

DAMON

BY

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THE PROTECTORS

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Chapter 1

Nicole Callahan's piece of crap on wheels slid sideways into the wet parking lot. The muffler clanged loudly as she slammed her brakes to stop in front of the old warehouse. Man, she hated to be late and because her face got in the way of someone's fist, she was really running late.

Peering into the review mirror, she groaned. Her eye was already turning a lovely shade of black. Oh well, it wasn't the first black eye she'd ever had and it probably wouldn't be the last. Grabbing her bag out of the backseat, she climbed out and trotted toward the door. Glancing around the parking lot quickly, it looked like she was the last to arrive. With a deep breath, she pushed open the door. "Well, this should be a freakin hoot."

"Good God, Callahan. What happened to your face?" Mitchell Reed yelled as she blew into the room.

"I could ask you the same thing boss" Throwing her bag down, she felt everyone's eyes on her.

"Stop being a smart ass and tell me what happened?" Mitchell stomped toward her. He was a huge man with a permanent scowl as if he was ready to bite your head off any second. Most of the time, in her case, he was ready to do just that.

Grabbing her sweats and t-shirt out of her bag, she headed toward the bathroom. "My routine check wasn't so routine. It seems Mr. Mullins has an addiction that his new foster child is supplying. I caught him in the act of draining the poor kid. He didn't appreciate the interruption."

"Son of a bitch," Mitch cursed then turned toward the workout area. "What the hell are you stopping for? Get your asses' moving," he yelled sending everyone stumbling over one another.

Nicole came out of the bathroom in sweats and a t-shirt, her long blonde hair pulled into a messy ponytail. "Can you explain again why we're here?" Nicole tossed her clothes onto her bag as she passed it, stopping in front of Mitch.

"Ah...have you seen your face?" Mitch's hands tightened into fists, his scowl fierce. "This is getting more and more dangerous. I can't have you

guys out there without training.”

“Yeah, I know,” Nicole agreed, looking around hating again that she was late. Everyone else was running laps. Her eyes landed on three guys standing in the middle of the running group. “Who are they?”

“They, for the next couple of months, are your instructors.”

“Dang, could they be any bigger?” They were huge. The tallest of the group turned to glare at her looking highly annoyed. “They make you look like a midget.”

“Yeah, well, guess you better get your ass out there Callahan.” Mitch shoved her toward the group of runners, “Looks like they don’t like anyone being late.”

Nicole stumbled into the group and took off jogging. “About time you got here Callahan. You think you’re special or something?” Chad Evans, better known as jackass, complained as he huffed past her.

“I know I am,” Nicole snapped, adding under her breath, “jerk.”

Nicole caught up with Pam Braxton, who she usually partnered up with on cases. “What happened to you?” Pam huffed, sweat sliding down her face.

“Got caught with my hands down,” Nicole grimaced. Running was making her eye throb. “Is this all I’ve missed so far?”

“Yeah.” Wiping sweat off her face with her shirt, Pam kept pace then nodded toward the three men in the middle of the mats, “They just came out and said to start running. God, I think I’m going to die. How in the hell is this going to help with our jobs? I’m not going to be doing any job if I’m dead.”

Nicole chuckled as she glanced at the three men. Mitch stood with them talking. She looked away when they all turned to glare at her.

“Okay, everybody stop and take a knee.” Mitch’s booming voice echoed off the warehouse walls.

“Take a knee? What the hell is he talking about...take a knee?” Pam

moaned as they headed toward the men. “If the SOB doesn’t let me sit on my well cushioned butt, I’m going to flop over right here on this mat and die. I didn’t see him running. Did you?”

Nicole grinned. Pam was a trip. They became fast friends the day they met. Nicole knelt on the mat helping Pam down. Where Nicole was short and curvy, Pam was tall and stick thin.

There were eight employees who worked for Mitch in the Special Family Services Department of Clermont County. Special meaning they worked with vampire and human children. Nicole and Pam were the only women and it had been an uphill battle for both of them. Most of the men, along with Mitch, had accepted them, but Chad and his little followers of merry jackasses did everything in their power to make the ladies lives in the department a living hell. It was just the eight of them standing between innocent children in the county and the ones who would use them for greed. No one else wanted the job. In all honesty, it was too dangerous for most and the small paycheck every two weeks didn't inspire new employees.

“Jesus people,” Mitch shook his head in disgust. “Breathe in through the nose out through the mouth. I can’t hear myself think with all that huffing you wimps are doing.”

Nicole cocked her eyebrow at that. Her breathing was just fine since she ran a minimum of five miles a day.

“Yeah, I know Callahan. You’re the shit when it comes to running,” Mitch stepped to the side, slightly away from the three men standing behind him.

“Suck up,” Chad whispered behind her. Acting like she was fixing her shirt, she flipped him the bird.

Mitch ignored them. “Okay, here it is guys. Ever since the vampire race decided to let us know they were and have been a part of our everyday life, we've been knee deep in funky shit. It’s no secret that vampire blood, better known on the streets as Crimson Rush, has hit the Social Service Departments all across the country hard. Human and vampire kids are being sent out to homes and it’s our job to make sure the homes we send them to are safe. Humans want to adopt vampire kids and vampires want to adopt human kids. Pretty screwed up if you ask me, but who the hell am I to say what’s right or wrong.

“Most of these types of adoptions are legit, but the ones that aren’t, is what we're dealing with right now. As you know, some human adopters are using the vampire kids as their very own drug producer, harvesting their blood. And the vampires are turning the human kids to sell for money. It’s a cluster fuck of a mess. Your jobs have become more dangerous than they were a year ago. Just take a look at Callahan’s face. You may not have had a seriously dangerous situation yet, but it’s coming. That's why I have decided to call in the experts to train you how to better protect yourself while doing your job.”

Everyone’s focus went to the three men. Now that her gaze wouldn’t draw attention since everyone was staring, Nicole was instantly aware of how perfect and gorgeous these men were. They all wore the same black workout sweats with black tank tops. Talk about muscles and hard bods. Glancing up, her gaze locked on golden eyes glaring deeply into her baby blues. Shivering, she turned her attention back to Mitch doing her best to keep her focus glued to her boss.

“Before I turn you over to these guys, I want to let you know that this is mandatory. Five nights a week, weekends, and whenever they want you for as long as they want you. Before you open your mouth Callahan, we will work out the details of emergencies like you had tonight as they come up,” Mitch glared at her.

Where was all the glaring coming from? “Didn’t say a word boss.”

“Maybe not out loud, but I know what’s in that head of yours before it makes it to your big mouth,” Mitch grumbled loudly.

“Impressive,” Nicole murmured to Pam, “scary, but impressive.” Pam chuckled.

Mitch glared for another few seconds at the women before continuing. “These men have taken time out of their busy schedules to help make you guys safe, so I expect nothing but respect for each of them. This is Duncan Roark, Jared Kincaid and Damon DeMasters. They belong to the Vampire Council, the group of warriors we’ve been hearing about in the news.”

Nicole heard the buzzing of her coworkers behind her as her eyes shot up to the one named Damon. If you haven’t heard of the Vampire Council Warriors, then you have either been living under a rock or dead. One year

ago, almost to the day, as the vampires made known they were not only in the movies but living among the human race, the VC Warriors were keeping the peace between the two races along with the human Special Forces. Turning humans without special council approval and also consent from the human, was a warrant for death which was carried out by these special warriors.

The blonde vampire, Duncan, stepped up beside Mitch. “We’ve been working closely with Mitch to see exactly where we can help you carry out your jobs. As we can’t be everywhere, and have many rogue vampires running rampant, the children of the two races have fallen between the cracks. The reason the Council has approved us working with you is because they believe that what you do is just as important as what we do.” Duncan nodded toward the other two, “We are here to instruct you on how to protect yourselves and will be pairing up with some of you on your jobs to see exactly what you’re dealing with. The goal is to prepare you for anything that comes your way.”

“Who exactly is pairing up with who?” Pam raised her hand, and then snapped it back down, embarrassment coloring her cheeks. “Nicole and I have the heaviest case load, but some of the others have more dangerous areas.”

Mitch stepped in on this question. “Even though they have more dangerous areas, that doesn’t really have anything to do with who is breaking the law and using these children. We’re going to pair Jared and Damon with you and Callahan since you two have the most cases. Duncan is up in the air right now. The Council has said that if we need more help it will be offered to us, but we are to start out with these guys. Now to get us started, Callahan, why don’t you tell us exactly what happened tonight and we can go from there.”

Nicole started flicking her thumb nail nervously, an old habit. She hated being in the spotlight. “Ah, well, I did my follow up call this afternoon and talked to Mr. Mullins. He sounded nervous, talking fast, and clearing his throat a lot. I asked how things were going and he assured me everything was fine and that Sam was playing PlayStation. I asked the protocol questions as usual, and even though he answered everything okay, he still sounded nervous and out of breath. I then asked to speak to Sam. He said he wasn’t there, that he was playing at a friend's house.”

“How old is the boy?” This question came from Damon.

“Eight,” Nicole answered without looking directly into those gorgeous golden eyes. “I didn’t bring up the fact that he just told me he was playing PlayStation since I knew I was going to do a home visit as soon as I hung up with him. I acted like everything was good, assured him I would talk to him next week and hung up.”

“Who did you let know where you were going?” Mitch interrupted.

“I sent Pam a text letting her know. She was already on a scheduled home visit.”

“What's the difference?” This again from Damon.

“A scheduled visit is usually less dangerous, as the foster parents know we're coming. We schedule visits up to three months, six months and up to a year depending upon the case. The home visits not scheduled are the most dangerous. Even before Crimson Rush hit the streets, it was more dangerous to do an unscheduled visit. Many of us would find that the foster parents were not who we thought they were.” God, the things she had found in those homes kept her awake at night.

“Go on,” Damon crossed his arms nodding at Nicole.

“When I got to the house, I sat for a few minutes in the car across the street watching the house to see if anything seemed off. Then I got out and knocked on the door. It wasn’t closed all the way, and opened a little when I knocked. I could hear Sam crying. Again I called out, and when no one answered, I hit 911 on my phone and went inside.”

Everyone’s eyes were on her and she hated having to repeat what she saw. The anger and horror she felt earlier consumed her again at the memory of it. Everyone waited for her to continue.

“The crying seemed to be coming from downstairs, so I headed in that direction, found the door leading to the basement and the crying got louder.”

“Please tell me you didn’t go down in the basement without backup Callahan,” Mitch rubbed his eyes knowing damn good and well that was

exactly what she was telling them.

“He was terrified Mitch. What was I supposed to do, just stand there and listen to him scream and cry?” Nicole shook her head. “No way. Not happening.”

“You’re just damn lucky that black eye is the only thing that happened to you tonight.” Mitch nodded for her to continue.

“I headed down the stairs and saw Mr. Mullins leaning over something. Looking around, I saw an IV stand lying sideways on a long table with a bag of blood hanging from it. At that point, Mr. Mullins had moved and I saw Sam strapped to a chair with IV tubing coming out of one arm. Mr. Mullins was working on a second bag of Sam's blood.” Her stomach twisted at the memory. “Not thinking, I headed toward Sam wanting to yank the tube out of his arm, and I guess I surprised Mr. Mullins. He turned and backhanded me.”

“I need a full report on this first thing in the morning,” Mitch told her, shaking his head in disgust.

Nicole nodded as she continued, “After he hit me, I heard someone run up the stairs. I didn’t see who it was, but there was money scattered at the bottom of the steps and a busted bag of what I assume was Sam’s blood. By then, the police were there and had Mr. Mullins under control and Sam was being taken care of by the paramedics.” Glancing over, she saw Damon’s scowl.

“Do you have any idea what kind of danger you put yourself in?” Damon demanded, looking at the small blonde woman who had the biggest blue eyes he'd ever seen. The bruising under one of those lovely eyes had his blood raging. Ever since she had walked through the door, he had an overwhelming urge to protect her, and that confused the hell out of him, making him growl his question at her.

“Yeah, I do, but at the time my only concern was for Sam,” she scowled back. “I have never, and I hope I never again, see what I saw tonight. For a child, vampire or human, to go through something like this is uncalled for, and I’ll do everything in my power to see that Mr. Mullins is never allowed to be near a child again.”

“I still think you are taking grave risks that you are ill equipped to take, human,” Damon scowled, his voice a low deep rumble of authority.

“Yeah, well, it wasn’t you who put that child in the hands of a monster, vamp,” Nicole shot back. If he thought to scare her with the big bad vampire warrior thing he had going on, he was sadly mistaken. Backing down wasn't an option when it came to her job.

“Ah...okay,” Duncan stepped in not liking where this was heading. “Everybody partner up.”

Mitch glared a warning at Nicole, who just shrugged and mouthed, “He started it.” Taking a quick peek at the warrior, she noticed his smug grin. Oh yeah, this was going to be a problem.