

# **The Vampire Gene**

**Book 2 in *The Iron Trilogy***

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**The Iron in Blood (Book 1 in *The Iron Trilogy*)**

## **Prologue**

**Monday 21 January**

### **Angus**

I drove as fast as I could within reason, but reason had nothing to do with how I felt. I wanted to floor that accelerator, to hear the engine shriek, to feel the surge that carried me faster to where I had stupidly, blindly left Rebecca earlier that day. I clenched my jaw and tried not to imagine her anguish, and what might be happening to her at that very moment. Instead I tried to concentrate on some sort of strategy for her safe extrication from the nightmare she occupied, right now, while I drove through the Scottish countryside, trying desperately not to attract the attention of anyone who might want to stop me.

Then the iron I had swallowed a few miles back began to kick in and I joyfully liberated the beast within me, and let its rage wrap around my soul and obliterate my anguish, like a dose of morphine that erases pain and leaves you feeling *good*.

I drew a deep breath and felt the world slow as it was all reduced to the here and now. The monster uncurled itself in my belly, awakening the hunger, the irresistible urge to tear flesh and snap bones and feel the hot blood flowing down the back of my throat. The van lurched as the transformation within me settled, and the speedometer fluttered ever higher as the engine screamed its objection. My muscles flexed and tightened, and my heart slowed, and an incredible, terrible focus gripped me.

Focus.

Today was going to be a good day for somebody else to die.

## CHAPTER 1

### Thursday 17 January

#### Rebecca

I was back at school the next day. It would have been nice to have been able to add *as if nothing had happened*, but this was clearly not the case.

Firstly, Angus took me to school. In his car. I knew next to nothing about cars, but apparently the male population of the school knew quite a lot about them, and they stared. I hopped out of the car and turned to wave goodbye to Angus, but he had already climbed out of the driver's seat and was striding around the back of the car, and next thing I knew he had kissed me. In front of *everyone*. He grinned wickedly, got back in the car, and drove off. I stood there, blushing helplessly and watched him drive away. I contemplated revenge for a few heady seconds, but dismissed the idea pretty quickly. Revenge against any vampire was an absurd ambition. Revenge against a vampire like Angus - an outrageous aspiration of improbable proportions. Oh well.

When I turned around I started blushing all over again. Every single set of eyes was watching me, fascinated, as if I was about to flip out and start screaming, or something. It was an option. I hated being the centre of attention before I found out that I was a vampire a couple of days ago. Now that I had several excellent and very real reasons to shy away from attention of any sort, I hated it even more. I ducked my head and started walking in the direction of the headmaster's office. Along the way it occurred to me that these people had seen me being abducted two days ago, and they knew next to nothing of what had happened to me since then. Their minds were probably conjuring up all sorts of improbable scenarios. I chuckled. I bet they would really freak out if they knew that I was actually a vampire, and I had been abducted by another vampire, and rescued by my vampire boyfriend. Sorry, *fiancé*. Yeah, that would really blow their minds. I grinned to myself.

"What's so funny, Miss Harding?" The headmaster, Mr Parker, stood in front of me, as if he'd appeared out of nowhere, looking stern and concerned at the same time. He pulled it off quite well, actually.

"Nothing, Mr Parker. I am just very happy to be back at school." And I was, in a way. I had always bewailed the boredom of my existence, but right now I was ready to embrace the tedium of high school like an old and very dear friend. It would be a nice break from the madness of the past week.

"Glad to see you back, although I must say, it seems to be a bit soon after what happened..." His voice tailed off, but he watched me carefully for signs of impending tears, or failing that, hysteria. I smiled at him.

"I'm fine, really. I need the distraction."

He nodded as if this made sense. "Fair enough," he said. "Just remember, you can go home any time you need to."

"Thanks, but I'm fine." I was too. It was amazing how quickly my mind had adjusted to everything. Four days ago I had almost died. Angus had rescued me by making me drink his blood, and then he'd told me that I was an iron metaboliser, someone whose body was able to use iron in a way that rendered them almost supernaturally strong and fast. In other words, a vampire. It was a bit of a surprise, to be fair.

Then two days ago a creepy blood drinking vampire and two human idiots had abducted me from in front of the school gates, and Angus had rescued me. Then his brothers had told us that we were getting married in ten day's time, in the hope that this would help deter Jack from coming after me.

Jack. Well, we knew next to nothing about him. He was a vampire, most probably, and he wanted me for some reason, and it was likely that he was a bit of a big cheese in his own vampire community up in Scotland, but other than that, nothing.

My mind turned again to the whole wedding business, and I smiled. Not about the ceremony and party, because that kind of stuff didn't interest me much. But I was going to be married to the most beautiful, kindest and strongest man that I had ever met. I thought about all the ramifications of that and grinned again.

The only downside to this that I could see was that I was going to have to tell my mother about being engaged and getting married in ten days' time tonight. That was something that I was most definitely dreading. I could only imagine the horror inherent in that situation - I shuddered just thinking about it. Angus would be there with me, and Mark would be there too, but I didn't see that it would make it any easier. It was like having root canal work done. They could be there for support, but I was the one in the hot seat. And root canal was root canal, dammit.

I thought about my fourteen year old brother, and how close we'd become over the past couple of days, and how accepting he'd been about the whole situation, and I smiled again. He was the only person who knew about the whole iron metaboliser business, and I wouldn't have it any other way. Angus had offered him a lift this morning, but he had refused, only because he had wanted to show off his new iPhone to his friend Harry on the walk to school. Boys and their toys.

I made my way to my first class of the day, and eventually became engrossed in the intricacies of biochemistry. I'm not going to lie, I've always liked the academic part of school. I guess you could call me a bit of a nerd. I wasn't too keen on my peers, though. They inspired either disgust or indifference in me. I had wondered if I had some peculiar personality disorder, but then I realised that it was because I was a different species to my classmates. Yeah, that would explain quite a lot, actually.

The day seemed to pass fairly rapidly after biochem, with people staring less and less at me. Nevertheless, I was still enormously relieved when the final bell rang, and I was able to escape the stifling curiosity. Angus was parked right outside the school gates, and he stood leaning his long, powerful body against the car. If he noticed the gaping stares, mine included, he gave no indication of it. Instead, he smiled at me, and opened the passenger

door, shutting it again once I was firmly ensconced in the comfortable leather seat. A few seconds later, he was sitting next to me.

"Where to?" he asked, as we pulled away from the kerb. I looked at him in surprise.

"Ring, remember?" he smiled wryly at me. I blushed, of course. I had forgotten about the ring.

"Right, then," I grinned at him. "Let's go and get a ring. Ooh, I wonder if they'll have a pink diamond in the shape of a heart..." I let my voice drift off, and glanced up at Angus, who was looking a bit startled. I couldn't help it - I started laughing. He looked down at me, sighed, and shook his head in mock disapproval.

"There's a family run jeweller in town. Mum says he's the best," I told him and he nodded.

"I await your direction, my lady," he intoned, looking down at me, his dark eyes glinting mischievously.

A few missed turns later, and we pulled into a parking lot opposite a row of small old fashioned shops with creaking signs hung from old stone walls, and weathered window panes covered in dust. The second from the right looked particularly dilapidated, but when we opened the door and walked inside, it was surprisingly neat, and smelled like lavender and old furniture. Angus was trying to explain to me about indicating where to turn *before* we reached the junction, and that saying "turn here" as we drove past the road was simply not helpful at all, and I was pretending to listen.

"May I help you?" An elderly man with a woolly cap appeared from behind a dark green curtain as if by magic, and went to stand behind the glass counter beneath which dozens of rings lay nestled in blue velvet, glittering beguilingly.

"We're looking for an engagement ring," Angus told him. He nodded, glanced at me briefly, and removed a tray from beneath the thick glass. The rings were smaller than some of the others, and not as flashy, but they appeared to be beautifully designed - to my uninitiated eye, anyway.

There were two that I particularly liked, and I finally decided on one with an oval diamond embedded in a simple platinum band. Elegant and unfussy.

"This one." I held it out to Angus.

"Let's see if it fits." He slid it over the knuckles of my left ring finger. It was a perfect fit. I held my hand out, admiring the way the ring just seemed to belong there. The man with the woolly cap nodded, and replaced the tray with the remaining rings. Angus gave him a black plastic card, signed a slip of paper and thanked the old man, who nodded graciously. We walked outside together into the weak wintry sunshine, and it dawned on me once again that I was engaged to be married. I wondered if I'd ever get used to the idea. I didn't have much time to become accustomed to it, either. Because in ten days I'd have to get used to the idea of being married. Good grief.

The drive home was conducted in a comfortable silence. Angus didn't need directions to get back - he seemed to have an unerring sense of direction and a spectacular memory. By the time we got back to his place I had begun to feel exhausted.

"You're tired." It wasn't a question.

"Yes," I sighed, and suddenly the frenetic madness of the past week seemed to catch up with me. I felt drained.

I dragged myself out of the car and inside. The white kitten that he had recently given to Mark appeared as if out of nowhere, and mewed at me. I picked it up and it purred.

Angus followed me inside. "Upstairs. You can sleep in my bed."

I nodded and climbed the stairs, cradling the kitten in my arms. I glanced at the spare room. It now contained a desk, complete with computer and stationery, and an antique-looking wardrobe, which I knew was actually a cunningly disguised gun safe. I smiled. Those were both new; they would have arrived this morning. Fergus worked fast.

I carried the kitten to the main bedroom, removed my jacket and jumper, and climbed into the massive wooden sleigh bed, pulling the bedding up around my chin. The kitten snuggled up next to me, still purring, and I fell asleep, cocooned in the delicious male smell of the man I loved.

## Angus

I was worried that Rebecca would have changed her mind about marrying me when I went to fetch her that morning to take her to school. She had seemed so subdued the night before, as if the events of the previous few days had left her stunned and disorientated. But she was back to her quietly feisty self in the morning, and gave no indication that she was about to pull out of anything. I was profoundly relieved.

I was looking forward to ten day's time far more than I would ever admit. She would be mine then, mine to protect, mine to...

I shied away from that thought, feeling vaguely guilty about how I felt about her. Even though I looked no more than twenty years old, I was actually fifty nine years old, young for a vampire, but more than twice her age. She was the first female vampire I'd ever met, the first woman I'd ever desired, and God, did I desire her. Just the thought of her made my blood hum.

I had decided last night, after I had left her with her family, that I would wait until after the wedding before I yielded to the intense craving my body had for hers. She had had this marriage thrust upon her by my brothers, and to a lesser extent, myself. The hope was that Jack would be more likely to leave her in peace once she was married. I wasn't so sure that a ring and a piece of paper would make a difference to him. It was more likely that the smell of me on her skin would deter him.

I would give her ten days to change her mind before I took her.

Those ten days were going to be excruciating for me though. It would be easier for me to sit in a fountain of fresh human blood than in an enclosed space with her. It had taken almost all of my iron control to sit calmly in the car next to her this morning, with her alluring smell wafting around me, and not touch her. And when we had arrived at school, and I'd felt what some of those kids were thinking, I felt an overwhelming urge to make it known that she belonged to me now. So I kissed her. It was much more difficult then to tear myself away from her, but I managed it somehow.

I spent the rest of the morning trying to distract myself by organising various things through Fergus. He had ordered the gun safe and desk and computer last night, and they had arrived earlier this morning. I was still awaiting delivery of the surveillance system for around the Harding house. I had chosen one that would alert me immediately if it was breached. I had something that needed protecting now.

It was mid morning before the security company arrived. I walked with them across the road to Rebecca's house, and showed them exactly where I wanted the unobtrusive CCTV cameras set up. The white kitten had somehow managed to escape from inside the house, and it came running up to me as soon as it saw me. I picked it up and draped it over my shoulder where it lay purring, while I showed the security technician what I needed.

Rebecca's mother had given her permission for the installation this morning. I had phoned her at work and explained that Rebecca might need extra protection for a while after her abduction, and that she would feel more secure with a few simple precautions, and she had agreed. I could tell she was still worried about her daughter. I wondered how she would react when Rebecca and I told her tonight that we were getting married in ten day's time.

The Harding house was locked so the little cat would have to spend some time at my place until the family arrived home. I carried it back to my house as my thoughts drifted of their own accord back to Rebecca.

It couldn't have been easy going back to school so soon after all the strange things that had happened to her recently, but she had insisted in true Rebecca-style, and so she had gone. I had capitulated - I really had no business telling her what she should or shouldn't do.

Later that afternoon, when I picked her up from school, it seemed as if she had been right to insist on going. It appeared as if the normalcy of being back at school again had helped her to regain her equilibrium. But once we had been to town and she had chosen her ring, it all seemed to crumble a little, and she looked shattered, as if the effort to be normal had been an exhausting ordeal. I sent her to sleep on my bed, resisting the fleeting but fierce temptation to join her, and remembered something I needed to discuss with Fergus. I had just picked up my phone to contact him when there was a knock on my door. I opened it to reveal a worried looking Mark standing on the step.

"Have you seen my cat?" he wanted to know. "I think she got out this morning, before we went to school, and now I can't find her anywhere." He looked almost frantic.

I grinned at him. "She's upstairs sleeping with your sister. I found her loitering outside your house this morning, and brought her back here."

His relief was almost palpable. "Thanks. I was really worried. She hasn't been out much. So," he changed the subject, "are you going to offer me coffee or what?"

I chuckled, and held the door wide for him. He stepped inside, and looked around. "Where's the safe?" he wanted to know.

"It's upstairs in a wardrobe."

"Cool." Nothing seemed to surprise Mark. He'd barely registered any astonishment when he'd found out that Rebecca was a vampire, or, come to think of it, that I was one of a family of vampires. I think us using the term iron metaboliser helped, plus the fact that there was a very rational and scientific explanation for what could euphemistically be described as a very unusual condition.

I was making the coffee when my mobile rang. I pressed speakerphone, and Fergus' voice filled the room.

"Angus. I tracked down the YouTube video footage that those vampires used to find Rebecca. I've deleted it off the internet, but the person who loaded it up might find out that it's gone and try to upload it again. I will send you the details of our perpetrator in a few minutes. You might want to pay him a visit."

I thought about what Rebecca had had to go through recently as a direct result of the actions of one of her fellow students, who had robbed her of her privacy and endangered her life all in one go. I might indeed want to pay him a visit. I looked across to where Mark stood, serenely sipping his coffee. He appeared not to have heard, but I was sure that he had. It didn't worry me very much that he had, though. I knew that he would want me to protect his sister in whatever way I could. Sensing my attention, he looked up at me, and I held my finger to my lips in that age old 'shhh' sign. He grinned and nodded.

"Another thing. Marcus has run a few preliminary DNA tests on those samples we took from the vampires you, er, butchered."

"Don't hold back, brother," I said dryly. "Tell it as it is."

"Well, we could say executed, if it would make you feel better."

"Come and say it here," I told him, grinning.

"Ha! No thanks. Anyway, it appears that the blood drinking vampires have the same father, and six different mothers between them. That father is likely to be Jack, and if it is, he's at least two hundred years old. Oscar, the one you smelled outside Rebecca's school is about one hundred and sixty, and he's not even the oldest of the sons."

"There seems to be quite a lot of inbreeding going on too," Marcus interrupted. "Jack appears to have fathered more vampires with his daughters."

"Gross," said Mark.

Fergus laughed. "Hey Mark, did you get the package?"

"Yes, thanks! I was going to drop you a line tonight."

"Looking forward to it. Keep an eye on those two for us." As if I wasn't even in the room. Click.

"One day I'm going to educate them about hello and goodbye," said Mark.

"Yeah, good luck with that," I said wryly. He chuckled.

"Thanks for the coffee, Angus. I'd better go and set up my new laptop so I can actually email Fergus tonight. I wouldn't like to have a vampire mad at me!" He laughed loudly and long as he walked out of the door.