itself behind the advancing threat. All at once, a man's figure materialized in its place, silhouetted in the shadows. Tall and lean as whipcord, he was dressed in some sort of lengthy trench coat. Untangling a long, slender object from the folds of his coat, he lifted his weapon and placed it against his shoulder. The moonlight glinted off the cool gray metal of a sawed-off shotgun.

Time spun away. Everything around Jesse ground down into disorienting slow-motion movements.

The stranger pulled the trigger without hesitation.

Boom!

Ambushed from behind, the vampire, formerly known as Candace Ackerman, stared down at the newly formed holes in its chest, courtesy of the blast of a double-ought buckshot.

A toothy grin replaced its scowl of bewilderment. Swinging around to face its new assailant, the she-beast growled. "Not good enough."

The stranger reloaded, calmly jacking another shell into the chamber. "This is," he said, and fired.

Another shot rang out, kick-starting Jesse's breathing with a burst of adrenaline. The vampire's head exploded, its fanged menace vanishing in an instant. Jesse's mouth dropped open.

The mutilated corpse wavered, balance and footing all of a sudden unsure. Seconds later it dropped to the ground in a crumpled heap.

For ten, maybe twenty seconds, Jesse couldn't move. Nothing had adequately prepared her to see a body so gruesomely mutilated.

This time Candace Ackerman was unquestionably dead.

Without warning, the corpse began to splutter and spark. Flesh dissolving like overheated wax, the remnants of skin and bone crackled and grew blacker, oozing a thick pus-like substance. A stench like rotting eggs emanated from the fizzing mass.

Jesse gagged when the sickening odor of burnt flesh permeated her nostrils. Unable to tear her gaze away, she watched the cadaver devour itself. At the same time, thin strings of gray-white mist gathered above the remains. It slowly took shape, curling into the figure of a bat-headed, clawed mutant.

The demon laughed.

Then, with a flick of its reptilian tail, it vanished. A strange luminescent afterimage lingered as if scorched into the fabric of the atmosphere. All that was left of the body was something that looked gummy and sticky, like tar poured on top of the newly turned soil. Immolation had happened so instantaneously, it was almost hard to believe the thing had existed.

Knees going weak, Jesse collapsed. It was all she could do not to scream or break into hysterical sobs. She hadn't imagined anything like this would happen when she'd climbed over the fence surrounding the cemetery. A stake to the heart and the vamp would turn into a neat pile of ashes—game over.

Only this was no game.

Gun in hand, her rescuer sauntered over like a soldier armored in the pride of an enemy's defeat. He stopped within a foot of Jesse, overwhelming her with his presence. His lanky body filled her vision. The power he radiated enveloped her, kept her sitting.

"First time you see a demon face-to-face is a shock."

Struggling to calm her erratic heartbeat, she barely managed a nod. "No shit."

He raked a hand through his dark hair. The tangled mess looked as if it hadn't seen a comb in a decade. He examined her, grunting with satisfaction. "You look all right to me."

Heart slowing to a normal rhythm, Jesse resisted the urge to flip back something inane. Now wasn't the time to be a smart-ass. "Thanks for your concern." Her lungs were burning with the need to drag in a breath of air, and her voice sounded strained, unnaturally high.

The assassin prodded the useless stake with a booted foot. He flashed a lazy yet intimate grin. "You actually thought this would do the job?"

Jesse swallowed, unexpectedly tongue-tied. Very aware that he was armed and dangerous, she squinted hard to get a closer look at the stranger. He was impossibly tall, broad shouldered, yet with a wiry leanness that suggested he could move as fast as a puma on the prowl.

"I—I thought it was supposed to work." Brushing away a few pieces of clinging gore, she grimaced. "All I know about vampires—"

The stranger cut her off with a dismissive gesture. "Yeah, I know. You got out of books and movies." He hunkered down to her level, pinning her under a laser beam stare. "Just in case you didn't know, we're not fighting Hollywood's version of vampires."

Jesse gulped. His very masculine presence sent a thrill of sexual awareness straight down her spine. That alone made him ten times more lethal than the gun he carried. "We're not?"

Her savior shook his head. "We're fighting demons, and they have a whole different set of rules to play by." His accent piqued her interest, bringing to mind the taste of sweet red wine and erotic whispers while sitting on the banks of the Seine River on a warm summer night.

Jesse's gaze zeroed in on the burnt, sticky mass. She winced. Candace Ackerman's former grave looked as if a bomb had gone off on top of it. "So what do we do now?"

"We get the hell out of here." A rueful smile curled the corners of his mouth. "Before somebody calls the cops."

Goose bumps rippled across Jesse's skin. Going back to jail was something she'd like to avoid. She wasn't stupid enough to think she could explain her way out of this mess.

Reaching for the stake she'd lost, she clambered to her feet. It wasn't much, but at least she had

something. It was also best not to leave any evidence behind. “Thanks for the help, man,” she mumbled.

The stranger also rose, straightening to his full height. A smile tugged at his lips. “If it helps, my name is Maddox,” he offered as an introduction. “Maddox deValois.” His accent thickened a little on the foreign surname.

Jesse shrugged. His name meant nothing. “I’m Jesse.” Most people didn’t care who the hell she was.

Maddox kicked a little dirt over the residue with one booted foot. “You should come with me.” He glanced around. “It’ll be safer if we stay together.”

Jesse doubted he needed anyone to watch his back.

“Thanks, but no thanks.” She shook her head. “I travel alone.” She had a goal to accomplish and couldn’t let anything get in her way. Besides, it was better if she kept to herself—definitely safer.

He scrubbed a hand over his jaw, his palm rasping against the stubble on his face. Their gazes met across the expanse of darkness separating them. “She isn’t the only one out here,” he advised in a low voice. “Where there’s one, there’re more. Going it alone isn’t wise.”

Jesse’s muscles tensed in subtle preparation. Her fingers tightened around her own ineffective weapon as her eyes swept the cemetery. “I’ve been making bad decisions all night. One more won’t matter.” Bluster masked her fear. She wondered how much longer she could tempt fate and still walk away unscathed. The next time she screwed up might be her last. The odds were against her.

Careful to make no sudden moves, she took one step back, and then another. Putting some distance between them was probably advisable. After all, he’d come prepared to do the job right, and she’d . . . Well, she’d just learned you didn’t bring a wooden stake to a gunfight. The urge to simply run like hell hovered in the back of her mind.

Maddox inclined his head. “Do whatever you want, then.” Hitching his shotgun over one shoulder, he turned and started to walk away. “Just remember, guessing isn’t good enough,” he tossed back at her. “If you want to know how to do this job right, you’d better stick with me.”

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