

DARK REUNION

The Vampire Diaries Book 4

By

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gathering into a shape roughly the size of a man.

There was another one a little distance away. Then Bonnie saw a third. The same thing was happening all over.

Mist was flowing out of the ground, between the trees. Pools of it, each separate and distinct. Bonnie, staring mutely, could see through each patch, could see the flames, the oak trees, the bricks of the chimney. Klaus had stopped smiling, stopped moving, and was watching too.

Bonnie turned to Stefan, unable to even frame the question.

"Unquiet spirits," he whispered huskily, his green eyes intent. "The solstice."

And then Bonnie understood.

They were coming. From across the river, where the old cemetery lay. From the woods, where countless makeshift graves had been dug to dump bodies in before they rotted. The unquiet spirits, the soldiers who had fought here and died during the Civil War. A supernatural host answering the call for help.

They were forming all around. There were hundreds of them.

Bonnie could actually see faces now. The misty outlines were filling in with pale hues like so many runny watercolors. She saw a flash of blue, a glimmer of gray. Both Union and Confederate troops. Bonnie glimpsed a pistol thrust into a belt, the glint of an ornamented sword. Chevrons on a sleeve. A bushy dark beard; a long, well-tended white one. A small figure, child size, with dark holes for eyes and a drum hanging at thigh level.

"Oh, my God," she whispered. "Oh, *God*." It wasn't swearing. It was something like a prayer.

Not that she wasn't frightened of them, because she was. It was every nightmare she'd ever had about the cemetery come true. Like her first dream about Elena, when things came crawling out of the black pits in the earth; only these things weren't crawling, they were *flying*, skimming and floating until they swirled into human form. Everything that Bonnie had ever felt about the old graveyard—that it was alive and full of watching eyes, that there was some Power lurking behind its waiting stillness—was proving true. The earth of Fell's Church was giving up its bloody memories. The spirits of those who'd died here were walking again.

And Bonnie could feel their anger. It frightened her, but another emotion was waking up inside her, making her catch her breath and clench tighter on Stefan's hand. Because the misty army had a leader.

One figure was floating in front of the others, closest to the place where Klaus stood. It had no shape or definition as yet, but it glowed and scintillated with the pale golden light of a candle flame. Then, before Bonnie's eyes, it seemed to take on substance from the air, shining brighter and brighter every minute with an unearthly light. It was brighter than the circle of fire. It was so bright that Klaus leaned back from it and Bonnie blinked, but when she turned at a low sound, she saw Stefan staring straight into it, fearlessly, with wide-open eyes. And smiling, so faintly, as if

glad to have this be the last thing he saw.

Then Bonnie was sure.

Klaus dropped the stake. He had turned away from Bonnie and Stefan to face the being of light that hung in the clearing like an avenging angel. Golden hair streaming back in an invisible wind, Elena looked down on him.

"She came," Bonnie whispered.

"You asked her to," Stefan murmured. His voice trailed off into a labored breath, but he was still smiling. His eyes were serene.

"Stand away from them," Elena said, her voice coming simultaneously to Bonnie's ears and her mind. It was like the chiming of dozens of bells, distant and close up at once. "It's over now, Klaus."

But Klaus rallied quickly. Bonnie saw his shoulders swell with a breath, noticed for the first time the hole in the back of the tan raincoat where the white ash stake had pierced him. It was stained dull red, and new blood was flowing now as Klaus flung out his arms.

"You think I'm afraid of you?" he shouted. He spun around, laughing at all the pallid forms. "You think I'm afraid of any of you? You're dead! Dust on the wind! You can't touch me!"

"You're wrong," Elena said in her wind-chime voice.

"I'm one of the Old Ones! An Original! Do you know what that means?" Klaus turned again, addressing all of them, his unnaturally blue eyes seeming to catch some of the red glow of the fire. "*I've never died*. Every one of you has died, you gallery of spooks! But not me. Death can't touch me. I am *invincible*!"

The last word came in a shout so loud it echoed among the trees. *Invincible... invincible... invincible*. Bonnie heard it fading into the hungry sound of the fire.

Elena waited until the last echo had died. Then she said, very simply, "Not quite." She turned to look at the misty shapes around her. "He wants to spill more blood here."

A new voice spoke up, a hollow voice that ran like a trickle of cold water down Bonnie's spine. "There's been enough killing, I say." It was a Union soldier with a double row of buttons on his jacket.

"More than enough," said another voice, like the boom of a faraway drum. A Confederate holding a bayonet.

"It's time somebody stopped it"—an old man in home-dyed butternut cloth.

"We can't let it go on"—the drummer boy with the black holes for eyes.

"No more blood spilled!" Several voices took it up at once. "No more killing!" The cry passed from one to another, until the swell of sound was louder than the roar of the fire. "No more blood!"

"*You can't touch me!* You can't kill me!"

"Let's take 'im, boys!"

Bonnie never knew who gave that last command. But he was obeyed by all, Confederate and Union soldiers alike. They were rising, flowing, dissolving into mist again, a dark mist with a hundred hands. It bore down on Klaus like an ocean wave, dashing itself on him and engulfing him. Each hand took hold, and although Klaus was fighting and thrashing with arms and legs, they were too many for him. In seconds he was obscured by them, surrounded, swallowed by the dark mist. It rose, whirling like a tornado from which screams could be heard only faintly.

"You can't kill me! I'm immortal!"

The tornado swept away into the darkness beyond Bonnie's sight. Following it was a trail of ghosts like a comet's tail, shooting off into the night sky.

"Where are they taking him?" Bonnie didn't mean to say it aloud; she just blurted it out before she thought. But Elena heard.

"Where he won't do any harm," she said, and the look on her face stopped Bonnie from asking any other questions.

There was a squealing, bleating sound from the other side of the clearing. Bonnie turned and saw Tyler, in his terrible part-human, part-animal shape, on his feet. There was no need for Caroline's club. He was staring at Elena and the few remaining ghostly figures and gibbering.

"Don't let them take me! Don't let them take me too!"

Before Elena could speak, he had spun around. He regarded the fire, which was higher than his own head, for an instant, then plunged right through it, crashing into the forest beyond. Through a parting of the flames, Bonnie saw him drop to the ground, beating out flames on himself, then rise and run again. Then the fire flared up and she couldn't see anything more.

But she'd remembered something: Meredith—and Matt. Meredith was lying propped up, her head in Caroline's lap, watching. Matt was still on his back. Hurt, but not so badly hurt as Stefan.

"Elena," Bonnie said, catching the bright figure's attention, and then she simply looked at him.

The brightness came closer. Stefan didn't blink. He looked into the heart of the light and smiled. "He's been stopped now. Thanks to you."

"It was Bonnie who called us. And she couldn't have done it at the right place and the right time without you and the others."

"I tried to keep my promise."

"I know, Stefan."

Bonnie didn't like the sound of this at all. It sounded too much like a farewell—a permanent one. Her own words floated back to her: *He might go to another place or—or just go out.* And she didn't want Stefan to go *anywhere*. Surely anyone who looked that much like an angel...

"Elena," she said, "can't you—do something? Can't you help him?" Her voice was shaking.

And Elena's expression as she turned to look at Bonnie, gentle but so sad, was even more distressing. It reminded her of someone, and then she remembered. Honoria Fell. Honoria's eyes had looked like that, as if she were looking at all the inescapable wrongs in the world. All the unfairness, all the things that shouldn't have been, but were.

"I can do something," she said. "But I don't know if it's the kind of help he wants." She turned back to Stefan. "Stefan, I can cure what Klaus did. Tonight I have that much Power. But I can't cure what Katherine did."

Bonnie's numbed brain struggled with this for a while. What Katherine did—but Stefan had recovered months ago from Katherine's torture in the crypt. Then she understood. What Katherine had done was make Stefan a vampire.

"It's been too long," Stefan was saying to Elena. "If you *did* cure it, I'd be a pile of dust."

"Yes." Elena didn't smile, just went on looking at him steadily. "Do you want my help, Stefan?"

"To go on living in this world in the shadows..." Stefan's voice was a whisper now, his green eyes distant. Bonnie wanted to shake him. *Live*, she thought to him, but she didn't dare say it for fear she'd make him decide just the opposite. Then she thought of something else.

"To go on trying," she said, and both of them looked at her. She looked back, chin thrust out, and saw the beginning of a smile on Elena's bright lips. Elena turned to Stefan, and that tiny hint of a smile passed to him.

"Yes," he said quietly, and then, to Elena, "I want your help."

She bent and kissed him.

Bonnie saw the brightness flow from her to Stefan, like a river of sparkling light engulfing him. It flooded over him the way the dark mist had surrounded Klaus, like a cascade of diamonds, until his entire body glowed like Elena's.

For an instant Bonnie imagined she could see the blood inside him turned molten, flowing out to each vein, each capillary, healing everything it touched. Then the glow faded to a golden aura, soaking back into Stefan's skin. His shirt was still demolished, but underneath the flesh was smooth and firm. Bonnie, feeling her own eyes wide with wonder, couldn't help reaching out to touch.

It felt just like any skin. The horrible wounds were gone.

She laughed aloud with sheer excitement, and then looked up, sobering. "Elena—there's Meredith, too—"

The bright being that was Elena was already moving across the clearing. Meredith looked up at her from Caroline's lap.

"Hello, Elena," she said, almost normally, except that her voice was so weak.

Elena bent and kissed her. The brightness flowed again, encompassing Meredith. And when it faded, Meredith stood up on her own two feet.

Then Elena did the same thing with Matt, who woke up, looking confused but alert. She kissed Caroline too, and Caroline stopped shaking and straightened.

Then she went to Damon.

He was still lying where he had fallen. The ghosts had passed over him, taking no notice of him. Elena's brightness hovered over him, one shining hand reaching to touch his hair. Then she bent and kissed the dark head on the ground.

As the sparkling light faded, Damon sat up and shook his head. He saw Elena and went still, then, every movement careful and self-contained, stood up. He didn't say anything, only looked as Elena turned back to Stefan.

He was silhouetted against the fire. Bonnie had scarcely noticed how the red glow had grown so that it almost eclipsed Elena's gold. But now she saw it and felt a thrill of alarm.

"My last gift to you," Elena said, and it began to rain.

Not a thunder-and-lightning storm, but a thorough pattering rain that soaked everything—Bonnie included—and doused the fire. It was fresh and cool, and it seemed to wash all the horror of the last hours away, cleansing the glade of everything that had happened there. Bonnie tilted her face up to it, shutting her eyes, wanting to stretch out her arms and embrace it. At last it slackened and she looked again at Elena.

Elena was looking at Stefan, and there was no smile on her lips now. The wordless sorrow was back in her face.

"It's midnight," she said. "And I have to go."

Bonnie knew instantly, at the sound of it, that "go" didn't just mean for the moment. "Go" meant forever. Elena was going somewhere that no trance or dream could reach.

And Stefan knew it too.

"Just a few more minutes," he said, reaching for her.

"I'm sorry—"

"Elena, wait—I need to tell you—"

"I can't!" For the first time the serenity of that bright face was destroyed, showing not only gentle sadness but tearing grief. "Stefan, I can't wait. I'm so sorry." It was as if she were being pulled backward, retreating from them into some dimension that Bonnie could not see. Maybe the same place Honoria went when her task was finished, Bonnie thought. To be at peace.

But Elena's eyes didn't look as if she were at peace. They clung to Stefan, and she reached out her hand toward his, hopelessly. They didn't touch. Wherever Elena was being pulled was too far away.

"Elena—*please!*" It was the voice Stefan had called her with in his room. As if his heart was breaking.

"Stefan," she cried, both hands held out to him now. But she was diminishing, vanishing. Bonnie felt a sob swell in her own chest, close her own throat. It wasn't fair. All they had ever wanted was to be together. And now Elena's reward for helping the town and finishing her task was to be separated from Stefan irrevocably. It just wasn't *fair*.

"Stefan," Elena called again, but her voice came as if from a long distance. The brightness was almost gone. Then, as Bonnie stared through helpless tears, it winked out.

Leaving the clearing silent once again. They were all gone, the ghosts of Fell's Church who had walked for one night to keep more blood from being spilled. The bright spirit that had led them had vanished without a trace, and even the moon and stars were covered by clouds.

Bonnie knew that the wetness on Stefan's face wasn't due to the rain that was still splashing down.

He was standing, chest heaving, looking at the last place where Elena's brightness had been seen. And all the longing and the pain Bonnie had glimpsed on his face at times before was nothing to what she saw now.

"It isn't fair," she whispered. Then she shouted it to the sky, not caring who she was addressing. "It isn't fair!"

Stefan had been breathing more and more quickly. Now he lifted his face too, not in anger but in unbearable pain. His eyes were searching the clouds as if he might find some last trace of golden light, some flicker of brightness there. He couldn't. Bonnie saw the spasm go through him, like the agony of Klaus's stake. And the cry that burst out of him was the most terrible thing she'd ever heard. "*Elena!*"

Sixteen

Bonnie never could quite remember how the next few seconds went. She heard Stefan's cry that almost seemed to shake the earth beneath her. She saw Damon start toward him. And then she saw the flash.

A flash like Klaus's lightning, only not blue-white. This one was gold.

And so bright Bonnie felt that the sun had exploded in front of her eyes. All she could make out for several seconds were whirling colors. And then she saw something in the middle of the clearing, near the chimney stack. Something white, shaped like the ghosts, only more solid looking. Something small and huddled that had to be anything but what her eyes were telling her it looked like.

Because it looked like a slender naked girl trembling on the forest floor. A girl with golden hair.

It looked like Elena.

Not the glowing, candle-lit Elena of the spirit world and not the pale, inhumanly beautiful girl who had been Elena the vampire. This was an Elena whose creamy skin was blotching pink and showing gooseflesh under the spatter of the rain. An Elena who looked bewildered as she slowly raised her head and gazed around her, as if all the familiar things in the clearing were unfamiliar to her.

It's an illusion. Either that or they gave her a few minutes to say good-bye. Bonnie kept telling herself that, but she couldn't make herself believe it.

"Bonnie?" said a voice uncertainly. A voice that wasn't like wind chimes at all. The voice of a frightened young girl.

Bonnie's knees gave out. A wild feeling was growing inside her. She tried to push it away, not daring to even examine it yet. She just watched Elena.

Elena touched the grass in front of her. Hesitantly at first, then more and more firmly, quicker and quicker. She picked up a leaf in fingers that seemed clumsy, put it down, patted the ground. Snatched it up again. She grabbed a whole handful of wet leaves, held them to her, smelled them. She looked up at Bonnie, the leaves scattering away.

For a moment, they just knelt and stared at each other from the distance of a few feet. Then, tremulously, Bonnie stretched out her hand. She couldn't breathe. The feeling was growing and growing.

Elena's hand came up in turn. Reached toward Bonnie's. Their fingers touched.

Real fingers. In the real world. Where they both were.

Bonnie gave a kind of scream and threw herself on Elena.

In a minute she was patting her everywhere in a frenzy, with wild, disbelieving delight. And Elena was solid. She was wet from the rain and she was shivering and Bonnie's hands didn't go through her. Bits of damp leaf and crumbs of soil were

clinging to Elena's hair.

"You're here," she sobbed. "I can touch you, Elena!"

Elena gasped back, "I can touch you! I'm here!" She grabbed the leaves again. "I can touch the ground!"

"I can see you touching it!" They might have kept this up indefinitely, but Meredith interrupted. She was standing a few steps away, staring, her dark eyes enormous, her face white. She made a choking sound.

"Meredith!" Elena turned to her and held out handfuls of leaves. She opened her arms.

Meredith, who had been able to cope when Elena's body was found in the river, when Elena had appeared at her window as a vampire, when Elena had materialized in the clearing like an angel, just stood there, shaking. She looked about to faint.

"Meredith, she's solid! You can touch her! See?" Bonnie pummeled Elena again joyfully.

Meredith didn't move. She whispered, "It's impossible—"

"It's true! See? It's true!" Bonnie was getting hysterical. She knew she was, and she didn't care. If anyone had a right to get hysterical, it was her. "It's true, it's true," she caroled. "Meredith, come *see*."

Meredith, who had been staring at Elena all this while, made another choked sound. Then, with one motion, she flung herself down on Elena. She touched her, found that her hand met the resistance of flesh. She looked into Elena's face. And then she burst into uncontrollable tears.

She cried and cried, her head on Elena's naked shoulder.

Bonnie gleefully patted both of them.

"Don't you think she'd better put something on?" said a voice, and Bonnie looked up to see Caroline taking off her dress. Caroline did it rather calmly, standing in her beige polyester slip afterward as if she did this sort of thing all the time. No imagination, Bonnie thought again, but without malice. Clearly there were times when no imagination was an advantage.

Meredith and Bonnie pulled the dress over Elena's head. She looked small inside it, wet and somehow unnatural, as if she wasn't used to clothing anymore. But it was some protection from the elements, anyway.

Then Elena whispered, "Stefan."

She turned. He was standing there, with Damon and Matt, a little apart from the girls. He was just watching her. As if not only his breath, but his life was held, waiting.

Elena got up and took a tottery step to him, and then another and another. Slim and newly fragile inside her borrowed dress, she wavered as she moved toward him. Like the little mermaid learning how to use her legs, Bonnie thought.

He let her get almost all the way there, just staring, before he stumbled toward her. They ended in a rush and then fell to the ground together, arms locked around each other, each holding on as tightly as possible. Neither of them said a word.

At last Elena pulled back to look at Stefan, and he cupped her face between his hands, just gazing back at her. Elena laughed aloud for sheer joy, opening and closing her own fingers and looking at them in delight before burying them in Stefan's hair. Then they kissed.

Bonnie watched unabashedly, feeling some of the heady joy spill over into tears. Her throat ached, but these were sweet tears, not the salt tears of pain, and she was still smiling. She was filthy, she was soaking wet, she had never been so happy in her life. She felt as if she wanted to dance and sing and do all sorts of crazy things.

Some time later Elena looked up from Stefan to all of them, her face almost as bright as when she'd floated in the clearing like an angel. Shining like starlight. No one will ever call her Ice Princess again, Bonnie thought.

"My friends," Elena said. It was all she said, but it was enough, that and the queer little sob she gave as she held out a hand to them. They were around her in a second, swarming her, all trying to embrace at once. Even Caroline.

"Elena," Caroline said, "I'm sorry..."

"It's all forgotten now," Elena said, and hugged her as freely as anyone else. Then she grasped a sturdy brown hand and held it briefly to her cheek. "Matt," she said, and he smiled at her, blue eyes swimming. But not with misery at seeing her in Stefan's arms, Bonnie thought. Just now Matt's face expressed only happiness.

A shadow fell over the little group, coming between them and the moonlight. Elena looked up, and held out her hand again.

"Damon," she said.

The clear light and shining love in her face was irresistible. Or it should have been irresistible, Bonnie thought. But Damon stepped forward unsmiling, his black eyes as bottomless and unfathomable as ever. None of the starlight that shone from Elena was reflected back from them.

Stefan looked up at him fearlessly, as he'd looked into the painful brilliance of Elena's golden brightness. Then, never looking away, he held out his hand as well.

Damon stood gazing down at them, the two open, fearless faces, the mute offer of their hands. The offer of connection, warmth, humanity. Nothing showed in his own face, and he was utterly motionless himself.

"Come on, Damon," Matt said softly. Bonnie looked at him quickly, and saw that the blue eyes were intent now as they looked at the shadowed hunter's face.

Damon spoke without moving. "I'm not like you."

"You're not as different from us as you want to think," Matt said. "Look," he added, an odd note of challenge in his voice, "I know you killed Mr. Tanner in self-defense, because you told me. And I know you didn't come here to Fell's

Church because Bonnie's spell dragged you here, because I sorted the hair and I didn't make any mistakes. You're more like us than you admit, Damon. The only thing I *don't* know is why you didn't go into Vickie's house to help her."

Damon snapped, almost automatically, "Because I wasn't invited!"

Memory swept over Bonnie. Herself standing outside Vickie's house, Damon standing beside her. Stefan's voice: *Vickie, invite me in*. But no one had invited Damon.

"But how did *Klaus* get in, then—?" she began, following her own thoughts.

"That was Tyler's job, I'm sure," Damon said tersely. "What Tyler did for Klaus in return for learning how to reclaim his heritage. And he must have invited Klaus in before we ever started guarding the house—probably before Stefan and I came to Fell's Church. Klaus was well prepared. That night he was in the house and the girl was dead before I knew what was happening."

"Why didn't you call for Stefan?" Matt said. There was no accusation in his voice. It was a simple question.

"Because there was nothing he could have done! I knew what you were dealing with as soon as I saw it. An Old One. Stefan would only have gotten himself killed—and the girl was past caring, anyway."

Bonnie heard the thread of coldness in his voice, and when Damon turned back to Stefan and Elena, his face had hardened. It was as if some decision had been made.

"You see, I'm not like you," he said.

"It doesn't matter." Stefan had still not withdrawn his hand. Neither had Elena.

"And sometimes the good guys do win," Matt said quietly, encouragingly.

"Damon—" Bonnie began. Slowly, almost reluctantly, he turned toward her. She was thinking about that moment when they had been kneeling over Stefan and he had looked so young. When they had been just Damon and Bonnie at the edge of the world.

She thought, for just one instant, that she saw stars in those black eyes. And she could sense in him something—some ferment of feelings like longing and confusion and fear and anger all mixed. But then it was all smoothed over again and his shields were back up and Bonnie's psychic senses told her nothing. And those black eyes were simply opaque.

He turned back to the couple on the ground. Then he removed his jacket and stepped behind Elena. He draped it over her shoulders without touching her.

"It's a cold night," he said. His eyes held Stefan's a moment as he settled the black jacket around her.

And then he turned to walk into the darkness between the oak trees. In an instant Bonnie heard the rush of wings.

Stefan and Elena wordlessly joined hands again, and Elena's golden head dropped

to Stefan's shoulder. Over her hair Stefan's green eyes were turned toward the patch of night where his brother had disappeared.

Bonnie shook her head, feeling a catch in her throat. It was eased as something touched her arm and she looked up at Matt. Even soaking wet, even covered with bits of moss and fern, he was a beautiful sight. She smiled at him, feeling her wonder and joy come back. The giddy, dizzy excitement as she thought about what had happened tonight. Meredith and Caroline were smiling too, and in an impulsive burst Bonnie seized Matt's hands and whirled him into a dance. In the middle of the clearing they kicked up wet leaves and spun and laughed. They were alive, and they were young, and it was the summer solstice.

"You wanted us all back together again!" Bonnie shouted at Caroline, and pulled the scandalized girl into the dance. Meredith, her dignity forgotten, joined them too.

And for a long time in the clearing there was only rejoicing.

June 21, 7:30 a.m.

The Summer Solstice

Dear Diary,

Oh, it's all too much to explain and you wouldn't believe it anyway. I'm going to bed.

Bonnie