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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Taken by Midnight**

Written by Lara Adrian

Published by Robinson

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TAKEN BY



MIDNIGHT

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ROBINSON

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*To Heather Rogers,  
for being awesome*

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## ❧ CHAPTER ONE ❧

Life . . . or death?

The words drifted at her through the darkness. Detached syllables. The rough scrape of a flat, airless voice that reached into the heavy drowse of her mind and forced her to come awake, to listen. To make a choice.

*Life?*

*Or death?*

She groaned against the cold plank floor beneath her cheek, trying to bar the voice – and the relentless decision it demanded – from her mind. This wasn't the first time she'd heard these words, this question. Not the first time in the space of some endless hours that she'd peeled one heavy eyelid open in the frigid stillness of her cabin home and found herself looking into the terrible face of a monster.

Vampire.

'Choose,' the creature whispered thinly, the word drawn out in a slow hiss. He crouched over her where she lay, curled and shivering on the floor near the cold fireplace. His fangs glistened in the moonlight, razor sharp, lethal. The tips of them were still stained with fresh blood – her blood, drawn from the bite he'd made in her throat only moments before.

She tried to get up, but couldn't rouse her weakened muscles to so much as flex in response. She tried to speak, managed only

a rasping moan. Her throat felt as dry as ash, her tongue thick and listless in her mouth.

Outside, the Alaskan winter roared, bitter and unforgiving, filling her ears. No one to hear her screams, even if she'd tried.

This creature could kill her in an instant. She didn't know why he hadn't. She didn't know why he kept pressing her for the answer to a question she had been asking herself nearly every day of her life for the past four years.

Ever since the accident that had taken her husband and little girl.

How often had she wished she'd been killed along with them on that icy stretch of highway? Everything would have been so much easier, less painful, if she had.

She could feel a silent judgment in the unblinking, inhuman eyes that fixed on her in the dark now, searingly bright, pupils as thin as a cat's. Intricate skin markings tracked all over the creature's hairless head and immense body. The webbed pattern seemed to pulse with violent color as he watched her. Silence lengthened while he patiently examined her as he might an insect trapped inside a glass jar.

When he spoke again, this time his lips did not move. The words penetrated her skull like smoke and sank deeply into her mind.

*The decision is yours, human. Tell me what it will be: life, or death?*

She turned her head away and closed her eyes, refusing to look at the creature. Refusing to be part of the private, unspoken game he seemed to be playing with her. A predator toying with his prey, watching it squirm while he decided whether to spare it or not.

*How it shall end depends on you. You will decide.*

'Go to hell,' she slurred, her voice thick and rusty.

Iron-strong fingers clamped onto her chin and wrenched her around to face him once more. The creature cocked his

head, those catlike amber eyes emotionless as he drew in a rasping breath, then spoke through his bloodstained lips and fangs.

‘Choose the course. There isn’t much time now.’

There was no impatience in the voice that growled so near her face, only a flat indifference. An apathy that seemed to say he truly didn’t care one way or the other what answer she gave him.

Rage boiled up inside her. She wanted to tell him to fuck off, to kill her and get it over with, if that’s what he meant to do. He wasn’t going to make her beg, damn it. Defiance churned in her gut, pushing anger up her parched throat and onto the very tip of her tongue.

But the words wouldn’t come.

She couldn’t ask him for death. Not even when death might be the only escape from the terror that held her now. The only escape from the pain of having lost the two people she’d loved the most and the seemingly pointless existence that was all she had left since they’d been gone.

He released her from his hard grasp and watched with maddening calm as she sagged back down to the floor. Time stretched, impossibly long. She struggled to summon her voice, to speak the word that would either free her or condemn her. Crouched near her still, he rocked back on his heels and cocked his head in silent consideration.

Then, to her horror and confusion, he extended his left arm and sliced one talonlike fingernail deep into the flesh above his wrist. Blood spilled from the wound, dripping wetly, scarlet raindrops falling to the wood planks below him. He thrust his finger into the open cut, digging into the muscle and tendons of his arm.

‘Oh, Jesus. What are you doing?’ Revulsion squeezed her senses. Her instincts clamored with the warning that something awful was about to happen – maybe even more awful than the



horror of her captivity with this nightmarish being who'd taken her prisoner hours ago to feed off her blood. 'Oh, my God. Please, no. What the hell are you doing?'

He didn't reply. Didn't even look at her until he'd withdrawn something minuscule from within his flesh and now held it pinched between his bloodied thumb and finger. He blinked slowly, a brief shuttering of his eyes before they pinned her in a hypnotic beam of amber light.

'Life or death,' the creature hissed, those ruthless eyes narrowing on her. He leaned toward her, blood still dripping from the self-inflicted wound in his forearm. 'You must decide, right now.'

No, she thought desperately. *No*.

A rushing surge of fury rolled up from somewhere deep inside her. She couldn't hold it down. Couldn't bite back the burst of rage that climbed up her raw throat and exploded out of her mouth in a banshee scream.

'No!' She raised her fists and pounded on the hard, inhuman flesh of the creature's bare shoulders. She thrashed and raged, railing at him with every ounce of strength she could summon, relishing in the pain of impact every time her blows landed on his body. 'Damn you, no! Get the hell away from me! Don't touch me!'

She beat her fists against him again, over and over. Still, he crept closer.

'Leave me alone, damn it! Get away!'

Her knuckles connected with his shoulders and the sides of his skull, blow after blow, even as a heavy darkness began to descend on her. It felt thick around her, a sodden shroud that made her movements sluggish, her thoughts muddled in her mind.

Her muscles slackened, refusing to cooperate. Yet still she pounded on the creature, striking slowly, as though she were throwing punches in the middle of a black, tar-filled ocean.

‘No,’ she moaned, eyes closed to the darkness that surrounded her. She kept sinking deeper. Farther and farther into a soundless, weightless, endless void. ‘No . . . let me go. Damn you . . . let me go . . .’

Then, when it seemed as though the darkness that enveloped her might never release her, she felt something cool and moist pressed against her brow. Voices speaking in an indiscernible jumble somewhere over her head.

‘No,’ she murmured. ‘No. Let me go . . .’

Summoning the last shred of strength and will she possessed, she threw another punch at the creature holding her down. Thick muscle absorbed the blow. She latched on to her captor then, grabbing at him, clawing at him. Startled, she felt the crush of soft fabric bunching in her hands. Warm, knit wool. Not the clammy, bare skin of the creature who’d broken into her cabin and held her prisoner.

Confusion fired a warning shot in her sluggish mind. ‘Who . . . no, don’t touch me . . .’

‘Jenna, can you hear me?’ The deep, rolling baritone that sounded so near her face was somehow familiar to her. Oddly soothing.

It beckoned to something deep within her, gave her something to grab hold of when she had nothing but fathomless dark sea around her. She moaned, still lost, but feeling a slender thread of hope that she might survive.

The low voice she somehow needed desperately to hear came again. ‘Kade, Alex. Holy shit, she’s coming out of it. I think she’s finally waking up.’

She sucked in a hard breath, gasping for air. ‘Let me go,’ she murmured, uncertain she could trust her feelings. Uncertain she could trust anything now. ‘Oh, God . . . please, no . . . don’t touch me. Don’t—’

‘Jenna?’ Somewhere nearby, a female voice took shape above her. Tender tones, sober concern. A friend. ‘Jenna,

honey, it's me, Alex. You're all right now. Do you understand? You're safe, I promise.'

The words registered slowly, bringing with them a sense of relief and comfort. A feeling of peace, despite the chill terror that was still washing through her veins.

With effort, she dragged her eyelids open and blinked away the daze that clung like a veil to her senses. Three forms hovered around her, two of them immense, unmistakably male, the other tall and slender, female. Her best friend from Alaska, Alexandra Maguire. 'What . . . where am . . . ?'

'Shh,' Alex soothed. 'Hush now. It's all right. You're somewhere safe. You're going to be okay now.'

Jenna blinked, worked to focus. Slowly, the shapes standing around her bedside became human. Half sitting up, she realized her fists were still full of the wool sweater worn by the larger of the two males. The immense, fierce-looking African American with the skull-trimmed hair and linebacker shoulders, whose deep voice had helped pull her out of the drowning terror of her nightmare.

The one she'd been pounding on relentlessly for God knew how long, mistaking him for the hellish creature who'd attacked her in Alaska.

'Hey,' he murmured, his broad mouth curving gently. Dark brown, soul-searching eyes held her waking gaze. That warm smile quirked with unspoken acknowledgment as she loosened her death grip on him and settled back onto the bed. 'Glad to see you decided to join the land of the living.'

Jenna frowned at his light humor, reminded instead of the terrible choice that had been forced on her by her attacker. She exhaled a rasping sigh as she struggled to absorb her new, unfamiliar surroundings. She felt a bit like Dorothy waking up in Kansas after her trip to Oz.

Except the Oz in this scenario had been a seemingly endless torment. A horrifying trip to some kind of blood-soaked hell.

At least the horror of that ordeal had ended.

She glanced at Alex. ‘Where are we?’

Her friend came near and placed the cool, damp cloth to her forehead. ‘You’re safe, Jenna. Nothing can hurt you in this place.’

‘Where?’ Jenna demanded, feeling an odd panic beginning to rise. Although the bed she lay on was plush beneath her, abundant with fluffy pillows and blankets, she couldn’t help but notice the clinical white walls, the fleet of medical monitors and digital readers assembled all around the room. ‘What is this, a hospital?’

‘Not exactly,’ Alex replied. ‘We’re in Boston, at a private facility. It was the safest place for you to be now. The safest place for all of us.’

Boston? A private facility? The vague explanation hardly made her feel better. ‘Where’s Zach? I need to see him. I have to talk to him.’

Alex’s expression paled a bit at the mention of Jenna’s brother. She was silent for a long moment. Too long. She looked over her shoulder to the other man standing behind her. He was vaguely familiar to Jenna, with his spiky black hair, penetrating silver eyes, and razor sharp cheekbones. Alex said his name on a quiet whisper. ‘Kade . . .’

‘I’ll get Gideon,’ he said, offering her a tender caress as he spoke. This man – Kade – was obviously a friend of Alex’s. An intimate one at that. He and Alex belonged together; even in Jenna’s rattled state of consciousness, she could sense the deep love that crackled between the couple. As Kade stepped away from Alex, he shot a look at the other man in the room. ‘Brock, make sure things stay calm in here until I come back.’

The dark head nodded once, grimly. Yet when Jenna glanced up at him, the big man called Brock met her gaze with the same gentling calm that had greeted her when she’d first opened her eyes in this strange place.

Jenna swallowed past a knot of dread that was climbing steadily into her throat. ‘Alex, tell me what’s happening. I know I was . . . attacked. I was bitten. Oh, Jesus . . . there was a . . . a *creature*. It somehow got into my cabin and it attacked me.’

Alex’s expression was heavy, her hand tender where it came to rest on Jenna’s. ‘I know, honey. I know what you went through must have been awful. But you’re here now. You survived, thank God.’

Jenna closed her eyes as a raw sob choked her. ‘Alex, it . . . it *fed off me*.’

Brock had moved closer to the bed without her noticing. He stood directly beside her and reached out to stroke his fingertips along the side of her neck. His big hands were warm, and impossibly tender. It was the oddest sensation, the peace that emanated from his light caress.

Part of her wanted to reject his uninvited touch, but another part of her – a needy, vulnerable part that she hated to acknowledge, let alone indulge – could not refuse the comfort. Her banging pulse slowed under the gentle rhythm of his fingers as they traveled lightly up and down the length of her throat.

‘Better?’ he asked quietly as he drew his hand away from her.

She exhaled a slow sigh with her weak nod. ‘I really need to see my brother. Does Zach know I’m here?’

Alex’s lips pressed together as an aching silence grew long in the room. ‘Jenna, honey, don’t worry about anything or anybody else right now, okay? You’ve been through so much. For now, let’s just focus on you and on making sure you’re well. Zach would want that, too.’

‘Where is he, Alex?’ Despite the fact that it had been years since Jenna wore the badge and uniform of an Alaska State Trooper, she knew when someone was sidestepping the facts. She knew when someone was trying to protect another person, trying to spare them from pain. As Alex was doing with her this very moment. ‘What’s happened to my brother? I need to see

him. Something's wrong with him, Alex, I can see it in your face. I need to get out of here, right now.'

Brock's big, broad hand came toward her again, but this time, Jenna swept it away. It had only been a slight flick of her wrist, but it knocked aside his hand as though she'd put all of her strength – and then some – into the motion.

'What the hell?' Brock's eyes narrowed, something bright and dangerous crackling in his dark gaze, there and gone before she could fully register what she was seeing.

And at that very moment, Kade returned to the room, two other men with him. One was tall and lean, athletically built, his disheveled crown of blond hair and rimless, pale blue sunglasses that rode low on the bridge of his nose giving him something of a geeky mad-scientist vibe. The other, dark haired and grim faced, strode inside the small room like a medieval king, his very presence commanding attention and seeming to suck all of the air out of the place.

Jenna swallowed. As former law enforcement, she'd been accustomed to facing down men twice her size without flinching. She'd never been easy to intimidate, but looking at the likely thousand-plus pounds of muscle and brute strength that now surrounded her in these four men – to say nothing of the distinctly lethal air they seemed to wear as casually as their own skin – she found it damned hard to hold the scrutinizing, almost suspicious, gazes that were locked onto her from each man in the room.

Wherever she'd been brought, whoever these men were whom Kade associated with, Jenna got the very distinct impression that the so-called private facility wasn't a hospital at all. It sure as hell wasn't a country club.

'She's been awake only for a few minutes?' asked the blond, his voice carrying just the barest hint of an English accent. At Brock and Alex's joint nods, he walked up to the bed. 'Hello, Jenna. I'm Gideon. This is Lucan,' he said, gesturing to his

mountain of a companion, who now stood next to Brock on the other side of the room. Gideon frowned at her over the top of his shades. ‘How do you feel?’

She frowned back at him. ‘Like a bus ran me over. A bus that apparently dragged me from Alaska all the way to Boston.’

‘It was the only way,’ Lucan interjected, command palpable in his level, ask-no-permission tone. He was the leader here, no question about that. ‘You hold too much information, and you needed specialized care and observation.’

She didn’t like the sound of that at all. ‘What I need is to be back at home. Whatever that *monster* did to me, I survived it. I won’t be needing any kind of care or observation because I’m fine.’

‘No,’ Lucan countered grimly. ‘You are not fine. Far from it, in fact.’

Although it was said without cruelty or threat, an icy cold dread seeped through her. She looked to Alex and Brock – the two people who’d assured her just a few minutes ago that she was all right, that she was safe. The two people who’d actually managed to make her feel safe, after waking up from the nightmare that she could still taste on her tongue. Neither of them said a thing now.

She glanced away, stung and not a little afraid of what that silence might truly mean. ‘I have to get out of here. I want to go home.’

When she started to swing her legs over the edge of the bed to get up, it wasn’t Lucan or Brock or any of the other huge men who stopped her, but Alex. Jenna’s best friend moved to block her, the sober look on her face more effective than any of the brute strength standing ready elsewhere in the room.

‘Jen, you have to listen to me now. To all of us. There are things you need to understand . . . about what happened back in Alaska, and about the things we still need to figure out. Things only you may be able to answer.’

Jenna shook her head. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about. The only thing I know is that I was held captive and attacked – bitten and bled, for God’s sake – by something worse than a nightmare. It could be out there still, back in Harmony. I can’t sit here knowing that the monster that terrorized me might be doing the same hideous things to my brother or to anyone else back home.’

‘That won’t happen,’ Alex said. ‘The creature who attacked you – the Ancient – is dead. No one in Harmony is in danger from him now. Kade and the others made sure of that.’

Jenna felt only a ping of relief, because despite the good news that her attacker was dead, there was still something cold gnawing at her heart. ‘And Zach? Where is my brother?’

Alex glanced toward Kade and Brock, both of whom had moved closer to the side of the bed. Alex gave the faintest shake of her head, her brown eyes sad beneath the layered waves of her dark blond hair. ‘Oh, Jenna . . . I’m so sorry.’

She absorbed her friend’s words, reluctant to let the understanding sink in. Her brother – the last remaining family she had – was dead?

‘No.’ She gulped the denial, sorrow rising up the back of her throat as Alex wrapped a comforting arm around her.

On the wave of her grief, memories roared to the surface, too: Alex’s voice, calling to her from outside the cabin where the creature lurked over Jenna in the darkness. Zach’s angry shouts, a current of deadly menace in every clipped syllable – but menace directed at whom? She hadn’t been sure then. Now she wasn’t sure it mattered at all.

There had been a gun blast outside the cabin, not even an instant before the creature leapt up and hurled itself through the weather-beaten wood panels of the front door and out to the snowy, forested yard. She remembered the sharp howl of her brother’s screams. The pure terror that preceded a horrific silence.



Then . . . nothing.

Nothing but a deep, unnatural sleep and endless darkness.

She pulled out of Alex's embrace, sucking back her grief. She would not lose it like this, not in front of these grim-faced men who were all looking at her with a mix of pity and cautious, questioning interest.

'I'll be leaving now,' she said, digging deep to find the don't-fuck-with-me cop tone that used to serve her so well as a trooper. She stood up, feeling only the slightest shakiness in her legs. When she listed faintly to the side, Brock reached out as if to steady her, but she righted her balance before he could offer the uninvited assist. She didn't need anyone coddling her, making her feel weak. 'Alex can show me the way out.'

Lucan pointedly cleared his throat.

'Ah, I'm afraid not,' Gideon put in, politely British, yet unwavering. 'Now that you're finally awake and lucid, we're going to need your help.'

'My help?' She frowned. 'My help with what?'

'We need to understand precisely what went on between you and the Ancient in the time he was with you. Specifically, if there were things he told you or information he somehow entrusted to you.'

She scoffed. 'Sorry. I already lived through the ordeal once. I have no interest in reliving it in all its horrible detail for all of you. Thanks, but no thanks. I'd just as soon put it out of my mind completely.'

'There is something you need to see, Jenna.' This time, it was Brock who spoke. His voice was low, more concerned than demanding. 'Please, hear us out.'

She paused, uncertain, and Gideon filled the silence of her indecision.

'We've been observing you since you arrived at the compound,' he told her as he walked over to a control panel mounted on the wall. He typed something on the keyboard and

a flat-screen monitor dropped down from the ceiling. The video image that blinked to life on the screen was an apparent recording of her, lying asleep in this very room. Nothing earth-shattering, just her, motionless on the bed. ‘Things start to get interesting around the forty-three-hour mark.’

He typed a command that made the clip advance to the spot he mentioned. Jenna watched herself on-screen, feeling a sense of wariness as her video self began to shift and writhe, then thrash violently on the bed. She was murmuring something in her sleep, a string of sounds – words and sentences, she felt certain, even though she had no basis to understand them.

‘I don’t get it. What’s going on?’

‘We’re hoping that you can tell us,’ Lucan said. ‘Do you recognize the language you’re speaking there?’

‘Language? It sounds like a bunch of jibberish to me.’

‘You’re sure about that?’ He didn’t seem convinced. ‘Gideon, play the next video.’

Another clip filled the monitor, images fast-forwarding to a further episode, this one even more unnerving than the first. Jenna watched, transfixed, as her body on-screen kicked and writhed, accompanied by the surreal soundtrack of her own voice speaking something that made absolutely no sense to her.

It took a lot to scare her, but this psych ward video footage was just about the last thing she needed to see on top of everything else she was dealing with.

‘Turn it off,’ she murmured. ‘Please. I don’t want to see any more right now.’

‘We have hours of footage like this,’ Lucan said as Gideon powered down the video. ‘We’ve had you on twenty-four-hour observation the whole time.’

‘The whole time,’ Jenna echoed. ‘Just how long have I been here?’

‘Five days,’ Gideon answered. ‘At first we thought it was a coma brought on by trauma, but your vitals have been normal

all this time. Your blood work is normal, too. From a medical diagnostic standpoint, you've merely been . . .' He seemed to search for the right word. 'Asleep.'

'For five days,' she said, needing to be sure she understood. 'Nobody just falls asleep for five days straight. There must be something else going on with me. Jesus, after all that's happened, I should see a doctor, go to a real hospital.'

Lucan gave a grave shake of his head. 'Gideon is more expert than anyone else you can see topside. This thing cannot be handled by your kind of doctors.'

'My kind? What the hell does that mean?'

'Jenna,' Alex said, taking her hand. 'I know you must be confused and scared. I've been there myself very recently, although I can't imagine anyone going through what you have. But you need to be strong now. You need to trust us – trust *me* – that you are in the best hands possible. We're going to help you. We'll figure this out for you, I promise.'

'Figure what out? Tell me. Damn it, I need to know what's really going on!'

'Let her see the X rays,' Lucan murmured to Gideon, who typed a quick series of keys and brought the images up on the monitor.

'This first one was taken within minutes of your arrival at the compound,' he explained, as a skull and upper spinal column lit up overhead. At the topmost point of her vertebrae, something small glowed fiercely bright, as tiny as a grain of rice.

Her voice, when she finally found it, held the barest tremor. 'What is it?'

'We're not sure,' Gideon replied gently. He brought up another X ray. 'This one was taken twenty-four hours later. You can just make out the threadlike tendrils that have begun to spread outward from the object.'

As Jenna looked, she felt Alex's fingers tighten around her own. Another image came up on-screen, and in this one, the

tendrils extending from the brightly glowing object appeared to lace into her spinal column.

‘Oh, God,’ she whispered, reaching up with her free hand to feel the skin at her nape. She pressed hard and almost gagged to register the faint ridge of whatever it was embedded inside her. ‘He did this to me?’

*Life . . . or death?*

*The choice is yours, Jenna Tucker-Darrow.*

The creature’s words came back to her now, along with the recollection of his self-inflicted wound, the nearly indiscernible object he’d plucked from within his own flesh.

*Life, or death?*

*Choose.*

‘He put something inside me,’ she murmured.

The slight unsteadiness she’d felt a few moments ago came back with a vengeance. Her knees buckled, but before she ended up on the floor, Brock and Alex each had an arm, lending her their support. As terrible as it was, Jenna could not tear her eyes away from the X ray that filled the screen overhead.

‘Oh, my God,’ she moaned. ‘What the hell did that monster do to me?’

Lucan stared at her. ‘That’s what we intend to find out.’