



BLOOD SUBMISSION

DEATHLESS NIGHT SERIES #5



L.E. WILSON



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*This one is for you, Tania, my Australian friend.
Thank you for waiting (not) so patiently. It's readers like you that keep
me writing and improving. Can't wait to hear what you think!
Much love.*

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*(Dates are approximations of release dates)

CHAPTER 1



Dante's hand was on fire. Literally.

Instinctive self-preservation was the only thing that saved it from incinerating in the mid-day sun. As he pulled his hand inch by slow inch down into the grave he'd dug, the desert sand caved in on itself, dousing the flames.

His breaths were soft and shallow, so much so that a human would not have been able to survive the lack of oxygen. He didn't really need to breathe. It was more a habit than anything else, even after hundreds of years. The hot, dry air did little but burn the inside of his lungs, yet he continued the struggle.

He lay absolutely still in his grave. So still, in fact, that he could feel the movement of a creature slithering across the sand above him, tracking it with his heightened senses and by the vibrations in the fine grains. Arresting his breath, lest the serpent sense the predator lying in wait just beneath the desert floor, he forced himself to be patient. If he struck prematurely, before it got close enough to his hand, it would get away. Dante had learned this the hard way.

But this time his skill was dead on. The snake had no time to defend itself or escape before it was pulled down into the grave with him. His fangs—larger than the serpent's own—sliced effortlessly

through its protective scales. When he finished draining it of its lifeblood, he pushed the corpse away to join the pile of partially decayed reptiles above and let the burning sand settle over him again.

Dante had no sense of time as he waited to heal. He had no idea how long he'd been there, buried under the hot sand to protect him from the sun by day and insulate him from the freezing cold at night. How long he'd lain in the grave he'd dug for himself with bloodied broken fingers. After he'd jumped from the plane, he'd landed in a heap of shattered bones and lacerated skin, the pain such that he'd never felt before. Not even when he was a young, cocky vampire that had been put in his place more than once.

What he did know was that his bones were nearly healed now, in spite of the meager offerings from the desert. And that he'd been damn lucky the sun had already descended below the horizon, or he would have burned to ash before he'd been able to burrow into the sand.

And he was ravenous for more blood.

Hours, or years, later—he honestly didn't know or care which—he felt the heat of the sun begin to wane. The sand that protected him cooled as quickly as it heated. In the distance, he heard a yip, followed by a howl. Threads of the coyote's voice still hung in the night air when it was joined by others, together forming an eerie, beautiful song.

Dante worked his arm up through the heavy sand, cautiously breaking a few fingers through the surface. He waited a few seconds, and when he felt nothing but a cool breeze caressing his desiccated skin, he pulled his arm back in to his body and clawed at the grains in earnest.

It seemed a losing battle at first, for with every handful of sand he moved, more fell into the pocket of air he'd just created. But over time he made his way to the surface, unearthing himself like something out of a human's nightmare with a little help from the night winds.

The effort exhausted him.

Once free of the heavy weight, he collapsed face first onto the sand and rolled over onto his back. He gathered his energy as he ran his

tongue over lips, cracked and dry with thirst. He couldn't even swallow.

Squinting his eyes against the brightness of the moon, he let his head fall to the side. All he saw was sand, sand, and more fucking sand. Turning the other way he saw much of the same. Wait, no. There were a few patches of creosote, and just beyond it some type of round cactus.

Neither of which would ease his particular type of thirst.

Dante studied the bursts of light above him. It had been a long time since he recalled seeing so many stars in one place before. As his eyes followed a particularly fascinating constellation spanning across the never-ending expanse of blackness, they were drawn down to a portion of the night that was brighter, more illuminated than the rest. Only one thing lit up the night sky like that.

A city.

And where there was a city, there were humans. And humans were full of blood. Much more than the scaly creatures he'd been surviving on up until now.

Dante burst to his feet in a flash of movement that belied his exhaustion of just a few moments ago. The thirst burned his insides like the sun burned his skin, and his fangs shot down, readying to feed. Pure vampire instinct took over, and Dante became the predator he had been reborn to be.

CHAPTER 2



Laney Moss took her water bottle from the side pocket of her backpack. Unscrewing the cap, she took a long swig of the tepid liquid, wrinkling her nose at the metallic taste. Her white tank top was sticking to the trail of sweat running down the middle of her back, but she could already feel the first drafts of cooler air that would come with nightfall. Eyeing the setting sun, she stuck the bottle back in its designated pocket and set out again.

Maybe not such a great idea to start a hike so late in the day, but nature had called. And after the hectic week she'd had, she'd answered with enthusiasm. So here she was, about thirty minutes south of her apartment in Vegas, hiking through the upper portion of the Mojave Desert.

She saw a distance marker on the trail and squinted at the sinking sun again. If she kept up a good pace, she should be able to reach her car before it completely set. But first, she took just a moment to admire the breathtaking pink and orange hues of dusk streaking the blue sky. Following the reach of the sun with her eyes, she watched as the last lingering rays touched the cactus and other foliage, and tinted the sand with gold, like a painting come to life. Sighing with pleasure at the wonder of Mother Nature, Laney resumed her hike.

She was about a mile from her car when the temperature took a swift dive. The sun had dipped below the horizon, but she could still see well enough. However, she was an experienced hiker, and she knew that when full darkness came, it would be fast and sudden. Which was why she was well supplied with a flashlight, a headlamp, and pepper spray to ward off any nighttime critters that might get too curious.

Stepping off the trail, she took off her pack and set it on an outcropping of red rocks so she could find her gray pullover hoodie. Pulling it out of her pack, she gave it a good shake to make sure nothing had crawled in there during her last break. Sticking one arm into a sleeve, Laney froze, listening.

She thought she'd heard something behind her. Perhaps she'd surprised an animal coming out of its burrow after sleeping the day away. Moving only her eyes, Laney looked from side to side, and then cautiously turned her head to look behind her. She could've sworn... but no, there wasn't anything there. It was probably nothing more than a shifting of the sand, either from the wind or a reptile, but it was enough to set her on high alert.

Still watchful and keeping an eye out for anything that moved, she stuck her other arm through its sleeve and tugged her hoodie down over her tank top. Taking her pepper spray out of the front pocket of her cargo shorts, she slung her pack onto her back and started walking again, holding the small can at the ready. It was probably nothing, but it was always better to be prepared.

She'd been walking about ten minutes when she thought she heard footsteps on the packed mixture of dirt and sand on the trail behind her. Laney glanced back nervously over one shoulder. She didn't see anything, but it was almost full dark now. However, she didn't want to stop to pull out her flashlight. Dammit. Why hadn't she gotten it out when she'd stopped earlier?

Keeping up a brisk pace, she shrugged her pack off her shoulders and started digging around for her flashlight, glancing back every few seconds to make sure she wasn't about to become dinner for one of the coyote that frequented the area. She'd heard them singing to the

rising moon just a little while before. It sounded like they were quite a ways away, but she was well aware of how distance could be deceiving in the desert.

Her hand came in contact with the cold steel of her heavy-duty flashlight just as she tripped and stumbled over a displaced rock on the path. With a soft curse, she regained her footing and picked up her flashlight from where she'd dropped it.

A feral growl directly behind her lifted the hair on the back of her neck and froze the blood in her veins a moment before the adrenaline kicked in. Switching on her flashlight, she spun around, swinging the beam from side to side. At the same time, she dropped her pack and lifted her pepper spray in front of her. The light flicked past and then landed on something. Laney blinked hard, her mind unable to comprehend what it was she was looking at.

The thing moved, covering the fifty feet or so between them so fast she had no time to open her mouth to scream. It towered over her in the split second before it attacked, and she caught a flash of crepe-like skin covering a hairless head, long fangs, and red glowing eyes.

The scream tore from her throat as it fell on her. Thin limbs with abnormal strength wrapped around her, cushioning her from the impact as they landed on sand still warm from the sun. With a surge of courage she didn't know she possessed, she swung her heavy flashlight at the back of its head. It landed with a solid thunk, but didn't phase the creature at all. Her eyes widened and she screamed again as it wrapped one hand in her hair, yanked her head to the side, and sank those long fangs into the side of her throat. Pain lanced through her, and she began to fight in earnest. But no matter how hard she struggled, she couldn't get—whatever the hell it was—to release its grip.

And then it began to drink.

Holy shit. This thing wasn't trying to eat her. It was draining her blood. Instantly, she knew what it was: *Vampire*.

Laney knew that vampires weren't just in bad horror flicks. They actually existed. Her father had told her about them before he'd died. She'd even seen one once, years ago, when she was up north on a business trip. A few of her co-workers had invited her out for dinner and

drinks after their late meeting, but she'd left the meal earlier than everyone else because she'd wanted to get back to her room and watch a movie while she went through her notes.

Being unfamiliar with the city, she'd taken a wrong turn while walking back to the hotel and she'd stumbled across a scene that was now forever seared in her brain.

A man—a very handsome man—had a woman pressed up against the side of an old bookstore that was already closed for the night. His face was buried in the curve between her head and shoulder, and he was kissing her. One of his legs was wedged between her thighs and the woman was humping it shamelessly while making little sex noises. It had been so erotic: the way he'd held her captive against the wall; the way she'd clutched at his shoulders.

Laney had watched, completely transfixed by the sight of them. In spite of herself, her body had begun to burn and her breathing came in pants. The woman had opened her eyes and looked straight at her, her eyes glazed and her mouth slack with passion. And still Laney watched, desire clenching low in her belly as the woman smiled, closed her eyes again, and orgasmed almost violently in his arms.

As the woman spontaneously combusted, the man lifted his head and leaned his head back, looking up toward the sky. Laney had been shocked to see blood dripping from sharp, pointed teeth. It ran down his chin and landed on the woman's bared breasts.

Laney's desire had gone cold, and she'd gasped out loud before she could stop herself. The man's head had whipped around, following the sound. And when he'd spotted her watching, he'd smiled. Spinning away, Laney had ran back the way she had come, his laughter echoing between the buildings around her.

She'd never told anyone about that night, knowing they'd all think she was nuts or had had too much to drink, or both. And the one person she could've told was gone now.

The thing gave her hair a sharp tug and Laney cried out. She didn't realize she was crying until she felt the tears running down her temples. It groaned with pleasure at the sounds of her distress and

sucked harder. She was beginning to feel lightheaded, and knew that if she didn't do something, this thing was going to kill her.

Gathering every ounce of strength she had left, she managed to free her arm from where it was lodged between their bodies. Aiming the pepper spray at its face, she lifted her chin, squeezed her eyes closed, and pressed down on the depressor. For a moment, she was scared shitless that it wasn't going to have any affect on the creature, even though the side of her face and neck was burning like fire. She continued to spray, emptying the entire can into its face and mouth until, finally, it detached from her throat with a roar of rage. Rolling off her, it clawed at its skin as it screamed.

Laney scrambled to her feet. Clutching her pack to her chest, she left the thing writhing on the ground and staggered away. She didn't look back. She didn't want to see it. Tears from the pepper spray blurred her vision, and her hands were shaking so badly that the beam of her flashlight jerked around sporadically on the path. She tripped more than once before she finally reached her car, but each time she staggered back to her feet and kept going. Unzipping her pocket, she dug for her keys, terrified that they had somehow fallen out. But no, they were still there. It took her three tries to hit the button that would unlock her car.

Once inside, she locked all of the doors before starting the engine. Stomping down on the gas, she peeled out onto the road, gravel flying and tires squealing. She didn't think. She didn't try to call anyone. She only concentrated on getting the hell out of there and to the safety of her apartment. If she could just get home, it wouldn't be able to get to her, not without an invitation. And she sure as hell wasn't about to invite it inside of her home.

It occurred to her later that she had run through at least two red lights, but having to pay a couple of tickets was nothing compared to the terror she felt. Surprisingly, she managed to get upstairs and inside without anyone seeing her. Even her pain in the ass roommate was out. When she stumbled into her bathroom and flicked on the light, she realized that was most definitely a good thing.

Dried blood caked her neck, her dark hair, and the front of her

hoodie. Tears streaked her dirty face, and her normally olive-toned skin was pale and clammy. Reaching up with shaking hands, she lifted the neckline of her sweatshirt away from her throat, revealing two ragged puncture wounds. Blood still seeped from the holes. She should go to the hospital, but what the hell would she even tell them? It would bring her more attention than she wanted.

Sitting down on the side of the bathtub, she braced one hand on the wall and turned on the water for a shower. As she waited for the hot water to kick in, something brushed against her bare leg. Laney jerked away so hard she almost fell into the tub, her lungs locking up in terror. But it was only Fraidy Cat, her orange tabby rescue cat. He'd gotten his name when he hid under the end table for three days after she'd brought him home. But looking at his brazen attitude these days, you'd never know it. She reached down automatically to pet him, and as she stroked his soft fur and felt the vibration of his purrs, her heart resumed a normal rhythm, and she sucked in a grateful breath of air.

She didn't let herself think about what had happened. Not yet.

Leaving her clothes in a pile on the floor to be tossed out later, she stepped under the hot spray of water. The wound on her neck stung like a bitch, but she clenched her teeth and allowed the water to wash out the dirt and germs. She had to stop a few times because she was so lightheaded she was afraid she was going to pass out, but eventually she managed to get herself scrubbed clean and dressed in her navy "No Wake Zone" nightshirt. Digging the antibiotic ointment out of the first aid drawer, she applied some to a large square of gauze and then taped it over the bite.

Once she looked a little less like an attempted murder victim, she staggered out to the kitchen and opened the fridge to get the orange juice. It took her a couple of tries. The door was amazingly heavy. In retrospect, she probably should have done this first, but she was in shock. Laney recognized the signs, and it explained why the sight of all of that blood had sent her automatically to the shower to get clean.

Fraidy meowed, weaving in and out of her legs as she stood there

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in front of the open fridge door, wanting his dinner. She looked over at his empty food dish and blinked. The room spun around her.

And everything went black.

CHAPTER 3



Dante stood in the center of an empty courtyard. It belonged to a run-down apartment complex that had seen better days before the neighborhood had gone to shit. He stared up at the third floor window. It was the only window that still had a light on at this time of night.

The rest of his meal was in there. He could smell her.

He licked his lips, tasting the remnants of the human female he'd had for breakfast. She'd tasted unlike anything he'd ever had before, and his body had reacted harshly, but not unpleasantly. Or maybe it was just the fact that he was very nearly starved of blood. To the point that his skin felt dry and loose on his bones, and his muscles ached with a weakness he hadn't felt since he was a lowly human. So long ago, he was surprised he even remembered.

He heard a shout to his left. His head snapped around and his gaze narrowed in on a middle-aged human male swinging a bloated trash bag at a loose dog. The dog yelped, skittering away with its belly dragging the ground and its tail between its legs.

Lifting his face to the wind, Dante scented the male. His parched throat immediately began to burn in response. In less than the space of a heartbeat, he crossed the expanse of the courtyard and stood in

the human's path. The dog, an ugly little thing with brown and white fur, began to bark crazily at his sudden appearance. Dante smiled in amusement as the ridge of wiry hair on its back rose up into a full mohawk. Ignoring the little beast, he focused on the human that stood wide-eyed and frozen with fright in front of him.

Dante knew it was fright and not just surprise. He could smell the sour stench of fear hanging heavy in the chilly air. The asshole *should* be frightened. Dante had a thing about humans that thought they were better than other creatures.

Without thinking twice about it, he swung out with his right hand and broke the human's neck, then yanked the body toward him and sank his fangs into the warm flesh. He'd have to drink quickly, before the heart stopped beating completely, but that had never been a problem for him.

Dante managed to take only three large swallows before he dropped the corpse at his feet. Leaning over, he gagged, spitting out the blood still in his mouth. The dog, who'd crept closer to sniff his pant leg, jumped back quickly out of the way.

Dante straightened and took some deep breaths, fighting down the nausea. He eyed the dead guy at his feet. Though obviously not an animal lover, he didn't look the type to have a meth cocktail in his veins. But those looks were deceiving, because he'd tasted absolutely vile.

The little dog sat down next to the deceased human. It wasn't nearly such an ass kicker now that it had gotten his scent, or maybe because he'd protected it from the bastard human. Dante ignored the mutt as he tried to clean his mouth of the disgusting blood. But every few seconds, it would raise its soulful brown eyes to his face and whine. It was a pitiful sound coming from such a tough little dude. He stared down at it, and the little beast stared back without blinking. Squatting down, he held out his hand for the dog to sniff, which it did from a cautious distance. After a moment's hesitation, it stood and took a small step toward him.

"Are you gonna gnaw on me if I pet you, little man?" Dante's voice

was barely audible, his vocal cords not yet healed. He switched to a different way of communicating.

I won't hurt you.

The dog came another step closer and peered up at him with its sad little face. Carefully, so as not to accidentally harm it, he rubbed its silky ears.

A bizarre feeling crept over him, one he tried hard not to interpret. He knew he must look to be a monster, yet this little guy didn't seem to care in the least. It didn't even care that he'd just killed someone.

Or maybe it did. But dogs, like vampires, tended to be realists. And though it was giving him its finest sad face, it seemed to know that its best bet was to befriend the one that was still alive and could possibly help it find something better to eat than what was in that trash bag.

Dante gave it one last good ear rub, silently wishing it a good hunt. Then he stood and walked away without a backward glance, back to the window he'd been watching. When he got to the same spot he'd been in before, he felt something against his foot and looked down. The little dog had followed and was now sitting beside his boot, staring up at that same window. The barest wisp of a smile crossed Dante's features, then he reached down and picked the little fucker up and tucked it under his arm.

"You're lucky I can climb one-handed." The dog probably weighed in at a good forty pounds, but he barely noticed the extra weight, scaling the side of the building with ease. When he reached the window, he dug the toes of his boots into the worn siding and gripped the sill with the same hand that was holding the dog to hold steady. With the other, he tested the window. It was unlocked. As he slid it open, a fat orange cat waddled out of the kitchen and sat in the middle of the living area to silently watch him with its owlish topaz eyes. A muffled noise came from the kitchen, and the cat flicked its tail.

"My phone. Where the hell is my phone?" A female's shrill voice came from inside the apartment, and a moment later, she rushed into the room, pulling up short at the sight of Dante hovering outside the

window. She had dark hair and skin, and appeared to have just gotten home, as she still had a coat on over her short black dress.

Catching her gaze with his, Dante reached out to her mind. "Invite me in," he commanded.

She dropped the phone in her hand, her eyes as large as the cat's, who sat watching the scene go down with idle curiosity. "Come in," she said in a monotone voice, then stood aside to await his next command.

He lowered the dog in first. Its tail immediately started wagging as it went over to the cat to say hello.

Dante climbed in after him and slid the window shut again. He breathed in deeply, discerning and cataloging the different smells. The scent of the woman he'd tracked there was much stronger now, which meant he'd been correct in guessing that this was where she dwelled.

It was a small apartment. From where he stood just inside the main room, littered with mismatched furniture straight out of a thrift store, he could see the doorway to what appeared to be a small galley kitchen. The entry door to the apartment was directly across from him and a little to his left. To his right were three more doors. One he could see was a bathroom. A pile of clothes lay on the floor. That was where the overriding smell of blood was coming from. His mouth watered and his gums burned as his fangs descended, his stomach clenching with need. Leaving the animals to do their thing, he headed toward one of the other doors, of which he could only assume was a bedroom. He needed more of this human.

As he passed the female that had invited him in, he reached out with one large hand and snapped her neck with a quick twist. He had no interest in feeding from her. She reeked of alcohol and pills.

Walking past the kitchen, something caught his attention out of the corner of his eye—a human limb. A bare, olive-skinned leg, actually. And attached to the leg was the human woman he was looking for. She was passed out cold on the floor in front of the open refrigerator. An unexpected hunger that had nothing to do with feeding assaulted Dante as his eyes traveled from the arch of her petite foot up the curve of her calf to her shapely thigh. It disappeared underneath a

sleeping garment that looked to be nothing more than a long T-shirt. Her other leg was bent underneath her and her long dark hair hid her face, damp tendrils of it sticking to her cheek and forehead.

For one frozen second, Dante feared she was already dead. Squatting down on his haunches next to her, he pressed his fingers to the pulse point on her throat, paused his breathing, and listened.

He heard her heart contract and release at the same time he felt a reedy pulse. Removing his hand, he rested his forearms on his thighs as he regarded her prone form. Funny, but now that he'd found her, he was in no rush to finish her off. So it appeared he had a choice to make: he could go ahead and assuage his thirst for this one, and then go hunt for another that tasted as good as she did. Or, he could keep her alive and have the most amazing blood he'd ever tasted ready and available whenever he wanted a sip. At least until he got home. Dante scratched his chin. It wouldn't be hard to bring her with him. Perhaps he'd even keep her for a while.

Decisions, decisions.

Glancing toward the kitchen doorway, he found the animals sitting side by side in silent companionship, waiting for his decision.

"What do you think?" he asked them in his broken voice.

The cat blinked its large eyes at him, not offering an opinion either way. But the dog lifted one front paw and yipped once.

Dante nodded. "Yeah, you're probably right. I should keep her around." *At least until I'm healed enough to take the time to find another as appetizing.* Gathering her up in his arms, he rose and carried her out of the kitchen. The animals followed him.

He stood in the center of the main room, unsure of where to go to wait out the day. Though there was only the one window and it had blinds he could pull down, it was large, and made him feel too exposed. He could cover it with a blanket or something for extra protection, he supposed, but it wasn't enough. Turning on his heel, he opened the door to the first bedroom. It definitely belonged to the female in his arms. Her scent was everywhere. One eyebrow lifted in surprise. Instead of the ruffles and glitter most human females seemed to favor, he found a clean room decorated simply and tastefully in

warm blues and browns. Looking down at her, he tried to determine her age. Maybe she had matured past that ridiculous crap. These days, it was much harder to gauge a human's age. In any case, pleasant as it was, there was also another window.

Backing out of the room, careful not to knock her head on the doorframe, he sidestepped over to the bathroom. The room was small but clean. All beige and white, with a deep bathtub, a pedestal sink with a mirror, and just enough floor space for him to sit on the large tiles with his legs stretched out in front of him. And more importantly, not a fucking window to be seen.

It would do.

Lowering his meal into the bathtub, he left her there and went back into the kitchen and found the cat's plastic dishes. He filled one with water and one with some dry cat food that he found in the pantry, and set them both on the floor. That should keep the two of them happy while he got some rest. And cat food had to be a step up from rotting garbage for his new canine friend. Then he retrieved the pillows and the pale blue comforter from the bed and took them into the bathroom with him.

"Behave," he told the two animals. Then he shut the door. The corpse could rot where it was for the day.

Dante arranged the pillows against the wall next to the sink and spread out the comforter. Lifting the woman from the tub, he sat down and settled her across his lap. Her hair fell away from her face as her head fell back over his arm.

Startled by the surge of lust that shot through him, Dante studied her closer. The female was quite beautiful, with the high cheekbones, sculpted full bottom lip, and dark slash of brows common to the women from the old country. Dante frowned, touching her cheek. The skin was cold and clammy to the touch, and had a chalky gray pallor to the natural olive tones. Raising his wrist to his mouth, he bit through the skin until he tasted blood, then laid the open wound over her mouth. He wiggled his arm a little until he got her mouth open and the blood could drip in.

When she didn't respond right away, he scowled, but then she

started swallowing instinctively. He re-opened the wound and let her drink a little more, but not more than he could afford to lose. He examined her again. Her color was better, and she seemed to be breathing a bit easier. She would live to feed him again.

Satisfied, he rearranged her on his lap so she was sitting with her back against his chest and her head resting on his shoulder. If she awoke before he did, he would know. He was taking no chances of her getting away.

Dante wrapped his arms around her, slightly amused at how small she was. Her bare feet didn't even reach his ankles. His eyes travelled up her full legs. They reminded him of what he thought of as old Hollywood legs, like the starlets of the nineteen forties and fifties. For as little as she was, she had plenty of curves. He tugged her nightshirt down and pulled one side of the comforter up and over the two of them, then he closed his eyes. It wasn't a bed or even his old mattress back home under the city of Seattle, but it was definitely a step up from being buried alive in sand.

At that thought, Dante opened his eyes again and looked at the tub in front of him. He briefly considered making use of it, but found he couldn't gather the energy. The sun wouldn't be up for an hour or so yet, but he was fatigued from the exertions of the night. He needed to rest.

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