

"Darkness on the Horizon is a dark and gritty debut that Christopher Renna delivers with all the panache of a seasoned author. It's violent, graphic, and most definitely not the swoon-inducing tween-type drama that litters a now saturated field of vampire fiction. My cup of blood runneth over... and it's brilliant." — Readers' Favorite

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"Familiar territory, but one that Renna treads confidently. This is a good solid start." — Andy M. Boylan, *Taliesin Meets the Vampires*

D A R K N E S S
O N
T H E
H O R I Z O N

Christopher Renna

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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To my sister, Tonya.
And to my husband, Paul and our children.

CHAPTER ONE

Morgan Fischer purposely bit his lip, so he could taste the blood. It hurt like hell, but the jolt of pain calmed him. He exhaled as if the force of air had the power to scatter his anxieties far away from Colby, Pennsylvania. When the tightness in his chest faded and the thump of his heart softened, he touched his lip and admired the blood's dark red color. Then he sucked his fingertip clean and returned to his bedroom from the kitchen.

Seated on the twin bed, he ate stale cereal straight out of the nearly empty box. Not because he liked the brittle, tasteless cereal without milk. Not because he was eccentric or lactose intolerant. He ate it because there was no milk in the refrigerator. No milk until he sat in the school cafeteria two months later during his senior year.

The lack of food was his father's fault. Detached, irresponsible, and neglectful, Frederick Fischer spent money at the local bar every night of the week.

On that warm June morning, Morgan understood he could no longer depend on his father. He needed to earn money to feed himself.

Morgan tossed the empty cereal box onto his mother's old wooden desk. A red, swollen mosquito bite on his left shoulder begged for attention. He pressed the edge of a fingernail into his skin, then again, marking the bump with an X for temporary relief.

Fighting mosquitoes was a frequent nuisance in the house. Without air conditioning, the windows remained open day and night during the summer. A scrap of paper taped over a hole in the worn screen hung by one corner. While Morgan reattached the tape, a muddy white pickup pulled into the driveway. Before the truck squealed to a stop, the driver honked the horn.

Morgan darted to his father's bedroom. The stench of alcohol and body odor assaulted his nostrils. Dirty clothes, *Playboy* magazines, and beer bottles littered the floor of the dark room.

Frederick was asleep, having stumbled through the front door and passed out as soon as he'd climbed into bed the previous night. The late return home was as routine as Morgan waking his father in the morning. Frederick relied on the ritual. Morgan resented the responsibility.

"Dad," he grumbled, knowing there wouldn't be an immediate response. The undertaking was like trying to resurrect a corpse. He questioned the miracle it would take to resurrect the attentive and loving father from his childhood.

The horn of the truck disrupted the silence.

Agitated, Morgan kicked his foot against the mattress. "Dad. It's time to wake up. You gotta go to work, or they'll fire you."

He wanted to yell "Wake up, you drunk son of a bitch." But he resisted the urge, expressing his irritation with increased volume instead. "It's time to go to work."

"Dammit," his father grunted. "I heard you."

"I'm gonna tell them you're on your way."

Frederick squinted bloodshot eyes at his son. "I'm up."

As usual, it irritated the driver to see Morgan, not Frederick, walk out of the house. He always displayed his displeasure with a biting tone. "You're out here in your underwear?"

"Boxers. They're practically shorts. So, who cares?" Morgan eyed the obnoxious driver with disdain and pressed a fingernail into a spot on his forearm.

Jabbing the horn out of frustration, the driver yelled, "Dammit, boy. Go tell your father to get his ass out here."

Annoyed by the sense of duty, Morgan returned inside the house. The sound of running water in the bathroom was a good sign. "They said to hurry."

Following seconds of silence, Morgan walked away. "You're welcome."

In his room, he listened for Frederick's footsteps and the slam of the front door. Once the pickup sped away, he dressed then walked to the kitchen. The stale cereal hadn't satisfied his hunger, so he ate a peanut butter and jelly sandwich while boiling water for instant coffee.

As he removed peanut butter from the roof of his mouth with his tongue, he glanced at the clock. Ten after eight. He dashed to the bathroom to brush his teeth. Staring at the cracked mirror, he spat toothpaste at its shiny, flawed surface. "Fuck you, Colby, Pennsylvania." Then he rinsed his mouth, turned off the gas stove in the kitchen, and raced out the front door.

Colby was an unexceptional, small town on the southern border of the Lackawanna River Valley. The Pocono Mountains overlooked steeple-churches and gingerbread-style Victorian houses. Colby had thrived as an industrial township of steel and lumber production. When the iron ore had dwindled several years into the twentieth century, businesses and much of the population had moved elsewhere. Still, the ghosts of prosperity remained in the form of abandoned factories and warehouses.

Most of the current residents had lived in town for decades. Because Colby had never recaptured its former splendor, the divide between financial stability and economic hardship had widened. The railroad tracks served as the border between the modern homes on the east side of town and the unkempt, older homes on the west side, commonly known as "Cardboard Valley" because of the many boarded-up, vacant houses.

The town had created wealthy families, courtesy of industry. Morgan, the offspring of such a family, had experienced life on both sides of the railroad tracks. His great-grandparents had done well in Colby as the owners of a small textile company. They had built a large white Colonial home referred to as the "Fischer House" at the end of Ridge Street. Fire had destroyed the textile company in 1964, so the family moved to a modest home. But everyone still called the Colonial home Fischer House.

Morgan knew the family legacy by heart. The Fischers had been members of Colby's elite due to their prosperous business. But in 1997, the Fischer name was no longer associated with success.

The weekday morning was active, with cars rushing by on the street. Occasionally, someone waved hello. Morgan casually waved in return, embarrassed that someone saw him walking to Lancaster Orchards. The orchard his family had owned when his mother was alive. The orchard Frederick had sold after his parents died. The orchard Frederick had worked at before turning to alcohol following the death of his wife.

Morgan crossed the railroad tracks and strayed from the main road to the side streets. A gentle breeze carried the intoxicating fragrance of blooming roses. Maple Drive appeared to be in the midst of a rose-growing competition. The many radiant shades of red, orange, yellow, and white appealed to Morgan's artistic eye. However, the persistent aroma of roses irritated his nose.

Once he reached the orchard, he jogged to the office near the blackberry patch. Years had passed since he'd been there. The sight of fruit trees transported him to the days of his youth. Memories of the warm spring sun and pink apple blossoms produced an involuntary smile.

Straightening his posture, he knocked on the door.

Travis Lancaster pulled the door open. A stout man in his fifties, he was warm and friendly when he smiled, but his perpetually serious expression intimidated most people. Usually he appeared disinterested in any attempt at conversation. He rubbed a spot on his bearded chin. "Good morning, Morgan. What can I do for ya?"

Morgan's smile widened. "Hey, Mr. Lancaster. I wondered if you needed some help. Pick the fruit. Clean the field. Something."

Travis motioned for Morgan to step back so he could exit. He tucked his hands in the front pockets of his dirty jeans. "Well, we have workers. People pick their own, too."

Sensing rejection, Morgan kicked a pebble across the lot. "Yeah, I know. I just need to make a little money. I can pick up the apples for cider. Or toss the rotting ones. You know, to help keep the codling moth away."

"Spray shoulda taken care of that."

"Still gotta pick 'em up, though."

Travis agreed. "The school year just ended, didn't it?"

Morgan stretched his arms to the blue sky. "First free Monday."

"Gonna graduate next year, right?"

"Yeah. Finally."

"It's summer. You should be sleeping in or running around with friends."

"Maybe later."

"Or summer-romancing a girl around town," Travis suggested. "You're a good-looking guy."

His mother had often called him beautiful. Compared to the popular guys at school with girlfriends, Morgan didn't view himself as such. Although he appreciated Mr. Lancaster's compliment, he didn't believe it. "I'd need money to summer-romance a girl."

"I'll let ya collect the apples for the wildlife. When you're done, I'll find something else for ya to do. But I can't keep ya as a hired hand."

"Yeah, I know."

"Get to the field. I'll tell Manuel you're helping today."

Following the floral aroma of the apples, Morgan headed toward the trees his family had planted decades earlier.

Travis called out, "Hey. How's your father doing?"

Morgan turned and shrugged. "Eh, he's all right."

"Good to hear. Now get to the field and pick up those apples."

* * *

Many of the workers recognized Morgan. They knew his family had once owned the orchard. The initial stares caused Morgan to shy away from socializing, so he concentrated on his mission: earn money for a day's work.

A few hours passed while Morgan picked up fallen and rotten apples. Then Travis had Morgan remove debris from the ground near the blackberry and blueberry patches. Because the areas weren't in desperate need of clearing, he assumed Mr. Lancaster had created work to keep him busy throughout the day.

When the workers wandered off to enjoy their lunch break, Morgan lingered near the trees. He plucked an apple from a branch and cleaned it with his shirt. As he swallowed the first sweet-tart bite, Mrs. Lancaster appeared at his side with a smile.

Oh, God, he thought as he lowered his hand. Everyone went to lunch, and she caught me eating an apple I snatched from her tree.

Shielding the sun from her eyes, she invited Morgan to eat lunch with Mr. Lancaster in the office.

He imagined awkward periods of silence and avoiding eye contact while they ate. "Are you sure?"

"Go on. He's in the office."

The unexpected lunch in the office was a treat. Morgan and Mr. Lancaster talked about school, baseball, and the win of golfer Ernie Els at the Buick Classic. Golf didn't interest Morgan but talking about it avoided questions regarding his father. After the lunch break, he cleaned equipment and washed Travis' new red truck. Having completed a full day's work, he returned to the office to collect his payment of forty dollars.

"I wish I had work to give ya," Travis said. "I'll let ya know when I need someone."

Morgan stuffed the cash into his pocket. "Thanks for today."

"You could mow a few lawns each week. Sweat in the heat but make some easy money."

"Guess so. Don't have a mower though."

"You find lawns to mow, and I'll let ya borrow mine."

Morgan knew Mr. Lancaster had fired Frederick a few years earlier because of frequent tardiness and costly mistakes. The offer to lend Morgan lawn equipment was generous. "I don't know."

"Sure." Travis placed his hand on Morgan's shoulder. "You can start by going to your grandparents' old place."

"Ridge Street?"

"Yep. Heard someone moved in a couple weeks ago. Bet they need someone to do that big ol' lawn."

"Are they friendly?"

"Beats me. Don't know anyone that's talked to them."

Morgan considered the idea. "Thanks again."

"Come get the mower if you need it."

"Okay, I will."

Morgan hurried to the small market near his house. He was grateful the manager had never caught him stealing at the store in the past. *Paying for food now is good karma*, he thought as he searched for inexpensive food items. His father had often returned home with cheap, generic groceries or a cardboard box of donations from a local church. So, Morgan couldn't resist splurging on brand name groceries with bright colors and bold flavors. With money in hand, he earned the right to treat himself to the more delicious and satisfying alternatives.

He recognized the smiling girl at the cash register, Amber, but he didn't know her well. At school, she hung out with Brian Baxter, a guy harassed Morgan and every other boy he deemed an easy target.

Smiling, she handed him a receipt. "Turkey sandwiches and cherry vanilla ice cream."

He averted his gaze to the rack of candy bars and gum. "Yep."

As he turned to leave, he bumped into a popular jock from school. Morgan and the jock had been close friends during childhood. Their families had even enjoyed a weekend trip together to watch the Phillies play against the Giants one year. But the friends had drifted apart after Morgan's mother died.

The boy strutted by without looking at Morgan. "Watch where you're going, loser."

Regaining his balance, Morgan glared, said nothing, and walked out of the store.

* * *

Morgan and his father lived in an old, rickety house on Rose Lane. The street name was deceptive. Many of the neglected lawns featured dry brown grass and patches of dirt. Dandelions were more common than rose blooms adding splashes of color. The homes needed more than colorful roses to distract from their decrepit conditions. And colorful roses couldn't diminish Morgan's embarrassment about living in the house with his father.

He placed a can of cat food outside the backdoor for the neighborhood stray. The cat never approached closer than five feet, but Morgan always fed the calico cat he had named Scroungy. Then, with a sense of accomplishment, he put the groceries away. Before dinner, he ran a bath and soaked in the hot water. As he rinsed his hair, a bang on the door startled him.

"You almost done in there?" Frederick asked.

"Yeah." Without drying off, he wrapped a towel around his waist and opened the door.

Frederick studied his son's wet appearance. "Put the plug back in the tub."

"Huh?"

"Plug the drain. Run the hot water while I get some clothes."

Morgan returned to his room and hung his head in sadness. No warm greeting. No questions about the day. Only a demand.

He had grown accustomed to the lack of pleasantries since the death of his mother. The silence was often more hurtful than words of anger. Yet sometimes the truth of what their relationship had become pained him.

When he was twelve years old, Morgan didn't understand the deteriorating relationship with his father. But at seventeen, he understood the vast differences between himself and Frederick. His father seemed hell-bent on becoming a full-fledged alcoholic, living day to day and bottle to bottle. But Morgan daydreamed about an ideal future and his escape from Colby, Pennsylvania.

* * *

He spent the next couple of days reading *Less Than Zero* and *American Psycho*.

Most teenagers in Colby enjoyed summer break by hanging out with

friends. Boys often played baseball or basketball in the park. Girls wandered around town in small groups or watched the boys play sports. High school lovebirds drove in search of a secluded spot to explore sexual boundaries. But those activities didn't interest Morgan. A book to read or an art pad to sketch in kept him satisfied.

* * *

On Friday afternoon, warm, stale air greeted Morgan as he opened the refrigerator. The freezer didn't work either. Defeated, he slammed the door shut and tossed the container of melted ice cream to the sink. "Dammit."

Begging Frederick for money was a humiliating experience. The request always irritated his father. And Frederick consistently reacted as if Morgan should be ashamed of bothering him.

When Frederick returned home from work, he greeted his son in passing before the door creaked shut. After Frederick bathed and dressed, Morgan stopped him at the front door.

"I need money for food."

A wrinkle stretched across Frederick's forehead as he narrowed his eyes. "The grocery store?"

"The refrigerator doesn't work anymore."

"Fucking great." Frederick thrust money into Morgan's hand and stomped out to his car.

Five dollars. "What the hell am I gonna do with this?"

During the evening, he retreated to his room to read *Fight Club*. Lounging on the bed, he looked at the photograph of his mother on the nightstand.

Morgan stared at the stunning woman in the picture. Her blond hair cascaded around her face. Kindness beamed from her pale blue eyes. Her smile provided comfort. Momentarily hypnotized, his eyes welled with tears. "I miss you so much."

Doctors had diagnosed Cynthia Fischer with breast cancer shortly before Morgan's twelfth birthday. She died a few months later following the Thanksgiving holiday.

He lowered his head. "Why? Why am I here all alone?"

Silently, he let the tears flow. "I don't have anyone. No one." He laid his head on the pillow. "Nobody loves me. I'm all alone."

Morgan awoke at half past two in the morning. Frederick's car was in the driveway, so he walked to the kitchen. When he flipped the light switch, cockroaches scurried to find a dark spot to hide. Disgusted, he shuddered and headed to his father's room.

He listened to his father snore. Frederick's clothes lay in a heap next to the antique oak bed. The jeans were damp. Sweat? Beer? Urine? The source of wetness didn't matter. He rummaged through the pockets and pulled out the crumpled dollar bills. Morgan counted thirty-four dollars in the moonlight. He took nine dollars and stuffed the remaining money into the jeans.

Once he returned to his room, he hid the cash in a shoe and laid on the bed.

Morgan knew circumstances at home would only worsen. Although embarrassed to do so, he planned to ask the occupants of Fischer House if they needed someone to mow their lawn.

CHAPTER TWO

Many of the houses on the east side of town were up-to-date. The neighborhood mirrored the pages of an architectural magazine. Lawns were green and lush. Flowerbeds were colorful and pristine. A dandelion or a stray leaf was a rare sight. So, Morgan, wandering house to house, wanted to contribute a small piece of imperfection to the area.

He knelt on the sidewalk to tie his shoe and removed a stick of gum from his pocket. Certain that no one watched him, he released the silver wrapper from his fingers. It tumbled with the breeze across a driveway and settled underneath a row of trimmed hedges. Satisfied that he'd done something that would go unnoticed for days or weeks, he smiled and continued to walk.

Morgan doubted anyone needed someone to mow their lawn. Most people took care of their yard, while others recited the name of a landscaping company. To his relief, finally, an elderly woman accepted his offer.

Barbara Flynn rubbed the palm of her right hand as if it pained her. "The boy who mows my lawn hasn't been here in two weeks. But can you wait until next week?"

The tall grass needed cut though. Disappointed not to earn money that day, he smiled. "I can do your yard tomorrow."

"I can't pay you tomorrow."

"That's okay. It'll make it easier to mow next week."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I'll come by in the morning."

A man pushed a mower in the yard next door to Mrs. Flynn, so Morgan sauntered toward Fischer House. Awestruck by the house known by his family's name, he admired the three-story white Colonial with black shutters and trim. As he walked up the steps, he touched one of the four majestic columns that adorned the porch. Many people in town called it a mansion. And Morgan agreed as he thought of his small, dilapidated house on Rose Lane.

He rang the doorbell. A business card for tree trimming and a church flyer rested at the foot of the door. He pressed the button again. Still, no one answered, so he knocked on the bright-red wooden door. A minute later, Morgan stepped away.

"Can I help you?" asked a female voice.

Morgan glanced from side to side.

"I'm on the sun porch."

He scanned the area to his left, but fabric blinds pulled down in each of the windows concealed the woman from view.

"Uh, I, um—" A fleeting pang of dizziness caught him off guard. "I was going around the neighborhood asking people if they needed someone to mow their lawn." The sun burned the back of his neck as if a flame flickered against his skin. "I can take care of your yard. It's getting kinda tall."

"We haven't even finished unpacking. Haven't given the yard a thought."

He wiped the sweat from his brow. "I'm sorry. I didn't introduce myself. My name is Morgan Fischer."

"Come through the gate."

Morgan crossed a short distance on the grass and opened the gate. He passed a patch of mountain laurel and several rose bushes. The wilted roses, clinging to life, hung as if shamed by their condition while surrounded by full gorgeous blooms.

"Come on in." The woman sat in a chair near the doorway to the house. Even in the darkness of the room, Morgan appreciated her beauty. With a warm smile, she extended her hand. "My name is Ava."

She appeared to be in her mid to late thirties. In heels, she might stand taller than his five-foot-ten-inch frame. She didn't wear makeup. Her crystal blue eyes reminded Morgan of his mother's, and the sting of sadness surprised him.

Ava poured an iced beverage into two glasses from a crystal pitcher. "Lemonade. It's sweetened with honey."

"Thank you." Seated, he unconsciously tapped his foot on the floor.

"Nervous?"

"It's kinda weird being here." He placed one foot on top of the other. "My family owned this house years ago."

"Your parents?"

"Great-grandparents and grandparents."

She flicked a piece of lint from the burgundy dress that accentuated her figure. "My brother Jonathan and I came to Colby by chance and bought this

house. I admit, neither one of us is great with outdoor chores. We'll need someone to take care of the yard. Otherwise, the neighbors would complain."

"Yeah, they would."

"Can you take care of the flowers and hedges?"

"Yeah. My dad taught me about roses and apple trees and stuff when I was a kid."

"Wonderful." She clasped her hands together in her lap. "Tuesday or Wednesday will be fine."

"Um, sure." Again, Morgan concealed his disappointment not to earn money that day. "Thank you for the lemonade."

She stared deep into his eyes for several seconds.

Morgan cast his gaze to the crystal pitcher.

"I'll pay you half now and the other half on Tuesday," she said.

Not wanting to appear desperate, he blurted out, "You don't have to do that."

"It's fine. I know you'll return to do the work." Walking into the house, she called out, "I'll be right back."

Morgan's limited exposure to the home consisted of stories and family photographs. Gulping the rest of the lemonade, he wondered what the inside of the house looked like now.

She returned with thirty dollars. "I'll pay you forty to mow the lawn. Sixty for the lawn, flowers, and bushes every other week."

"That's fine. And thanks again."

"Later in the day is much better than morning."

Grateful he had money to buy food, Morgan strolled out with a cheerful bounce to his step. The summer might not be as miserable as he had anticipated.

* * *

Every Saturday and Sunday, Frederick often lingered around the house until late in the afternoon. Then he'd go out with coworkers or to the bar alone.

While his father hung around the house, Morgan preferred to be elsewhere. He favored the bench outside the library, the loading dock of the original post office, or the abandoned train station at the edge of town. Rarely distracted or interrupted, he enjoyed his self-imposed isolation. Concentrating on a book or an art project was far more beneficial than wallowing in self-pity.

The periods of depression and despair had come and gone. He had cried "why me" and complained "my life sucks" many times. Still, resilience and resolve influenced Morgan's hope for a better life. He promised himself nothing would stand in his way. So, the decision to earn his own money boosted his confidence.

* * *

On Tuesday, Morgan waited until three o'clock to retrieve the lawn mower. He hoped to finish the yard work around five o'clock, so he could make a trip to the grocery store and return home by his usual dinner time.

Fatigued by pushing the mower in the heat, he arrived at Fischer House and stood on the sidewalk. He officially recognized its beauty, towering over the nearby homes. Knowing his family had built the house provided a boastful moment of pride.

Before he knocked on the front door, Ava spoke from the sun porch. "Come on in."

She sat in the same chair near the entrance to the house. "It's nice to see you again. How are you?"

A droplet of sweat tickled the tip of his nose. "Good. You?"

"Fine. Thank you."

Kneading his earlobe, he glanced at his watch. "I should probably get started."

"Would you like something to drink? Looks like you could use it." She stepped toward the doorway. "You can come in."

In the living room area, a gorgeous olive-green sofa commanded attention. An oversized square wooden coffee table featured four individual piles of books of varying heights. Olive green and shades of blue accented various spots around the room. A small grand piano was situated near the door to the sun porch.

They crossed the foyer to a long hallway. Against the cream-colored wall, a dark wood table displayed a stack of books on one end, and a large empty clear vase on the opposite end. An abstract painting of reds, oranges, and blues hung between two bronze sconces with small lamp shades.

At a glance, Morgan admired the bright-white staircase with mahogany railing. Ava pointed at a closed door. "This is a half-bath if you need to use it."

The white kitchen cabinetry gleamed in the light. An enormous vase on

the island contained flowers not tall enough to stand above the rim of the glass.

The interior was elegant and stylish. Lights and lamps illuminated every room because fabric roller blinds blocked sunlight from shining into the home.

"What would you like to drink? Lemonade...water...juice?"

"Do you have grape juice?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I do."

"Your house is beautiful."

"Thank you. Would you like a quick tour?"

He swallowed and shook his head. "I should get to work."

A male voice asked, "Don't you want to see the home that bears your family's name?"

A tall, muscular man in jeans and a tee-shirt stood in the doorway. Dark-blond hair and piercing blue eyes highlighted a warm smile that revealed his upper teeth. He took a few steps toward Morgan and extended his hand. "I'm Ava's brother, Jonathan."

"Morgan. You scared me."

"Sorry. Didn't mean to. C'mon. I'll show you around."

Not wanting to be rude, Morgan muttered, "Sure."

Jonathan led Morgan into the dining room. The table seated ten people. Next, they walked through the living room. Two cream-colored sofas faced each other. The coffee table housed a menagerie of colored-glass vases. The sitting room with the small grand piano was across the hall, serving as the entrance to the den. Jam-packed, the floor to ceiling built-in bookshelves covered an entire wall. Two traditional chairs with navy-blue fabric seats faced an intricately designed oak desk. The den didn't have a single window.

Jonathan sat on the edge of the desk and outstretched his arms. "I spend a lot of time in here."

"What do you do for a living?"

"We invest in companies. California, New York, Philadelphia, London, and Montreal," he explained. "It allows us time to focus on personal interests. I set up a studio in the attic, so I can paint. And Ava is a pianist."

Morgan's interest swelled. "I write and sketch."

Jonathan wrapped an arm around Morgan's shoulder. "A fellow artist. Maybe we can see your work some time."

"I've never shown anyone before. Just my mom." He paused. "She died when I was twelve."

"I'm sorry about your mother. It's tough, I know. Both of our parents are deceased."

Morgan tugged at the hem of his shirt. "Thanks for the tour. I'm gonna get to work."

"You don't want to see the rest of the house?"

"Next time."

Jonathan flung his hand dismissively and pointed at the ceiling. "The bedrooms are on the second floor with a couple of bathrooms. There's another bedroom and attic space on the third floor. You can see them some other time." Gesturing toward the doorway, he said, "We'll let you get to work. You can go out through the sunroom."

* * *

Morgan enjoyed working in the yard that had once belonged to his family. He assumed his great-grandparents had planted the flowers and hedges. When he thinned and pruned the bushes, the roses received extra care. Then he pushed the lawnmower to a spot by the gate.

No one answered when he knocked on the screen door. Someone began to play the piano. The classical piece was slow and haunting. He entered and stood motionless, not sure if he should interrupt or wait for a silent moment.

"You can come in," Ava said while she continued to play.

Morgan stepped through the doorway. "I didn't mean to disturb you."

"You're not."

Fearful he might dirty the furniture with sweat, he seated himself carefully on the sofa.

Her fingers danced across the keys of the Steinway. "You're done?"

"Yeah."

"Would you like to stay for dinner?"

"Thanks. I should get going."

"I know you're thirsty," she said in a matter-of-fact manner. "And you must be hungry. Jonathan's waiting for you in the kitchen."

Morgan didn't know what to do or say. He hesitated, then walked toward the foyer. In the hallway, he stopped and looked at a framed black-and-white picture on the accent table. The weathered edges gave the appearance of a vintage photograph from decades ago. Ava wore a black dress with long black gloves and a strand of pearls that stretched out of frame. Her appearance reminded Morgan of the film *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Jonathan

stood next to her, laughing with one hand on top of the fedora on his head and the other clutching a glass of champagne. He looked sharp in a dress shirt, fitted vest, and bow tie. It was a festive scene, and the group of people in the photo appeared happy and lively.

Standing in the kitchen doorway, Morgan watched Jonathan scrub vegetables and fruit in the sink. Several seconds later, he finally stepped farther into the room. "Hey."

"Did Ava invite you to dinner?"

"Yeah."

"You'll be our first guest." Jonathan flipped the knife in the air, caught it, and resumed slicing carrots. "Salmon. Sautéed vegetables. Wild rice. You'll love it. I've spent years perfecting my culinary skills. I don't get to cook for guests often."

A few reasons not to stay for dinner raced through Morgan's mind. First, he wanted to buy groceries on his way home. Secondly, Morgan didn't want to take advantage of Travis Lancaster's generosity by returning the mower later than expected. He also worried conversation might include questions about his father.

A free meal was appealing, but he didn't want to appear eager or needy. An invitation to dinner, however, was a difficult offer to decline.

Jonathan retrieved one of his tee-shirts from the laundry room and tossed it to Morgan. "Get cleaned up. Then you can help me with dinner."

In the guest bathroom, Morgan stared at himself in the mirror. He couldn't believe the two friendly strangers had invited him to dinner. Although his surprise had faded, he still needed to conquer his embarrassment and unease. "Don't make an ass outta yourself."

Ava entered the kitchen as Jonathan and Morgan prepared the salad. She helped wash the vegetables and set the table. During the meal prep, Morgan summarized his family's history in town.

"My great-grandparents emigrated from Germany. They owned a textile business in town. I guess they made a lot of money, 'cause they built this house. They went on trips. The kids went to private school. And they had big, fancy parties here all the time. Some invitations are even at the Colby Museum.

"My grandfather, Jonas, had to take over the business after his brother Kurt drowned. And he was pissed about it. He went to Philadelphia and came back married to my grandmother, Mia. I guess it was a shock to the family.

"People thought she was after my family's money. Women said she was barren and tricked my grandfather into marrying her. But they had three kids. My dad, my Uncle Peter, and Aunt Monika.

"Peter is a casino manager in Atlantic City, and Monika works for a fashion designer in Paris. And my mother's parents retired early and moved back to Somerset, England."

Jonathan placed a bottle of wine on the counter. "There's no other family in town?"

"Nope. Just me and my dad," Morgan said. "The textile company burned to the ground, and Great-Grandpa Emil died of a heart attack. So, Grandpa Jonas convinced my great-grandmother to buy an orchard and move to a house on Oak Boulevard.

"My dad got a business degree, so he could run the orchard. He met my mother at college in Philadelphia. She moved to Colby to teach third grade, and they got married. Then I was born. But she died of breast cancer when I was twelve."

"I'm sorry," Ava said. The blue of her eyes shined as if comfort radiated from behind the pupils.

Morgan hated the awkward moment when someone learned of his mother's passing. Hearing *I'm sorry* was weird. His mind always questioned *why? You had nothing to do with it.*

She seemed to have noticed that his mind had wandered. "Your family owns an orchard?"

"No, they sold it after my grandparents died in a car accident."

"Wow, that's a lot of local history." Jonathan pointed at the food on the island. "Let's take this to the dining room. The salmon will be done any minute."

Morgan shared personal experiences at a quick pace, leaving out major details following the death of his mother. To avoid the topic of his father, he segued into baseball and school.

The flow of conversation and sporadic bouts of laughter during dinner put Morgan at ease. Finally, he relaxed and enjoyed himself.

Jonathan appeared to be a few years younger than Morgan's father, and Ava was around the age his mother would have been if she had lived. The way they interacted with each other intrigued him. They were kind and respectful, but they also teased each other in a playful manner.

Morgan devoured the baked salmon with spiced carrot sauce.

"Boy's got an appetite," Jonathan chuckled.

Convinced he'd developed the habit of eating too quickly because of not having food at home, Morgan apologized.

"Don't be sorry," Ava said.

He pressed a cloth napkin to his mouth and straightened his posture.

"Can I ask a personal question?"

"Maybe." Jonathan grinned.

"I was wondering why neither one of you are married."

Ava spoke first. "Lots of fun times and lots of mistakes." She motioned toward Jonathan. "Your turn."

"I was." Jonathan tapped his finger on the rim of the wine glass.

"Married for five years. There were some...fundamental differences."

"I was just curious," Morgan said. "I didn't mean to be intrusive."

"Intrusive?" Ava's face brightened as if impressed by Morgan's word choice.

"I read a lot."

"So, that's why you sound a bit older than your age," she teased. "Can I ask a personal question now?"

"Sure."

"You've said very little about your father. I mean, you gave us a pretty good history lesson about this house and your family. But your father, not so much."

Normally, Morgan would have ignored the question or lied in response. But he took a deep breath and exhaled forcibly. "I don't have a relationship with my father. He started drinking after my mom died. We don't talk at all. I hardly ever see him." Morgan felt strangely relieved to share details he usually tried to hide. "He's a drunk. He's never home."

"I'm sorry." Jonathan placed his hand on Morgan's shoulder. "Life can be rough. You'll get through it and be stronger for it."

Ava gathered the dishes. "Things might get better with time."

"No, they won't," Morgan shouted. "I can't wait to leave this town. Leave everything. 'Cause everything sucks. Everyone in town thinks I'm white trash now. My father is a drunk, and he ruined everything. We live in a shitty house that should be demolished. He doesn't care about having food in the house 'cause he only cares about alcohol. He doesn't give a shit about me."

When Morgan's loud rant ceased, the moment of silence that followed seemed profound.

"I'm sorry." Morgan stared at his plate. *I made an ass outta myself.*

Ava sat next to him. "Seems like you needed to get it all out in the open."

He shrugged. "I'm sorry I yelled like that."

"It's okay."

"Yeah," Jonathan said as if trying to lighten the mood. "If you're ready to move on from here, then we'll help you look at schools for college. Help you get a job somewhere."

"Why? I just met you," Morgan replied. "I've lived in this town my whole life and no one gives a shit about me."

"We're friends now," Jonathan said. "We invited you into our home. You had dinner with us. We'll be seeing you every week. We're friends."

Morgan rubbed his fingertip in a circular motion on the table. "It'll be dark soon. I need to get the lawn mower back."

Ava offered her hand. "We're glad you stayed for dinner. It was a pleasure getting to know you."

"Stop by and say hello anytime," Jonathan suggested.

The three walked to the sunroom. Jonathan handed Morgan forty dollars. "I don't have any tens. It's okay. Take it."

Morgan accepted the money and shook Jonathan's hand. "Thank you. And thanks for dinner."

"Remember what I said. Come by and visit."

"I will."

"Later in the afternoon," Ava reminded him. "Bring your writing or sketches."

Morgan was delighted to have new friends. Rather than holding onto a perpetual state of hopelessness, he was optimistic about surviving the circumstances in Colby.

He walked home thinking about Fischer House. The gorgeous furniture and décor. The delicious food. Art on the walls. Laughing and talking. And music on the piano. Excited, he wondered what great things he might experience knowing Jonathan and Ava.

CHAPTER THREE

Twice during the week, Frederick didn't return home after work. The need for a bath and a change of clothes was no longer a personal necessity. He continued to arrive home after midnight. In the morning, he still required Morgan's assistance getting out of bed.

On Friday, Morgan awoke eager to get to Barbara Flynn's house. Frederick wasn't home, and the dirty pickup didn't pull into the driveway. The mystery of his father's empty bed, however, didn't concern Morgan. Earning money for groceries was more important than Frederick's disappearing act.

* * *

Mrs. Flynn talked about the weather and her late husband for quite some time. After Morgan mowed the lawn, she gave him twenty dollars and a bag of cookies decorated like the American flag. "Happy birthday to this great country of ours."

He didn't realize it was the Fourth of July. To Morgan, holidays no longer served as an excuse to participate in celebration. Easter and Thanksgiving dinners didn't take place at home. Each Christmas passed without a tree and presents. Although saddened by the absence of festive rituals, it was another day to avoid interaction with his father. He thought of this as he walked to Fischer House.

No one answered the door. While he relaxed on the porch, he ate two of the red-white-and-blue cookies. He watched cars pull in and out of driveways. A woman pushed a stroller faster because a white Shih Tzu appeared out of nowhere to bark at her. A guy in his early twenties stopped jogging and stretched his legs. The young man cast a questioning gaze in Morgan's direction. Morgan raised his hand in a brazen gesture of saying

hello and "yeah, I'm sitting here." He brushed the crumbs from his shorts then walked to Lancaster Orchards before the midday sun burned bright and hot.

After Morgan put the lawn mower in the shed, Travis waved him over to the office. "Always good to see a hard worker."

"Thanks again for letting me use the mower. I can give you money for gas next time."

"Nah. There's a can in the shed."

"Are you sure?"

Travis nodded. "Going to the fireworks in the park?"

"Don't think so."

"We're going to watch the baseball game and grill burgers. You should join us. This year is supposed to be the biggest fireworks display Colby has ever put on."

"Really?"

"That's what they say."

"I'll think about it."

Travis patted Morgan on the back. "Hopefully we'll see ya later. Look for my truck. And bring your appetite. The missus makes the best potato salad in town."

* * *

Morgan arrived at the baseball field half-way through the game. Travis and his wife, Norma, greeted him warmly and introduced him to a few people. Within minutes, he had a lawn chair and a plate of food. The chitchat and meal provided a welcome change of pace to Morgan's usual evening at home alone. When the game was nearly over, he walked to the park to watch the fireworks.

He saw many familiar faces, including several kids from school. As he strolled through the main entrance to the park, he spotted Brian Baxter. Of course, the scrawny, tall, and shaggy-haired teen couldn't resist the opportunity to harass Morgan and marched in his direction.

Amber stood among Brian's small group of friends. Smiling, she raised her hand in acknowledgment.

Brian puffed out his chest. "Why the hell is your father messing around with my mom?"

"How would I know?"

"I don't like your alcoholic-loser-of-a-father trying to get it on with my mom. Spending the night at our house."

Morgan laughed. "If my alcoholic-loser-of-a-father and your alcoholic-whore-of-a-mother spent the night together, then you should know they're getting it on. And I don't give a shit. I'm not hanging around this town long enough to care."

"You're calling my mom a whore?"

"I'm repeating common knowledge."

They stood nose to nose. Morgan clenched his fists and braced himself for a fight. Although he ignored ex-friends who harassed him, he embraced the prospect of punching Brian in the face.

"You're a white-trash piece of shit," Brian taunted. "I'm gonna kick your fucking ass."

"Maybe. But I'll fight back, asshole."

Brian unexpectedly stepped back.

"Hey, Morgan," a male voice called.

The Lancasters walked in their direction. Morgan waved then faced Brian with a smirk.

Travis put his arm around Morgan's shoulders. "What seems to be the problem?"

"This guy's alcoholic-whore-of-a-mother is fucking around with my alcoholic-loser-of-a-father."

Norma frowned at the use of profane language.

Brian raised his middle finger and mouthed, "Fuck you."

"What does that have to do with you?" Travis asked Morgan.

"Nothing."

Norma adjusted a bracelet on her wrist and addressed Brian. "This is an issue between your parents, not the two of you. Go cool off." She brushed a strand of salon-bleached hair from her face then shoed him off with her hand.

"Thanks," Morgan said. "One of us would have thrown a punch."

Travis raised his eyebrows with interest. "You could take him on. If you need pointers, let me know."

"Don't encourage him to fight," Norma said.

Morgan smiled. "He started it. I was defending myself."

Travis patted Morgan's shoulder. "Let's go watch the fireworks."

Once they reached the viewing area, Morgan spotted Ava and Jonathan

several feet away. She noticed him and smiled. Jonathan turned toward him and waved. After briefly speaking to each other, they walked toward him.

"Hey, Morgan," she said. "Didn't expect to run into you tonight."

"The Lancasters talked me into it."

Jonathan smiled. "Oh. Lancaster Orchards."

"Yeah. This is Travis and Norma Lancaster."

They exchanged greetings and handshakes. "You're the folks living in Fischer House," Travis said.

Morgan tucked his hands into his pockets and swiveled on his feet.

"Yes," Jonathan replied. "This is our first night out on the town."

A boom of fireworks echoed throughout the park, followed by a red glow on the faces in the crowd.

Ava watched the explosion of sparks fade away, then she nudged Morgan in the ribs. "You're quiet."

"Sorry. Just surprised to see you here."

"Trapped in the house all day. It's nice to be out and about finally."

"You came out just for the big Colby Fireworks Extravaganza?"

Jonathan chuckled. "We had business to take care of first."

"In Colby?" Morgan asked with amazement.

Jonathan pointed at a triple eruption of blue and white lights.

The grand finale occurred twenty minutes later when an arsenal of fireworks rumbled and lit up the park. Travis and Norma offered Morgan a ride home.

"No. I'm fine," he said. "I'm gonna hang back a bit."

After saying goodbye to Ava and Jonathan, the Lancasters walked hand-in-hand toward the baseball field.

Jonathan squeezed Morgan's shoulder. "Are you sure you don't want a ride home?"

"No. Walking is fine." He scanned the thinning crowd and saw Brian perched atop the brick wall near the parking lot.

"Oh, c'mon," Ava encouraged. "We'll take you. No sense in walking when we can drop you off."

He didn't want to be rude and jeopardize the income mowing their lawn provided. So, he exhaled heavily, "All right."

Once they arrived at the run-down house, Morgan reached for the handle, pushed the door open, and stepped out of the Mercedes as quickly as possible. "Thanks."

"Hey," Jonathan said. "What's your rush?"

Morgan turned on his heel. "I'm sorry. It's just embarrassing. I didn't want you guys to see where I live."

Ava motioned for him to move closer. "We're not going to judge you because of the house you live in."

"Yeah, I know. But..." He reached underneath his shirt and scratched his stomach.

"We like you, Morgan," Jonathan said. "That's not going to change because of your house."

"Okay." He fidgeted with the hem of his shirt and continued to caress his stomach. "So, I'll see you Tuesday."

"Yes," Ava said. "But you're welcome to stop by before then."

"Maybe stay for dinner," Jonathan suggested.

Morgan hoped they didn't view him as a starving kid that needed their pity. "Um. Yeah." He glanced at the house. "I'm gonna go in now. Thanks again for the ride."

"You're welcome." Jonathan smiled. "Any time."

* * *

The Colby Public Library was a light-toned brick building. The one-story structure spanned a whole block but didn't stock as many books as it appeared. That Saturday morning, Morgan intended to ask the librarian for a couple of recommendations when he returned his borrowed books at the counter.

A young man knelt on the floor, cursing at the computer printer. "What the hell is wrong with this thing?" When he noticed Morgan, he didn't smile as he rose to his feet. "Hey."

Morgan recognized him as the jogger he saw while seated on the porch of Fischer House. "Hello. Where's Mrs. Johnson?" He placed three books on the counter.

The guy, friendly but a bit cocky, read each spine. "She has the morning off."

"You just started working here?"

"Only for the summer while I'm home from college."

"Okay. I'm gonna look around."

"Well, it is a library. Knock yourself out, sport." He added the books to a pile of returns and crouched in front of the printer.

Several minutes later, Morgan positioned himself on the floor to peruse a

small shelf of donated paperbacks. Any library member could borrow one or claim it to own. Most of the titles catered to romance readers.

A young guy rushed inside to the front desk. "Yo, Kyle."

The college student appeared from the office area. "Hey, dumbass. What are you doing here?"

Dumbass snorted. "You're not gonna believe it."

"Katrina finally let you slip her the tip."

"No. They found a headless body outside town."

"What? No way! Someone found a dead body?"

"Yeah. And the head is missing."

"Are you fucking with me? I don't have time for stupid games. I have to get these books on the shelf before Mrs. Johnson gets here. She'll throw a fit. And,"—he stressed—"She'll probably tell my mom. So, I'll have to hear about it at home, too."

"I'm serious. The state police are here and everything."

"Man, that's crazy. Wonder who it is?"

Morgan waved the paperback in his hand. "I'm gonna take this."

"*The Catcher in the Rye*? Yeah, okay. Good one."

"Teenage angst," Dumbass said.

Kyle laughed. "You haven't read a book since elementary school."

Dumbass ignored the comment.

Morgan strolled out as the young men contemplated who might find the missing head.

* * *

Calvin Hodges had discovered the headless body at the edge of his sweet cornfield. He calmly called the Colby Police Department. Accommodating and friendly, the sixty-seven-year-old man displayed patience when officers and detectives arrived. Yet his agitation swelled when CSI cordoned off a larger area of his field and dirt driveway. Then they presented him with a search warrant and taped off a bulk of the cornfield to look for the dead man's head. Later, Calvin Hodges fully embraced his anger when they told him not to water the corn until the crime scene investigation concluded.

"Ah, the hell with ya," he muttered as he stomped away. "Lemme know when I can take care of my damn crop."

Detectives determined the killer had dumped the male victim's body during nighttime hours. He wore a white windbreaker, a gray University of

Pennsylvania tee-shirt, black biker-shorts, white socks, and sneakers. A silver watch, two silver rings, a brown leather-string bracelet, and black leather wallet remained in his possession. The wallet contained one hundred seventeen dollars, three recent receipts, nine business cards, one packaged condom, and his driver's license. His name was Maxwell Thornton.

The twenty-eight-year-old man had rented a summer home at Lake Harmony. Maxwell was often spotted biking around the lake or along Route 903. He was last seen traveling east along the state highway at seven in the evening on July Fourth. A jogger discovered his bike near Tunkhannok Creek off Route 903 and Brier Crest Road, three miles from the home rental. Signs of a struggle did not exist. The absence of blood on the ground and bike confused investigators.

Blood wasn't found at the cornfield. The blood on the collar of the shirt and neck area suggested Maxwell had been beheaded and drained upside down. The lack of footprints, undisturbed environment, and the condition of the clothes indicated the killer had dropped the body at the scene. There was no recovery of DNA evidence not belonging to Maxwell. Despite extensive searches, no one found Maxwell's head.

* * *

Colby buzzed with conversation about the headless body. The older population was concerned a killer had dumped the body in their neck of the woods. Young residents were intrigued. The murder was the most noteworthy news since eighty-four-year-old Mr. Williams had accidentally driven into the entrance of the bank downtown.

Soon, people learned the body had been drained of blood. Eventually, the man's identity became common knowledge. Then people talked as though they had personally known Maxwell Thornton. Why did the killer cut off his head? A trophy? Why was his body dumped where it could easily be found? Why was his body virtually bloodless?

CHAPTER FOUR

Once again, Morgan was disappointed that Jonathan and Ava weren't home. An envelope with a short note and forty dollars was taped to the screen door. He did his work, returned the lawn mower, and made a trip to the grocery store before going home.

Irritated to see his father's car in the driveway, Morgan slowed his pace toward the porch. He thought about sneaking in the back door but decided against it. The moment he walked into the house, Frederick peeked out of his bedroom. Morgan said hello and closed the door with his foot.

Frederick crossed his arms. "Hey, there you are."

"Yep. Here I am."

"You need to clean this house tonight. Make sure you wash the dishes."

Clenching his jaw, Morgan stared at a random spot on the wall. "Fine."

"Don't give me any attitude."

"I'm not."

His father eyed the bag of groceries. "Shopping?"

"I've been mowing lawns for money. I had to buy food."

"Uh, huh."

Morgan walked toward the kitchen without saying a word.

* * *

The house needed a thorough cleaning. But Morgan doubted the old, dreary residence could look any better. Still, obeying Frederick's orders, he collected the cleaning supplies and prepared to work.

He didn't want to clean his father's bedroom, so he skipped it. He swept the floors and dusted. The bathroom got a quick mop and sponge job. He wiped the kitchen counters and stove, then mopped the floor. Tired of the

housekeeper routine, Morgan opted to place the dishes in the oven until the following day.

He spent the evening reading *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Hours later, Morgan awoke to the sound of his bedroom door crashing against the dresser, causing items to fall to the floor. His father screamed, "GET UP."

Startled by the noise, Morgan rubbed his eyes and turned on the lamp. The tone of his father's voice unnerved him. "What?"

"Get your ass outta bed right now."

He jumped to his feet and reached for his jeans.

Storming across the room, Frederick seized Morgan by the elbow. "You don't need to get dressed. Get your ass in the kitchen."

Frederick flung the oven door open. "What the fuck is this?" He pulled out the dishes and threw them on the counter. A coffee mug shattered on the linoleum floor. "I told you to clean the house."

"I did."

"No. You hid the dirty dishes in the oven."

"I was gonna do 'em tomorrow."

"You're going to do them NOW."

"It's two o'clock in the morning."

Frederick grunted and marched across the kitchen. He pulled Morgan toward the sink. "Wash the damn dishes."

The nasty stench of whiskey on his father's breath would have easily offend any seasoned drinker.

Morgan stood motionless. Frederick pushed Morgan's body against the edge of the kitchen counter.

"Ow," Morgan protested as his stomach pressed against the sink.

Frederick whacked the back of his son's head. "Stop whining and clean the fucking dishes." Muttering under his breath, he stomped to his bedroom and slammed the door shut.

"Asshole," Morgan whispered as his eyes watered and burned.

* * *

The township of Colby kept the old post office building erected as a historical relic from the past. The postal service had stopped using the facility decades earlier. At one time, a portion of the building served as a thrift store,

but the business closed within two years. All the doors were padlocked to keep people from entering the premises.

Morgan favored one spot in particular. A large, very thick wood bench he could stretch out on or arrange his art tools.

He flipped through his sketch book. Eight blank pages remained. Because he didn't know when he could buy a new sketch pad, he chose each new project carefully. The next drawing would be more elaborate in size and detail.

Four boys about thirteen years old approached with skateboards. Morgan had seen them at the post office many times. They liked to skate on the concrete loading ramp and parking lot pavement. Frequently, one dared another to perform a dangerous maneuver, which usually ended with a boy screaming out in pain. Like most boys, they continued unfazed.

They acknowledged Morgan and jumped on their skateboards. Morgan waved and gave the thumbs up.

Sketching the skateboarders, he sensed someone watching him. A chill spasmed on the back of his neck. He scanned the alley and a field bordered by barbed-wire fencing, but he saw no one. The sensation of being watched remained.

"What are you doing?" one of the boys asked.

"I thought someone was watching us. But I don't see anyone."

A boy pointed at the field. "I think someone was over there."

Everyone stared at the grass waving in the wind. The late afternoon sun was bright and hot. Soon, darkness would set upon the small town.

The dark-haired boy snickered. "You guys are crazy. There isn't anyone over there. Stop being a bunch of scared pussies."

"I'm not scared," one declared. "And I'm not a pussy."

The dark-haired boy sang, "P-U-S-S-Y. Gonna get scared and start to cry."

Morgan stared at the field again as the boys continued to tease each other. Still, he saw no one. "Yeah, I don't think anyone's out there. We woulda seen 'em. There isn't even a tree to hide behind."

"Way on the other side," the blond boy said.

"He'd have to be pretty fast," another replied.

Morgan looked at the darkened group of trees. The canopy of leaves and twisted branches concealed what or who might be hiding inside. A wisp of smoke caught his eye. It slowly rose from behind a tree and danced in the breeze until it quickly faded from view.

"Hey," the dark-haired boy said in a low, serious voice. "Maybe it's the killer."

A boy named Mike responded. "Yeah, it's probably the killer, and he wants to chop off someone's head." He waved his skateboard around, cutting through the air with a pronounced swoosh. "I'll protect you guys and beat his ass with my board."

A rock landed with a loud crack on the pavement. Morgan and the boys jumped. A second rock landed at the boys' feet. The young teenagers ran toward the alley while Morgan quickly gathered his art supplies. A third rock crashed through one of the windows of the post office. He snatched his backpack from the ground and ran. Arriving at Main Street, they stopped to catch their breath.

"That was just someone messing with us," Mike panted, his concern more than apparent. "Someone trying to scare us."

"It worked," Morgan said as a rock hit the upper area of his ass.

The four boys ran left. Morgan sprinted right.

* * *

Someone knocked on the front door after nine o'clock. Morgan placed his sketch pad on the bed and sauntered to the living room suspiciously. "Who is it?"

"Janis."

He opened the door. "Oh, yeah. Hello."

Brian Baxter's mom stood there, expressionless. "Your dad told me to come over. Said he'd meet me here after he did something."

"What's he doing?"

"Beats the hell out of me." Janis pushed the door and entered with a six-pack of beer, a bottle of vodka, and a bag of pretzels. "I didn't ask. He gave me money to buy this stuff and said to meet him here. So, here I am."

She wore cutoff jean shorts and a white tee-shirt with a rock band's name in bold block-letters over the image of a guitar. Her hair, stringy and wet, hung past her shoulders. Plopping down on the sofa, she crossed one leg over the other. The bottom of her sandals was falling apart.

Morgan then realized his father had wanted him to clean the house for her. The fact that Frederick had given Janis money to buy alcohol and snacks was insulting. He closed the door and nibbled on the tip of his thumb. "So, he's coming home soon?"

"Yeah, I guess." She twisted the cap off a bottle. "What are you doing? Watching TV?"

"The television isn't even on."

"Oh," she cackled. "Geez, man. Pay attention to details, Janis."

"You want me to turn on the TV?"

She chugged the beer and waved her hand in the air. "Sure, man. I can find something to watch while I wait."

He handed the remote to her. "Okay, I'm going to my room."

Without looking at him, she flicked her hand in his direction. "Hey. You have cable?"

"If he paid the bill, we do."

Morgan tried to finish work on a sketch. Every time Janis cackled, he cringed. Her annoying guffaw was a constant distraction that would have tested the sanity of any person. An hour later, he set aside the sketch pad and peeked out the window. There was no car in the driveway.

The thought of staying in Colby after graduating high school worried him. Attending college in New York City represented a far-fetched dream. He certainly didn't have the financial means to pay for schooling. But earning a degree was his best chance of creating the life he wanted.

Another option involved reaching out to Uncle Peter, Aunt Monika, or his grandparents in England. Although, he didn't feel comfortable imposing upon them.

Morgan considered all the possibilities. With limited resources, a year wasn't a lot of time to prepare. Jonathan and Ava's offer to help had caught him off guard. It was either a gesture of kindness or a sincere proposal. Either way, Morgan wanted to pursue the possibility that their friendship could improve his chances of accomplishing his goal.

CHAPTER FIVE

Morgan assumed his artwork was the best way to solidify a friendship with Jonathan and Ava. Proud of his work, he appreciated their interest. But sharing his art with two people knowledgeable enough to judge whether or not it was good fueled his nervous energy.

As expected, no one answered the front door. He walked through the side gate and knocked on the screen door of the sun porch. Following a moment of silence, he entered and tapped on the wooden door to the house. Several seconds later, it cracked open.

Dressed in a pair of basketball shorts, Jonathan wiped sweat from his bare chest with a tee-shirt. "I was working out with the punching bag." He pointed at Morgan's sketch pad. "You finally brought some of your work."

"I mowed your neighbor's lawn, so I thought I'd stop by."

"I'm glad you did. You can come in."

In the kitchen, Jonathan poured water into two glasses then reached for the sketch book. "May I?"

"Yeah, of course." Morgan nervously handed it to him. He studied Jonathan's face for signs of approval or disappointment.

Jonathan's gaze lingered on each page. "These are really good."

"Thank you."

Drenched with sweat, Ava entered, tossing her hand wraps onto the island. "Hey, Morgan."

"Hello."

"You brought your sketches." She peeked over Jonathan's shoulder. "You definitely have artistic talent. I like how you use color, not just black and white."

Jonathan agreed. "More captivating with color."

"You should go to college for art," she said.

Morgan rubbed a finger along his bottom lip. "I like to write and sketch. But what kind of life could I have as a struggling artist?"

"A happy one. Follow your passion. Pursue your talents and make a life with them."

"That's right," Jonathan exclaimed. "Do you want to be an accountant?"

"No."

"Work at a department store?"

Morgan scoffed at the suggestion.

"Don't lower your expectations or give up on your goals."

"Okay. Okay." Morgan glanced at Ava fanning herself with her hand. "So, you box, too?"

"Yes." Assuming the southpaw stance, she jabbed at Jonathan. "I can kick my brother's ass."

Jonathan laughed. "Actually, she *can* kick my ass." Standing, he faced her with his hands at chest level.

Ava punched his palms in quick succession. When he turned and grinned at Morgan, she slapped him on the head. He twisted back into position and moved his hands up, down, and to the side. Ava landed a punch every single time. Suddenly, he shifted his body downward. Her fist sailed through the air and shattered the pitcher of water. Morgan gasped and jumped from the stool. Jonathan swiped the sketch pad from the island with a speed that surprised Morgan.

As she pulled her hand back, blood splattered onto her tank top. "Dammit."

"I'm sorry." Jonathan gave the sketch pad to Morgan. Rushing around the island, he grabbed a towel and tossed it to her.

After inspecting the wound, she wrapped her hand and held it against her breast.

Morgan approached. "You might need stitches."

"No. I'm fine."

"If it doesn't stop bleeding soon, you'll need to go to the hospital."

Jonathan picked up broken glass from the floor. "Watch where you step."

Morgan reached out for Ava's hand. "Let me see."

"It's fine."

"Sorry. I'm only trying to help. I got stitches when I was ten. I cut my arm on a piece of metal. There's nothing to it."

"I'm not scared of getting stitches."

The hum of the ceiling fan betrayed the silence.

"Just show him," Jonathan said.

Her eyes widened. "Seriously?"

"Go ahead. Show him your hand," Jonathan said as he scooped glass onto a dustpan.

Morgan reached for her hand again. "You're a beautiful woman. You don't want an ugly scar." He unwrapped the towel. "You can hardly see the scar on my arm now."

Blood coated Ava's hand. No wound. He examined her fingers. Not a single laceration. Morgan looked directly into Ava's eyes.

"Like I said, no stitches."

A wave of confusion washed over him. The pounding of his heart intensified so quickly that it stunned him. He released her hand and stepped back. "What's going on? I don't understand."

The noise of glass hitting the bottom of the metal container rattled Morgan's attempt to remain calm.

"No stitches," Ava repeated and walked to the sink to wash her hand.

He stared at Jonathan. "Is this a joke? A trick?"

"No. How could we have planned this? We didn't even know you were coming here."

Ava crossed her arms. "I cut myself. I bled. I healed."

Morgan cast a skeptical gaze in her direction. "Ha ha."

"Don't be so theatrical, Ava," Jonathan said.

"I'm not." She picked up a piece of glass from the floor. Stepping up to Jonathan, she sliced his chest. The blood dripped quickly, following the grooves of his abs. "That's theatrical."

Jonathan winced and glared at Ava with disapproval.

The cut had split Jonathan's skin at least five inches. Within seconds, the wound closed and healed. Morgan glanced at Ava, then looked at Jonathan. "This is fucked up. I'm leaving."

"Don't leave," Jonathan said. "We wouldn't do anything to hurt you."

"Of course not," Ava added.

Panic set in, but Morgan was intrigued. A part of him wanted to stay, the other part of him wanted to flee to the house on Rose Lane.

She advanced toward him and placed her hand on his chest. "Your heart is pounding."

He flinched, bumping into Jonathan who had appeared behind him.

Grasping Morgan by the arm, Jonathan led him to a stool. "We knew that we'd have to be honest with you at some point."

"Honest about what?" Morgan asked. "You're both mutant superheroes or something?"

"That would be interesting," Ava chuckled.

Jonathan pulled a tee-shirt over his head. "We're not mutants or superheroes."

"Not aliens," Ava said.

Tempted to laugh, Morgan paused then asked, "Vampires?"

Neither responded.

"Bullshit. This is crazy."

"We don't go outside during the day," Ava said.

"All the windows have blinds blocking out the sunlight," Jonathan stated.

"We don't eat as much food as you."

Jonathan pointed at his chest. "We can heal ourselves."

"Now you're gonna kill me and drink my blood?"

"We never entertained the thought," Ava said. "Once we knew we could trust you, we had a proposition for you."

"A proposition? If I say no, then you kill me and drink my blood."

"We're not going to kill you and drink your blood," Jonathan asserted. "Get the thought outta your head."

Morgan repeated their strong denials in his mind. Although he wanted to believe them, fear overwhelmed him. His panic escalated. He needed to escape. Pushing Jonathan and Ava aside, he knocked the stool over and ran.

In the hallway, he crashed into the table, causing a vase to fall to the floor. He reached for the lock on the front door. Unexpectedly, Jonathan's hand pressed against the door. Morgan spun around to sprint toward the sun porch, but Ava stood in the sitting room.

Jonathan gently touched Morgan's arm. "Calm down. Come sit with us so we can explain everything."

"I wanna go," Morgan demanded and pulled the blinds from the nearest window.

Jonathan and Ava retreated from the rays of invading sunlight.

"Please," Jonathan begged. "Listen to us."

Morgan reached for the lock.

"We can help you. And you can help us," Ava said.

"Did you kill that guy and cut his head off?"

"No," Jonathan and Ava responded in unison.

Jonathan motioned to the living room. Morgan hesitated and fidgeted with the doorknob, twisting it side to side. He wanted to run but relented and

walked into the sitting room. Cautiously, he situated himself on the edge of the chair, with the coffee table separating him from Jonathan and Ava.

"Yes, vampires exist," Jonathan said. "There are a lot of us. Not thousands upon thousands, but a lot of us."

"Jonathan transformed first," Ava explained. "Then a few years later, I did."

"Your brother turned you into a vampire?"

"A guy followed me home after work. When I got to the door, he tried to take my purse. I fought back, and he stabbed me. Jonathan heard my screams, ran to the porch, and killed him. When I lost a lot of blood, he drained me to the point of death. He offered me his blood, and I accepted it. I didn't die. I was reborn. He saved me."

Morgan cast his gaze at Jonathan. "And you?"

"I was attacked in Boston. He was going to kill me, but I begged. I didn't want to die at thirty-seven years old. I didn't want to leave my sister all alone."

"When did this happen?" You were thirty-seven. How old are you now?"

"1927. I was thirty-seven years old in 1927. I'm one hundred and seven-years old."

Morgan reacted with laughter. "Vampires are real. You're over one hundred years old. Now you live in Colby, Pennsylvania, hiding from the sunlight in my family's old house."

"Yes," Ava responded. "When I drank Jonathan's blood, I felt the transformation take place. Later, he showed me the effect that sunlight had on him. And I knew what we were."

Morgan turned toward Jonathan. "I thought sunlight killed vampires."

"A vampire has to be hundreds of years old for that to happen. When you're that old and powerful, the sun can kill you instantly."

Morgan thought of many questions. "Cut the head off?"

"Beheading will kill anyone, human or vampire," Jonathan replied. "Beheading, sunlight, and bleeding to death."

"Bleeding to death?"

"Yes. Losing more than forty to fifty percent of your blood can kill you. But some people do recover. The blood replaces itself. The body adjusts. Red blood-cells take the longest to replenish. Most vampires recover more quickly because of our healing ability."

"Garlic?"

Jonathan laughed. "Vegetables won't kill a vampire or keep them away."

"Can you see your reflection in a mirror? Be photographed?"

"Yes, and yes."

"Stake through the heart?"

"It will kill a vampire, but you have to destroy the heart, too. You must burn it. Because another vampire can gain the power of the dead vampire by eating it."

Morgan's nose crinkled at the thought. "Disgusting."

Ava removed a strand of hair from her face. "Vampires are mostly killed by humans. Only deranged, power-hungry vampires kill other vampires. But usually, they're stopped before they even get a chance."

"How?"

Jonathan took a deep breath. "The older, more powerful vampires normally weed out the monsters that live among us. And there are monsters, to be sure."

Ava rose to her feet. "We can't answer all your questions. It's forbidden to educate humans on the history of Immortals." She crossed the room and paused at the foot of the staircase. "I'm going to change my clothes."

Morgan shifted his weight in the chair. His fear had diminished, allowing him to relax again. Still, he wasn't convinced Jonathan and Ava were, in fact, true vampires.

"I know you don't want to believe us," Jonathan said as he stood. "But we're being open and honest with you. We're putting a lot of trust in you. This is our secret, Morgan. This is a secret that Ava and I are sharing with you. We need you to keep it to yourself."

"Why tell me?"

"Well, the broken pitcher and healing in front of you made it impossible to avoid."

"This is unbelievable. How do I go home knowing vampires exist? Believing that you and Ava are vampires? Or so you claim."

"First, it's Immortals, not vampires." Jonathan knelt and placed his hands on Morgan's knees. "Please. Trust us like we trust you."

Morgan stared at the broken vase on the floor of the foyer. He noticed the framed black-and-white photograph of Ava and Jonathan. He straightened his posture and pointed. "When was that picture taken?"

Jonathan glanced over his shoulder. Returning his gaze to Morgan, he smiled. "In the early 1920s. 1924, I believe."

"Not a Roaring Twenties costume party or something?"

"No. The year was 1924."

Morgan stared at Jonathan's white teeth glistening in the light. "Okay. I promise."

"Listen, buddy. I know it's strange asking you to keep a secret like this. But you're our first real friend in Colby. And you consider us friends, right?"

"Yeah." Morgan leaned back in the chair. "I won't say anything to anyone."

"Thank you." Jonathan hugged Morgan in a tight embrace and playfully ruffled his hair. "Our secret."

Morgan's body tensed with fear but quickly relaxed. "No one would believe me."

Jonathan rose to his feet and pointed at the window blinds on the floor. "Will you take care of that, please?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry."

"No, don't be sorry. Great instincts. A quick reaction."

CHAPTER SIX

Morgan wanted to ask many questions. How does it feel to live decades longer than mortals? What are other vampires like? Are fangs concealed from human eyes by retracting after a feeding? How does it feel to be responsible for killing someone? He yearned to hear stories and be educated. Although he wanted to know boring and extraordinary details, he didn't want to annoy them. Loyalty and time would allow him to seek answers.

He didn't fear Jonathan and Ava as a pair of evil serial killers tempted to kill. They had welcomed him into their home with kindness and open arms. They had shared a great, dark secret with him. But Morgan understood they killed to consume blood, and that fact provoked recurring feelings of uneasiness.

As weeks passed, Morgan became more comfortable with Jonathan and Ava's true nature. Something exotic about their journey captivated him. And they provided the acceptance and love he had desperately craved for so long, welcoming him as part of their family.

Morgan spent a considerable amount of time at Fischer House. In doing so, Jonathan and Ava became more informed of Morgan's life, his pain and alienation. And Morgan learned about the two of them as well.

Ava could be playful, but she was much more serious than Jonathan. Like her brother, she was intelligent. Morgan assumed it was because of the extension of life as an Immortal. Advice occurred during conversation, but she never set out to teach Morgan lessons with a great monologue.

"Life is a journey," she said one day. "We all have a path to travel. There may be obstacles and detours along the way, but it is your path, nonetheless."

Ava loved books and movies. She gave Morgan novels she believed he should read. *Ulysses*, *The Great Gatsby*, *1984*, *At the Mountains of Madness*, *Little Women*, *The Age of Innocence*, *The Sun Also Rises*, and *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. She enjoyed discussing each novel with

Morgan. "What did you think?" "What made it good?" "What didn't you like about the story?"

Movies that provoked an emotional response were her favorite. *All About Eve*, *The Color Purple*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Imitation of Life*, *East of Eden*, *Silence of the Lambs*, *Stand by Me*, *Goodfellas*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *The Shawshank Redemption*. Ava wasn't embarrassed to cry or laugh or scream with fear while viewing a film. She loved to see Morgan's reaction while he watched a movie for the first time.

Music was Ava's greatest satisfaction. She gravitated to the piano as if it fueled her soul. She once said she had played the guitar for a while. Morgan guessed it was a short-lived musical excursion because she referred to it as "strumming the guitar years ago."

Occasionally, she interpreted a rock or pop song on the piano. By nature, Ava played moody, haunting classical pieces that resonated with the listener long after the final note faded. Sometimes she sat at the piano and composed mesmerizing music for a poem she had written.

"Morgan," she called from the piano bench. "Come help me."

"Help with what?"

"Put the apple down." She patted the piano bench. "You write. I haven't read any of your writing. I want you to add words to this."

Ava played a slow melody, adding chords and bass notes.

"Um, I don't know," he said and sat, listening to the music. "I've never written a song before."

She handed him a pencil and a pad of paper. "Just let the music move you and write whatever comes to mind."

Morgan closed his eyes and listened. He sensed sadness and longing in the notes. A couple of minutes later, he wrote on the paper. He handed it to her, picked up the apple, and returned to the living room to continue looking at a book of photography Jonathan had given him.

Ava read the words as she continued to play the melody.

Oh, my God, I'm so hollow inside

An empty shell of what I used to be

I pray for the appointed time

When I won't break so easily

Jonathan received a lot of joy in teaching Morgan about art. He introduced Morgan to a variety of art papers, soft pastels, charcoal, oil paints, pens, pencils, brushes, and canvas. Picasso, Jackson Pollock, Monet, Helen

Frankenthaler, Wassily Kandinsky, and Schnabel. Ansel Adams, Mapplethorpe, Bruce Weber, Irving Penn, Horst, Herb Ritts, Edward Weston, and Avedon.

They worked side by side in the attic studio. Morgan was also allowed to create in the studio alone. When they didn't create art in the attic, the two worked out by lifting weights.

Whether Morgan spent time with Jonathan in the studio or in the kitchen, he learned Jonathan was a caring and nurturing man. He had a great sense of humor and liked to play pranks. Hot sauce in the orange juice. Bubble wrap under the toilet seat. Whatever made him laugh off and on for several minutes.

He liked rock music, especially Fleetwood Mac, Tori Amos, Sheryl Crow, Depeche Mode, Radiohead, The Beatles, and Sting. When he lounged around or when he felt moody, he listened to Ella Fitzgerald, Chet Baker, and Nina Simone.

Jonathan liked to discuss life and the lessons he had learned to be of value. "Be a hard worker. Always be productive. Don't be lazy about your goals and dreams," he said. "Always strive to be a better version of you." "Don't let painful experiences, mistakes, or failures define you. Learn from them." "Anger and resentment are diseases of the mind and body. Your spirit will weaken from holding on to the negative." "Never give someone the power to control how you view yourself and your self-worth."

One day, while watching Jonathan paint, Morgan asked, "Who attacked you in Boston?"

"The Immortal that transformed my life...and me?"

"Yeah."

He set aside his paint brush. "I remember it vividly. It was Autumn, 1927. October eleventh. I even remember it was a Tuesday," he said. "And it was a chilly evening. The kind of bitter cold when you know an early winter is just around the corner."

* * *

Jonathan rushed along the gaslit streets of Beacon Hill, passing a poster for the film *The Jazz Singer*. It was a movie he wanted to see because people said it signaled 1927 as the beginning of "sound pictures." He made a mental note of taking his wife to see the film that coming Saturday. Then he glanced at his pocket watch.

He prided himself on being punctual. Running late for a business meeting produced a state of agitation. And he didn't look forward to delivering bad news to the man awaiting his arrival.

At the boarding house, he stopped in front of the first-floor shop. The window mirrored his reflection perfectly. He adjusted his coat and shirt, then smoothed the hair on the top of his head. Once inside, he raced up the stairs two steps at a time.

An unassuming businessman greeted Jonathan with a wide smile. "Good evening, Mr. Astor."

Jonathan nodded. "Mr. Quinn."

The gentleman presented the modestly furnished room. "Please, come in."

"I apologize for my tardiness. Dinner with the wife lasted longer than expected."

Mr. Quinn smiled. "How is Evelynn?"

Jonathan handed his coat to the man. "Not thrilled with me at the moment. But fine otherwise."

"You know how women can be. They can kiss you and scold you within the same minute."

Jonathan chuckled. "Too true, Mr. Quinn." He walked to the small table situated next to the window. A bottle of red wine enticed him. He picked it up and read the label. "May I?"

"Of course. Have a seat. I'll get two glasses."

The activity on the street below caught Jonathan's attention. He watched pedestrians stroll along the sidewalk; men sporting overcoats and derby hats alongside women in collegiate-style coats, carrying a clutch purse or pochette. His gaze focused on a young couple kissing on the corner. He smiled, then looked at Mr. Quinn walking into the room.

The wine was cheap, but Jonathan appreciated the grape. "Thank you."

Mr. Quinn sat on the wooden chair and savored the cabernet for a few moments. "Now, as you know, we are planning the expansion of the hotel. Additional rooms and a restaurant will enable us to—"

"I'm sorry. We decided not to invest in your hotel."

Mr. Quinn smiled, but his relaxed posture projected defeat. "Mr. Astor. If you and your company need extra time to make a fully-formed decision."

Jonathan knew Mr. Quinn needed the money to persuade the banker his hotel would no longer be in the red. "I'm sorry. We've discussed it several times. The investment isn't in our best interest."

"May I ask why?"

"Honestly, we spread ourselves too thin. During the past couple years, we've invested in several promising ventures. I'm afraid we can't invest in additional proposals."

"My proposal is humble. It's not a large sum of money."

"Again, Mr. Quinn. I apologize that we are declining the opportunity." Because his father had taught him to always be respectful discussing business, he added, "We wish you the very best with your expansion. In the future, if you wish to contact us again, we might be in a better financial situation to invest in your hotel."

"The expansion would certainly guarantee no further investments were needed," Mr. Quinn replied sternly. He paused and feigned a smile. "Please, forgive my tone."

"I understand your disappointment." Jonathan retrieved his suit jacket and pulled out a checkbook. "I'm more than happy to give you a check for fifty dollars. I hope it can assist you personally."

"I don't need a personal loan, Mr. Astor."

"It's not a loan. It's a gift. I'd like to help you out even though my company can't invest."

The older man drummed his fingertips together. "It's a very generous sum. But I don't need your charity."

"Not charity. A gesture of good faith."

"I don't have faith."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you." Jonathan placed the check on the table. "I wanted to help. As a friend."

"I don't need more friends. I need a business partner."

"I'll make a couple phone calls in the morning. Maybe I can generate some interest with a few investors. If they're interested, I'll have them get in touch with you." Jonathan offered his hand. "Have a pleasant evening."

The older man slapped the hand away.

"Well, I sincerely wish the best for you and your hotel. I'm sorry we're not able to provide the investment you were seeking."

Mr. Quinn raced to the door. "There must be something more I can do to convince you."

"I'm afraid not," Jonathan replied. "Kindly step aside."

"No."

Amused, Jonathan offered a smile. "You don't want to start a fight with me."

Mr. Quinn rushed forward and knocked Jonathan to the floor. "This is not a fight."

Jonathan looked at Mr. Quinn in disbelief. The older man was stronger than he appeared. "Don't make this difficult. You don't want the police involved." He brushed himself off and stood tall.

"I'm not concerned with the police."

"I'm worth a lot of money, Mr. Quinn. I'm a well-known businessman in Boston. I assure you, the police will get—"

Mr. Quinn knocked Jonathan to the floor again and nervously glanced around the room. With a quick and ruthless intent, he pounced and pinned Jonathan's arms to the floor while straddling him. "I'm sorry it had to come to this. I have no other choice."

He sank his teeth into Jonathan's neck and softly grunted as he drank. Jonathan struggled, but Mr. Quinn held him down. Within minutes, the man stood and lowered his head in shame. "I'm sorry. I truly am."

Jonathan turned on his side, gasping in quick, short breaths. Blurry-eyed, he stared at his coat. The wallet and checkbook had fallen out of the pocket. The scent of his blood sickened him.

Mr. Quinn paced the room. Finally, he sighed. "I apologize. I'm not a violent man by nature."

Jonathan muttered under his breath.

Mr. Quinn knelt next to Jonathan and leaned in close. "What? What did you say?"

"Don't kill me."

The man panicked, straightened his posture, and stared at the wallet and checkbook.

"My wife. My sister. They need me. Don't kill me."

The man caressed Jonathan's head. "Be quiet. It'll be over soon."

Jonathan reached out. "Don't let me die. My sister needs me."

Startled by Jonathan's touch, Mr. Quinn moved Jonathan onto his back. "Oh, my. That's a lot of blood."

He seized Jonathan's wallet from the floor. "I will save you. I will give you a new life. You must give me a new life in exchange."

The man pressed his mouth against Jonathan's neck and drank until Jonathan surrendered and shut his eyes.

Mr. Quinn bit his wrist and let the blood drip into Jonathan's mouth. "My blood will rescue you from death. Give you life again."

Jonathan awoke hours later. Lightheaded and confused, he glanced around the darkened room. He recognized that he was in a dangerous situation. Willing to fight to the death, he jolted to an upright position in the bed.

Mr. Quinn sat at the table next to the window. He tilted a wine bottle to his lips then slammed the bottle onto the table. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that."

Jonathan touched his neck. The wound had disappeared. He tossed the blanket aside. "Where are my clothes?"

"I had to remove them. They were soiled with blood."

Jonathan inspected his hands and chest. "Did you wash me?"

"Yes. I thought it was the considerate thing to do." Mr. Quinn shrugged then smiled. "What do you remember?"

"I'm not sure." Jonathan closed his eyes. "I was on the floor. You...stabbed me?"

"You know I didn't stab you." Mr. Quinn shook his head. "Of course not. I'm no good with weapons."

"What did you do?"

"I bit into your neck and consumed your blood."

Jonathan rushed to the wardrobe and searched the clothes. "You're mad." He put on a pair of trousers and yanked a shirt from a hook. "Tell your tall tales to the police."

Spotting his coat on the chair across from Mr. Quinn, he rushed to the table and grabbed his wallet. "You took my money? You'll be arrested."

Mr. Quinn lowered his head. "You are a man of wealth. I am not. But we are the same."

"What are you talking about?"

"I am an Immortal. And now you are an Immortal as well."

Jonathan scoffed. "Immortal?"

"A vampire, Mr. Astor."

"Tell it to Sweeny!" Jonathan advanced toward the door. "You have done yourself a great disservice, Mr. Quinn."

"If you leave, you will die."

Jonathan stopped and glanced over his shoulder. "What?"

"You need my blood." Mr. Quinn stepped forward. "Last night was your first feeding. It saved you. But you need six more, or you will die."

"You're insane."

"You begged me to spare you. You didn't want to leave your wife and sister."

Jonathan grasped the doorknob but remained motionless. Because their parents had died the previous year, he didn't want his sister to be the sole survivor of their family.

"Yes. You said your sister needed you. You didn't want to die." Mr. Quinn tapped his finger on the table. "Now you need me. And I need you."

"What are you talking about?"

"You need my blood to survive. I need your money."

Jonathan turned on his heel.

Mr. Quinn gestured to the table and chairs. "Sit. I will explain everything to you."

Arthur Quinn provided Jonathan with the required feedings. He charged a sum of one hundred dollars each time. The expansion project for the hotel broke ground. Jonathan lived, but his marriage suffered.

"I'm afraid to touch my wife," he said.

"Why?"

"Because I'm a monster. A creature of the night."

"Do not neglect your wife," Arthur replied. "You tend to all your responsibilities as you always have. Tend to your wife the same."

"She wants children," Jonathan said. "Now it's impossible."

"Go to her. Make love to your wife. Love her as you always have."

"She's twice miscarried." Jonathan looked at Arthur with sad eyes. "She will blame herself for not bearing children."

Arthur stared at his feet. "I'm sorry, Jonathan."

"I will grant her a divorce. When my transformation is complete, I will move to California."

"You need not forfeit your marriage."

Jonathan rejected the idea that the single, middle-aged man could offer sound marriage advice. "How will I explain living by night? How will I explain that I cannot give her children because I am no longer human?"

"Oh, dear," Arthur whispered. "I have caused so much anguish. Perhaps I should have let you die."

"It may have been easier for everyone."

Arthur shook his head. "I apologize."

Three weeks later, Jonathan consumed his last feeding and truly became an Immortal. He and Arthur set out to celebrate with dinner and fine wine.

During the meal, Arthur excused himself. Minutes later, several women screamed outside.

A small crowd gathered at the train station. When Jonathan arrived at the scene, he recognized Arthur's body underneath the engine. His head lay several feet away.

The next day, Jonathan buried Arthur Quinn in the family plot at a local cemetery. He filed for divorce and gifted Evelyn with ten thousand dollars. Two days later, he moved to Los Angeles.

* * *

Immortals might exist as the result of a curse, Morgan thought. But Jonathan and Ava were Immortals by choice. Both accepted their fate to avoid death. In fact, Jonathan had requested it.

No one would ever suspect their dark, sinister secret. They presented themselves as everyday mortal humans. They dressed in contemporary clothing. A stranger would consider them to be typical people in their late thirties. The one great contrast, if someone paid attention to details: they never interacted with anyone in the sunlight.

The strikingly human characteristics of Jonathan and Ava made it difficult to believe they were vampires.

Morgan hadn't been subjected to the unpleasant sight of fangs used to rip into the throats of victims. Jonathan and Ava weren't unusually pale-complected. Neither wore dark clothes like a moody and rebellious Goth person. They didn't recoil in fear at the sight of a crucifix. Nothing indicated both were creatures many considered evil, murderous supernatural beings.

According to myth and legend, Jonathan and Ava were monsters to be feared. But Morgan did not fear them. He loved them.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Helen Donahue and her husband lived on the outskirts of Colby before green grassy yards became fields of corn or soybeans. She tended to a vegetable garden in the backyard as the fading sunset added tangerine coloring to her cheeks and hands. Contemplating what to cook for dinner, she watered the last of the summer's Cherokee Purple tomato plants. Out of the corner of her eye, she detected a small ball of light in the tall grass separating her yard from a farmer's crop.

The illuminated orb ascended above the overgrown grass and hovered silently. It bounced around like a beach ball riding the waves of the ocean. The small globe climbed higher and hovered once again, surrounded by a faint mist of smoke.

Helen watched the choreography of the light as it danced around the field. Although the orb floated over twenty feet away, she pointed the garden hose and directed a stream of water in its direction. The light unexpectedly dropped into the grass. She shrugged and walked to the faucet with thoughts of canning cucumbers and the tomatoes. As she turned the valve, she noticed the siding of the house illuminated. Helen quickly spun around. The orb had moved to the vegetable garden. She gasped and ran as fast as her fifty-six-year-old feet could propel her into the house.

Spying the orb from the kitchen window, fear eclipsed Helen's curiosity. She raced to the telephone on the wall and called the police department.

* * *

Deputy Todd Miller parked in the driveway and radioed the station he had arrived at 2786 Church Street. Because it wasn't an emergency, he took his time in the car. First, he organized several sheets of paper that had fallen onto

the floorboard. Then he searched the console for a pack of gum he had purchased earlier in the day. When he couldn't find it, he sipped coffee from a Styrofoam cup before getting out of the car.

Helen stood on the porch with her husband, Daniel. They hurried down the brick steps and met Deputy Miller in the front yard.

"Good evening, Todd," Daniel said.

"Good evening, Daniel. Helen. What seems to be the problem?"

"Helen saw a strange light hovering above our garden."

"Hovering?"

"Yes, sir," Helen responded. "It bounced around in the air before it disappeared in the grass. Then suddenly it was above the garden and scared me half to death."

The deputy squinted and raised his left brow. "It's still there?"

"Yes," Helen replied. "Go look."

"It's the damnedest thing," Daniel added. "A ball of light. I don't know. Ball lightning or something."

The three strolled along the side of the house. Once they reached the backyard, they saw the orb floating in the air.

"See?" Helen nestled against her husband's arm. "What is that?"

The last hues of sunset had vanished. Deputy Miller stepped toward the light illuminating the backyard. It ascended a few feet higher. He took another step, and it sailed over their heads, along the side of the house, then stopped in the middle of Church Street.

"Go inside. I'll check in with you a little later." He rushed to his car and radioed the station to explain what he had observed.

The dispatcher snickered. "Aliens."

The light flew above Church Street and out of town.

"I'm going to follow it," he said and pulled out of the driveway.

It sailed through the air at about twenty-five miles per hour for a few minutes. Then it made a sharp left. Miller followed it along an old paved road in need of repair.

The light maintained its position five feet ahead of the car. Four miles down the road, it disappeared. It didn't shoot off in any direction. It simply vanished, leaving the headlights of the police car as the only source of light in the dark.

Several moments later, the orb reappeared and moved forward. The deputy followed and soon spotted a large dark splatter of liquid on the left side of the road. Closer, the headlights revealed the blackness to be red. The

stain looked as if a container of crimson-red paint had exploded on the ground. A block up the road, another huge red spot on the right. And another nearly twenty feet ahead.

Soon, he noticed a huge object in the middle of the road. The headlights caused two silvery eyes to stare at him. Driving slowly, he identified the bloody carcass of an enormous pig on the ground. He gasped. The animal must have weighed seven hundred pounds or more. He had never seen a pig so large.

Miller stopped the car and called the police station. As he steered to maneuver a U-turn, four loud taps on the trunk of the vehicle startled him. He glanced in the rear-view mirror but saw nothing. Five more taps on the car frightened him. Again, he glanced at the rear-view mirror and the mirror outside his window.

Ten feet ahead, the orb appeared as the deputy reached for the door handle. Hovering above the pig, it morphed into a vertical strip of light.

Miller stared at the dark outline of a human behind the bright glow. The light disappeared. Three taps on the passenger window. Three taps on the driver's window.

Reluctantly, he twisted toward the window. The pig's head pressed against the glass caused him to scream out. He reached for his gun and peered at the pig carcass. Its head was missing.

The back window shattered. The passenger window shattered. The driver's window shattered.

Miller covered his face as glass showered around him. He shifted the car into reverse and slammed his foot on the gas pedal. The car abruptly came to a halt as if it hit something hard. Thinking he had driven into a ditch or a tree, Miller reached for the door handle.

"Do you want to live or die?" a male voice asked from the backseat.

Jumping with fright, the deputy turned his head to the side.

"Don't try to look at me," the male warned. "Do you want to live or die?"

"Live. I want to live."

"Why?"

"I have a family. Kids."

The male reacted as if amused by the answer. "They always say *'I have a family. I have kids.'* It's so predictable,"—he huffed—"I had a family once."

Surprised by his trembling hands, the police officer waited for the man to speak. His mind conjured thoughts of his daughter attending cheerleading camp the next week and training his son to pitch a baseball. Then he snapped

back to the present moment and discreetly tried to glance at the rear-view mirror.

"I TOLD YOU NOT TO LOOK AT ME."

The male clutched Miller by the shoulders and hauled him over the seats and through the back window. He dragged the deputy over the trunk of the car, to the ground, and across the pavement. The stranger pushed the cop onto his stomach and pressed his face against the asphalt.

"Who are you?" the deputy asked.

"My name is not for you and your kind to know."

"What the hell are you? You came from that light."

"I was the light," the man growled. "You want to live?"

"Yes."

"What a pitiful response. Say it with conviction."

"YES. I WANT TO LIVE."

"Stand up, facing the car."

Todd Miller rose to his feet and placed his hands on the trunk. Blood dripped from his right forearm. Pain had eluded him until he detected the laceration. He glanced up and realized the man no longer stood next to him.

The stranger swiftly returned and dropped the pig's head at Todd's feet. "You know, it's funny. I didn't plan this. The pig. You...a cop. A coincidence, I assure you."

The deputy remained silent.

"You're not at all amused by it?"

"No."

"Take your clothes off," the man ordered.

"What?"

"Take. Your. Clothes. OFF."

The deputy stripped and kicked his clothes to the side.

"Your socks and underwear, too."

Todd removed the remaining garments. "Now what?"

"Don't ask me questions. I ask the questions." The man massaged the deputy's shoulders. "You seem tense. Been stressed out lately? Anxious?"

Miller thrust his elbow into the man and forced himself backward. But the stranger quickly slammed the deputy's head into the trunk of the car.

The man continued. "Is it the wife? The kids? Or is something else making you anxious and tense?"

"It's not the wife and kids. It's you."

The man sighed. "Yeah, I guess that's understandable." He ran his hand

down the deputy's back and across the top of his buttocks. He sensually caressed each butt cheek. "Do you feel vulnerable?"

"Yes."

"Your mind is racing with thoughts."

"Yes."

"Lie on the ground, face down."

Miller situated himself on the road. Bits of rock pressed into his skin. He tried to shift into a more comfortable position.

"Yeah, not too pleasant on the road," the man said. "Your ribs against the pavement. Dirt and rock creating spots of pain here and there and everywhere. Your nostrils breathing in the dirt. Your cock forced to seek relief between the asphalt and your body," the man taunted.

Miller rubbed his hands on his thighs, removing rock from his skin.

"The unpleasant sensation will fade." The man ran his hands through Miller's hair. "Your mind will focus on something else."

Todd felt weight on his ass and lower back as the man straddled him.

The stranger whispered in the deputy's ear. "Do you want to live or die?" His warm breath smelled like mint.

"Live. Please. Don't kill me."

"Stop whining. I didn't ask if you wanted to be killed or not. You want to live, right?"

"Yes."

The man laughed. "Of course, you do." He pressed his fingernails into the deputy's neck.

Todd clenched his teeth and grunted. An image of his wife and children crying upon hearing of his death flashed through his mind.

"Wait." The man stopped pushing his fingernails in deeper. "How old are you?"

"Forty-three."

"Ah. Forty-three is a good number."

The stranger tore a gaping hole in Miller's neck and shoulder. He peeled a section of skin away and tossed it aside. Miller raised his left hand to the gash, but the man yanked Todd's arm with a tremendous force that instantly dislocated it. Todd screamed.

"I could let you bleed to death. Or I could put you out of your misery." The man pushed the officer's face into a puddle of dirty blood. Todd was face-to-face with the pig's head.

Choking on his blood, the deputy couldn't respond.

The stranger pressed his mouth against the gaping wound. "I want to live. I want to live. I want to live," he mocked with laughter.

* * *

The department dispatched Deputy Kevin Jones to investigate the last known location of Deputy Miller. He drove at a high rate of speed, fearing something terrible had happened to Todd. Kevin considered him a close friend. The two had grown up together in Colby.

In no time, he thought he spotted a dark-colored boot in the road. The other boot confirmed his suspicion. Several feet ahead, a pair of white socks. Then a pair of police uniform pants.

"Oh, fuck." He slowed the car to a crawl.

The police shirt and belt lay one block ahead. He punched the steering wheel. "Dammit."

Jones called in to the station and requested backup. "It doesn't look good. I haven't found him yet. Send someone now."

He parked behind Deputy Miller's car and jumped out with his gun drawn. "Todd," he called out at the top of his lungs. "Come on, buddy. Where are you, man?"

Deputy Miller's patrol car engine and lights were off. As Jones approached the vehicle, he discovered the pool of blood and the chunk of flesh. When he opened the driver's door, the pig's head on the seat startled him. "What the fuck?"

Jones scanned the area. "Where are you, buddy? Can you hear me?"

The sound of crickets and locusts filled the air.

He reached into the car and turned the key in the ignition.

A police siren wailed in the distance.

Jones stepped away from the car. In the high beams of the headlights, he saw Miller's severed head in front of the carcass.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Hundreds of citizens joined family, friends, and dozens of police officers at Todd Miller's funeral. The presence of three state FBI agents didn't go unnoticed by many. The local police didn't have the resources to examine the crimes of a potential serial killer. State police, along with the FBI agents, arrived to assist the Colby Police Department's investigation.

The involvement of the FBI put some minds at ease. Still, the gory details about the crime eclipsed the reaction to Maxwell Thornton's headless body. The small community feared for their safety. Most people preferred not to walk alone on quiet, darkened streets. Kids rushed home before sunset faded into darkness. People had become suspicious of neighbors and strangers equally. The police department received calls reporting anything and anyone suspicious.

Morgan wanted to discuss the murders with Jonathan and Ava. He wanted to question whether they were capable of committing such lewd acts. Did they perpetrate the murders as a means of consuming blood? Was Colby the ideal town to kill in, in order to survive? Was Morgan meant to be a close friend willing to defend and provide testimony to their innocence? When confronted with questions, would they kill to protect their vampire secret?

The questions that plagued Morgan's mind directly opposed what his heart believed to be true about Jonathan and Ava. They couldn't have killed the two men. Jonathan and Ava were loving, nurturing, and sympathetic people. They cared for Morgan a great deal. Neither had ever subjected him to anger, harsh words, or ill-tempered reactions. It seemed implausible the two people Morgan loved as family could be monstrous killers. And he felt terribly guilty for thinking of such allegations.

But they're vampires, his mind repeated.

* * *

Morgan arrived at Fischer House soon after nine o'clock in the evening. Usually alive with music in some form, the silence of the house unnerved him. Although lamps and overhead lights were on, he walked with a sense of foreboding as if he expected a horrible monster to emerge from a dark corner. A grotesque demon who would steal his soul. A creepy phantom that would scare him to death. A sinister madman with an ax.

Jonathan entered the sitting room. "Hey, buddy. I didn't hear you come in."

"Hello."

"Did you eat dinner?"

"Yeah." He glanced around the room and focused on the piano. "Where's Ava?"

"Getting some unpacked boxes from the basement. You want to talk to her?"

"No. Just wondering."

Jonathan motioned for Morgan to follow him into the den. He sat at the desk and retrieved a leather-bound book from the top left drawer. "I was going to write in my journal for a bit."

"Well, I don't wanna bother you."

"You're not. Have a seat."

Morgan leaned back in the chair. "You know about those murders?"

"Yes, it's sad."

He didn't expect the sentiment. "Why?"

"Because two men lost their lives. Two innocent lives," Jonathan said. "It's one thing to kill to protect yourself. It's another to kill to survive. But when you kill for the joy of killing...that's disturbing."

Morgan hesitated. "You and Ava have killed innocent people, right?"

Jonathan straightened his posture. "I guess you could say that."

"You guess?"

"Immortals were once mortal humans. Being Immortal is like a disease. Blood from a mortal is like medicine. Feeding on another human provides the nourishment we need to survive."

"Even the innocent?"

"Yes, I've killed innocent people. Especially in the beginning. I stalked the unsuspecting. Secretaries. Fathers on business trips. I became a much more discerning hunter over time. I chose men who had raped or killed. I chose women who neglected or beat their children. Drug users wasting away. Mean drunks leaving the bar."

"To satisfy your hunger?"

"It's also how we acquire life. If I kill a thirty-year-old man, I acquire thirty years."

"You gain years every time you kill someone?"

"Yes."

"I thought you were immortal. Live forever."

"Nothing lives forever, Morgan. Even the universe will cease to exist at some point."

"If you don't kill humans, you'll die?"

"If we don't consume human blood, our bodies will age. Our faces will form wrinkles. Muscles and bones weaken. Organs can fail. Disease can ravage the body. Our bodies would lose the ability to heal themselves. But it's one of the first abilities we acquire, so it would be the last to go."

"You can die. You're not immortal. You could stop drinking blood and then die."

"Eventually. If I acquired three hundred years before I stopped feeding, I'd still have three hundred years imprinted on my soul."

"I'm confused."

Deep in thought, Jonathan paused then spoke. "Do you know what a *palindrome* is?"

Embarrassed, Morgan fidgeted with the seat of the chair. "No."

"It's when you can read a word or a series of numbers backwards, and it's the same as reading it forward. The Immortal existence is like that. From the beginning to the end, it's the same from the end to the beginning. Except then there's an additional letter. And that additional letter is the last moment of human form before transformation. The additional letter is death if I stopped feeding. I'd continue as an Immortal until reaching that additional letter. Death."

"You wouldn't die from starvation?"

"No, because I can eat most food. Drink. Eat plants and bugs. Consume the blood of animals."

"I guess I understand."

"I'll try to explain and answer questions when I can," Jonathan said. "But I'm not an Elder. The Elders know everything."

"The oldest vampires?"

"Basically. There's a hierarchy. But we'll save the Immortal lessons for another day."

Morgan relaxed.

"Anything else you'd like to talk about?"

"No." Morgan paused before exiting. "I'm sorry if I offended you by asking if you and Ava killed those two guys."

"I wasn't offended."

Morgan ambled along Main Street then stopped one block from the railroad tracks to tie one of his sneakers. A police vehicle came to a halt as he stood.

The officer lowered the window. "Why are you walking around this late?"

"I'm on my way home. It's like eight blocks away. Rose Lane."

"I'll drive you."

"No, that's okay."

"Get in, kid."

Morgan flopped onto the passenger seat. Numerous little white, red, and green lights partially illuminated the interior.

The policeman put the car into drive. "What's your name?"

"Morgan Fischer."

"The Fischer Family? Your dad is Fred Fischer?"

Morgan grimaced. "Yeah."

"You know there's a curfew, don't you?"

"Yeah."

"You need to obey it."

"Okay."

"You shouldn't be walking around in the dark this late. A lot of people are worried about what's happened."

"The murders."

"Yes, the murders. You gotta be more cautious, kid. You don't know where danger hides. A dark night. Walking home alone."

"Okay. I'll be careful."

The officer made a right turn. "Which house is it?"

Morgan pointed at the house and unfastened his seatbelt.

"School starts in a couple weeks," the officer said. "Looking forward to it?"

"Yeah," Morgan muttered. "Senior year. Then I'm outta here."

"Big plans?"

"I'm working on it."

"Good. Reach for the stars, kid. Until then, don't walk around in the dark."

"Thanks for the lift."

"You're welcome," the officer said with a smile. "And I mean it, kid. You need to be cautious and on guard."

Morgan chuckled. "You make it sound like I'm being hunted."

The officer leaned toward the passenger door. "That's what most killers do. They hunt for their victim."

Morgan glanced at the dark street. "I'll be careful."

"Discovering the dead body of a kid isn't easily shaken off."

"I understand. Thank you for the ride."

* * *

Morgan had fallen asleep on the tattered couch while he watched television. A bang on the porch woke him soon after one o'clock. The laughter of a woman followed heavy footsteps to the door.

"Oh, God," Morgan murmured. "Dad and Janis."

Someone had difficulty inserting the key into the lock.

"Hold on," Morgan called out. As soon as he stood, the door swung open from a forceful kick. The door frame cracked and splintered. The screws in the top hinge loosened as the door swayed.

"What the hell," Morgan gasped. "I was gonna unlock it."

Janis laughed. "Oops. Need to fix that now."

Frederick waved his hand dismissively and grinned.

"Geez, Dad. Couldn't you wait five more seconds?"

"Aw, shut up. Go to bed. It's late."

"Huh? I'm not twelve years old."

Frederick glared at his son. "I know you're not twelve years old. This is my fucking house, and I told you to go to bed."

Janis walked a few wobbly steps into the living room. "Whatcha doing? Watching a movie or something?"

Frederick continued to stare at Morgan. Oblivious to the tension in the room, Janis watched the scene unfold as if she were observing a casual, friendly conversation.

Morgan reached for his glass of water on the coffee table.

Tugging on his shirt, Frederick stumbled backward against the wall and kicked off his boots. It was a sight of intoxication Morgan had never witnessed when his mother was alive.

Laughing, Janis poked Frederick with her finger. "Hey. You forgot the beer in the car."

"*You* forgot the beer in the car," Frederick mocked.

"Me?" she shrieked.

Frederick returned his gaze to Morgan. "I told you to go to bed." He threw a boot in Morgan's direction. It hit the wall behind the couch with a loud thud.

"Man, what a fucking asshole." Morgan sighed and turned to walk away.

Frederick grabbed Morgan and twisted him on his feet. Nostrils flaring, he simply stared.

Janis staggered to them. "Hey, knock it off. Go get the beer. Let him go to sleep."

"Yeah, go get your beer, Dad," Morgan said as he walked away.

"Shut the hell up," Frederick bellowed. He picked up the other boot and threw it.

When the boot nailed Morgan in the back, he gasped in shock and pain. Without hesitation, he grabbed the boot and threw it at his father's head, but it missed and hit the wall.

Rubbing the back of Frederick's neck, Janis placed her other hand on his crotch. "Hey, c'mon, baby. Don't fight. Forget him. Get the beer so we can go to bed."

Morgan slammed his bedroom door shut and locked it. "I can't stand you," he yelled. "I hate you."

CHAPTER NINE

The morning of August 25th was cool and damp. The first day of school.

Morgan awoke excited to begin his senior year, but nervous about walking the halls and sitting in classrooms with people he didn't like. The summer break had provided an escape from whispers, stares, and name-calling. Several schoolmates teased Morgan because of his artistic interests and loner mentality. He didn't play sports anymore, so he was a "loser." He didn't have a girlfriend, so he was "weird." He liked art, so he was a "faggot." And "white trash" was a term he heard often.

Other negative comments regarded Frederick, their financial situation, and their broken-down house. Although the rude remarks no longer hurt his feelings, the summer break had shielded Morgan from the verbal assault he encountered at school.

Only ten months left in Colby. Morgan embraced the idea that each passing day propelled him closer to graduation. He grabbed his backpack and walked out without eating breakfast.

At school everything seemed fresh and new, like he had never walked the halls before. The bright fluorescent lighting caused him to squint the instant he strolled into the building. Residual scents of cleaning solutions filled his lungs as he marched up the stairs to the second floor. He concentrated on the shades of yellow and beige tile flooring as he walked. Voices and the clatter of opening and closing lockers filled the halls, cluttering Morgan's mind with thoughts about the next ten months.

He paced himself to an assigned locker and placed his supplies on the shelf. When he closed the door, Brian Baxter and Amber approached. Hoping to avoid insults or a physical confrontation, he pretended he forgot something in his locker.

Brian was always quick to seize an opportunity to be a bully. Now that Frederick was dating Brian's mother, Morgan anticipated frequent run-ins with Bullshit Brian.

Morgan stared inside the locker as Brian advanced toward him. But Brian passed him as Amber stopped two doors down. She smiled at Morgan and unloaded books from her backpack.

The day passed quickly. During last hour, a woman walked into the classroom and handed envelopes to the teacher. He called out three names, including Morgan's. Each student retrieved the envelope and sauntered back to their seat.

Morgan quickly read the letter. The notice addressed *Dear Parent* regarding the outstanding balance for textbooks. He shoved the letter into his backpack and returned to the algebra problems due at the end of class.

Tim, a casual friend seated to Morgan's right, moved closer. "What is it? Detention slip already?"

Morgan feigned laughter. "No. A bill for textbooks."

When registration for the new school year had neared, Morgan didn't attempt asking his father for money. He hoped that he'd be able to somehow convince the school to loan the textbooks to him.

"You're kidding," Tim replied. "Didn't you pay when you enrolled?"

"Nope."

The boy seated behind Morgan chuckled. "Yeah, right. How the hell is an orphan gonna pay for schoolbooks?"

"Screw you," Morgan responded.

"Your mom's dead. And your dad's a drunk that doesn't give a shit about you. You're an orphan."

Tim gave the boy the middle finger. "Shut up."

"You shut the hell up."

The teacher cleared his throat. "All of you shut the hell up."

When the school day was over, Morgan retreated to the attic studio at Fischer House. Since meeting Ava and Jonathan, he constantly evaluated the progression of his artwork. He splattered black paint onto a large canvas. As he studied the results, he wondered what blue would look like on top of the black. Or maybe he could sponge the black paint before it dried then release drops of blue from high above. Maybe red would look better than the blue. Yellow would certainly stand out.

The attic door opened. The overhead light suddenly illuminated the room.

"Trying something new?" Ava asked.

Morgan turned and smiled. "Yeah, maybe." He shrugged. "I don't know. Just playing around, I guess."

"Well, that's how you learn."

"I don't know what I'm doing." He stared at the canvas. "Guess I need to experiment more."

Ava sat on a wooden chair and crossed her legs. "How was the first day of school?"

"All right."

"Just, all right? Why?"

"First day is first day, you know?"

"It was a long, long time ago for me."

"Oh, yeah. Well, getting back into the swing of things." Morgan placed the paint brush in a jar of water and twisted the cap on a tube of acrylic paint.

"What happened?"

"I'm tired of this town." He wiped black paint from his sneaker. "I want the school year to end without dealing with bullshit."

"Such as?"

He retrieved the textbook notice from his backpack. "I got this. It's embarrassing. Then some guy called me an orphan."

"What a jerk." She held out her hand for the notice.

"Yeah, he said '*Your mom's dead and your dad doesn't give a shit about you.*' So, I guess that makes me an orphan."

"No. It makes him an asshole." She read the paper. "Why didn't you say anything? Jonathan and I would have given you the money."

"I don't want you guys to think I'm taking advantage of you."

"Jonathan and I don't mind doing things for you. If we did, we wouldn't offer."

"I know."

"Stop sulking. I'll give you the sixty dollars." She waited for him to join her at the door.

"You don't have to."

"Knock it off. Come on."

Downstairs in the den, she opened a desk drawer. "First, take the money and say thank you. Second, forget about all those jerks at school. You need to learn to let things go. Don't waste time and energy on negative bullshit. Do you want to be beat down every time someone says something mean and nasty?"

"No."

"You're letting people have that power over you. You're letting some punk ruin the rest of your day."

Morgan accepted the cash. "Thank you. And no, I don't want some punk to ruin my whole day."

"Forget it and move on. No negativity," she said. "You already finished your homework?"

"Just gotta read some chapters for a couple classes."

"Well, get to reading. After dinner, we'll watch a movie or do something fun."

"Thank you."

She hugged him. "You're welcome."

He relaxed in her embrace, enjoying the affection he had not received since his mother had been alive and healthy. Knowing Morgan could rely on someone established the security he had craved for so long. The belief he belonged to a family provided comfort and happiness.

Morgan often thought his life might be perfect living with Jonathan and Ava instead of his poor excuse of a father, Frederick Fucking Fischer. But he knew perfection didn't exist. Jonathan and Ava, however, allowed him to believe a form of perfection was within reach.

CHAPTER TEN

Small-town gossip entertained those who liked to talk about the lives of acquaintances and strangers. Because of the murders, a lot of people whispered accusations about their fellow citizens in Colby. Many had heard at least one version of a story regarding Old Man Radford, Toby Johnson, and the Astor siblings.

Benjamin Radford lived in a small brick house next to the Colby Township Recreational Area. Kids called him Old Ben or Old Man Radford. The elderly man had a reputation for screaming in a rage when kids wandered into his yard or congregated on the street. Children created dozens of creepy and mysterious stories in his honor. Naturally, numerous kids and teenagers suspected Old Man Radford was the killer of the biker and policeman.

Many teens and adults cast a suspicious eye in Toby Johnson's direction. The twenty-year-old dropped out of school during his junior year. He lived with his parents and younger sister in a nice neighborhood of newly constructed homes. On two separate occasions, the police arrested him for possession of marijuana and charged him with the theft of jewelry from the home of a friend. Later, the parents of the friend dropped the charges.

The quiet young man rarely ventured out in public. He dressed head to toe in black, dyed his hair black, and wore dark eyeliner, black nail polish, and a lip piercing.

Many people around town whispered he participated in devil-worship. They believed Toby killed the two men as part of a sinister ritual to honor Satan.

Ava and Jonathan Astor had quietly lived in town for months. Sightings of the two were limited to neighbors and a few people around town. They didn't socialize with other residents. The pair were more of an enigma than Old Man Radford.

Initially, people thought Ava and Jonathan were eccentric, wealthy siblings who chose Colby as a means of privacy. The more salacious rumors started several weeks after their arrival in town. Some people also hinted the brother and sister duo used the house to torture and kill.

Brian Baxter couldn't wait to confront Morgan with questions and accusations. He spotted Morgan sitting with Tim in the cafeteria. With Amber and his sidekick, Shawn, in tow, he appeared at their table.

"What do you want?" Morgan asked.

Brian smiled and sat. "Figures I'd find you two together. The loner and the nerdy brainiac."

"We have some things in common," Tim replied.

"Yeah, like what?"

"We both know you're an asshole."

With a wide smile, Morgan nodded. "We have that in common with a lot of people."

Tim snickered and slapped his hand on the table.

Brian mocked Tim's giggle then focused his attention on Morgan. "You worked at your family's old house this summer, right? Doing yard work for Anna and John?"

"Ava and Jonathan," Morgan corrected. "Yeah. Why?"

"Oh, sorry. Ava and Jonathan." Brian laughed. "That guy, John. Does he have sex with both of you or just his sister?"

"Did you make that up yourself?"

Amber grimaced. "That's gross, Brian."

"I didn't make it up. Someone told me. I'm asking if it's true."

Morgan glared at Brian. "You don't like me. I don't like you. Why are you starting shit with me? Just leave me alone. We can be strangers until the end of the year."

Shawn laughed. "Hey, I've seen that Ava girl. She's sexy as hell. I wouldn't blame you if you were fucking her. I don't know why you'd wanna keep it a secret though."

Brian raised stared at Shawn as if dumbfounded. "If the brother is fucking both of them, Morgan doesn't want anyone to know. Duh."

"Jonathan isn't having sex with me or his sister."

"She's pretty," Amber said. "And the guy is hot as hell."

Brian playfully knocked Amber off balance by pushing her shoulder. "He's not hot. God, are you kidding? He has all those muscles and the tight

jeans and tee-shirt. He's like totally gay or something. I mean, like, he should be living in Philadelphia or some big city. Not Colby."

"You don't know them," Morgan said.

"I saw them at the gas station filling up their Mercedes."

"Yeah," Amber smiled. "And he was hot."

"Or a pervert," Shawn added.

"Exactly," Brian said. He cast his gaze to Morgan. "Well, if there's no sex going on, then they gotta be like, kidnapping and chopping people up in there. They have a secret they don't want people to know about."

Morgan anchored his sight on Brian. "That's bullshit. They're not having sex with each other. *Or me*. And they're not chopping up people. God. You're so fucking stupid."

Brian stood to walk away. "That's what people are saying around town. Better hope the police don't arrest your friends."

Still agitated, Morgan watched Shawn scamper behind Brian like a puppy scared to lose sight of its owner. When they disappeared into the hall, he returned his attention to the tray of food.

Amber rose to her feet. "Sorry. He can be a real ass sometimes."

"Why are you his friend?"

"I've known him my whole life. He's a good guy most of the time."

Morgan cocked his head in disbelief. "If you say so."

* * *

Jonathan laughed when Morgan repeated the rumors. Ava, on the other hand, wasn't amused. "Seriously? People and their gibble-gabble. Never changes."

"Yeah, well, people are freaked out about the murders," Morgan said. "People are suspicious 'cause you're strangers. They're gonna pay more attention to you."

Jonathan agreed. "We don't need unwanted attention."

Ava shifted her position on the sofa. "We're in the infamous Fischer House. So, let's throw a party."

Morgan's jaw dropped. "A party?"

Jonathan grinned with excitement. "We invite them into our home. Make everyone feel welcome. Everyone gets to know us a little and leaves with a smile."

"What if they wanna be friends after the party?" Morgan asked.

"We'll deal with that when the time comes," Ava said. "Until then, I'm going to start planning. Just like the parties your family used to have here. And you'll be a part of the whole process."

"What? The people you invite aren't gonna want me around."

"C'mon, buddy. It'll be fine," Jonathan reassured him. "Of course, we want you to be there. It's a chance for people to see you're not your father. You shouldn't be ostracized because of who he is."

Ava's face brightened. "This will be fun. It's been a long time since I've thrown a party."

Morgan surrendered to the idea and agreed to participate.

* * *

Days later, one of the most popular jocks in school approached Morgan after gym class. He situated himself on the bench next to Morgan and offered a banana.

Morgan glanced at the fruit then continued tying his shoes. "A banana? Is that the setup to a fag joke?"

"No." Andrew chuckled and placed the banana on the bench. "I've never called you a faggot."

Morgan shrugged. "I don't want one."

Andrew retrieved another banana from his backpack, peeled it, and took a bite. His attitude revealed his arrogance, if not his smugness. The cool kid who didn't need to remind others he was cool. "They're good for you. Before or after a workout. Replaces a lot of nutrients."

"Good to know."

"If you still played sports, you'd know." He touched Morgan's bicep. "You're still in decent shape."

Morgan jerked his arm away. "What do you want, Drew? You haven't talked to me in years."

"You're the one that stopped talking. Stopped playing sports. You turned into a recluse."

"Recluse?"

"Yeah. Big word for a jock, huh?"

"For the dumb ones."

Andrew tossed the banana peel into the trash can from his seated position. "I'm not dumb. I know you changed after your mom died. And things got worse with your dad."

"Is this trip down memory lane going anywhere soon?"

"Just making conversation," Andrew said. "But that's not why I wanted to talk to you."

"What's the reason?"

"My parents got an invitation to your party."

"It's not my party."

"Jessica Taft lives on that block. She said she sees you there all the time."

"So?"

"My mom says it's going to be a big fancy party." Andrew bit into a protein bar. "Of course, I'm not allowed to go."

"Why not?"

"Apparently, it's for adults."

"It's not an adult party. I'll be there."

"Naturally."

"Maybe your parents will let you go if they know I'll be there."

"Yeah, we'll see."

"Is that why you're being nice and talkative? A fancy party at my friends' house?"

"You know, if you smiled and said hello to all of us, you'd be part of the group again."

"You think so?"

"Yeah. No one pushed you away or said they didn't wanna be your friend anymore. You decided that on your own."

"Some of them are total assholes. I don't wanna be their friend again."

"We're not all assholes." Andrew stepped away. "Some of us never were."

Morgan stared at the floor. He had pushed everyone away. After his mother died, he didn't want sympathy and exaggerated affection from his friends' parents. Later, he was embarrassed by his drunk father. It was easier to pull away from everyone to avoid revealing the shame he harbored.

Was it his fault that friends ignored him? Did they gravitate toward dislike and harassment because of his actions? Could he correct the situation? Or had the damage already been done? Did he even care?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Candice Blackwood had been in Philadelphia attending a seminar for work. She returned to her house after sunset Friday night. As she pulled the car into the driveway, she saw the dark silhouette of a person standing on the corner of the block.

Walking into the kitchen, she tossed her purse onto a chair at the breakfast table. The glass coffee pot was still warm, so she poured herself a cup and added a small drop of creamer. Then she strolled outside to the mailbox.

While she perused the bills and advertisements, she noticed the dark silhouette still stood on the corner. Because the streetlight was behind the figure, she couldn't see the face, but she could tell it was a man. Motionless, he stared in her direction. Uneasy, she swiftly closed the mailbox and returned inside the house.

Candice locked the front door and looked out the living room window. The man walked along the sidewalk in an odd manner. His steps reminded Candice of a woman attempting to walk with a broken heel. Once he reached the front of the house, he stopped and inspected the windows upstairs then downstairs. Then, within a heartbeat, he focused on the living room window. She retreated and raced to the cordless phone in the hall.

"Colby 911. What's your emergency?"

"A strange man is outside staring at my house."

"Ma'am, could you repeat that, please?"

"A strange man. I saw him standing on the corner when I went to get the mail. When I came back inside, he walked down the sidewalk and stopped in front of my house. He stared at each window like he was looking for me."

"A strange man followed you?"

"Well, yeah, I guess you could say that. Yes."

"Can you please look to see if he's still there?"

"Yes." Candice returned to the living room and pulled the curtain aside.
"YES. He's still there."
"What is he doing?"
"He's standing there."
"Can you describe him, please?"
"He's dressed in dark clothing. It looks like he's wearing some sort of trench coat or long jacket. Six feet tall? I can't see his face."
"And you're sure it's a man?"
"YES."
"He's not moving around or saying anything?"
"Oh, Jesus!" she proclaimed in exasperation. "He's standing out on the sidewalk that leads to the porch. He's not moving. He's completely still. Please send someone here. My husband and son went to a ball game, and they're not home yet."
"What's your address, ma'am?"
"2248 Sycamore Drive. It's a beige house with white shutters."
"2248 Sycamore Drive?"
"Yes."
"And what is your name, ma'am?"
"Candice Blackwood. Black wood. Candice Blackwood."
"Can you still see him standing on the sidewalk?"
"Yes. He's still...wait...oh, Jesus. He's running. He's running toward the backyard." Candice sped to the backdoor. It was locked.
"Ma'am, hello? Are you still there?"
"Yeah. Yeah," Breathless, she scanned the yard. "He's gotta be out there somewhere."
"Did he run away?"
"No. He ran to the backyard."
"Ma'am, remain calm. I have an officer on the way."
"Dammit. I can't see anyone in the yard. I'm going out the front door."
"No. Remain calm. Check that he's not waiting for you outside the door."
"What?"
"If you didn't see him in the backyard, he might still be out front."
"Okay. I'm turning on all the lights." She raced to flip the switches in the kitchen, dining room, living room, foyer, and at the entrance to turn on the porch light. The sound of breaking glass outside caused her to jump. "Oh, my God. HE IS. He's right outside the front door. He broke a three-hundred-dollar light fixture."

"Get away from the door, ma'am. Can you barricade yourself somewhere safe?"

"What do you want?" Candice screamed. "WHY ARE YOU HERE? WHAT DO YOU WANT?"

The stranger beat against the door.

"Ma'am, are you all right? Tell me what's going on, ma'am."

Candice sprinted up the stairs to the master bedroom. "I'M IN MY BEDROOM. AND I'M GONNA GET MY HUSBAND'S GUN."

"The police should be there any minute. Did you lock the door?"

"YES. I'm getting the gun." She pulled a lockbox out of the closet. "I GOTTA GUN. I GOTTA GUN. I'LL SHOOT YOU."

The stranger kicked and beat against the bedroom door.

"Oh, my God. HE'S GONNA GET IN. WHAT DO YOU WANT? PLEASE, GO AWAY. PLEASE. I GOTTA GUN. THE POLICE ARE ON THEIR WAY."

Candice let out a blood-curdling scream as the door burst open. She aimed and shot the handgun. Then she fired twice more as the man approached. "WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS? WHAT DO YOU WANT?"

"Ma'am? Are you there? Can you hear me?"

Candice screamed as she fought the dark figure. The cordless phone fell out of her hand, but she still held the gun. She managed to squeeze the trigger once more. The dark figure stumbled a couple of steps backward. He seized the gun and tossed it aside. Gripping her by the throat, he hoisted Candice to her feet. Although her vision was blurry, and the room was dark, she caught a glimpse of his blue eyes in the moonlight. She kicked and flung her arms about, but the intruder overpowered her.

The dark figure pushed Candice against the wall and pressed his body against hers. "Do you want to live or die?"

"I want to live," she cried.

A police siren wailed outside. The screech of tires echoed on the street.

"I could easily rip your throat out," the dark figure said. "But I'm not going to get blood on my hands and waste it. I'll let you live for now because you put up a fight."

He let her fall to the floor. When she looked up, the man had already vanished. She quickly crawled to the phone. "I'M HERE. I'M HERE. I'M HERE." She ran downstairs to the arms of a police officer. Gently, he motioned for her to join another officer in the front yard. Safe, she cried more heavily and fell to her knees in the grass.

Several neighbors had gathered to investigate the commotion taking place. A second police car arrived on the scene.

The dark figure watched the flashing red and blue lights from the roof of a house down the street. He inspected the gunshot wound in his upper chest area and wiped the blood away. It had healed and closed.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ava had planned an exquisite affair for Saturday, September 13th. Neighbors and those considered Colby's elite social circle had received invitations. Nearly forty people had RSVP'd. Hors d'oeuvres, a buffet dinner, cocktails, champagne, fine wines, dessert, and imported coffee. Fresh bouquets of flowers in every room. Extra seating in the house, on the sun porch, and in the backyard.

The idea of mingling with people who knew Frederick filled Morgan with anxiety and dread. He put forth a great deal of effort avoiding most people in Colby, especially those who had been close to the Fischer Family when they were wealthy and respected. Still, he didn't want to disappoint Jonathan and Ava by not participating.

Jonathan had purchased a black suit for Morgan and arranged for a tailor to visit the house to make the necessary alterations for a perfect fit. Ava presented him with a silver watch.

"Thank you." Morgan admired the gift. "It looks expensive."

"A little. But you're worth it."

"You didn't have to get me anything."

"An early birthday present. For the party. You'll get your other gifts on Tuesday."

Morgan opened his mouth to object, but Ava silenced him with the wave of her finger. "Gifts and cake," she stated. "I want cake, dammit."

* * *

Morgan arrived at Fischer House early Saturday afternoon. He accepted the deliveries from the florist and caterer. After cleaning a few areas, he retreated to the guest room that shared a bath with Jonathan's bedroom.

He carefully placed his suit on a chair. Tired, he fell back onto the bed

and stretched his arms over his head. Not thinking about anything in particular, he stared at the ceiling fan.

Jonathan emerged from the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist. "Hey, buddy. Ready for the shower?"

Morgan sat up. "Yeah."

"You're going to shave, right?"

"Um, I don't know. I didn't bring anything."

"I'll get you set up while you shower. Better to shave after than before."

Morgan let the hot water rain down on his head a few extra minutes. He spent the time encouraging himself to have a good night. *Everything is gonna be fine*, he told himself. *It'll be fun and exciting. Don't be nervous.*

He opened the shower door. "I need a towel."

Jonathan walked in and tossed it to Morgan. He adjusted the cuff of his white dress shirt. "A razor and shaving cream are on the sink."

"Thank you."

"You can use some cologne, too. If you want."

Morgan finished drying his body and pulled on a pair of boxer briefs. He applied shaving cream to his face and ran the razor in an upward direction.

Jonathan stopped him. "Wait. Not like that." He took the razor from Morgan's hand. "Your father never taught you to shave?"

Morgan laughed at the idea. "Yeah, right."

"Look at me." Jonathan gently ran the razor in a downward motion on Morgan's face. "Shave with the grain. Down. Under your chin is down, too. The neck to the chin is upward. If you want a completely fresh face, then you can shave upward to remove all signs of remaining hair. After you do the downward work."

Morgan couldn't resist smiling. He appreciated Jonathan's interest in teaching him something his father should have taught him years ago.

"I know your relationship with your father is a real bummer. He hasn't been a father to you since your mother died. It's a shame. But I'll help you any way I can."

"I know. Thank you."

Jonathan's smile widened. "Hey, what about the birds and the bees? Did he ever give you the sex talk?"

"No."

"Or, um, I don't know. Do you need the sex talk?"

"I messed around with this girl when I was fifteen. We didn't go all the way, though."

Jonathan chuckled as he walked out. "Oh, man. I've got advice and stories for you, buddy. I can't wait."

The sun had set earlier with each passing day. Darkness usually occurred at 7:45. The invitation listed the party time as 7:30 – 11:00. Nearly seven o'clock, Morgan rushed downstairs to see if he could help with anything.

"Come here." Jonathan adjusted the collar of Morgan's dress shirt. Pleased by Morgan's appearance, Jonathan gave him a one-armed hug. "I'm going to start bringing the food out for the table."

Ava entered as Jonathan walked to the kitchen. "Well, well, well. You look great," she smiled at her brother.

"Thank you," he said. "So do you."

She wore black slacks and a white blouse. The observing eye could detect the slightest hint of pink. A strand of pearls highlighted Ava's cleavage. Long silver and diamond earrings hung from her earlobes and rings Morgan had never seen before adorned several fingers. She had styled her hair in a slightly messy bob.

"You look gorgeous," Morgan said.

"Thank you. You're very handsome in your black suit." She removed a piece of fuzz from his right shoulder. "I assume you and Jonathan opted not to wear ties."

"No tie."

"Surprise, surprise." She shook her head and smiled. "Okay, let's get this place ready for party time."

Several people arrived promptly at seven-thirty. Travis and Norma Lancaster walked in before eight o'clock. Their friendly faces put Morgan at ease. Finally comfortable with the party atmosphere, he wandered through the house saying hello to guests.

Morgan didn't engage much in conversation. Briefly chitchatted. Responded to comments regarding the house his family used to own. Explained how he became friends with Ava and Jonathan. Agreed the food was delicious. Blushed whenever someone complimented he was handsome or looked sharp dressed in a suit.

When Andrew's parents entered, he was disappointed not to see Drew. Soon, he spotted the college guy who worked at the library.

"Hi. Your name is Kyle, right?"

"Yes."

"I'm Morgan." He offered his hand.

"My parents dragged me here. Wanted me to be a part of something grand rather than wasting a Saturday night out with my friends. Some shit or another that my mother said."

"You're bored?"

Kyle motioned toward the back of the house. "I'm going to sneak out to smoke a cigarette and drink a beer. Wanna join me?"

Morgan glanced around the room. A couple in the foyer engaged Ava in conversation. Jonathan entertained a few people seated on the living room sofa. He smiled and winked at Morgan.

Kyle walked toward the kitchen. "Coming?"

* * *

Once they stepped outside, Kyle hesitated. A woman seated on the patio smiled. "Hello, Kyle. How have you been?"

"Fine. No complaints."

The man seated next to her pointed at the two beers in Kyle's hand. "We're not going to tell your folks."

"Thanks." Kyle gestured to a set of chairs near the garage.

He used his house key to pop the caps off the long neck bottles. "You're the only person in town that knew these two?"

"Apparently," Morgan said and gulped the beer. He had tasted a couple of different brands with friends in junior high but didn't care for it. The taste didn't satisfy his curiosity to the point of liking it. But drinking beer with Kyle somehow made him feel more adult.

"Ava is really pretty," Kyle noted. "They seem nice."

"They are. They've helped me out a lot. I like them. I like spending time with them."

Kyle swallowed the beer and leaned back. "My dad told me your father's an alcoholic."

Morgan moved the toe of his shoe around in the dirt. He didn't let Kyle's statement sour his mood. "Yeah. I've always thought of him as a drunk. But, yeah, I guess he's an alcoholic."

"That's too bad." Kyle lit a cigarette. "Want one?"

Morgan hesitated.

"Ever smoke before?"

"No."

"You can try one if you want. You like it, or you don't. Won't hurt my feelings either way."

Morgan lit a cigarette and inhaled. When he coughed, the smoke escaped through his nostrils.

Kyle laughed. "You look like a dragon about to breathe fire."

Morgan took another drag off the cigarette. Again, the smoke escaped through his nostrils. They laughed.

A stylishly-dressed Latin man with buzzed hair approached.

Morgan placed the beer on the ground and positioned his legs in front of the bottle.

The man lit a cigarette. "You boys brought the party outside?"

Kyle eyed the stranger. "Yeah, I guess so."

The man offered his hand to Morgan. "Don't worry. I won't lecture you about drinking."

Morgan accepted the handshake. "Thanks."

"I was young once, too." His blue, slightly green eyes sparkled as the end of his cigarette burned brighter. He sat next to Morgan. "My name is Tirich."

"Morgan. And this is Kyle."

Tirich shook Kyle's hand. "So...the old folks inside bore you to death?"

Kyle nodded. "Lots of talking while sipping wine and cocktails."

Tirich pulled the cuff of his dress shirt, tight and seemingly too small. "Well, you guys are just talking and drinking out here." He looked at the beer bottle on the ground. "How old are you guys?"

"I'm twenty," Kyle answered.

"I'll be eighteen in a few days," Morgan replied.

Tirich smiled. "Ah, youth. Twenty and eighteen years old."

Kyle glanced at Morgan and rolled his eyes.

"Why? How old are you?" Morgan asked.

"Much older than you." He stretched his arms in the air. "Any sexy women inside?"

"You didn't see any in there?"

Tirich picked up Morgan's beer. "Haven't been in yet."

"Why not?"

He swallowed the rest of the beer and stared directly into Morgan's eyes. "I wasn't invited." Maintaining eye contact, he reached down and placed the bottle behind Morgan's legs.

"You're crashing the party?"

Tirich shrugged. "I guess."

"That's probably not a smart idea."

Kyle pointed to the driveway. "Yeah, seriously, dude."

Tirich flicked his cigarette to the ground. "Relax. Live life. Or die not having lived."

"What the hell does that mean?" Kyle asked.

"Live or die? Which would you choose?"

"You should leave," Kyle replied.

Tirich crouched at their feet. "Don't get your panties twisted. I know Jonathan and Ava."

"Then why weren't you invited?" Morgan asked.

Kyle lit another cigarette.

Tirich took it and placed it between his lips. "Smoking might look cool, but it's gross. Especially the smell that lingers on your clothes and skin." He dropped the cigarette and stepped on it. Walking toward the house, he glanced back. "See you boys inside."

* * *

Jonathan motioned for Ava to join him in the sitting room. Once she appeared at his side, he spoke loudly. "Everyone, please. Everyone, can I have your attention?"

He paused while guests crowded into the sitting room and foyer.

"I would like to thank you for joining us tonight. This was an opportunity for us to meet you and welcome you into our home."

People raised their glass in recognition of Jonathan's kind words.

He continued, " My sister and I have enjoyed your company.

"We'd also like to thank our friend, Morgan. And I know this is going to embarrass him." He surveyed the room. "Where's Morgan?" he asked Ava.

Morgan entered from the foyer. Jonathan watched him approach and noticed Tirich in the living room.

"Um." Jonathan put his arm around Morgan. "We met this young man days after we arrived in Colby. He's a wonderful, hardworking, smart guy. He's really great to be around, and we feel like he's a part of our family. He helped us out quite a bit with this party. So, thank you, Morgan. And thank you all for coming."

Ava pulled Morgan closer and kissed him on the cheek.

Tapping her on the shoulder, Jonathan motioned to Tirich. They reacted with smiles, but Morgan sensed their initial uneasiness.

Voices filled the house again as people returned to interacting with each other.

Tirich threw his hands in the air. "Jonathan. Ava."

He extended his hand and rested the other on Jonathan's shoulder. Kissing Ava on the cheek, he glanced at Morgan. "Hey, young man. Long time, no see."

Ava looked at Morgan. "What does he mean?"

"We met outside." He moved closer to her and stared at the guy.

Jonathan stepped forward. "What are you doing here?"

"Hey." Tirich smiled. "We've been friends a long time. Let's be friendly."

"You're not a friend," Jonathan corrected.

Tirich admired the room. "This is a nice house."

"Why are you here?" Ava asked.

He grabbed a glass of champagne from a tray on the table and swallowed the beverage in one gulp. "I've been around Colby a little while. Kinda checking things out. Doing a bit of this, a bit of that. And, well, I caught wind of your presence here in town. When I heard you were having a party, I thought, I really should drop in and say hello."

"Mission accomplished." Jonathan directed Tirich toward the front door.

"C'mon. It's been a long time," Tirich responded. "Don't you want to sit and catch up?"

"No, not really," Ava answered and squeezed Morgan's hand.

Tirich sighed. "I know you're busy with your guests. You'll be wrapping it up soon enough. I can wait," he said and walked away.

Travis and Norma Lancaster then approached. "Thank you for inviting us this evening," she said.

"You're welcome," Jonathan replied. "Thank you for being here."

"We're happy you've taken Morgan under your wing," Travis added. "He's a fine young man. It's nice to see him having a good time."

Morgan smiled.

"We like seeing him happy, too," Ava said.

When Travis and Norma stepped outside, Ava turned toward Morgan. "You planned on spending the night?"

Jonathan silenced them with the wave of his hand. "Doesn't matter. He's not leaving here." He stepped away to check on the whereabouts of Tirich.

Close to an hour later, Jonathan stood in the entryway and waved as the last guests pulled out of the driveway. Once he shut the front door, he marched to the kitchen with Ava and Morgan on his heels.

Tirich sat on the island with a plate of fruit and smoked salmon. "This is really good," he said. "Lemon and capers. Probably should have used fresh dill as well."

"We didn't make any of the food," Jonathan informed him and pushed the plate away. He eyed Tirich with contempt. "What are you doing here?"

"Like I said, I heard you were having a party. I couldn't resist the opportunity to reconnect with old friends."

"You heard we were having a party?" Ava questioned. "Or did you seek us out?"

Tirich patted a napkin against his lips and used it to wipe his hands clean. "No, I didn't seek you out." He removed an invitation from the pocket of his slacks and tossed it on the island. "Um"—he glanced at the handwritten names on the cover of the invitation—"Henry and Candice Blackwood couldn't make it tonight, so I came in their place."

Ava sighed as she retrieved the invitation. "You killed them. You're the one that killed those men."

"Like I said, I've been around a bit. Didn't you guys question whether an Immortal might be lurking around?" Tirich stuffed food into his mouth. "A predictable scenario if you ask me."

Morgan stepped behind Jonathan.

"The men, and now Henry and Candice." Jonathan clenched his jaw and crossed his arms. "What the hell is wrong with you? How could you come around here and start terrorizing the town?"

"I'm not terrorizing the town." Tirich's voice rose with intensity. "I spared the son. I waited until he went to his grandparents for the weekend. That shows restraint on my part."

Loud and acid-tongued, Ava said, "Killing a child is forbidden. Doing so would have revealed the true monster that you are. Now there's a thick fog of fear all around this town."

"You need to leave Colby and not come back," Jonathan demanded. "We were here first."

Tirich walked around to the other side of the island. He acknowledged Morgan with a nod and grabbed the plate of food. As he shoved caramelized

pear and salmon into his mouth, a glass of champagne slid across the island into his grasp. "Who is this kid? Your Mortal Soul?"

Morgan watched the man's every move but remained silent.

"We don't have anyone currently working as a Mortal Soul," Jonathan stated.

Tirich grinned at Morgan. "Good-looking kid. If he's not to be your Mortal Soul, then what? His beauty is his attribute for transformation? Or does he possess some other value?"

"He doesn't know about Mortal Souls or attributes," Ava said.

"Ah, but he knows what you are," Tirich said with increased interest. "What is he then? Some sort of pet?"

Jonathan quickly stepped between Tirich and Morgan. "Leave him alone. He's a part of our family. Morgan is forbidden to you. It is, here and now, law to you."

Tirich raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. "He's off limits."

"Ava, take Morgan upstairs," Jonathan ordered with an indignant tone Morgan had never heard before. Then he motioned for Tirich to leave the kitchen.

"Hey, kid," Tirich said and winked. "Happy Birthday."

Jonathan pushed him toward the doorway. "Keep walking."

Ushered through the hall, Tirich continued to talk. "Are you grooming him to be your Mortal Soul? Your Intimate, perhaps?"

"Shut the hell up. Let's finish this conversation in the den."

Morgan immediately asked questions once he and Ava entered the guest room. "That guy is a vampire?"

"Yes."

"He's been killing people around here?"

"Apparently." She sat near the window and gazed skyward.

He hesitated to speak, but finally asked, "What's a Mortal Soul?"

"A Mortal Soul is a human who accepts the role of a servant to an Immortal. They do things that Immortals can't do for themselves, like running errands and taking care of business affairs during daylight hours. They are a kind of assistant and protector."

"Do you and Jonathan want me to be your Mortal Soul?"

"It isn't something we seriously discussed. I don't know if we ever would have brought it up."

"Should I be scared of that guy, Tirich?"

Ava crossed the room and sat next to Morgan on the bed. "No. You're fine. Jonathan and I will protect you. He's been warned. He is obligated to leave you alone."

"The attributes he mentioned?"

"Look, Morgan. I know you have questions, especially now. Let's wait for Jonathan. We can discuss it tomorrow," she said and walked toward the door. "Go to Jonathan's room and get something to sleep in. I'm going downstairs to check on him."

Morgan rushed across the room and grabbed her hand. "Wait. If something happens, give me a warning. Scream my name or something, so I know to get the hell outta the house."

"Everything is fine. We wouldn't let anything happen to you."

Concern didn't fade from Morgan's mind.

"I promise," she said. "Go on. Get something to sleep in."

"All right." He stepped toward Jonathan's bedroom. "Be careful."

Jonathan sat behind the desk in the den. Tirich meandered around looking at the books on the shelves and various framed photographs and paintings.

"You chose this quiet Pennsylvania town as your new home?" Tirich asked. "You and Ava could certainly create a heightened state of fear among the residents pretty quickly. Even without my contribution."

"Yes, this is our home. Our chosen district."

"District? Interesting. You plan on establishing a colony here?"

"Tirich, I'm not going to entertain a long list of your questions with answers. State your business here, then be on your way."

Ava appeared in the doorway. "How did you make it to Colby?"

Tirich smiled. "Hey, beautiful. Come in. Sit."

"Yeah, why Colby?" Jonathan asked.

"You know my colony is located in California."

"Yeah, somewhere by Tahoe," Jonathan replied. "You were banished."

"Banished?" Tirich chuckled. "I've been on a sort of sabbatical."

Ava stepped into the room. "Call it what you want. You were becoming a danger to your colony. You were told to depart or die."

The truth didn't interest Tirich. "Anyway. I set out on a quest and followed Interstate 80. You know it stretches from West Coast to East Coast? Nearly three thousand miles across the country. Made for easy traveling."

"You've been following a direct course?" Jonathan asked in disbelief. "A trail of blood in your wake? How fucking stupid and irresponsible of you."

"America can be a very strange and scary place," Tirich remarked. "Late at night. Out in the darkness of the desert. Small communities, miles from another civilized town. People have their nightmares and superstitions. Things that pretty much no one outside of that community would dare to imagine being true."

"Like vampires," Ava pointed out.

Tirich smirked. "More than vampires. Supernatural beings. Creatures that humans don't want to believe exist."

He gestured for Ava to sit next to him. She crossed the room and stood next to Jonathan.

Tirich continued. "Not long after I left California, I found myself in Nevada. Pretty damn quickly. I mean, the whole Tahoe region is literally on the border. After a few nights in Reno, I had heard these stories about a stretch of Interstate 80 that had quite the reputation for murder and mayhem. A lot of the locals feared it, one section of Northern Nevada in particular. So, being the curious type, I followed Interstate 80 to witness this area known for semi-truck driving serial killers, demons, and skinwalkers. I guess demons and skinwalkers could be interpreted as the same. Maybe something entirely different, I don't know.

"Anyway. There were these stories about people being terrorized by small packs of human-like entities."

He removed a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of his slacks and tossed a broken one onto the desk. Lighting a cigarette, he exhaled a long stream of smoke before speaking.

"There were stories of people relaxing at rest areas, taking a nap after a long drive, catching up on sleep. That sort of thing. Only to be tormented by these fairly young people, usually in packs. As far as I know, no one had told of being physically assaulted. Maybe these packs of skinwalkers...demons, whatever they are...feed off fear. Or maybe the people sharing their experiences were lucky to be alive. I don't know. I wanted to see if I could find these skinwalkers. And I did.

"I found a pack of them along Interstate 80, not far from the area of Mount Tobin. They torment people, scare them by revealing their evil nature. Growling and practically foaming at the mouth like vicious dogs. I suppose some people were convinced that they were a pack of werewolves before physical transformation."

Tirich laughed. "Human bodies completely transforming into larger, taller, savage beasts. Elongated snouts, claws, and canine teeth. Humans to

werewolves then back to human form after stretching and virtually destroying the human body." He inhaled a long drag off the cigarette and dropped it into a champagne glass. "I mean, we know of the existence of werewolves, but not the variety concocted by the naive human mind. Mortals like to believe in the impossible, but not within reason."

Jonathan sighed out of frustration. "You hung out with these skinwalkers? Became a hunting companion?"

"Oh, no, no, no. I simply observed. My initial thought was that they might be vampires. But a pack of vampires that only wanted to collect the emotional state of fear? Not feeding on blood?" He laughed at the thought. "Wouldn't exist for long, would they?"

"I watched these skinwalker beings. I saw them torment several people. One man tried to flee by escaping out the passenger door of his car. Those things chased him and pounced. They are very, very fast. You know vampires with the speed ability can get up to forty miles per hour. These things are much faster.

"Anyway, when they realized I was around, they wanted me gone. There was no confrontation or anything. They just made me completely aware of the fact that I wasn't welcome. I certainly didn't want to interfere with their affairs. I don't know what they are. Not the skinwalkers that Native Americans talk about.

"But, like I said, they didn't want me around. I carried on with my journey to Utah. Skinwalkers, werewolves, flying humanoid creatures. Wyoming. Nebraska. Iowa. Illinois. Indiana. Werewolf territory in one spot. Ohio, too. There were various creatures and supernatural beings along the way. I never ran into any vampires, not until I arrived in this area. So, here I am. I learned that you were here. And what a pleasant surprise, the two of you. Old friends."

Ava laughed. "Old friends?"

Jonathan set his clasped hands on the desk. "This is all very fascinating. Your stories from your trek across America," he said. "You still haven't told us why you're here. Why you hung around."

Shifting his position, Tirich said, "Look, I enjoyed my time around Colby. But let's be honest. I got to feed. You informed me that this is your territory. Fine. I'm not going to stick around. I mean, I wanna see what the rest of Interstate 80 has to offer. I made it this far. Why stop now?"

"Exactly," Ava replied. "There are rules you must obey. Why risk bringing on the wrath of the Elders? You'd be hunted down and killed."

"I'm fully aware," Tirich responded. "No need to remind me."

Jonathan stood, gripping the desk with both hands. "Let me remind you of this. This is our territory. We haven't extended an invitation to you to share it. We have obligated you by law to stay away from Morgan. And we don't want you to return."

"Hey, I'm not here to cause trouble," Tirich said. "Just wanted to stop in and say hello."

"Then be on your way," Jonathan ordered.

Tirich stood and turned toward the doorway.

"Wait," Jonathan demanded. He looked at Ava and pointed to the ceiling. "Go to Morgan. I'll be there in a few minutes."

When Ava reached Tirich's side, he placed a hand on her shoulder. "Good to see you again. I almost forgot how beautiful you are."

She pulled away from his touch and continued to walk out.

As Jonathan escorted Tirich to the front door, his angry tone subsided. "Seriously, we don't want to create any problems between any of us. I wish you the best of luck out there on your own. Please, don't come back trying to start any problems here. You leave us in peace. We will grant peace to you."

Tirich smiled. "And peace to you."

"Thank you."

"Yes, of course. And thank you for the food and champagne. It's been a long time since I've had such delicacies."

"You're welcome. Good night."

Jonathan rushed throughout the house locking doors, turning off lights, and pulling down blinds in every window. Having secured the house, he sprinted up the stairs to the guest room.

He shut the curtains in both windows. After removing his shoes, watch, and cuff links, he climbed into bed and snuggled close to Morgan. Massaging his temples, he glanced to his right.

Morgan opened his eyes. "He's gone?"

"I thought you were sleeping."

"I was too nervous to fall asleep."

"Don't worry. You're safe."

Jonathan thought of Tirich, and when they had met years ago in Sacramento. He and Ava had traveled to the city to facilitate a donation to the Crocker Art Museum. They met Tirich at a dinner party, and the drunken vampire expressed his affections for Ava. When she rebuffed his advances,

he departed the party in anger. Later that night, they discovered him lingering over the body of a young man he had killed. After consuming the young man's blood, Tirich left Jonathan and Ava with the task of disposing the body.

Ava walked in, dressed in sweatpants and a shirt. She situated herself in bed on the other side of Morgan. Turning on her side, she placed her arms together and rested her head on her hands, facing Morgan. "Go to sleep," she said.

Morgan turned onto his stomach and closed his eyes.

Minutes later, Jonathan whispered to Ava, "I don't trust Tirich."

"I don't either. Should we be concerned?"

Jonathan eyed Morgan then returned his gaze to Ava. "I don't think so. But we'll need to be fully alert for a while, until we're certain."

"Maybe we should have given him money to stay away."

Jonathan huffed. "Tirich isn't getting anything from us. Money wouldn't keep him away. He'd take it and still do whatever the hell he wanted to do."

"Okay." Ava studied Morgan and wondered what he might dream about.

"Then we'll concentrate on keeping Morgan safe."

They slept peacefully through the night.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Morgan woke up between Jonathan and Ava. He maneuvered his body toward the foot of the bed, to the floor, then walked to the bathroom. Memories of the previous night's encounter with Tirich troubled his mind. The fear that something bad might soon happen gnawed at him like a wild animal chewing to get out of a cage.

Later that morning, in the kitchen, Morgan glanced around. "This house is a mess."

"Yeah, I know," Jonathan responded. "We'll get to it later."

The plate Tirich had eaten from remained on the counter. "Are you sure that guy won't come around again?"

"Don't worry about him."

"I know he's a vampire. You guys weren't happy to see him. I mean, he didn't seem like a bad guy, but I know he is. Something didn't feel right about him being here."

"He's definitely a bad guy," Jonathan said. "Banished from his colony because he's a reckless killer. No concern for anyone but himself. He's flamboyant about being a vampire. Too risky and dangerous."

"Should I be worried that he knows I know about you guys?"

"We took care of it, last night. Colby is our home, not his. He's not welcome here," Jonathan emphasized. "Besides, he's eager to continue on his journey. Somewhere away from here. Somewhere on the East Coast."

"Okay. I won't worry. That was last night. Today is a new day."

"Exactly. Let's eat something. Then we'll clean this place up."

* * *

The three relaxed in the sitting room. Ava sipped lemonade and rearranged a pile of books on the coffee table. "Morgan, do you have any questions you want to ask us?"

He thought a moment. "Nothing I desperately need to know."

"You can ask us anything," Jonathan said.

"Ava told me about the Mortal Soul thing. But that guy, Tirich...he mentioned attributes."

"It's strongly encouraged that a person possess something of value before being turned into an Immortal. Usually, the Elders want to approve the person being transformed. They don't want vampires roaming the land, killing anything and everything in sight. Our existence would be undeniable, and then we could be exterminated."

"A person has to give you something in exchange?"

"The most sought-after values are wealth, intelligence, real estate, battle and military acumen, medical skills, political influence, and beauty."

Ava offered a glass of lemonade to Morgan. "It's all about maintaining our existence in the human world," she explained. "If Tirich believed we transformed you without approval, he would have used that information to his advantage. He would have made certain demands, subjected us to extortion. Something in his favor."

"My value is beauty?" Morgan laughed.

Beauty, he contemplated. The judgement amused him. Sure, he had been called cute and handsome and good-looking in the past. But he hoped that someone in the Immortal world viewed artistic talent as a value. Aside from Jonathan and Ava, no one in mortal Colby, Pennsylvania, seemed to appreciate his interest in art.

Jonathan rubbed a finger on the stubble of his chin. "Well, he focused on something obvious to him. Beauty is a value because humans give a lot of power and influence to beautiful people. It can be used to charm, manipulate, overpower, and acquire possessions or knowledge that otherwise might not be readily available to certain people."

"What's your value? Beauty?"

"Wealth. Our family is considered Old Money. We continue to earn money from real estate and investments because we still function in the human world as a business."

Ava gathered her hair in a ponytail. "Jonathan and I live here in Colby, not in a colony, because we pay a fee to live among the humans. It allows us to live the way we want. And it provides financing to the Council and our colony, so they can maintain secrecy and security."

Morgan wiped condensation from the glass of lemonade "Thank you for telling me. I mean, I don't know if you're breaking a rule about educating a human."

"We might not be able to answer all your questions," Ava said. "When we can, we will."

"All right." He rose to his feet. "I should probably go home now."

She raised her hand and pointed at him. "Wait."

"What?"

"Do you think you're ugly?"

Morgan shrugged his shoulders. "I just thought it was funny that my attribute would be beauty."

"No, there's something else. I can tell," she said. "What?"

After a long pause, Morgan muttered, "I'm weird-looking."

"Weird-looking? Does that mean ugly?"

He didn't want to have the conversation. He ran his finger along his bottom lip and glanced to the floor. "Yeah, I guess."

She moved closer and grabbed his hand. "You're beautiful."

Jonathan agreed. "Why do you think you're ugly?"

"Because. Look at me. My nose is all thin. My lips are kinda big. I don't know. I look weird."

"You're not weird-looking or ugly," Ava said. "You have pretty blue eyes. Your eyebrows are nice and thick. Your nose is not *thin*. It's chiseled-looking. Your lips are full, not *big*. You're beautiful, Morgan. And it's a shame you don't think so."

"Well, I don't."

"You are," she stressed. "You're comparing yourself to other people... high school kids. Once you're out in the real world...you'll see. Girls will be fawning over you because of your looks."

Jonathan nodded. "You'll get a lot of attention from the girls."

"And when that day comes," she said, "don't be an arrogant ass about it. Just enjoy it."

"Okay. If you say so."

"No, I didn't *say so*. I'm telling you the truth." She wrapped her arms around him. "You're beautiful and talented and smart. And fun to be around. You're a wonderful person, and I'm glad I know you. I'm happy you're a part of our life."

Smiling, he squeezed her more tightly. "Thank you."

* * *

Like a shadow, a feeling of dread followed Morgan as he walked away from

Fischer House. He soon convinced himself there was no reason to fear walking home. Yes, Tirich was a terrifying vampire, but he couldn't venture out into the sunlight.

Morgan entertained scenarios about what it must be like to work as a Mortal Soul. The sacrifice by the human would be great. A normal human life would be impossible, Morgan contemplated. But would it be exciting and satisfying?

He prayed Tirich wouldn't ambush Jonathan and Ava during the night. The thought of losing either one of them filled him with great sadness.

"The daylight is my protection," he said to himself. "Tirich is forbidden from harming me. I am safe. *I am safe.* I am *safe.*"

* * *

Morgan turned the key in the front door of his house and pushed it open. His father sat on the couch; his eyes focused on the entrance.

"The big fucking hotshot decided to come home."

Morgan didn't know how to respond.

Frederick stumbled to his feet. "You must think you're something special now," he said, rushing forward. He threw Morgan to the floor and smashed a beer bottle on the coffee table. Shards of glass flew in Morgan's direction.

"What did I do?"

"I heard all about you and your fancy party. Champagne and extravagant food. Mingling with the rich folks. Having a good ol' laugh at my expense."

"What are you talking about?"

"Wanna make a fool of me?"

Morgan touched his forehead. Blood coated his fingers. "What the hell is wrong with you? What did I do?"

"I'll teach you a fucking lesson." Frederick pulled the belt from his pants.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Frederick whipped the belt with reckless abandon. He didn't seem to care where the strap struck his son's body.

Morgan grasped the belt and tugged with a strength that knocked Frederick to the floor. He kicked his father in the thigh then pushed himself up from the floor as quickly as possible. "You're an asshole. Beat me with a belt?"

His father groaned a string of unintelligible syllables.

Lingering, Morgan refused to play the role of helpless victim. "Why? What the hell did I do to make you treat me this way? Why are you such an asshole?"

Frederick latched onto Morgan's ankle and pulled, causing both to crash to floor once again. He seized his son by the shoulders and dragged him toward the wall. "Hey, hotshot. You think you're better than me because you're hanging out with a bunch of rich people? In the house that I grew up in. Telling lies about me."

Enraged, Morgan pushed his knee against Frederick's chest. But the man had a strong grip on his collar bone. Morgan hollered in pain.

Frederick slapped him across the face. "Not a hotshot now, are you?"

"At least I'm not a drunk piece of shit like you." He managed to kick his father away and sprung to his feet.

In a quick series of movements, Frederick stood, wiped his mouth, and grabbed the waistband of Morgan's jeans. He dragged him through the house, knocking over objects and a chair.

Janis sat at the small, rickety kitchen table. She turned her head and stared at the wall as if nothing out of the ordinary occurred.

Frederick pushed Morgan into the bedroom and slammed the door.

"Why?" Morgan cried. "What did I ever do to you?"

He listened to his father catching his breath.

Frederick let go of the doorknob. "You remind me of your mother," he said and stomped away.

Morgan fell to his knees with his head pressed against the door. "She's dead. She's dead," he bawled.

When he awoke, he repeatedly blinked his eyes to adjust to the darkness of the room. Each movement of his body caused him to wince. He noticed spots of blood on the pillowcase.

He removed his clothing and inspected the red marks along his torso and legs. One welt in particular throbbed with pain. Both shoulders appeared bruised along the collar bone. Dried blood coated Morgan's forehead and the bridge of his nose as if he had suffered a serious wound. But the cut above his left eye was small.

The house was dark and quiet. Morgan walked to his father's bedroom. Janis and Frederick weren't there. He peeked out the living room window. Frederick's car was gone.

Morgan raced to the bathroom and grimaced at his reflection in the mirror.

He searched the medicine cabinet for aspirin. The bottle was empty. He squirted toothpaste directly into his mouth and lowered his head to the flow of water. Swishing the toothpaste around, he held his hand under the faucet. The temperature never changed.

In the kitchen, he turned on the gas stove. He didn't hear the hiss of gas, so he attempted to ignite the burner with a match. Nothing.

Returning to the bathroom, he rinsed out his mouth and splashed water on his face. Realizing Frederick might return soon, he sprinted to his bedroom.

He stuffed schoolbooks, an art pad, and the framed photograph of his mother into a backpack. Then he dressed in the first pair of jeans and shirt he spotted in the closet.

In the living room, beer bottles were in various spots. Broken glass shimmered on the coffee table. Cigarette butts floated in a plastic cup of water. A half-eaten sandwich wrapped in cellophane and an empty potato chip bag rested on the arm of the couch. Even the belt Frederick whipped Morgan with lay on the floor.

"So long, asshole."

Normally, Morgan would have walked a path that limited interaction with people. He would have shunned face-to-face conversation. He wouldn't want anyone to see the marks and bruises on his face and arms. But Morgan marched on with his head held high. He didn't care who saw him.

The streetlamps were bright. The temperature was cool. Morgan wrapped his arms around his torso to keep warm.

Sunday night guaranteed little traffic. Occasionally, a car passed, but Morgan didn't pay attention to whether he recognized the driver or not.

Once he crossed the railroad tracks, he walked north on Madison Street. He spied a couple of families eating dinner as he passed by their windows. Most houses were dark. The street was practically void of any noise until he heard dogs bark in someone's backyard.

He shifted the weight of the backpack on his shoulder and continued to walk. A loud pop echoed like the crack of a whip in the middle of the street. He glanced to the right. He saw nothing. Again, he heard the smack sound several feet ahead of him. He stopped and focused his sight on the asphalt.

The dogs barked again.

Morgan continued to walk. The sound reverberated once again. He thought it could have been a rock tossed to the street. The odd experience at the post office flashed through his mind.

At that moment, he sensed danger.

Morgan quickened his pace. Nervous, he became more fearful with each step. His heart hammered. The dogs barked more urgently. Suddenly, it became dead silent. He stopped and scanned the area, but he saw nothing.

A dog whimpered as if it cowered from a threatening force.

Morgan ran. The backpack swung frantically in his left hand. Nearly a full block of darkness then a streetlamp. Again, nearly a full block of darkness then a streetlamp. Finally, he reached Ridge Street. The sudden appearance of a large racoon startled him. To avoid colliding with the animal, he dug his heels into the pavement and fell to the ground.

The racoon ignored him, continued along its path, and disappeared between two houses.

Regaining his composure, he wiped the dirt from his hands and picked up the backpack. Thankful he hadn't twisted either ankle, he stood. Something or someone moved about in a row of bushes.

"Tirich?"

The rustling hedges indicated something had concealed itself in the overgrown shrubs.

Morgan sprinted the last six blocks to Jonathan and Ava's house. He slammed the gate shut behind him and ran to the sun porch. Inside the house, he bent over and rested his hands on his knees.

Shocked, Ava asked, "Morgan, what's wrong?"

Gulping big breaths, he uttered, "Nothing."

"What happened?"

"I got scared." He dropped the backpack.

Jonathan entered with a book in his hand, surprised to see Morgan. "What's going on?"

"I don't know," Ava said, rising to her feet. "He ran in. Something scared him."

"Is it Tirich?" Jonathan stared at the cut above Morgan's eye. "Did he try to get you?"

"No."

Alarmed, Ava examined the red, black, and blue blotches on his skin. "Who did this to you?"

He pulled the neckband of his shirt to reveal his collar bone. "My father."

"Why?"

"Because he's an asshole."

Jonathan clenched his teeth and slammed the book onto the table. "The reason tonight?"

"He was yelling about me hanging out with rich people. Said I made him look like a fool. And he kept calling me hotshot. That sort of crap."

"Let's go upstairs and check out all those marks," Jonathan said. "You're going to need ointment for some of them."

Morgan chuckled. "You can self-heal, but you have ointment in the house?"

"Always be prepared," Jonathan replied.

* * *

Most of the red welts had diminished considerably by morning. It hurt to move, but it was not as painful as the night before.

Morgan lounged in bed several minutes, recalling the fight with his father. It was a surreal moment to accept that it had taken place, and that he awakened in a guest room at Jonathan and Ava's house. Being at their home, instead of his own, made him feel safe. He was elated.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Morgan contemplated not going to school. He anticipated stares and whispers. Yet he walked the halls like any other ordinary day. But he hadn't anticipated Brian marching to his locker as soon as he unlocked the door. After everything that had happened the night before, Morgan wasn't in the mood to listen to Brian's taunts.

"Don't start your bullshit with me," Morgan said.

Brian leaned against a locker with his arms crossed. "My mom said you and your dad got into a big fight."

"Yep."

Moving closer, Brian studied Morgan's bruised face. "Must have been a good one."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Never really thought you were a fighter."

Morgan closed the locker and fixed his gaze on Brian. Although insulted, he didn't believe he owed Brian an in-depth explanation. "What? You thought I'd just stand there and get my ass kicked?"

"Well, you stood up to me a couple times. But never saw you take a swing at somebody."

"I'm a lover, not a fighter."

"I've never seen you with a girlfriend either."

And I've never seen you with a girlfriend either, Morgan thought. "What, now you need to hear that I made out with some girl?"

"I just think it's cool that you stuck up for yourself."

The complimentary remark caught Morgan off guard. "Oh. Well, thanks. I guess."

"I hope you got a couple hits in."

"I fought back. So, yeah, he's probably sore."

Grinning, Brian patted Morgan's shoulder. "Good for you. Your father is a real dick."

"Yeah, I know."

"Next time you should kick his ass."

"There won't be a next time. I'm not going back there."

"Ever? Where are you gonna live?"

"At Ava and Jonathan's."

"A Fischer living at Fischer House again."

"Yep."

"Lucky for you," Brian said and walked away.

Morgan appreciated Brian's new friendly attitude, but he preferred to remain on guard. Without warning, Brian's bully mentality could rear its ugly head like a snake hissing to scare away a perceived threat. And when that moment arrived, Morgan didn't plan to retreat.

The school counselor summoned Morgan to his office during last hour. The Algebra II teacher gestured toward the door. "Go on. You can catch up when you get back."

Morgan sauntered through the halls. The silence and lack of activity was a pleasant experience. He was in no hurry to sit for a conversation, and he was in no rush to return to Algebra.

Most of the students liked Mr. Davis. Unlike most of the high school staff, he never presented himself as a stern authority figure. He genuinely cared for the students. He knew every student's name and always offered a smile. But Morgan suspected Mr. Davis wanted to discuss the visible bruises.

On the telephone, Mr. Davis motioned for Morgan to enter. After Morgan sat on the old wooden chair, he hung up the receiver.

"Ah, Mr. Fischer," he said, his mustache quivering with each spoken word. It appeared as if a caterpillar rested above his lip. "I'm glad you stopped by."

"Am I in some sorta trouble?"

"No. Have you gotten into trouble recently?"

Morgan shook his head. "I'd rather stay under the radar than get caught fighting or get into trouble."

"It looks like you got into a fight."

"Looks can be deceiving."

"An accident, then?"

"Sure. It was an accident."

"That's not convincing."

"I'm not trying to convince you of anything."

Mr. Davis massaged his neck with both hands. "I wanted to talk to you about your plans after graduation."

Glancing at his fingernails, Morgan focused his gaze on a spot of ink on his thumb. "Really? You wanna know my plans?"

"Yes. Have you been thinking about college? Are you interested in any schools?"

He lied. "Not really. I haven't researched anything."

"I can help you with that." Mr. Davis opened a manila folder and perused a sheet of paper. "You're a smart young man, Morgan. You ace all your tests. But most of your teachers note that you neglect your homework."

"I'm passing all my classes."

"Yes, I know. If you did your homework, you'd be a straight-A student. What's the problem with doing your daily work?"

"There's no problem. I have other things to do."

"Like what?"

Morgan sighed, placed one of his shoes on the chair, and played with the shoelace. "I read a lot. I work on my art."

"That's great. Are you interested in art school?"

"I don't know. Do we have to do this now?"

"I'm trying to help you out. I can give you information about schools. There are plenty of colleges with art programs. Or specific art schools."

"I don't know what I'm gonna do exactly."

"If you work on bringing your grades up, you can look into scholarships. Pell Grants. Apply for student loans."

"I'll think about it."

"Do you have *any* plans after high school?"

"Get the hell outta Colby."

Mr. Davis folded his arms. "How are things at home?"

Morgan heaved his backpack from the floor. "Home is fine, Mr. Davis. Are we finished talking about grades and college?"

"We don't have to talk about grades and college. We can talk about other things. Is there anything you'd like to talk about?"

"No."

"Go ahead, Morgan. Have a seat. Tell me what's on your mind."

"Nothing. I thought we were done here."

"Got any problems with any classmates? Girls? Your parents?"

"My mother's dead!"

He had uttered the words before the thought had fully formed in his

mind. Biting his lip, Morgan had no intention of crying about his mother in the counselor's office.

Mr. Davis cleared his throat. "That's right. I'm sorry, Morgan. I wasn't thinking clearly while I rattled off questions."

"It's okay. Don't feel bad." Morgan slung the backpack onto his shoulder and walked toward the door.

"Would you like to talk about your mother?"

Morgan turned on his heel. "I don't need a therapy session."

"What about your father?"

"I don't live with my father."

"I didn't know that. You live with other family members?"

"No, I'm staying with people who love me."

"I'm happy to hear that." Mr. Davis slid a blank index card across the desk. "You need to update your contact information."

Morgan returned to the desk and wrote down the phone number and address to Fischer House.

"It's nice that these folks took you in."

"Like I said, I don't need a therapy session. Everything is great."

"Don't think of me as a therapist. I'm the school counselor that wants the best for all students."

"Do I need a slip for Algebra?"

Mr. Davis signed a piece of paper. He crossed the room and placed his hand on Morgan's shoulder. "Give this to your teacher."

"Yep." Morgan walked out to the hall. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. Let me know if you want any information on colleges. Come back anytime you'd like to talk. My door is always open."

Morgan continued to walk down the hall. "Uh, huh."

* * *

Morgan returned to Jonathan and Ava's house after school. Although he felt comfortable and welcome, he worried that he interrupted their routine of life. Yet they voiced no concern about him staying at their house. They never asked about his plans after graduation. They seemed to accept that he lived with them.

Together they provided a home environment Morgan assumed most *normal* families experienced. Jonathan took on the role of buddy and older brother. Ava behaved more paternal.

She expected Morgan to follow rules. A curfew was set. Chores were delegated. She demanded he complete his homework every night. He helped with dinner and cleaned the kitchen. Then the three lounged around talking or watching television. The interaction reminded Morgan that guidance and love had been absent from his life for far too long. He finally felt accepted and loved. He finally felt like he belonged.

* * *

When Morgan awoke early Tuesday morning, the sight of a dozen colorful balloons in the bedroom surprised him. A card on the nightstand wished him a Happy Birthday and promised a fun night. He jumped out of bed. "I'm eighteen. I'm eighteen years-old today," he sang and boogied his way to the bathroom.

After school, he rushed to Fischer House. Once he stepped inside, Jonathan and Ava yelled, "Happy Birthday."

Ava gestured toward the dining room. "Come on, birthday boy."

The table was covered with beautifully wrapped presents and more balloons. "Wow," Morgan exclaimed. "This is a lot."

Jonathan pulled him into a bear hug and cupped the back of his head. "Nah, come on, buddy. You're eighteen. Let's celebrate."

A black sport watch. Novels. Art books. Books of photography. Art pads. Pencils. Canvases. A silver chain necklace. Jeans. Tee-shirts and dress shirts. A peacoat for winter.

"You didn't have to get me so much stuff."

"We wanted to," Ava replied. "Birthday celebrations were pretty much discarded long ago."

"I've never had this many new clothes at once before."

"Everything should fit," she said.

"If not, we can exchange it for the right size," Jonathan added.

Ava motioned for Morgan and Jonathan to leave the room. "All right, I'm going to clean this up. Morgan, remember the rule: you must do your homework before anything else. Jonathan, do whatever you need to do to start fixing dinner."

Later, Morgan sat at the dining table trying to set the time on his watch. Jonathan and Ava entered singing "Happy Birthday."

Placing the cake on the table, Jonathan smiled. "Make a wish."

The cake looked large enough to serve two dozen people. A likeness of a teddy bear holding a red rose elicited a smile from Morgan. Two flames flickered atop candles in the shape of a one and an eight.

Morgan thought of a life filled with love and happiness. He wished for freedom from the life he knew with his father and blew out the candles.

"I hope it was a good one," Ava exclaimed with glee.

Smiling, Morgan replied. "It was."

Jonathan popped the cork to a bottle of Veuve Clicquot and poured three glasses of champagne. "*Only* for this special occasion."

Morgan accepted the crystal flute. The last time he had cake and presents on his birthday was the year following the death of his mother. Glancing at Ava and Jonathan, he acknowledged the good fortune of having people who accepted him, guided him, and loved him. He cast the air of melancholy aside and smiled. "I love the teddy bear."

"So cute," Ava teased. "The bakery didn't have enough advance-notice to make the cake I wanted. I settled for this. When it was delivered, I put the candles on top, and ta da...your birthday cake."

He gestured to the teddy bear and raised the glass of champagne. "From childhood to adulthood."

"That's right," Jonathan replied. "Let's toast."

Ava grabbed the flute by the stem and held it out in front of her. "Happy Birthday, Morgan. You're very special to us. You're a great addition to our lives. We wish nothing but the best for you, and we love you very much."

Jonathan elevated his flute higher. "Happy Birthday. You deserve the best in life. Love you, buddy."

They gestured to Morgan with their glasses and drank. As Morgan raised the champagne to his lips, Jonathan indicated he should wait.

"You're the toastee. Don't drink yet." He swallowed champagne then lowered his glass. "All right. Now it's your turn to say something if you want."

Morgan rose to his feet. "Um. Thank you. I haven't had a birthday party in years. This was very nice of you. I don't know what I would do without you. I love you."

Tirich watched intently through the dining room window as Jonathan, Ava, and Morgan ate birthday cake. He casually smoked a cigarette while they talked and laughed. Once he had viewed enough of the birthday celebration, he ran toward the orchards.

The full moon illuminated the ground as Tirich stomped on stray apples, pears, berries, and winter squash. He stood on a hill that overlooked Colby, observing the town below with disgust. "What a bunch of idiots."

In need of a place to rest, he ran briskly toward the Pocono Mountains.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Initially, Morgan had difficulty accepting the rule of two authority figures. On his own, he'd gone to bed when he wanted, bathed when he wanted, and decided to complete homework assignments or not. Yet Ava and Jonathan's parental-like expectations exuded a certain nurturing comfort that Morgan embraced.

When Morgan had told Ava and Jonathan about his discussion with Mr. Davis, the two promised to participate more actively in Morgan's education. Homework needed to be completed before dinner. He needed to study for all exams. During the next ten months, Morgan needed to focus on preparing for college. And if he concentrated on a successful academic year, then Ava and Jonathan would help him pay for school.

Jonathan sat in the den with Morgan, studying for a US Government exam. He had been quizzing Morgan for fifteen minutes when the doorbell rang. Morgan instantly recognized his father's voice. He jumped to his feet and rushed out of the room.

Frederick stood in the foyer. He didn't appear drunk. Once Morgan was in his sight, he smiled. "Hey, son."

"What are you doing here?"

"Look, I'm really sorry about the other night. Just thinking about what happened, it eats me up inside."

"Oh, really?" Morgan shifted his weight from one foot to the other and shoved his hands in his pockets. His father's apology carried no weight. "I'm fine. I haven't thought about it all."

Ava retreated to the stairs as Jonathan entered the foyer. "Who's this?" he asked.

"My reformed father."

"Oh." He extended his hand. "Jonathan Astor. This is my sister, Ava."

Frederick firmly gripped Jonathan's hand before stepping back to the door. "I know who you are. I came to get my son."

Morgan couldn't believe his father stood before him, putting on a show for Jonathan and Ava. Doubtful that Frederick was sincere, he shook his head. "I'm not going with you."

"You have to."

"Why?"

"You're my son."

Ava spoke. "I'm sorry, Mr. Fischer. Why do you want him to go home with you? Beating him with a belt isn't something that would make him want to stay or return."

"I'm sorry about that. I feel awful about it." He looked Morgan in the eye. "I really do."

Jonathan leaned against the stair railing. "He's been here five nights. You missed his birthday."

Frederick's eyes brightened. "Officially a man."

"Legally an adult," Morgan emphasized. "I don't wanna go home with you. And I'm not." He reinforced his statement by running up the stairs.

No one said anything or looked at each other. Frederick pressed his lips together and cast his gaze to the floor. He suspected the silence allowed Ava and Jonathan to study him...to judge him more harshly than they had probably already done based on stories. And he believed Morgan told exaggerated stories or outright lies because Ava and Jonathan didn't seem too friendly toward him.

"Mr. Fischer, Morgan's welcome to stay here," Ava said. "He's happy. He's being taken care of. He's going to school, doing his homework. He's fine here."

"He's my son," Frederick yelled before lowering his voice. "He should be home with me."

Jonathan stepped closer. "We'll talk to Morgan. Maybe in a few days, the two of you can talk. Clear things up. Maybe work it out for the better. Give Morgan time to think about it."

He resented Ava and Jonathan for getting involved in his son's life. "What the hell do the two of you want with some eighteen-year-old kid? Huh? Some kid suddenly shows up on your doorstep, and you guys pretend like you're a family or something? Is that it?"

Ava crossed her arms. "We're not pretending to be anything. We love

Morgan. We want what's best for him. Right now, it doesn't seem like your home is the best thing for him."

"Fine. But you're not a family. He's my family, not yours. You're taking my son away from me."

"You pushed him away," Jonathan declared.

"Ha. You don't know. Now he's living in the house my family built. That's some fucked up irony for ya."

A door slammed shut upstairs.

The sudden bang of the door caused Frederick's face to tingle, as if his deceased wife had slapped him.

"You turned him against me."

"No, you did that," Ava replied.

Jonathan opened the front door. "Good night, Mr. Fischer."

Humiliated, Frederick walked out cursing under his breath. A gust of wind forced him to sway on his feet. Steadying his balance, he faced Jonathan and Ava with an unexpected sense of relief. "Yeah. Fine. You're doing me a favor."

Jonathan's cool demeanor vanished. "Well, then, you're welcome. Now do us a favor, don't come back." Then he slammed the door.

The guest room door slowly opened. "Hey, buddy."

Morgan met Jonathan's gaze and drew in a breath. "I don't care how sorry he says he is. He hasn't changed. In five days? He took a bath and put on clean clothes to try to make a good impression on you. And he wasn't drunk. We're supposed to think he sobered up and started going to A.A. meetings or something?"

He occupied his hands by haphazardly arranging books on the desk. "Ha. What a joke. *He's* a joke."

"I didn't come in here to change your mind," Jonathan said. "Maybe in a few days you'll talk to your dad and figure out what you want to do."

"I already know *exactly* what I wanna do, and I'm not changing my mind. Please, let me stay here. I'll finish out the school year. I'll do whatever I need to do, so I can go to college. Don't make me talk to him or go back there," Morgan pleaded. "I'll do whatever you want. I'll help out around here. I'll be good and do whatever you ask me."

"Morgan."

"I will. I can do what needs to be done around here. I can be your Mortal Soul. I'll do everything you guys can't do, you know, during the daytime. I

can do everything then. I'll be your Mortal Soul. You need someone to do those things. I can be that person. I'm the one. Maybe that's why we became friends. Maybe I was meant to meet you and be here. To be your Mortal Soul. You need me."

Ava entered the room and took Morgan into her arms.

"I can't live that life again. I can't go back there. No food. The utilities getting shut off. And him. *Him*. A drunk that doesn't love his own son. A drunk that hates me and wants to beat me, 'cause I remind him of my mother. He doesn't care about me being home with him. He just doesn't want me here. I won't go back. I'll run away first."

He lifted his head from Ava's shoulder. "I can be your Mortal Soul. You guys need me. And I need you."

Jonathan motioned for Morgan and Ava to sit on the bed. He squatted at their feet. "Morgan, calm down. You're here now. We're going to carry on as usual. No Mortal Soul talk. Let's live each day as it comes."

"Yeah, let's get back to what we were doing," Ava suggested.

Morgan wiped a tear from his face and nodded. "Sorry you guys have to deal with this."

Jonathan tapped Morgan on the knee. "Get yourself cleaned up. When you're ready, we can finish prepping for that test tomorrow."

Ava shut the door to the den. "What are we going to do?"

Jonathan sighed. "He needs us right now. Let's do what we can. We'll figure it out when the time comes."

"When we need to be somewhere? When we need to go out...and feed?"

"I know. I know."

As a mortal, Ava had never dreamed of marrying and having kids. She had focused her attention on business affairs and her own personal interests. When Jonathan and Evelyn had tried having children, she accepted her future role as an aunt with anticipation and excitement. She had looked forward to doting on a young girl or boy without the responsibilities of being a parent. Now her maternal instincts wanted to help and protect Morgan. "We didn't accept a human to act as a Mortal Soul. We took in a kid that needs to be taken care of."

"What do you think we should do?"

"I'm not trying to suggest anything. He can't go back to his father. I know that. It's better for him here."

Jonathan agreed. "I don't want to construct a detailed plan. Not tonight."

"You know, he said he was meant to meet us, so he could be our Mortal Soul. To help us. But maybe we were meant to help him."

"Let's take it day by day. Everything will be fine. Don't worry." He pulled her into a hug. "We're going to help him. We're not going to push him back to his father's house."

* * *

The following day, Morgan passed the US Government exam. He returned to Fischer House relieved it was Friday. He hadn't been home long when someone knocked on the front door. The arrival of an unexpected guest made him nervous. Hoping it wasn't his father again, he rested his hand on the knob. "Who is it?"

"Detective Sellers."

Morgan opened the door. "Hello. Can I help you?"

"Hello. I'm Detective Julian Sellers. Are your parents home?"

"I don't live here with my parents."

The detective apologized. "I'm looking for Jonathan and Ava Astor."

Morgan fixed his gaze on the detective, hoping he didn't appear nervous or suspicious. "Uh, can you wait here while I get them?"

"Yes, of course."

The detective on the porch worried Morgan. Limited interaction with the police in the past had never caused anxiety. But he interpreted the detective's arrival as an indication of trouble. Detectives investigated and probed. So, Morgan understood that the man sought information provided by answers to questions. Although Detective Sellers wanted to talk to Ava and Jonathan, Morgan feared the man would scrutinize his every physical movement and facial expression.

Jonathan looked up from a stack of paperwork. "What is it?"

"There's a detective at the door."

"Detective?"

"What if it's about Tirich?"

Jonathan shook his head. "No way."

"What do you want me to tell him?"

"I'll be right there."

"Should I get Ava?"

"Sure. Show him to the living room."

Once Morgan returned to the front door, he invited the detective in. "Would you like something to drink?"

"No, thank you. You live here as well?"

"Yeah."

"Family?"

Uh oh. Here's the list of questions. "Yeah, but not by blood."

The detective smiled. "You were at the party last Saturday night?"

"Yeah"

"Your name is?"

"Morgan Fischer."

"Do you know Henry and Candice Blackwood?"

Morgan's heart thumped as if it had imploded. "No, I don't know who they are."

Jonathan entered and introduced himself. "How can I help you?"

"I'm here to ask a few questions regarding a couple invited to the party you had last Saturday."

"All right."

"How well were you acquainted with Henry and Candice Blackwood?"

"We didn't know them at all," Jonathan answered.

Ava entered. "Hello."

"Hello. I'm Detective Sellers. I was asking your husband—"

"Brother," Ava corrected.

"Forgive me. I was asking your brother about Henry and Candice Blackwood. He says you didn't know the couple."

"It was suggested that I invite them."

"Who suggested them?"

"Miranda Jacobs. She's a neighbor, a few houses down. She was here with her husband Larry and their son, Kyle."

"You never met Henry and Candice before?"

"No."

"Well, it looks like they planned to attend. We found the invitation envelope with a bottle of wine." Sellers scribbled notes in a small spiral notebook. "What was the purpose of your party? Some sort of celebration?"

"Not a celebration," Ava responded. "We were introducing ourselves to neighbors. Getting to know them and vice versa."

"You recently moved in?"

"Yes," Jonathan answered, "in June."

"Where did you move from?"

"Denver," Ava said.

The detective adjusted his position on the sofa. "I assume you heard the Blackwoods were murdered the night of the party?"

"Yes," Jonathan replied. "It's disturbing."

"It certainly is."

"I hope you catch the killer soon," Ava said. "Return some normality to this town."

"We're working on it. Right now, I'm here to ask questions. Any information we get might be helpful down the line."

Morgan leaned forward in the chair and scratched a spot on his knee. "You don't have any idea who the killer is?"

"No," he said. "Do you guys know if they planned on bringing an additional guest?"

Ava shook her head. "Candice confirmed by telephone. She left a message. She didn't say anything about bringing someone with them."

"Do you still have the message?"

"Probably not. I can check."

"Could you, please? And let me know."

"Of course."

"I don't believe I have any more questions for you, especially since you didn't know them. Please, call me if you hear anything...talk around town, something in conversation."

"We will," Jonathan replied.

The detective smiled at Jonathan and Ava. "Thank you for your time."

They remained in the living room while Morgan escorted the detective to the door. Then the three retreated to the dining room.

Morgan drummed his fingers against his chest. "Oh, great."

"Don't worry," Jonathan replied. "The party invitation led him here. He's doing his job."

Ava sighed. "Tirich better have taken his ass all the way to the East Coast."

"I don't think he's smart enough to set us up for the murder of the Blackwoods."

"Never know," Morgan said.

In thought, Jonathan rubbed his thumb on the table as if it helped him concentrate. "We can't sit here making ourselves anxious about some gumshoe. He was here to ask questions, and that's it. We're fine. We have nothing to worry about."

"Gumshoe?" Morgan chuckled and walked toward the living room. "I hope we don't have anything to worry about."

A return visit from the detective wasn't something that Ava wanted to experience. "If he comes knocking on the door again, he'll have a whole new set of questions," she said. "Tirich could have planted something in that house."

"You're giving Tirich too much credit."

"We don't know what he's capable of."

"Well, it would make more sense to set up a human than Immortals."

Ava situated herself more comfortably and sighed. "Remember the body in Sacramento?"

Jonathan cradled his head and sighed. "Yes."

"Remember how we almost got caught getting rid of that body?"

"YES." He rubbed his eyes and gazed at her. "I really don't want to think about him being capable of disrupting our lives. We haven't been in Colby long. It's going to be a pain in the ass if we have to move somewhere else *already*."

"Okay," she replied. "The detective seemed satisfied when he left, so outta sight, outta mind. I don't want Morgan to worry."

He stepped toward the kitchen, then looked back. "Good. Back to normal."

"Maybe we should bring up college."

Jonathan tilted his head and crinkled his nose. "A lot has happened this week already. Let's hold off a bit on the college talk."

"Fine. But he needs to start making some decisions about his future."

Alone with her thoughts, Ava wondered how much happier Morgan would be once he left Colby. When he returned to visit, would he resent spending time in the small town? Should she and Jonathan continue to live there long-term? Should the three of them leave Colby together?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Daylight dwindled to about ten hours as November neared. The new month would bring more clouds and rain. Days would be cold. Nights could be chilly. Sometimes the temperature dropped low enough to produce snowfall.

Morgan grabbed his backpack and headed to the abandoned train station at the edge of town. The three-story building of rotted wood and crumbling brick still dominated the area. Weeds and wild grass sprouted from nearly every hole and crevice in the concrete platform. Overgrown bushes stretched across the landscape, attempting to conceal the ugliness of what had once been magnificent.

Long ago, the luxurious interior had been quite the spectacle to the observer. The station was one of Colby's grand treasures until automobiles and planes eclipsed travel by train. Walls had taken on yellow and brown stains. The ceiling had cracked and fallen in sections. Tile and wood flooring lifted in areas and sunk in other spots. Although the air was thick with dirt and the musty aroma of age, the train station remained one of Morgan's favorite sites to lose himself in creation and thought.

He marveled at the wilderness on the opposite side of the railroad tracks. Stretching up the hill, it weaved into a tapestry of trees looming over the surrounding area. The leaves were brilliant shades of red, orange, and yellow. The branches appeared as if they were on fire. Even the ground looked aflame. Soon, the cold weather would have the region in its grip, and the trees would be naked and dead in appearance.

Movement next to a tree caught his eye. At first glance, he thought it might be a young black bear. He watched the animal emerge from behind the tree, then recognized it was a dog. Not good at identifying dog breeds, he guessed it was a big, dark-haired German Shepherd. An Akita, perhaps. It eyed him as intently as Morgan watched it.

The dog walked several feet then laid down, lowering its head to its front paws. The blanket of fallen leaves nearly concealed the dog's muzzle.

"Hey, boy," Morgan called out. "You lost? Need some food?"

Morgan rose to his feet but returned to his seated position when the dog stood. Once Morgan sat again, the dog relaxed.

Reaching into his backpack, he pulled out a pear and a peanut butter cookie. He tossed the food toward the German Shepherd. Initially, the dog ignored the offering, but eventually walked forward and sniffed it. He ate the cookie, snatched the pear, and ran away.

"Next time I'll bring something you'll like better," he called out.

* * *

Jonathan and Ava were allowed to hunt as vampires in Northeastern Pennsylvania without crossing the border into New York. Philadelphia and the central and west areas of Pennsylvania were off limits as well. Sometimes they traveled to small towns or the mountains for quick consumption. Scranton was the largest city they frequented.

Their routine remained the same. A hotel room. Dinner at nice restaurants. Nights out surveying the bars or clubs. After feeding, they enjoyed the rest of their time in the city like any other visitors to Scranton.

Jonathan often wandered the areas known for criminal activity. If he killed, he preferred to take the life of drug dealers, violent husbands, abusive mothers, and corrupt police officers. He certainly didn't think of himself as a superhero, but he didn't feel guilty killing the less-than-desirable members of the community. He considered it a form of civic duty.

Capable of killing, Ava favored the consumption of human blood without introducing death.

They often ventured out alone to pick up someone at a bar. Sexual activity was as enticing as blood ingestion. While in the throes of passion, it was easy to play rough and bite a sexual partner. A small quantity of blood could satisfy the appetite. If a long duration of time had passed, consuming a large amount of blood was necessary. But Jonathan and Ava often avoided bringing a person to the brink of death.

Willing donors usually lived in cities rather than small towns. Certain people gravitated to the vampire mystic for a variety of reasons. Many considered the vampire an exotic creature. They eagerly donated to people who believed they needed blood for rejuvenation and survival. None were the wiser having provided blood to a real in-the-flesh vampire.

Two months had passed since Jonathan and Ava had consumed the blood

needed to survive. Fatigue had set in. The pangs of hunger had become stronger. They couldn't ignore the temptation.

Jonathan and Ava planned to go away for five days.

"Five?"

"Yes, for, um...health reasons."

Morgan's eyes widened. "Oh. You need to go for blood."

"Yes. It's been too long. We're going to Scranton. You can use Ava's BMW if it gets too cold to walk to school. There's plenty of food in the house. We'll leave you some money."

"Thank you."

"You can't have anyone over to the house," Jonathan informed him. "We have to know and trust someone before you can bring anyone here to hang out. It's not only about protecting ourselves and our way of life, it's about protecting you as well."

"I understand."

"Good. And don't answer the door if anyone should come knocking."

* * *

Morgan sat at the dining room table with textbooks open in front of him. He had set aside his pencil and paper. A dinner plate contained a half-eaten sandwich and a salad. A lamp and the fixture in the kitchen illuminated the darkness of the room.

He folded his arms together on the table to support his head. Staring blankly toward the living room, Morgan sat like a lone statue eroded over time by rain and wind.

Once the fog of saddened thoughts had lifted, he roamed through the house, admiring the paintings and photographs on the walls. He touched the soft fabric of the sofa and ran his hands along the railing of the stairs. He perused the binds of the books on the shelves in the den. In the hallway upstairs, he studied the framed work of famous photographers.

He entered Ava's bedroom, the master. Everything was bathed in white. Seated at her vanity, he examined her jewelry. Gems of various colors and sizes adorned the collection of brooches of butterflies, dragonflies, and flowers. Smiling, he carefully returned them to the appropriate jewelry box.

In Jonathan's room, Morgan sat in a chair and flipped through the pages of a family photo album. Several photographs featured their parents. Some photos were of Jonathan and Ava as children. Most of the book contained

photographs of the two as adults in various poses, capturing numerous occasions spanning decades.

Later, Morgan dressed for bed. He couldn't fall asleep. After several minutes of staring at the moonlight on the ceiling, he returned to Jonathan's bedroom. He laid down on the king-size bed and rested his head on the pillow. Finally, he drifted to sleep.

* * *

Excited to drive Ava's BMW to school, Morgan parked the car where he could easily check on it from a window overlooking the school grounds. He worried something would happen to the car the first time he used it. A key used to scratch the paint. A broken window. The stereo stolen. At the end of the day, he was relieved to find the car without damage.

Since it was Friday, he was in no hurry to return to an empty house. And he wanted to feed the dog at the train station.

Morgan drove to the gas station and parked next to the pump. Inside the store, he selected a soda and a bag of chips. As he stood in line, a small group of boys from the high school baseball team walked in. He averted his gaze and looked straight ahead. One of the boys focused his attention on Morgan.

"Oh, look," he said. "Loser fag boy is here."

A couple boys snickered as they continued to walk toward the beverage coolers. The lead bully purposely bumped into Morgan. "You're in the way, loser."

Morgan thrust his shoulder against the boy. "Go to hell."

The old, gray-haired lady behind the register frowned as she rang up a customer. "Hey. If you're going to buy something, go get it."

The boy chuckled and joined the others.

Morgan tapped his foot, impatiently waiting his turn at the register. Anticipating additional taunts, he kept the boys within sight of his peripheral vision.

They had selected their drinks and gathered behind Morgan. One of them swung his bat in the air mischievously. "If I hit him in the head, the girls won't think he's a pretty boy anymore."

Morgan momentarily doubted they talked about him. But they stood directly behind him, so they must have been referring to him. "Fuck off," he said under his breath.

"Next," the lady said.

He approached the counter. "Twenty dollars on pump seven."

The lead boy laughed. "Moron's driving a Bimmer. He thinks he's a rich kid now."

Irritated, Morgan glanced back and eyed the group.

A guy snatched a squeeze bottle of ketchup from the hot dog counter and waved it in the air. He grinned, handed his soda to one of the guys, and jogged outside.

Morgan stuffed the change into his pocket. "Thanks."

Approaching the car, he spotted a message in ketchup on the windshield: *White Trash Fag Bitch*. The graffiti was a blow to his spirit, but he didn't give the boys the satisfaction of an angry and wounded reaction. He walked to the pump and filled the car.

Laughing, the boys pointed at Morgan. One of them waved a hot dog in front of his crotch and sang "white trash fag bitch." The other boys joined in, serenading Morgan as he pulled out of the parking lot.

Morgan drove to the nearest car wash. He cleaned the windshield and wallowed in self-pity. A part of him thought he should have confronted the boys. Not one boy was much bigger or more muscular than Morgan. If a one-on-one fight escalated, he could have protected himself.

Disappointed he did nothing to defend himself, he punched the steering wheel and sat in the car several minutes. *I don't know*, he thought. *Maybe I am just a pussy.*

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A teen-aged boy walked across the parking lot of the Shop-N-Pump convenience store. Stepping inside, he warmed his hands by rubbing them together. A strong aroma of bleach and the bright fluorescent lights stung his eyes. He didn't recognize the guy at the register.

"Hello. You got here just in time. I'm about to close for the night."

The teen glanced around. "Kelly isn't working?"

"Nope. I think she works tomorrow. I can check the schedule."

He turned to walk out. "That's okay. I'll see her at school tomorrow."

"All right, man. Have a good night."

"Thanks. You, too."

The teen sat on the sidewalk next to the dumpster at the rear of the store. He buttoned his jacket and picked up the remainder of a discarded cigarette. As he lit a match, a man stepped in front of him and presented a pack of cigarettes.

The stranger lit one and offered it to the teenager. "Don't smoke a dirty cigarette you found on the ground."

"I don't care. And I'm out."

"That's why I'm giving you one."

He took the cigarette and nodded. "Thanks, dude."

"No, problem, kid. I'm going in. I'll get you a pack."

"No, that's okay."

"It's fine. You're out," the stranger replied. "I'll be right back."

Upon his return, he tossed a pack of cigarettes to the boy.

"Thanks, dude. You didn't have to do that."

The stranger sat next to him. "You're welcome." He extended his hand. "My name is Tirich."

Shawn shook his hand and introduced himself.

"Why are you sitting out here in the cold?"

"I got into a fight with my parents."

"Yeah. It happens. You'll be all right, kid."

"It's been a crappy night. I don't wanna go home yet."

Removing a bottle of whiskey from his coat pocket, Tirich offered it to Shawn. "Here."

"Don't think I should go home with alcohol on my breath. I'm already in trouble."

"Whatever, kid. It's cold out. It'll warm you up. But I understand if you don't want to further upset mommy and daddy."

Shawn grabbed the bottle, swigged the whiskey, and grimaced. "Man. That's strong stuff."

"It'll put hair on your chest and warm your balls."

Shawn laughed. "Warm my balls?"

"Something like that." Tirich drank then handed the bottle to Shawn. "I need something to eat. Want anything?"

"No, thanks. You better hurry. The guy said he was gonna close the store."

When Tirich returned, he pointed across the street. "Let's move the party to the park. The guy is about to hose down the sidewalk."

Dizziness caused Shawn to sway before he sat on the park bench. Surprised by the quick intoxication, he giggled. "I think the whiskey hit me."

"The better stuff doesn't take long." Tirich opened the bag of chips. "Here. Put something in your stomach."

Shawn grabbed a handful and pushed the bag to Tirich.

"Nah. I'll eat in a bit."

"All right. Thanks."

"What's the big problem you have with your parents?"

"They're too controlling," Shawn complained. "Don't do this. Don't do that. I can't take it anymore."

"You're young. You're their son, and it's their responsibility to take care of you. They're only doing what's best for you."

"They're a pain in my ass."

"Parents can be." Tirich chuckled. "You'll be out on your own soon. It's a big, crazy world out there. Your parents are trying to set guidelines you'll use in your adult life."

"The constant nagging drives me crazy. It pisses me off."

"Parents will piss you off whether you're a good, rule-abiding son or not. It's their job to raise you right...and sometimes piss you off."

Shawn lit a cigarette. "I guess so."

Tirich took the cigarette and inhaled. "You know...don't break the law. Do your homework. Don't get a girl pregnant. Don't talk to strangers."

"Yeah. Strangers." Shawn lit another cigarette. "You live around here?"

"No. I was here a couple months ago. Now I'm passing through town again."

"Staying at a motel or something?"

"Nope. An abandoned house."

Shawn glanced at him. "Really? Why?"

"Like I said, I'm just passing through town. Needed a place to crash. It's my hideout."

"Hideout?"

"Yeah. No one knows I'm there. And I don't want anyone to know."

"You a thief or something?"

Amused, Tirich shook his head. "I'm a vampire."

"Oh. A vampire," Shawn mocked. "Scary."

"I wouldn't expect you to be scared of me. Not until I rip your throat open."

"Of course. To drink my blood."

"I might eat your heart, too. I haven't had one in a while."

"Uh, huh." Shawn quickly stood. "I feel sick."

"Lightweight," Tirich teased. "Gotta go easy on the whiskey, kid."

Shawn rushed to a nearby tree and threw up. He steadied his balance as the whiskey continued to churn in his stomach. "It's a lot worse on the way out than going in."

"Relax. Take a few deep breaths." Tirich placed his hand on Shawn's shoulder. "You'll be fine."

"I feel a little better now."

A gust of bitterly cold wind knocked the bag of chips to the ground.

"Looks like a storm is brewing," Tirich said and unzipped his pants.

Shawn cast his gaze to the street then looked straight ahead past the tree trunk.

"I need to take a piss." The steam from the urine danced along the bark of the tree.

"Yeah, so do I."

"We're both grown men," Tirich said. "Don't be a puss about it."

Shawn turned away from Tirich and unzipped his pants. "Yeah. All right."

"Don't be so uptight."

Shawn released a heavy stream of urine. "Yeah, I'm sorry."

"No problem, kid." Tirich slammed Shawn's face into the tree.

Shawn collapsed to the ground as if rendered unconscious. He touched his face and whined, "What the fuck, man?"

Squatting, Tirich yanked Shawn by the collar of his shirt. "Put your dick in your pants and stand up."

Rising, Shawn zipped his pants then pushed Tirich off balance.

Tirich retaliated by pushing back. When Shawn landed several feet away, Tirich scurried to him, forcing him to a standing position. "Walk toward the trees and don't think—"

Running in the opposite direction, Shawn yelled, "Help!"

Tirich appeared at his side. "Shut the hell up."

Shawn continued to yell, so Tirich knocked him out with one punch.

* * *

Groaning, Shawn opened his eyes and focused on dirty, rotted wood flooring. The scent of dust and mildew filled his nostrils. Realizing he was in an abandoned house, he turned onto his back and scanned the room. Three candles flickered on an old coffee table. The wind whistled through a hole in the window. The light from a streetlamp reminded Shawn that he was trapped inside somewhere at night.

Tirich sat on the floor with his back against the wall. Grinning, he exhaled a cloud of cigarette smoke. "Hey, kid. Ready to finish our conversation?"

Shawn staggered to his feet. "What conversation?"

"Between the whiny teenager and the vampire."

"Listen, asshole. I don't know what your problem is. Just let me go and we'll forget this happened."

"I remember everything. But you won't have to," Tirich said, "because you'll be dead."

Shawn's heartbeat quickened. "Seriously, man. Let me walk outta here. I won't tell anyone that you're staying here. I won't say anything about you attacking me."

Tirich laughed. "I didn't attack you yet." He raced across the room and pushed Shawn to the floor. "You're seventeen? Eighteen?"

"I'll be seventeen next month."

"When I rip your throat open, I'll drink your blood. When you reach the point of death, I'll stop. Your nearly seventeen years will be mine."

Trembling, Shawn wanted to throw up again. He covered his mouth as tears welled in his eyes. "You're the guy that's been killing people and cutting their heads off?"

"Yes, that's me," Tirich boasted. "It's been kinda fun taking the heads. Gives me someone to talk to for a while. Then I toss 'em because they rot and stink."

"I'm too young to die."

"No, you're not. I've killed four...maybe five kids younger than you."

The statement increased Shawn's terror tenfold. He positioned himself on all fours, inhaling and exhaling heavily, then he threw up.

Tirich shoved him. "Dammit. You're making a mess of the place." He clutched Shawn's hair and lifted him partially from the floor. "I'm not going to take your head though. I have something else in mind."

"Please, don't kill me."

Tirich dragged Shawn to the far side of the room and rammed him against the wall. When he returned to the center of the room, he grinned before speaking. "All right, you whiny little bitch. If you can get by me, you're free to run."

Rising to his feet, Shawn rested against the wall. "What?"

"This is your chance to escape." Tirich pointed toward the door. "Go on. Make a run for it."

Shawn took a deep breath then sprinted forward. In the center of the room, he veered to the left. Surprisingly, Tirich didn't even try to grab him.

Shawn threw open the door and jumped off the porch. He lost his balance and tripped but kept running. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Tirich watching from the doorway.

"Fuck you, asshole." Unexpectedly, he crashed to the ground with Tirich on top of him.

"I changed my mind," Tirich said and slammed Shawn's face against the ground.

"You broke my fucking nose."

"I'm going to rip your throat open, and you're worried about your fucking nose?"

Shawn struggled to turn over, but Tirich latched onto his legs and dragged him toward the house. Once they reached the porch, Tirich hauled Shawn to his feet and pushed him through the doorway.

Before Shawn could crawl to the next room, Tirich kicked him to the side.

"Sixteen. Seventeen in a few weeks." Tirich smiled and kicked again. "Young blood. Foolish, but innocent. No more birthday parties. No high school graduation. No wedding. No wife and children."

Tirich turned in a circle. "I'm going to need a new place to stay. Your rotting blood and whiskey-vomit will stink up the place."

Cowered in the corner, Shawn pleaded, "Please, let me go."

Laughing, Tirich inched closer then squeezed Shawn's hand until the bones snapped. "Oh, boo hoo. Are you scared of me, little pussy boy?"

Shawn screamed.

"You wanna see a true vampire?" Tirich tilted his head back and growled. He looked down at Shawn, revealing his monstrous vampire form. As he lowered his head, Tirich opened his mouth and tore the flesh from Shawn's neck.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

When Morgan awoke in the mornings, Ava and Jonathan were usually sleeping, so he sometimes liked to pretend that he lived on his own. His routine of showering, dressing, and eating breakfast had become a ritual of independence. There was no father who required Morgan's assistance waking from a drunken stupor. There was no broken-down refrigerator or cupboards without food. The anxiety that had pounded away at his calm demeanor no longer existed.

The previous year, Morgan had attended school due to necessity. Now each passing day at school was one step closer to accomplishing a goal. And at the end of the day, Morgan looked forward to returning home because of what awaited his arrival. Unlike the old, empty house on Rose Lane, Fischer House provided comfort, love, and security.

The frigid air stung Morgan's face. Thankful that the walk from the parking lot to school was short, he couldn't wait to step inside the warm building. When he approached the school, he spotted Amber outside with two girls. From a distance he watched the girls console Amber as she wiped tears from her cheeks. A few minutes later, the girls left her standing on the steps leading to the double door entrance.

At first, Morgan thought he should leave her alone. But the sad expression on her face convinced him to speak to her. "What's wrong?"

"Shawn is missing."

"Missing?"

"Yeah, he had a big fight with his parents and went to Brian's house. Then your dad kicked him out, and he never went back home."

Not knowing how to respond, he muttered, "Sorry."

"He's been gone all night," she said. "It's freezing outside. He didn't take extra clothes or anything."

"Maybe he went to another friend's house."

"Oh, yeah? Which friend?"

"I don't know. You know him better than I do."

"He woulda gone to my house or Brian's."

"There are a lot of abandoned houses and buildings in town. Did he ever hang out at any of those places?"

"Not that I know of." She slammed her backpack onto the concrete ledge and searched inside. "Brian's mom was all pissed off. She yelled at your dad, and he slapped her around. The cops were called and everything."

Morgan imagined the police interrogating his father. "Did they arrest him?"

"No. Janis didn't press charges. She basically kicked the cops outta her house."

"Shawn will turn up soon. I'm sure people are looking for him."

"Yeah. Searching for a dead body."

"Don't say that."

"That killer was never caught. He killed the biker guy. And the cop. That couple...the Blackwoods. Maybe he killed Shawn, too."

"I'm sure everything is gonna be all right. He stayed somewhere around town. I'll help you look for him."

"Thank you. I gotta get to class. There's a fucking test this morning, and I didn't even study. This day sucks."

"Where's Brian?"

"He's out looking for Shawn," she answered and walked away.

Morgan thought of his father and Brian throughout the day. Did they have a heated argument that escalated into a physical confrontation? Did his father beat Brian with a belt? How badly did his father rough up Janis?

Then his thoughts wandered to Tirich. Was he back in town? Did he return to terrorize Colby once again? Did Shawn fall victim to a vampire seeking blood and the thrill of torture and murder?

* * *

After school, Morgan stopped by the train station to feed the dog. Back at home, he eagerly awaited Ava and Jonathan's return from Scranton. When they walked through the back door, he rushed to the kitchen to greet them.

He sat on a stool. "I got news."

"Good news, I hope," Ava replied.

"Shawn is missing. The kid that hangs out with Brian Baxter."

"Missing?"

Jonathan perused a stack of mail on the kitchen island. "What do you mean *missing*?"

"He got in a fight with his parents. My dad kicked him outta Brian's house. He never went home. So, he's missing."

"When did this happen?"

"Last night."

Ava sat next to Morgan. "Maybe he went somewhere to blow off some steam."

"What if Tirich is back, and he killed Shawn?"

Jonathan contemplated the possibility. "I don't think so. He always did his own thing. That's why he was banished."

Ava agreed. "Interfering with us would only summon the wrath of the Elders. He would be hunted and killed."

"He can't interfere with the livelihood of any Immortal," Jonathan explained. "He was granted the right to continue living but on his own. No district. No clan. No colony. Nothing."

Morgan objected. He didn't understand why Ava and Jonathan seemed to ignore the obvious. "You said he told you he was following Interstate 80. What if he decided to follow it back to Colby? That seems logical, right?"

Ava approached several shopping bags she had placed on the floor. "We don't know what happened to Shawn. If he ran away, he might return soon. We can't jump to conclusions. There isn't a body."

"Exactly," Jonathan stressed.

Morgan nodded. "I told Amber I'd help look for him tomorrow. Hopefully, he's hanging out somewhere until he decides to go home."

"Give it another day or two," Jonathan said. "He might go home when no one expects it. You'll see. Everything will be fine."

Ava picked up the shopping bags. "C'mon, Morgan. I bought you some shirts and sweaters. Let's go upstairs and try them on."

"Shirts and sweaters?" Morgan asked.

"Winter will be here soon. You need warmer clothes for the weather," she said, walking out of the kitchen.

Jonathan winked at him. "Go on. Go see what she got for you."

Morgan wanted to discuss the possibility that Tirich returned to town but thought better of it. "All right."

"Don't worry, buddy. Shawn will turn up."

Morgan drove Ava's car to the high school early in the morning. He picked Amber and Brian up in the parking lot. No one spoke during the drive. They parked near the railroad tracks, so they could check out two old, empty factory buildings.

Brian appeared genuinely concerned for his missing friend. The worry Brian projected forced Morgan to view him differently. Sympathetically.

As they wandered along the railroad tracks, Brian asserted Shawn wouldn't run away from home. "No way," he said. "He's gotten into fights with his parents before and left the house to cool off. He never ran away."

"What if it was a really bad fight?" Morgan asked.

"No. He never talked about leaving. He wanted to go to some sorta vocational school after graduation."

"I don't think he ran away," Amber said.

Brian grunted in frustration. "I know, Amber. You think the killer got him."

She said nothing and twirled a strand of dark-brown hair with her finger.

"We can check out the old train station," Morgan suggested. "There's a stray dog there. I need to leave him food."

Snow flurries swirled in the breeze as Morgan placed food on the train platform and poured water into a bowl.

"That water's gonna freeze real quick," Brian pointed out.

"Maybe he'll come around soon. Or if he's desperate, he can lick the ice."

"Your dad said you got a job mowing lawns, so you could buy food. Guess it makes sense you'd wanna help out a stray dog."

Amber shot Brian a look of disapproval.

"Hey, I'm not trying to be mean. Morgan's dad is an asshole. I don't blame Morgan for moving out."

"Why did he tell you that?" Morgan asked.

"He gave me shit last night about getting a job."

At that moment, Morgan felt bad for Brian. "Sorry you have to deal with him now."

"No kidding. But, in a way, it's all right 'cause sometimes my mom doesn't come home, so I get to be alone."

Something in the station crashed to the floor, causing the three to jump with fright.

Brian hurried to an empty window frame and poked his head inside. "Hey, Shawn," he called out, "are you in there?"

Amber and Morgan joined him at the window.

He called out Shawn's name again.

The wind whistled through the lobby.

"I'm going in there," Brian informed them.

"Be careful," Morgan said.

"If he's in there, he might be hurt. A broken leg or something."

Amber protested. "You might get hurt in there."

"I have to check it out. If he's hurt, we can go get help." Brian hoisted his body to the window frame and jumped to the floor inside. He slipped but regained his balance. "I'm gonna look around."

"We'll go with you," Morgan said.

"One of you has to wait outside in case something happens."

Amber motioned for Morgan to go inside.

Morgan smirked. "I'm not scared of going in there."

Brian and Morgan wandered through the lobby to the back of the decaying building. They called out Shawn's name but heard nothing in return. After they searched the office area and bathrooms, they crossed the lobby toward the staircase leading to the second floor.

Amber screamed.

The two boys sprinted to the window and jumped outside.

"What? What? What?" Brian yelled.

Amber stood with her back against the building. She covered her mouth and laughed. "I heard a noise. When I turned around, the dog was standing there. Scared the hell outta me."

Brian shook his head. "Ah, geez, Amber."

Morgan glanced around. "Did he run off?"

"Come on," Brian said. "We're already late for school."

* * *

A hiker had found a torso discarded on the side of the road in the Poconos. Although it was discovered a distance from Colby, residents believed a serial killer was canvassing the region for victims. Many people were convinced Shawn had become the latest casualty in a killing spree. And most people in Colby expected DNA evidence to confirm that the torso was Shawn.

His disappearance was a popular topic of conversation at school.

Occasionally, kids whispered and glared at Morgan. He suspected some kids blamed him. A note slipped into his locker confirmed his suspicion.

Shawn would still be alive if it wasn't for your dad.

* * *

Later, Morgan complained at dinner. "If Shawn is dead, I think Tirich did it. You should hunt him down and kill him."

Ava straightened her posture. "If Tirich is killing around here again, then something has to be done. But that's not for Jonathan and me to do."

"Why not?"

"Because," Jonathan responded, "we would have to contact the Elders, and *they* would determine what to do about Tirich. They would send someone to hunt for him and kill him."

"You should call them. Give 'em the heads up."

Ava asked, "Should we contact the Elders to investigate?"

"I don't know," Jonathan said.

Morgan thumped his hands on the table. "If Shawn is dead and other people start turning up dead, you'll have to."

Jonathan agreed. "If it is Tirich, they better kill him."

* * *

Morgan awoke with a start. Frightened by a nightmare he couldn't remember, he sat up in bed and looked around the dark bedroom. The digital clock displayed 4:30 in the morning.

He watched the shadows of tree limbs sway across the ceiling like fingers reaching for something to grasp. The moonlight, silvery and bright, illuminated much of the room except for the corners of complete blackness. He took a deep breath and swung his legs to the cold wood floor.

The carpet on the stairs embraced his feet with warmth and comfort, like soft plush fabric. Then, once again, the cold wood floor greeted his feet as he walked to the kitchen.

The single fixture above the sink cast a dull light in the room. His upper body quivered from the unpleasant feeling of coldness. When the smell of honey and buttered croissants reached his nose, he relaxed.

It was remarkably quiet, considering ambient noise from nighttime activities usually filled the house.

As he yawned and stretched his arms high in the air, Morgan strolled to the guest bathroom. His drowsiness subsided as he urinated and gazed at the painting of a farm on the wall. An unexpected noise caught his attention. He paused the steady stream of urine and listened for activity in the house. Once he continued to urinate, he heard a muffled thud. He finished peeing and walked out.

He stood in the hall and listened. Then he returned to the bathroom to flush the toilet. Again, a muffled thud penetrated the silence.

"I don't know why I woke up so early."

Morgan craned his neck in anticipation of a response but heard nothing in return. He steadily inched toward the staircase and peered into the darkness upstairs. Two dull thuds disrupted the stillness of the moment. He spun around and looked toward the basement.

"Oh, crap," he groaned. "Of course, it's the basement."

Reluctant to explore the cellar, he felt compelled to investigate. He could have easily searched for Jonathan or Ava upstairs, but he didn't want them to think he feared the basement. "Don't be a pussy."

The cut-glass doorknob melded into the grooves of Morgan's hand. A draft of chilly air greeted him from the darkness. Leaning in, he fumbled for the light switch. The flick of the old switch required more of a push than modern hardware. The loud snap of the toggle was jarring.

Morgan moved his hands along the weathered panel walls and descended each creaky step. Halfway down the stairs, he detected the stomach-churning stench of rancid fruit. The scent reminded Morgan of pineapple that had gone bad.

He turned to go back upstairs but stopped. He took a deep breath and resumed walking down the steps. Listening at the bottom of the stairs, he stood motionless. The lack of noise was a relief. The foul odor burned his nostrils. The cold air caused him to shudder.

Thump.

The sound originated from the far wall.

Thhh-uump.

Morgan squinted his eyes at the darkness. His body stiffened in anticipation of a massive fright jumping into the subdued light. But no monstrosity emerged.

Thhh-uump. Thump.

Emboldened, Morgan marched toward the wall.

Thhh-uump. Thump.

Glancing to his left, he spotted the source of the noise. An awning window swayed on its rusted hinges. A light breeze wouldn't have caused the weathered frame to swing, but the howling wind was strong enough to force it to sway. Morgan adjusted the old metal latch to keep the window closed.

The dull gleam of the light bulb created shadows misleading to the eye. The thought that someone might lurk in a dark corner made Morgan anxious. Suddenly, the silence terrified him more than the bangs and thuds that had piqued his interest. At least noise indicated where danger might be.

He weaved through a maze of dusty boxes and old pieces of furniture. The overhead light dimmed considerably beyond one large wooden crate. It was the farthest point he wanted to go in the murky basement. Ground zero for the nauseating odor. But he couldn't resist the temptation to inspect the area.

Thhh-uump. Thump. Thump.

Eyes wide with fear, he looked toward the window.

Thhh-uump. Thump.

He wanted to latch the window again, but he had reached his destination. With one hand on the jagged brick wall, he worked up the nerve to peer around the edge of the dusty crate.

A small pool of dark liquid shimmered on the concrete floor. The sight and stench confirmed Morgan's suspicions. Blood.

Thhh-uump. Thump.

A thin trail of blood led to a nearby dark corner. The discovery Morgan feared lay on the floor. A dead body.

The skin appeared purple. Escaping gases bloated the body. The eyes bulged in their sockets. The tongue partially hung out of the mouth. A gaping hole of exposed flesh in the neck revealed a shiny liquid that had dried.

Thhh-uump. Thump. Thump.

Gasping, Morgan staggered backward. "Oh, my God," he whimpered. "It's Shawn."

Without warning, he threw up. He covered his mouth and purposely inhaled and exhaled heavily to calm his nerves and stomach.

Fear overwhelmed him. *Is that what my mother looked like? Is that what happened to her body after she was buried? Is that gonna happen to me if Tirich captures me?*

He spun around and collided with a stack of boxes. A heavy wooden coat rack crashed to the floor and broke apart.

Morgan wiped his mouth with his shirt. He knelt and threw up again.

Teary-eyed, he repeated, "It's Shawn."

Thhh-uump. Thump.

The thought that Tirich could be in the basement terrified him. Full-fledged panic took over.

He maneuvered his way through the maze of boxes and furniture toward the stairs. A sharp pain in the heel of his foot caused him to cry out. Lifting his leg, he winced and pulled a piece of glass from the sole of his foot.

"Blood," he noted with alarm.

He glanced at the window and watched it sway open. *Thhh-uump. Thump.*

Morgan reached the bottom of the stairs and grasped the rail. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed movement at the top of the steps.

Jonathan stood in the doorway.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Morgan sprinted up the stairs and pushed passed Jonathan. "Shawn's down there."

"What?"

Mystified that he had to clarify, he yelled, "Shawn's dead. And his body's in the basement."

Jonathan descended the stairs. When he returned to the hallway, he called out, "Ava, get down here now."

Morgan looked at Jonathan with pleading eyes. "You didn't do that?"

"Of course not," Jonathan proclaimed. "Why would we kill him and stash the body in the basement?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry. I know you didn't. I don't know what the hell is going on."

"We've never deceived you in any way, Morgan. Don't question our trust now. You know who did this."

"Tirich."

"Yes, Tirich."

Ava entered the kitchen. "What about Tirich?"

"He killed Shawn," Morgan said, pacing the kitchen in a panic.

Jonathan added, "He put the body in the basement after climbing through one of the windows. *This* was obviously a setup. He intended for this to serve some purpose. Maybe get the detective sniffing around here again."

"Why?" Morgan asked.

"I don't know. Two Immortals free to live on their own. He wants this house. Our money. Ava. Maybe even you."

Morgan's eyes widened.

"I knew it," Ava exclaimed, grabbing a set of keys off the counter. "I said he'd come back here." She tossed the keys to Jonathan. "We have less than two hours to get rid of the body."

Jonathan wrapped Shawn's body in a painter's tarp from the garage and loaded him into the trunk of the Mercedes. Then he raced inside to the

kitchen. "We can drive about twenty minutes, bury the body, and be back before sunrise. Let's go."

Ava pulled on a coat and rushed outside.

Still in a state of shock, Morgan remained seated at the island.

Jonathan snapped his fingers. "C'mon, let's go."

"I have to go?"

"I'm going to need your help. And Tirich could be waiting for the opportunity to capture you and do to you what he did to Shawn."

Morgan opened his mouth but said nothing.

"C'mon, buddy. Get your shoes. Put my jacket on. Move it."

* * *

Tirich kicked in the entrance to the kitchen and sauntered into the house. He grabbed a partially eaten croissant and sniffed it. *Ah, Ava*, he thought and took a bite.

The desire to destroy everything within reach excited him. He walked down the hallway and knocked all the framed photographs to the floor. Stepping on shards of broken glass and scattering them with the toe of his boot amplified his excitement.

He believed Jonathan and Ava had squandered their vampire existence. He pitied them. Any Immortal that chose to live among the humans disgusted him. And they had an eighteen-year-old kid under their wing. It was a disgrace.

Roaming around upstairs, he searched for Jonathan's bedroom. Once he walked into the room, he immediately tossed objects left and right. He spotted the photo album, seized it from the accent table, and tucked it under his arm.

When he returned downstairs, Tirich's anger erupted. "I should burn this house to the ground."

In the den, he rummaged through the drawers. He took cash from a wooden box and Jonathan's journal.

"Tell me where I don't belong. Tell me I'm not welcome. Banished!"

Tirich climbed on top of the desk and kicked everything to the floor. Grunting and mumbling under his breath, he pulled the light fixture from the ceiling and tossed it aside.

"Two vampires not even old enough to know shit. Two blood-sucking fetuses. Trying to rule authority over me," he ranted. "*ME*."

He pushed the desk across the room into the wall, causing most of the books to fall. On his knees, he beat his fists on the floor.

The skull under his skin undulated by an unseen force. His face took on a ghastly appearance, shifting from human to supernatural creature. Still humanoid, but he morphed into something demon-like. He bared his elongated canine teeth and revealed the true nature of his being.

"This should all be mine." He scratched his claws on the floor like a rabid animal ready to attack. "I'll kill you. Two vampires and a mortal boy."

He jumped into a standing position and let out a bone-chilling scream. Then he threw items around the room in a frenzy.

* * *

Ava followed a dirt road into State Game Lands 318 and parked the car in a field of tall grass. She inspected the area for possible witnesses hunting cottontail, bear, or deer, while Jonathan and Morgan dug a hole.

Jonathan retrieved the body from the trunk and dropped it to the ground. "We need to unroll him from the tarp before we put him in the hole."

"Can't we leave him in there? I don't wanna see him again."

"I took the tarp from the garage. I have no idea if there is anything that can be traced to the house."

Morgan focused his sight on the horizon as he pulled the tarp from Shawn's body. The odor turned his stomach. "Hurry, before I throw up again."

Using their feet, they pushed Shawn into the hole. The body landed with a percussive thud. As they shoveled dirt into the hole, Morgan looked down at Shawn's hand. The class ring on Shawn's finger was the last thing he saw before turning away.

Ava drove as Jonathan informed them what their plan should be.

"We're going to seek out Tirich. He's a danger to us. Everything has changed. Our ability to live in Colby. Morgan's ability to live with us. We won't have peace as long as he is still alive."

"What about the Elders?" Morgan asked.

"We have to tell them," Ava said.

"Of course," Jonathan replied. "But we can't sit back and wait for their arrival. It could be days or weeks. It depends on what they determine to be the best course of action. Maybe we're expendable."

The Mercedes pulled into the driveway minutes before true sunrise. Parked in the garage, Ava jumped out of the car.

"Go get us some clothes to put on," Jonathan ordered as he retrieved the tarp from the trunk. He led Morgan into the garage and pointed to a corner. "Help me move the barrel. We need to start a fire."

After they placed the barrel behind the garage, Jonathan returned inside. He carried lighter fluid and a box of matches. "Take your clothes off."

"What?"

"We can't have any evidence of Shawn. We have to burn the tarp and our clothes."

"Everything?"

"Yes. We can't take any chances," Jonathan stressed and kicked off his shoes. "Shirt, pants, underwear, socks, shoes, jacket. Get completely naked. We have to burn it all."

"How the hell is there gonna be anything on our underwear and socks?"

"We're erring on the side of caution. But fine, keep your boxers on," Jonathan said. "Going to have to rip out the interior of the trunk, too. Or get rid of the Mercedes. We'll still have Ava's BMW." He pulled his tee-shirt over his head. "And the basement needs to be thoroughly cleaned."

Morgan removed his clothing and tossed everything to the ground. Naked, he shivered uncontrollably, rubbing his hands together and dancing around on the soles of his feet.

Jonathan dropped the tarp and clothes inside the barrel. "I'm sorry. It's freezing, I know."

Morgan's teeth chattered. The wind whipped his body. He stood rigid, as if the cold air would have less of an effect if he didn't move at all.

"The fire will warm you up," Jonathan said sympathetically.

"I can still kinda smell death."

Ava arrived with clothes and a bucket full of warm soapy water. "Wash your hands and arms."

Jonathan and Morgan quickly scrubbed their skin and dressed.

"Tirich trashed the house," she said. "There's stuff broken all over the place. He took all the blinds from the windows. All of them."

"Shit," Jonathan exclaimed. "The sun's rising."

Morgan buttoned his pants and put on a shirt. "I'll go inside and put something in the windows." He ran toward the house.

"Wait," Jonathan called out. "Go down to the basement and unlock the outside door."

Morgan didn't want to. "The basement? What if he's down there?"
"The den doesn't have windows," Ava said.

* * *

Morgan fixed the blinds and curtains. Then Jonathan investigated the basement. "He's not down there. He's somewhere around town, or somewhere in the area. Close."

"We need to hunt for him," Ava said.

Jonathan motioned for Morgan to sit. "I called the Elders when we were in the den. Until they contact us, we're on our own."

"Tirich took all the cash and Jonathan's journal," Ava said.

"All the cash?" Morgan asked.

"Yes," Jonathan replied. "Over five thousand dollars."

"Why did you have that much cash in the house?"

"Always be prepared," Jonathan responded. "We can replace the money. The journal is more important."

"Why?"

Ava gathered broken picture frames from the floor. "Because it has information and details about our life here in Colby. The house. Business. Finances. You."

"Me?"

"Yes," Jonathan said. "You're a part of our life. You're in the journal. He could use any information in there to his advantage."

Ava sat on the sofa, next to Morgan. "If he's smart, he'd try."

"He's almost two hundred years old," Jonathan stressed. "He's an idiot, but he's not completely dumb. So, we have to be smarter."

Jonathan continued, "Look, we have to be on guard. We can't make any mistakes. Morgan can't be without us. He's too vulnerable." He directed his attention to Morgan. "The sunlight is your only protection. When the sun is gone, you must be with us. Understand?"

"Yeah."

"No exceptions."

"Okay, I understand. When the sun goes down, I'm with you."

Ava squeezed Morgan's hand. "We'll protect you during the night. We won't let anything happen to you."

Jonathan sat on the coffee table. "Unless we find some other form of protection for you, you're going to have to go with us when we hunt for him."

"To kill a vampire?" A flurry of confusing and frightening thoughts filled Morgan's mind. He wanted God to instantly erase the current chaos and Tirich from their lives. "I have to go with you?"

"Maybe we can send you somewhere safe."

Ava rose to her feet. "We don't even have time to do that."

Jonathan paused with thought then agreed. "I'm sorry, buddy. When the time comes, you're going to have to go with us."

"What the hell could I possibly do to help you hunt and kill a vampire?"

"We'll figure it out. Right now, we need to rest."

Ava turned before leaving the room. "You need to come home immediately after school."

"No. I'll stay and get everything cleaned up."

* * *

The first night involved searching vacant buildings in Cardboard Valley. They inspected each site for every possible entrance and explored the premises as a group. Morgan feared every dark corner and closed door. Every unexpected noise was a possible warning to run.

"Ava and I will see him first because we have the ability to see in the dark," Jonathan said. "We'll react before you even realize we've spotted him."

"Which will scare the shit outta me," Morgan pointed out.

"Remember what we told you. If we get him down, use the knife and stab him in the heart. Then I'll cut his head off."

Morgan recalled macabre vampire deaths in the movies he had watched over the years. He envisioned Tirich's body bursting into flame or instantaneously turning to ash or his skin melting from the bone.

"If we tell you to run, then run as fast as you can," Ava reminded him.

"This is crazy. I feel stupid. I shouldn't be here."

Ava stopped walking and looked Morgan in the eye. "You could stay home, and hope Tirich doesn't attack you. If he does, you better hope we make it back in time to save you."

"Let's check out the old post office," Jonathan suggested as they departed an abandoned apartment building.

Morgan paced himself close to Jonathan's side. "What if he's hiding somewhere outside of town? The orchards. Some cave or something."

"He has to be somewhere warm," Ava answered. "Shawn's body wouldn't decay as quickly exposed to the freezing temperatures."

Jonathan pointed toward the post office. "We'll go home after checking out this building."

"And search again tomorrow?" Morgan asked.

"Yes. We'll check out those abandoned houses on the edge of town. We have to find him before he comes for us."

* * *

The following day after school, Morgan ventured to the train station to feed the dog. Sitting on the edge of the concrete ramp, he rummaged through his backpack. The dog walked out of the woods toward the station. "Come here, boy. I brought you food."

As the dog approached, Morgan spotted several pieces of paper debris on the ground. They were photographs. He jumped from the platform and rushed to the first photograph on the ground. A picture of Ava. Five other photographs from the photo album littered the area. He gathered the photos and sprinted to the car.

Morgan sped home, praying a cop wouldn't pull him over. After screeching to a halt in the driveway, he ran into the house calling out to Jonathan and Ava.

She rushed downstairs. "What?"

"I found him. I found him. He's at the old train station."

Ava perused the photographs.

"I went to feed the dog, and I found these on the ground," Morgan explained. "He's there. He's hiding in the train station."

When Jonathan entered the room, Ava gave the pictures to him. "Morgan found these at the abandoned train station."

"I've been feeding a dog there."

"What dog?" Jonathan demanded to know.

"I've been feeding a stray. A German Shepherd. Maybe a wolf-hybrid."

Ava gasped. "That's Tirich's wolf."

"What?"

"Why didn't you tell us about the dog sooner?"

"I don't know."

Jonathan tossed the photographs onto the table. "Wolves are protectors of Immortals. They keep an eye out during the day," he explained. "You've been feeding Tirich's wolf. He's probably been in the station the whole time."

"Wait. Are you sure? Maybe it's just a stray dog."

Ava slapped her hand on the sofa. "It's a damn wolf, Morgan. Tirich is in the train station," she shouted. "You found the pictures there."

"What if he's trying to trick us?"

Jonathan waved the photographs in the air. "He's in the station or those empty houses near there. To trick us, he'd have to lead us there. You didn't follow clues."

Folding his arms, Jonathan stood tall. "We can wait to see if he comes here, or we can go there to ambush him."

Morgan shook his head. "A fight in an abandoned train station is better than a house on a street full of neighbors."

Ava agreed. "Let's get ready. We'll leave as soon as it's dark."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The idea that Morgan might soon confront a murderous vampire caused his chest to ache with anxiety. Participating in the killing of Tirich terrified him. He constructed a few possible outcomes. All but one included his death. The only positive scenario seemed so outlandish he repressed the urge to laugh as they drove toward the train station.

Jonathan parked the car at a run-down, vacant house several blocks away. The train station loomed in the distance like a haunted house luring them to danger. The bright moon and frigid wind only added to the wicked setting. Morgan expected to hear the wolf howl from a nearby hilltop, but it never happened.

They congregated behind an old Pennsylvania engine. The locomotive had been a dark-blue beauty, but the metal had corroded and tarnished with time. Still, it was an awesome sight to see.

"Okay, it's going to be a little tricky," Jonathan whispered. "Going in, he'll probably spot us before we see him. That's to his advantage. But it gives us time to react.

"Morgan, follow us and stay close behind. If Tirich thinks he can grab you first, then he'll try to snatch you from us. But Ava and I are the bigger threat to him."

Warming his hands with his breath, Morgan nodded.

"As fast as you can, stab him in the heart. It will render him defenseless, giving me enough time to cut his head off."

Ava adjusted the steel, hunter's knife in the sheath on Morgan's belt. "If he's not in there, then we'll find a spot to wait."

* * *

A light snow descended like ash settling on an apocalyptic scene. The three

strategically walked from the abandoned engine to the rear of the station. They entered through a door that led into the office area. After Morgan's eyes adjusted to the darkness, they walked toward the lobby, inspecting each room they passed.

The lobby was the largest space in the entire building. Places to hide were few in number. Most of the windows were boarded-up. Sunlight illuminated much of the room during the day. They knew Tirich wouldn't take up residence there.

The second floor housed a few offices of larger size and a storage room.

The attic was on the third floor. An enormous wooden armoire and pieces of rotted lumber blocked a single large window. A pile of old, tattered blankets, clothes, and a large sheet of burlap were arranged in the middle of the room. Scattered about the area were candles of varying sizes. A shipping crate and an old wooden chair had been set up several feet away. Discarded apple cores, bits of bread, and garden vegetables littered the floor. They had discovered Tirich's personal area to hide and sleep.

Jonathan collected the journal and photo album from the crate. "Let's get downstairs."

Tirich had to use one of two entrances into the building. An empty window frame or the back door into the office area. Jonathan selected the best spot to position themselves. To their advantage, it provided sight of both points of access into the lobby.

Morgan nestled himself against the wall and scanned the lobby. Every surface of the interior was a shade of brown or gray. Even the moonlight couldn't beautify the heart of the train station.

Gathering dirt in a pile, Jonathan tossed a handful onto Morgan's clothes. "Lift your arms. We need to conceal your scent as much as possible." He reached under Morgan's shirt and rubbed dirt on his armpits and upper body. "Close your eyes," he said before smearing dirt on Morgan's face and head. "It'll mask your scent enough, so Tirich can't immediately smell you when he walks into the room."

Jonathan and Ava covered themselves with dirt as well. Then they situated themselves on the floor in front of Morgan. No one said anything, only the train station produced the creaks and groans of an aged and degraded building.

Morgan pondered the situation with a level of awe and fear. *I'm gonna get myself killed. I shouldn't be here. What if I do something that results in the death of Ava and Jonathan? If Tirich kills them, will I fight or surrender to death?*

He dozed off around two o'clock.

* * *

The bang of the back door woke Morgan. He quickly confirmed Ava and Jonathan still sat with him. *This is it*, he thought.

A part of him wanted to curl up into a ball and stay hidden in the darkness. His other instinct was to sprint as far away as possible from the train station. But he closed his eyes and concentrated on the task at hand. *I'm gonna fight*, he thought. *I don't wanna die.*

Jonathan whispered, "Love you, buddy. Don't be scared."

At that moment, Morgan considered *don't be scared* the most absurd statement Jonathan had ever spoken to him. Apprehensive, he took a deep breath and stared at Ava. "We're not gonna die."

She pressed her head against his. "No. We're not."

Footsteps signaled Tirich's approach. Morgan's heartbeat accelerated. The intense pounding in his chest hurt. He clenched his fists so tightly that his fingernails indented his palms.

Jonathan placed a finger to his lips and moved out of the corner, sliding his back along the wall.

In the center of the lobby, Tirich stopped and tossed his coat to the floor. He stepped forward then paused. "Aeron," he called out.

The black wolf entered and trotted to Tirich's side. It nudged its head against Tirich's hand and sniffed the air. Snarling, it darted its head from side to side. Then the wolf scanned the darkness.

"What is it, Aeron? We got company?" Tirich surveyed the lobby. He spotted Jonathan and grinned. "Yes, we do."

"I warned you not to come back to Colby," Jonathan said.

"Warned me?" Tirich laughed. "I wondered why none of you were at the house. You're here to attack me."

Jonathan ran, jumped in the air, and landed with his hands around Tirich's neck. They both fell to the floor in a cloud of dust. Tirich lifted his legs and kicked Jonathan aside.

Aeron charged at Ava and Morgan in the corner. She sprinted forward

and collided with the wolf, knocking them both into the ticket counter. Aeron whimpered once then sprang to his feet. He growled and snapped as she pummeled his head.

Jonathan sprinted, dove low, and rammed his head into Tirich's stomach. The impact caused Tirich to stumble backward. Then Jonathan swung him into the wall.

Dusting himself off, Tirich stood. "This is going to be fun."

Ava clutched Aeron's hind legs and dragged him across the floor. The wolf stopped resisting, went limp, and turned his head. When he bit Ava's hand, she screamed and dropped one of his legs. Aeron balanced himself with three legs and escaped her grasp.

Tirich raced forward and kicked Jonathan in the chest. When Jonathan fell to the floor, Tirich removed his shirt and flexed the muscles in his torso.

The wolf charged forward. Ava dropped down, resulting in his tumble to the tile flooring below. The maneuver caused her to stumble and skim across the floor on her back, stopping at the wolf's feet. She winced and clutched her shoulder.

Morgan watched the scene unfold from the safety of the corner. He'd been ordered to wait until Jonathan had rendered Tirich incapacitated. Concerned that Ava continued to battle the wolf, he bolted to her side.

Growling, Aeron stared at Morgan. Ava seized the opportunity to grab the fur around the wolf's neck. She twisted her body to the left, forcing him to fall on his side. In a frenzy, Morgan jabbed the knife at the wolf. Although Ava restrained him, Aeron darted his head from left to right, trying to bite Morgan.

When Tirich noticed Morgan, he smiled and redirected his attention to Jonathan. "You brought me a mortal."

"No, we're bringing death to you."

He smirked. "You're going to kill me? The two of you?"

"Death."

"I'm going to tear your mortal's arms off. Then I'll slice his stomach open, so he can watch me pull out his intestines. I'll eat his heart before I drain him dry. And I'll have eighteen more years added to my existence."

"Not going to happen."

"Of course, I'll have to kill you and Ava first." Crouching low, Tirich banged the floor with his fist and breathed heavily. His body transformed into the monster vampire. "I'll show you how many years I have on you."

The creature Tirich could manifest into at will morphed into a full-

fledged savage beast. The interfemoral membrane materialized on the underside of his arms and connected to his rib cage. He hovered several feet in the air. "You're no match for me."

Jonathan ran forward, jumped, and grabbed the enormous chandelier. Swaying with the fixture, he landed on the railing of the second floor. He pulled the chandelier from the ceiling and hurled it at Tirich. When the fixture and Tirich crashed to the floor, Jonathan dropped down and lunged on top of him.

Ava straddled Aeron's back and wrapped her arms around his neck. Breathless, she squeezed as hard as she could. The wolf flailed about in a desperate attempt to break free of her grasp.

Uncertain, Morgan jabbed the knife until he pierced Aeron's side. The wolf wailed wildly. Ava continued choking him until he weakened. She dropped the wolf to the floor. Catching her breath, she pointed to the far wall. "Morgan, go over there." She raced to Jonathan in the center of the lobby.

With the wave of his right hand, Tirich caused the chandelier to slide away. Out of the corner of his eye, he monitored Ava's approach. "Wanna watch me kill your brother?"

She swung a large chunk of a wooden beam, but Tirich lifted his arm and stopped the lumber mid-air. She hoisted the beam vertically and brought it down against his shoulder three times. Tirich's right arm and wing separated from his body and waved about the floor.

He howled in pain and retreated several feet away. Distressed, he pressed his hand against the wound.

Jonathan and Ava stood their ground as Tirich stormed toward them. He snapped his incisors as Jonathan repeatedly punched him in the face. Once he collapsed to the floor, Ava pounded the beam into Tirich's chest. He ceased to fight and closed his eyes.

"Come on, Morgan," Jonathan yelled, wiping blood from his face.

Ava mounted Tirich's legs. Jonathan positioned himself above Tirich's head and pinned the vampire's shoulders.

Sliding to a halt at Tirich's feet, Morgan pulled the knife from the sheath.

"Stab him," Ava shouted.

Tirich opened his eyes and thrust his fist into Jonathan's face. He pulled his knees up toward his stomach and pushed Ava off with a kick to her shoulders. Sailing backward, she knocked Morgan down in the process. The knife skidded across the floor.

When Jonathan regained his balance, Tirich grabbed him by the throat

and pushed him against the wall. He punched until Jonathan collapsed in a heap onto the floor.

Ava rammed the wooden beam into Tirich's back, sending him to his knees. He heaved the beam toward himself then slammed it into Ava's shoulder. She stumbled backward and dropped to the floor.

Morgan ran toward the office area with the knife.

Squatting with one foot against Jonathan's chest, Tirich pounded his fist on the floor. Tiles popped into the air and showered down as Morgan stumbled.

Tirich sliced Jonathan's throat with a talon-like fingernail and smeared the blood across Jonathan's mouth. "It's going to be so good to taste you."

He pulled loose electrical wiring from the wall, wrapped it around Jonathan's ankle, and jumped to the second floor. Then he twisted the wiring around the railing, dragging Jonathan's body across the floor and into the air. "Whatcha going to do now?"

Suspended above the floor, Jonathan swayed from side to side as he attempted to remove the wire from his ankle.

Tirich landed on the lobby floor, picked up the wooden beam, and rushed to Ava. "Such a pity to kill something so beautiful." He raised the lumber high into the air. "I was going to kill you second."

"No," Morgan screamed from the office area. He knelt and frantically pushed all the buttons on his sport watch.

"Come back and finish me off," Jonathan yelled.

Tirich waved his arm dismissively. "Shut the hell up."

The watch emitted high-pitched beeps.

Returning his gaze to Ava, Tirich grinned. "I'll be back after I take care of this little fucker you guys are protecting."

He casually strolled toward the office area. "Jonathan and Ava really have a thing for you, mortal boy. It'll be fun killing you as they watch."

At the far side of the lobby, he threw wood panels and pieces of lumber aside. "I'm going to rip you apart. You're going to suffer."

Finally, he spotted the watch on the floor and smashed it with his foot. "I'm going to find you, little fucker."

Morgan sprung out from behind sheet rock and jabbed the knife into Tirich's back. To his amazement, Tirich's body transformed into a small bright orb as they fell to the floor. Although he couldn't see Tirich, he felt Tirich's physical body pinning him down.

Bloody claw marks appeared on Morgan's face.

"Keep stabbing him," Jonathan yelled. "He's still there."

Although the knife continued to puncture an unseen form, Tirich punched Morgan in the jaw. He yanked Morgan by the shoulders and pulled him away from the wall.

Morgan clutched at anything he might grab, but Tirich continued to drag him. Still holding onto the knife, Morgan scooped dirt with his free hand and threw it at Tirich.

Reappearing, Tirich staggered and wiped the dirt from his eyes.

Without hesitation, Morgan lunged forward and drove the blade into Tirich's chest. Screaming with each thrust of the knife, Tirich fell forward clutching Morgan's neck. When the blade entered his heart, he dropped to the floor and convulsed as he shrieked. His body slumped to the side. Face-to-face with Morgan, he growled and bared his teeth.

The blood spewed forth in concentrated amounts as Morgan continued to stab Tirich's chest. Several moments later, Tirich's head flopped to the side.

Jonathan cheered. "Come cut me down."

Morgan ran upstairs. "Oh, my God. I did it." He wildly hacked away at the electrical wiring.

Landing on the lobby floor, Jonathan rested a moment then smiled. "Yes, you did, buddy."

Downstairs, Morgan joined Jonathan at Ava's side. She bolted up ready to fight.

"We got him," Jonathan said. "Gimme the knife."

Morgan gave the weapon to him and pulled Ava into a tight embrace. "He's dead, Ava."

She rested her head on his shoulder. "Good job, Morgan."

Minutes later, Jonathan returned with Tirich's head and dropped it to the floor. "We have to burn the body and get out of here."

Morgan grimaced at the sight of Tirich's severed head. He cast his gaze to the window frame. Sunlight had begun to lighten the dark sky. "It's almost sunrise."

"We might have time to get home," Jonathan said.

Morgan ran to the window frame. "I don't think so. The sun will be up by the time we burn the body."

"Move slowly," Jonathan whispered. "Get outside now."

Turning around, Morgan gasped when he saw Aeron standing a few feet away. The wolf growled, lowered its head, and uttered a deep bark.

"Don't look him in the eye," Ava said.

Morgan directed his stare to a dark corner, still keeping the wolf within sight.

Jonathan cautiously inched closer.

Aeron stared at Jonathan and snarled. The wolf charged at Morgan, knocking them both through the window frame to the platform outside.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

As Aeron gnashed his teeth, Morgan shielded his face and punched Aeron in the side with his free hand. The wolf bit into his arm and dragged him across the platform. Ignoring the rest of his body, Morgan concentrated on the grasp of Aeron's sharp teeth. The searing pain was like a vice grip clamped onto his arm.

Powerless against the wolf, Morgan twisted from side to side. He finally freed his arm and tried to push his body up from the concrete. Screaming in agony, throbbing pain shot through his arm. Then Aeron bit into his shoulder and hauled him over the edge to the snow-covered ground below.

A surge of coldness from blood loss rushed through Morgan's body. He feared he would soon be dead.

Ava tossed the knife to Jonathan and ran to the window frame. As soon as her hands rested on the sill, the sunlight burned her skin. She retreated with a shriek.

Ready to fight, Jonathan grabbed a piece of thick wood, snatched Tirich's discarded coat from the floor and sprinted to the window. Once he spotted Morgan and the wolf, he bolted outside to the platform.

Morgan kicked his legs and flung his arms, but he couldn't free himself from the wolf's jaws.

Aeron pulled Morgan toward the woods then chomped down; each bite increased the intense terror surging throughout Morgan's body. The wolf wanted to rip him apart.

Jonathan draped the coat over his head and raced across the platform. He jumped to the ground and swung the wood back and forth.

The wolf eyed Jonathan. Swiftly, he latched onto Morgan's skull and

dragged him farther into the trees. Morgan's eyes rolled back as he released quick, shallow breaths. Then Morgan lost consciousness.

Jonathan's exposed skin burned. Spots peeled away like bright orange fireflies fluttering in the breeze. As he dove into the air, the coat sailed to the ground. But Jonathan charged forward.

Hunkering down, Aeron ripped flesh from Morgan's shoulder.

Jonathan threw the wood, pelting Aeron in the head. With a whimper, the wolf retreated a few feet from Morgan's body. They momentarily eyed each other then stormed headlong into battle. Aeron bit. Jonathan stabbed. With each passing second, Jonathan's concern for Morgan's condition escalated. A few minutes later, the tussle ended.

Aeron flopped to the ground, seemingly lifeless. Jonathan sliced the wolf open from the throat to the underbelly.

The skin on Jonathan's face split and oozed yellow fat and blood. A sleeve of his shirt ignited. He removed the garment, tossed it aside, and fell to his knees. "Morgan. C'mon, buddy."

Jonathan sprinted with Morgan in his arms to the platform. He scooped snow with both hands, rubbing it on his face, arms, and torso before jumping onto the concrete.

Then he carried Morgan to the window frame. "Pull him inside."

* * *

Ava stumbled to the floor with Morgan, using her feet to propel herself backward to the darkest area of the lobby. Laying him down, she cried, "Morgan, can you hear me?"

Jonathan climbed through the window and collapsed.

"Morgan," she wailed as she shook him.

Slumped on the floor, Jonathan recovered from the wounds inflicted by the wolf and the sunlight.

Ava sobbed. "He's dead."

Jonathan sluggishly crawled to her. Crying, he lifted Morgan's body and listened for breathing. He searched for a pulse as his tears fell onto Morgan's face. "I'm sorry."

Ava scooted closer, took Morgan in her arms, and bit his wrist. Several seconds later, she looked at Jonathan. "His heart is still beating," she said. "Barely."

"Are you sure?"

"Turn him, Jonathan."

He said nothing.

"Turn him," she pleaded.

He hesitated then bit his forearm and held it above Morgan's face. The blood dripped quickly. He pried Morgan's mouth open, letting the blood trickle directly into his mouth.

Ava caressed Morgan's face. "C'mon. Accept it."

Jonathan sank his teeth into his forearm again and held it above Morgan's mouth.

Morgan remained motionless.

"It's not going to work," Jonathan said.

"Keep trying."

He wrapped his lips around the opening in his arm and sucked the blood out, then pressed his mouth against Morgan's. He repeated the process of force-feeding Morgan several more times.

Overcome, he surrendered to the idea that Morgan was dead. Grief and guilt coursed through his veins like poison. But when he noticed activity under Morgan's eyelids, he gasped.

As Morgan opened his eyes, his body trembled slowly until it stopped altogether. He cried out.

Inching closer, Ava touched his face. "You're alive."

Jonathan bit his forearm once more and pressed it against Morgan's lips.

Morgan drank. He jolted from Jonathan's arms and fell onto his back, screaming in anguish as his body became silent and rigid. A single tear rolled out of the corner of his eye.

Ava whispered in his ear. "Everything is going to be okay."

Jonathan carried Morgan upstairs and laid him on the makeshift bed on the attic floor. Exhausted, he and Ava situated themselves close to either side of him.

Listening to the sound of the wind outside, they waited for Morgan to regain control of his body. A few minutes later, when he tried to sit up, Jonathan calmed him. "It's okay. You lost a lot of blood. Rest."

Kissing Morgan on the cheek, Ava wrapped her arms around him. "Go to sleep."

Jonathan pulled the sheet of burlap over their bodies, and the three slept until sunset.

* * *

Morgan awoke, but Jonathan and Ava were not with him. He sat up and scanned the dark attic. His eyes instantly adjusted to the darkness. An invisible light source seemed to illuminate everything in the space. His improved sight was like watching a 3D movie with the special glasses.

He inspected his face and body. Although covered in dried blood, Morgan didn't have a single wound. He vaguely remembered being attacked by Aeron, but he couldn't recall the extent of his injuries. Pain eluded him. His body didn't ache from fighting. In fact, Morgan awoke rejuvenated, as if he had never fully understood the definition of *being alive*.

He surveyed the room and sensed the dimensions of the chair. It measured 17.5 x 18 x 40. The wooden crate box was 33 x 20.5. The window was 36 x 28. It was located twenty inches above the floor. If he needed to hide, he could easily fit inside the armoire in front of the window.

Morgan marveled at the keen senses he had developed. He listened to the surroundings and heard sounds as he normally did. When he concentrated, he detected noises he hadn't noticed the first time. The sounds of the attic, but also the sounds outside the station and the floor below were amplified to his benefit.

Jonathan and Ava were close.

He descended the stairs to the second floor. He saw them in the lobby next to a pile of clothes, lumber, and the bodies of Tirich and Aeron.

"The wolf would be an odd find, but nothing that warrants investigation," Jonathan said. "We need to burn Tirich's body."

"We should have tossed it out into the sunlight earlier."

"It might have attracted attention before it disintegrated." Jonathan looked toward the second floor. "Hey."

Morgan beamed and rushed downstairs to their open arms.

Ava eyed him from head to toe. "No injuries, right?"

"Nope. I'm fine."

Jonathan wrapped an arm around Morgan and pulled him close. "Ah, our blood brother."

Morgan repeated "brother" with a smile.

CHAPTER TWENTY–THREE

I am a vampire, Morgan thought. I am immortal.

He sat at the desk in his bedroom gazing out the window. The full moon was especially bright and high. It possessed a power of greater significance; although, he didn't yet understand the full magnitude of its authority. He studied its black blotches and its halo of light. The silvery brilliance hypnotized him.

Morgan's life had forever been altered. The future he envisioned for himself would not come to pass. Life would play out differently than he imagined. College? A wife? Hell, could he even finish high school?

Still, he was calm. Content.

He thought of his mother. If Heaven existed, did she watch over him with disappointment or sorrow? What did she dream and hope for him? Could she possibly be smiling about the grand detour his life had taken?

The defeat of Tirich played in his mind. He recalled quick flashes of Aeron's attack. He remembered drinking Jonathan's blood and accepting the Immortal property as his own. Maybe instant recognition, when first consuming Immortal blood, was part of the process.

They had taken Tirich's body deep into the woods and burned it. They buried the bone fragments with dirt and tree branches. Then they collected the burned heart debris in a jar and buried it at the house.

Relief set in once they returned to the comfort and safety of home. Celebrating the defeat of Tirich wasn't a priority. Conversation wasn't a necessity. The first thing Morgan wanted to do was take a shower.

Washing the blood and dirt from his body took much longer than he'd anticipated. Once he was clean, he felt revitalized.

Morgan walked into Ava's bedroom. "Are you in here?"

"Yeah," she called out from the bathroom. Dressed in sheer, light purple panties and bra, she applied a cream to her face.

He cast his gaze to a closet door. "Sorry. I can come back."

She giggled at the look of embarrassment and surprise on his face. "The naked body is nothing to be ashamed of or embarrassed by. Plus, I'm partially dressed. So, get in here and stop acting like a little boy."

As she slipped on a lavender dress, her expression became more serious. "You're certain this is what you want?"

"Yeah."

"It's unfair. You never had the option of choosing. Now you're a part of this legacy...this Immortal life."

He studied his reflection in the mirror. "I don't know if I woulda wanted it. I never thought about being...a vampire. Immortal."

"You're okay with this?"

"Yeah."

"I didn't want you to be robbed of living a long life. And I didn't want to lose you."

He thought of his brush with death. "Thank you."

"You really were a part of our family," she said. "And now...literally."

"I haven't felt wanted for a long time. I always felt like I belonged here. With both of you." He took a deep breath. "I don't know. Thank you? Thank you for giving me a second chance at life."

"A long life. "

"Do you have any—" He paused. "Do you have any regrets?"

"About you? Of course not. Never. "

"No. I mean, regrets about being Immortal."

She shook her head and glanced to the floor. "Not regrets. But sometimes I'm irritated by the longevity of life. "

"Why? "

"At a certain point, you become an observer of life...people...the world. I've seen so many things change for the better. Some things have progressed at a snail's pace. Some things...some people change for the worse. And it can be draining at times. "

"So, it can wear you down?"

"To be honest, yeah. It's worn me down at times. But don't misunderstand me. I'm happy. I love life. I really have nothing to complain about. But...I've lived a whole century now."

Morgan appreciated Ava's honesty. The conversation seemed to further solidify their bond. "And you're not worn down now?"

"No. You made me appreciate life in a different way than I had before."

"How?"

"Because I have someone else to care about and love, not just me and not just Jonathan. I have you."

Although his eyes welled with tears, he smiled. "Thank you."

Jonathan's face brightened as they entered the kitchen. He stopped slicing a tomato and stared at them for several seconds.

Morgan blushed. "What?"

"On the one hand, I feel bad this all happened, and that you had to go through all this. On the other hand,"—he grinned—"I'm really excited."

Morgan beamed. "Well, I guess I am, too."

"And I'm hungry," Ava said.

Jonathan pointed a handful of silverware at the dining room. "Dinner's almost done. We can eat and start lesson number one."

* * *

"Now you have a heightened sense of taste," Ava said. "Nearly all food is going to taste different. Bitter will be a lot more bitter. Sweet might be too sweet."

Jonathan nodded. "Cooked meat isn't appetizing. The taste. The grease. The texture."

"Except fish?" Morgan asked.

"Sautéed. Seared. Baked in the oven. It basically keeps its texture. You won't be interested in cooked land animals."

Ava portioned food onto the plates. "You have to be careful about seasoning."

Jonathan added, "Lots of fruits and vegetables. Bread. Rice. Fish."

Disappointed, Morgan looked at his plate of food. "I'm a vegetarian now?"

"Chemicals and dyes added to food will make you sick," Ava informed him.

"Packaged cookies, chips, and junk won't taste good," Jonathan said.

Morgan raised his eyebrows. "None of it?"

Ava shook her head with a smirk. "Nope."

"Okay. What about blood?"

Pouring a glass of wine, Jonathan smiled. "You're going to have a ton of questions. Let's take it as it comes," he said. "You'll learn with each step of the process."

"Each step," Morgan repeated with irritation. "Six more feedings?"

"Yes." Jonathan scooped food into his mouth as if he hadn't eaten in days. "The Immortal DNA is taking over your body. But your body's resisting. Like when you catch a cold or have allergies or develop some disease. The body goes into attack mode to protect itself."

"You can drink the blood of animals to satisfy a hunger, but not to become fully Immortal. You must consume Immortal blood. And it must be mine," he explained. "Well, you could drink from another Immortal, but it's frowned upon because of possibly intermingling the bloodlines."

Morgan thought for a moment. "I'll know when I need a feeding?"

"Yes, like hunger for food," he answered. "If you consume too much blood, from a human or me, it could kill you by causing damage to your organs. Your body would shut down and die."

"If you stopped the feedings, you would die. You were on the edge of death when I fed you. The human part of you is essentially dead but fighting to stay alive. Understand?"

"I think so."

"You were rejuvenated. That's the life force from me to you. And I lost some of mine by offering it to you."

Morgan's eyes widened. "What happens with the second feeding?"

"You'll get some benefits...skills. And you'll be more inclined to want to live nightly instead of during sunlight hours."

"The sun won't kill me?"

"No. After your last feeding, you'll have one last opportunity to see the sun set as the moon rises. It's called the Gloaming."

"The Gloaming?"

"Humans associate sunrise with the beginning of their day. Immortals associate dusk with the beginning of their day," Jonathan explained. "The Gloaming is your final goodbye to your human self. Then sunlight can kill you if you're exposed to it for long enough."

Morgan pondered all the information. Intimidated by learning so much at one time, he asked what he considered a stupid, off-topic question. "Um, how did Tirich turn into a monster?"

"An Immortal can take on those characteristics when they reach one hundred years as a vampire. The ability to manifest is gifted to those who want it."

"To scare people?"

"Yes. He had wings, but he didn't fly around. He hovered because he used the levitation ability. It's a mental skill acquired over time with practice."

"He turned into a ball of light when I stabbed him."

Ava raised a glass of wine to her lips. "I didn't know he could do that."

Jonathan seemed unimpressed by Tirich's ability. "Mental projection. To trick the observing eye into seeing something other than the true vampire form."

Morgan picked up his fork. "And all those things...you have to be an Immortal for a hundred years?"

"Everything progresses with age," Jonathan said. "You'll develop abilities and skills as time passes. Other things take effort. You aren't suddenly blessed from the get-go."

* * *

A definitive plan for Morgan's future had not been determined. Missing school or dropping out altogether would have raised suspicions.

During the weekend, he hadn't ventured outside the house. His reintroduction to the human world occurred Monday morning. He prepared to leave for school and wondered how he'd feel in the *real world*. He had felt like an outsider before the initiation of his Immortal transformation. Would he be more of an outcast, now that he was truly different?

Morgan hesitated before walking out of the house. The sun shined. Although told the sun would not harm him, he was reluctant to experience the sunlight on his skin. Nervous. Almost fearful.

He stepped outside and held his hand out in front of him. The sun did not burn his skin. Morgan tilted his head back, closed his eyes, and enjoyed the warmth of the sun on his face. He smiled as he walked to school.

Morgan possessed a stronger sense of what people thought of him. The perceptions he previously ignored or didn't fully know were more obvious to him as he walked the halls. Like. Dislike. Friendliness. Unfamiliar. Cute. Caring. Sympathetic. Artistic. Talented. Funny. Too serious. He examined

the faces in class and instantly understood the most predominant opinion of him. Ugly. Smart. Pretty boy. Annoying. Pitiful. Pathetic. Sad. Skunk. Pretentious. Hopeful. Gonna make something of himself.

He liked the last assessment the most because it consisted of more than one word.

* * *

On Thursday, Morgan experienced an uneasy feeling during Advanced English class. The ability to concentrate became difficult. His hands were damp with sweat. The sensation of bugs crawling on his skin caused him to scratch. His heartbeat pounded throughout his entire body.

He cleared his throat and stood with weak legs.

The teacher frowned. "Morgan, what are you doing? Sit down."

"Um, I don't"—he tried to focus—"I'm sick. I gotta go."

"Just sit down and relax."

"No. I gotta go. I have to go home."

When Morgan shoved a notebook and pencil into his backpack, a textbook fell to the floor. He reached for it and swayed with dizziness. "I need to go."

Concern. Confusion. Liar. Faint. Ha ha. Weirdo. He ignored the faces and rushed out of the classroom.

Walking at a frantic pace, everything and everyone he passed was a blur. Finally in front of the house, he raced inside to Jonathan's bedroom.

Jonathan opened his eyes with a start. "What's wrong?"

"I feel weird. Something isn't right."

"You're okay. Come here."

Morgan alternated between confusion and panic. "Is this it? Do I need blood? Or is something wrong with me?"

"You need your second feeding. Sit on the bed and relax. I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?"

"To get a razor."

Jonathan returned, sat on the bed, and sliced his forearm. Morgan cupped Jonathan's arm and pressed his mouth against the incision. He wanted the blood quickly.

Finished, Morgan exhaled with relief and licked his lips. He watched the wound on Jonathan's arm heal and vanish. "I feel much better now."

The dream began with Morgan opening his eyes. He stood in front of a group of trees. It was snowing heavily. He entered the woods. The sunlight shined through the branches, penetrating the darkness with brilliant rays of light.

The snowfall stopped as he walked among the trees. One last snowflake landed on his palm. He licked the water from his hand and noticed the snow on the ground had melted. The water maneuvered across the ground and collected in several small pools of water. He approached a pond and fell to his knees to admire it.

It's so beautiful, he thought.

He placed his hands in the mud as the sunlight rapidly vanished. When he looked at his reflection, the water had turned to blood.

Morgan awoke in bed. He glanced around the room.

It was silent. He was not scared.

He closed his eyes and fell asleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The Immortal blood that coursed through Morgan's veins provided more than the gift of immortality; he was more self-assured and motivated. He associated being an Immortal with being invincible, as if a superpower liquid gold flowed through his veins. But on the days when he needed a feeding, the Immortal blood churned throughout his circulatory system like a toxin. The vulnerability of those moments caused his Immortal high to crash and burn. Yet once he recovered, his confidence and personality shone brighter than they had in years.

At school, the verbal harassment had decreased considerably. But name-calling and rude remarks didn't cease altogether. Still, one afternoon, Morgan was caught off guard by the taunts of two guys on the opposite side of the hall.

Standing at his locker, Morgan overheard comments about his style of clothing. He turned toward the boys. "What the hell are you saying?"

Josh, a popular junior and all-around arrogant son of a bitch, laughed. "We're talking about you and your outfit."

"What about it?"

"You've been wearing alotta nice dress shirts lately. But it doesn't change the fact that you're white trash."

It was true. Morgan regularly wore dress shirts, which he hadn't done in the past. He followed Jonathan's lead as far as style was concerned. Apparently, his fashion choices upset the boys across the hall.

In the past he would have walked away. "Fuck you."

The other guy smirked. "Fuck us?"

"Ohhh." Josh slowly walked across the hall. "You walk around like a rich kid now. And you have a new sarcastic attitude, too." He stood directly in front of Morgan. "Tell me to fuck off again."

Morgan tilted his head slightly. "Fuck off, asshole."

Josh scanned the hall then pushed Morgan against the locker. Morgan reacted by forcing Josh back a couple of steps.

A small crowd gathered, watching with curiosity and excitement. Morgan noticed Amber and Brian approach.

Josh's friend advanced toward Morgan. "What are you gonna do?"

"Wanna find out?"

"Are you threatening me?"

"I think he is," Josh said. "He's threatening both of us."

To Morgan's surprise, Brian stepped forward. "Knock it off."

"I'm fine," Morgan said. "I don't need any help."

Josh pushed Morgan against the locker again. "Pussy."

Morgan raised his eyebrows. "Pussy, huh?" He shoved Josh.

The blow sent Josh sailing to the opposite wall of lockers, crashing into the metal then slumping to the floor.

The crowd gasped. Morgan's eyes widened. He took a deep breath and glanced at Brian and Amber. They stared at him, awestruck.

The other guy rushed to help Josh to his feet. "What the fuck!"

Josh steadied his balance then charged at Morgan.

Once Josh was within reach, Morgan grabbed him and smashed his head into a locker before tossing him aside.

Josh staggered to the floor, careened down the hall, and crashed into a classroom door.

Astonished, Morgan pushed his way through the crowd.

A male teacher snatched Morgan by the arm and steered him toward the administration office. "Wait a minute, Mr. Fischer. You and I are going to visit the principal."

* * *

Morgan waited until after dinner to tell Ava and Jonathan that he'd been suspended for two days. Ava reacted sympathetically, but Jonathan's expression revealed disappointment. The silence hung in the air like a rain cloud that lingered to spite the sun.

Staring at the centerpiece on the dining room table, Morgan rotated a pencil between his fingers.

"First, you need be careful with your strength," Jonathan said. "Secondly, now this is going to show up on your transcript."

"But they started a fight with me," Morgan protested.

"Look at what your actions got you. Suspended."

For the first time, Morgan found himself in the position of having to defend his behavior while Jonathan scolded him. As much as the tone of Jonathan's voice created discomfort, it was Jonathan's dismay that caused Morgan to consider regret.

"I didn't think he'd fly down the hall like that. I barely pushed him."

"You have acquired strength and speed," Jonathan said. "You need to exercise restraint."

"But I was protecting myself."

"Yes. But you need to blend in, not stand out." Jonathan walked out of the dining room.

Ava stacked the textbooks in front of her and waited for Morgan to make eye contact. "Do you strut down the halls at school like a bad-ass?"

Morgan laughed. "No."

"Good. Because you don't need to be arrogant to project confidence."

"I know."

She leaned closer. "A debilitating disease and great personality can go hand-in-hand just as easily as a star athlete with an ugly personality."

"I'm not being an asshole."

"I've seen people change in negative ways after becoming immortal," she said. "I want you to continue to blossom in fantastic ways."

"Okay. I understand." He set his pencil on the table. "Jonathan is pissed."

"He's disappointed, but he's not going to treat you differently."

"I hope not."

"He won't." She offered a smile. "Homework is done. So now what?"

The doorbell rang before Morgan could respond.

* * *

A tall, striking woman in her forties stood on the porch. In a stylish black gown, the woman appeared as if she had just completed a fashion photo shoot. *Sophisticated Sex Kitten with a Briefcase.*

Surprised by her presence, Jonathan failed to greet her.

Although she didn't appreciate the lack of enthusiasm, she smiled. "Good evening, Jonathan."

He kissed her hand. "Priscilla."

Four tall, handsome men in suits followed her into the house, as if trained by duty and commitment. "Lovely home," she said.

"Thank you."

She inspected the house with each step as she walked to the kitchen. Peeking into the dining room, her face brightened. "Ava. It's wonderful to see you."

The two women greeted each other with the European air cheek-kiss.

"Hello, Priscilla. We weren't expecting you."

"I know." Priscilla tilted her head and eyed Morgan. "Who is this handsome young man?"

"This is Morgan," Jonathan answered.

Morgan offered his hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise." She held his hand, staring deep into his eyes. His heartbeat quickened as he maintained eye contact. She admired his confidence, then she cast her gaze to Jonathan. "You turned him?"

He took a deep breath and crossed his arms. "Uh, yes, I did."

"Obviously, I want to hear all about it. But we have other business to address first." She motioned for Jonathan and Ava to follow. "I assume there is somewhere we can speak in private."

"Yes, of course," Ava responded. "The den."

"Great." She stepped out of the room but abruptly turned on her heel. Standing in front of Morgan again, she extended her hand and smiled. "I'm sorry. I'm Elder Priscilla."

She walked away before Morgan could respond and addressed the men in suits without looking in their direction. "All right, boys. Make yourselves comfortable somewhere. Don't stand around making this poor young man feel awkward."

* * *

Priscilla flopped down on the chair behind the desk. She shook her golden locks and sighed. "Sometimes private jets aren't as accommodating as I'd prefer. And the drive from Philadelphia"—she inspected her fingernails—"was tiresome. But, I admit, it was scenic."

"You're here to discuss Tirich," Jonathan said.

"He's been taken care of, correct?"

"Yes."

She raised her eyebrows. "Just you and Ava?"

"And Morgan."

"I see."

Ava moved to the edge of the chair and placed her hands on the desk. "Everything will make sense to you. We had no other choice as far as Morgan is concerned."

Priscilla leaned back, mirroring a model's relaxed pose. "There's always a choice." She shifted into a more serious persona, like a CEO about to reprimand an inexperienced assistant. "Yes. Or no. Do. Or don't. Approve. Disapprove."

Ava acknowledged the words with a nod.

"Then you understand my point?"

"Of course, we do," Jonathan responded.

"Good. Because I'm not here to condemn and persecute. Tirich was a terrible, unruly vampire. I mean, honestly, you did us a favor by getting rid of him. If he were still alive and running around here, the boys probably would have killed him tonight or tomorrow. But you really, kinda-sorta jumped the gun."

"No," Jonathan objected. "We had to act when we did. It was the right decision."

Priscilla pulled a large leather-bound book from her briefcase and flipped through the pages. With pen in hand, she said, "No detail omitted."

* * *

Jonathan and Ava summarized the events that had transpired, leading to Tirich's death. The murders. Tirich's unexpected arrival at the party. Shawn's body in the basement. Aeron. The confrontation at the train station. And, finally, the transformation of Morgan.

Priscilla tapped her finger on the desk. "You could have let Morgan die."

Ava spoke before Jonathan had a chance. "He was in the situation because of us. He discovered Tirich's hideout. He delivered the fatal wound. And the wolf...he was killed by that wolf because of us. We needed to save him because we loved him and wanted him to live life."

Priscilla looked at Jonathan. "Did you hesitate?"

"Not because I wasn't sure about saving him. Because I knew turning a human is supposed to be approved."

"It most certainly is," Priscilla replied. "However, given the circumstances, and your love for this boy, I guess approval was impossible. An immediate decision made at the moment of lifelessness. Just like when you turned Ava."

She stood and adjusted a framed photograph on the wall. "Did you ever discuss the idea of turning him? Ever mention it to Morgan?"

"No, of course not. We didn't have any plans that involved Morgan becoming immortal."

Priscilla faced them with a smile. "Okay. I think I've heard enough."

"Thank you," Ava said and rose to her feet.

"Ava, dear. Please allow me a few minutes with your brother."

"Of course. I'll check on Morgan and the others."

"Thank you." Priscilla gestured with a bow of her head. "And tell those boys to be on their best behavior. Or there will be hell to pay."

Ava entered the living room and glanced at the four men. A program on television captivated their attention. Morgan stood behind the sofa with a confused expression. He approached with a furrowed brow and seemed to silently beg for positive words.

"You look like a fish outta water," she said.

"Yeah. In my own house."

"Jonathan is still talking to Priscilla. Everything's fine."

"I was beginning to think we were in some sorta trouble."

"She wanted to know about Tirich. And Jonathan turning you."

"I don't need to be worried about anything?"

"No. You can relax," she replied. "Let's see if these men need anything."

Jonathan had seated himself behind the desk. He signed his name on a page in the leather-bound book.

Priscilla walked behind him, leaned over his shoulder, and draped her arms across his chest. Resting her face against his, she softly spoke. "Oh, Jonathan. It's been so long."

"Yes." He caressed her hands. "Years."

"I miss you."

He gently touched her cheek. "I know. And I'm sorry."

"We could have really been something."

"That's not the life I wanted. And it's still not the life I want."

"I know. You want to live in the real world. Among the humans as if there's still a mortal part of you left."

"I'm not longing to be mortal. I don't have regrets."

"You are a generous, selfless, and sentimental soul. You cherish and

protect those human traits, while many others have cast them aside. It's admirable."

"Thank you."

"It's also why you've looked after your sister the way you have. The reason you took in this young boy. Bringing him into the fold. A blood brother now."

"Yes. We are a family."

She took a step backward. "Take me in your arms. Kiss me like you used to."

Jonathan forced her against the wall. The kiss was deep and sensual. Frenzied. Powerful.

* * *

Priscilla emerged from the den. "Dominick, get my luggage from the car."

Jonathan sat near the piano. When he offered a comforting smile, Morgan recognized that Jonathan was no longer angry with him.

Priscilla knelt and held Ava's hands in her own. "Please tell me that you have something to nibble on. I'm famished."

"What would you like?"

"Something delicious. And a nice wine."

"I'll help you," Jonathan said.

Priscilla turned her attention to Morgan. "Now you. I'd like to know more about you. Join me in the den, please."

Nervous, he glanced at Jonathan and Ava. He folded his hands together and followed Priscilla like a schoolboy pacing himself to the principal's office (again).

* * *

Seated behind the desk, Priscilla opened the briefcase and pulled out a silver case. She removed a cigarette, lit it, and searched the desk for an ashtray. With a shrug, she grabbed a crystal container and dumped the writing instruments it held onto the desk.

"You're lovely. And sincere. Polite." She smiled and rubbed her finger on top of the lighter, eyeing him with curiosity. "What did you expect when you established relationships with Jonathan and Ava?"

Morgan shifted his weight in the chair. "Expectations? I didn't have any."

"You love them."

"Of course. Like a brother and sister."

"And your mortal family?"

"I don't have one."

"Were you neglected? Abandoned? Unloved?"

"My mom died when I was twelve. My dad became an alcoholic after that. There wasn't any other family around."

She exhaled a long stream of smoke. "Then you gravitated to Jonathan and Ava."

"We became friends."

"And what do you know about being immortal?"

"Um, well, I don't know a lot." He struggled with the answer. "I mean, I know some stuff. Obviously, I don't know everything."

"You know very little." She took a drag off the cigarette. "Do you know about Violamate?"

"No."

"Hmm." Priscilla sighed and opened the leather-bound book. "There's a lot of Immortal history in this book. It all starts with Violamate."

"Who is he?"

"*She* is the origin of this curse. The reason we exist."

"I don't know about her."

"She became the first Immortal in 1264. She lived in the Amazon of Brazil. Her tribe imprisoned her in a cave in the mesa. She ate insects, lizards, and the blood of bats to survive. When she escaped from the cave, she returned to the tribe to reclaim her children. But they feared her. So, she screamed to the gods to curse her as the monster the tribe believed her to be."

"Then what?"

"She turned others. They spread throughout the land in all directions until the bloodlines converged in India. There was a war over who would rule the region. The first Great Immortal Battle. Eventually, there was an agreement, and that's how clans and colonies came to be."

"Is she dead?"

"Her body is preserved. Her heart was taken elsewhere. At some point, they will be joined again to awaken her."

"She's the Queen?"

Priscilla nodded. "To feed solely on the blood of animals is considered a blasphemous act against Violamate. You need human blood to feed the Immortal DNA."

"I know."

"At some point, you'll need to kill a human," she stressed. "Are you capable of doing that?"

"I killed a vampire."

"That's different. You killed to protect and survive. Killing a human is important to the survival of your soul. You're a lot more vulnerable without the benefits of additional life force."

She extinguished the cigarette and sat next to Morgan. "You're essentially living as a mortal, and you need to accept the fact that you're not. Soon enough you will be a full Immortal. It's a whole other way of living life."

"Yeah, I know."

"You have the benefit of living with Jonathan and Ava as a family. Like a very small colony. You get to experience life as if very little has changed." She adjusted the earring on her right ear. "Well, for the most part."

He maintained eye contact, focusing on every word she spoke.

"If you lived in a colony...a house of Immortals...life would be very different."

"So, my situation is unique?"

She chuckled. "You're not the first, dear boy. Far from it."

"I didn't mean to imply that I was *special*."

"You're not special," she said. "I want a few things to be clear."

"Such as?"

"Once you've transformed completely, there's no turning back. There are rules you must obey."

"I know."

"This is vital," she stressed. "In most circumstances, approval is needed before turning a mortal. It's possible another Elder could have come here to investigate. It's possible that he or she wouldn't have approved of Jonathan turning you. You would have likely been terminated."

"I understand."

"I can appreciate the circumstances of your turning. The love between the three of you," she said. "I spared you."

"Thank you."

"Always remember...there are Immortals out there that won't like the fact that you were unapproved. That you easily set up residence outside of a colony. *And* that you were responsible for the death of an Immortal. Even if it was a reckless monster like Tirich."

"Okay."

"To some, you'll have to prove that you're worthy of being an Immortal."

"How do I do that?"

"Be yourself," she said and rose to her feet. "And that's how I'm ending this conversation."

Somewhat confused, he accepted her final words with a nod.

"Fantastic. Now I need a glass of wine."

* * *

Jonathan and Priscilla had made love. In bed, they softly talked and laughed like committed long-term lovers. During a moment of silence, she ran a finger up and down his chest as she recalled their past relationship. Her smile faded.

She situated herself to look him in the eye. "Don't you ever get lonely?"

"Lonely? For a woman? A wife?"

"Yes. Don't you ever wish you had a spouse? Not some random rendezvous with an Intimate. Woman or man."

"No. Not really," he replied. "I like my life. I have Ava. And now Morgan. I'm content with my life. Even without a romantic commitment or marriage."

She rested her head on his chest, wondering if he ever regretted ending their relationship. "Sometimes I miss having that with you."

"You became an Elder. That's a lot of power and authority. I didn't want to live my life according to Immortal politics."

She wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. "Yes, I understand."

Jonathan positioned Priscilla on her back and spread her legs. "I still love you."

She tossed her head back as he entered her. "I love you, too."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Priscilla and the men in suits planned to return to Philadelphia following dinner. Halfway through the meal, she retreated to the den and phoned the other Elders about the death of Tirich. Nearly an hour later, she returned to the dinner table.

While the men in suits prepared for their departure, she resumed her meal. "I discussed Tirich with many of the Elders, and none voiced concern about his demise. Honestly, most were pleased by the elimination of a vicious vampire. Even the fact that Morgan, now turned, had delivered the fatal wound did not raise an objection or disapproval."

"That's good to know," Jonathan said.

"The colony in Tahoe is thrilled to be rid of the stigma of his existence."

Ava smiled. "So are we."

Priscilla continued. "You knew that Tahoe wasn't his original colony?"

"No."

"They took him in when he relocated to California. They pretty much adopted him because he had no plans to return to his homestead. His bloodline...his original colony is in England. London, to be precise."

"I didn't know that," Jonathan said. "Ava and I hardly knew him aside from a few interactions over the years."

"Well, I explained everything in detail to his original colony. I told them the investigation had concluded. But they want to send someone to discuss it with you."

"Really?" Ava asked. "That's a form of closure on their part?"

Priscilla checked her lipstick with a compact mirror. "I suppose they want to be definitive in their acceptance of the matter. I mean, he was one of their own. Being killed by a human certainly is not uncommon. The fact that Immortals were involved warrants a tête-à-tête. It would be a form of courtesy on your part."

She directed her attention to Morgan. "Remember everything I told you

last night. You're in good hands with Jonathan and Ava. I'll be checking in on you. After all, you're a part of my clan."

Morgan looked at her with surprise. "I am?"

"Yes, dear boy. There are clans all around the world. Across the United States. Our colony is in Connecticut. I oversee the three of you."

She swallowed the last of her wine. "I don't like a drawn-out goodbye. Give me kisses, and I'll be on my way."

* * *

A couple of hours later, Jonathan knocked on Morgan's bedroom door. He pushed it and poked his head inside. "Hey, buddy. Dress in a shirt and shorts and meet me in the attic."

"You wanna work out now?"

"C'mon. Get dressed." Jonathan smiled and walked away.

When Morgan entered the attic, Jonathan tossed a pair of hand wraps to him. "I'm sorry I lost my cool with you yesterday. I didn't mean to make you feel bad or hurt your feelings."

"It's okay. I'm over it now," Morgan said. "But I thought you were really pissed and regretted having me around."

Jonathan frowned. "You thought I had regrets about you?"

"I don't know. Maybe a little."

"I don't regret having you around, Morgan. We told you, you're a part of our family. That hasn't changed."

Glancing at the hand wraps, Morgan nodded. "I know. I'm sorry."

"And I'm sorry," Jonathan said.

As he helped Morgan wrap his hands, he explained, "The other day, at school...you didn't exert the control you should have. You need to control your emotional response and your physical reaction."

"What? You think I overreacted?"

"I'm saying, you need to think first before you react."

He led Morgan to the punching bag. "Boxing is a great skill to possess. It's physical and mental. Power and technique to the punch. You also need to anticipate what might come next. But, at the same time, be aware of what you need to do to protect yourself."

Morgan positioned his wrapped fists in front of his face.

Jonathan smiled. "Lower your hands to chest-level or below your chin."

You don't want to block your sight. You need to see what's coming. A lot of boxers, especially beginners, block their face. But we're not boxing for sport. We're going to box for defense and survival in a fight."

Standing next to Morgan, Jonathan positioned his left foot pointing straight and his other foot back at a slight angle. "We're both right-handed. So, position your stance like mine."

"I don't know that I'd stand like this in a fight."

"Once you get the hang of it, you probably will. And you'll see why in a minute."

Morgan mirrored Jonathan's stance and watched intently.

"Good. Now, don't stand straight and rigid. Bend your knees slightly." Jonathan relaxed his posture slightly and bounced in place. "You're going to jab with your left hand. And your right hand is your power punch." Jonathan demonstrated with the punching bag. "Jab. Jab. Jab. Then punch with your right, using your foot and hip to push power into your punch. Okay?"

He stepped back and examined Morgan's stance. "Flat left foot. And lift your right heel a little. When you punch with your right hand, you're going to twist your foot into the punch."

While Morgan jabbed at the punching bag, Jonathan corrected his moves. "Your jab is going to show you how close the person is to you. If you can reach him with your jab, then you know your punch will make contact." Then he demonstrated the best method of throwing a punch. "When you're pulling your jab back start to bring your right arm forward for the punch. No time in between. Jab and punch before you pull your jab all the way back."

Once Jonathan believed Morgan had gotten the hang of the jab and punch, he told Morgan to rest. He approached the punching bag. "Good job. Now, watch me. Pay attention to my body. I'm going to add the left hook."

During the next thirty minutes, Jonathan watched Morgan concentrate on jabbing and throwing punches correctly. He admired Morgan's motivation to master the moves and implement suggestions for improvement. Even when his knuckles were sore, Morgan continued to box and follow instructions like he wanted to memorize everything Jonathan had to say.

When the training session had come to an end, they sat and rested. Morgan wiped the sweat from his face and gulped water. In that moment, Jonathan was proud. He imagined the sentiment must be similar to a father admiring his son, and he smiled. Then he pushed the comparison out of his mind. *Morgan doesn't need a father*, he thought. *He just needs someone to believe in him.*

The next day, Morgan returned to the house on Rose Lane. The decaying condition of the home seemed more pronounced. Chipped paint on the siding exposed rotting wood. The porch sagged and creaked with each step.

Once inside, he scanned the filthy living room. Musty and dark. Dust coated everything. Beer bottles and food wrappers were scattered about the house. Several cockroaches didn't even attempt to flee as Morgan walked through the house.

Since he intended to collect his belongings and leave quickly, his father's absence was a relief.

In his old bedroom, the space that had once been his refuge provoked sadness. Comfort within the four walls no longer existed.

A pile of birthday and holiday cards lay on the bed. The removal of cash was obvious. A card from Peter contained a check for fifty dollars. He stuffed the cards, art supplies, and artwork into a duffel bag.

When Morgan walked into the bathroom, he recoiled at the sight of an opossum floating in the half-full tub of water. "I could have been bitten. The opossum could have run around the whole damn house. Or worse," he said to himself, "removing the dead opossum to take a bath."

Returning to the bedroom, he glanced around one last time and grabbed the duffel bag. He retrieved his mother's necklace from the desk drawer. As he searched the bookshelf for *The Boxcar Children*, a car door slammed shut. He rushed to the window and saw Frederick walking toward the house.

Slinging the duffel bag over his shoulder, he walked out of the bedroom for the final time.

Frederick entered the house and stared at his son. He placed a brown shopping bag on the floor and folded his arms. "What are you doing here?"

"Brian told me you were moving in with Janis. I came to get my things."

"What *things*?"

"Clothes, books, my birth certificate, and pictures."

"Yeah, yeah. Take it. Whatever you didn't take is going in the trash."

"Really? Just gonna throw it all away like I wasn't even here?"

"You're the one who ran away."

"No. You chased me away."

Frederick coughed and shook his head. "You turned against your own father."

"I suffered here. I woulda suffered until the day I graduated. Then I

woulda gotten the hell outta here. But I got the chance to get outta here sooner.

"And I turned against *you*?" Morgan laughed. "You've gotta be kidding me. YOU turned against me. You started right after Mom died. By becoming a drunk. Not taking care of your own child who needed you. You loved alcohol more than your own son."

"You don't know what the hell you're talking about."

Morgan stared at the man who had taught him to ride a bike. "I spent the last five years living with your bullshit. I let people treat me like shit 'cause you treated me like shit."

Frederick removed his jacket and tossed it to the couch.

"This house is a dump," Morgan continued. "When you move out, the city is gonna tear down this hellhole."

Frederick slammed the front door. "Hey, you had a roof over your head."

"Yeah. With cockroaches. Mice. Skunks under the house. I went to school smelling like a skunk one day 'cause a family of them lived under this piece-of-shit house."

"Fuck you. You had a place to live."

"Yeah," Morgan said. "Then you stopped buying groceries. You stopped paying bills. I had to wash my hair with dish soap. I had to get a job, so I could feed myself, 'cause you were more concerned with being a drunk than a father."

"Just get out."

"Then you started knocking me around. Beating me with a belt. Yeah, that's love." Morgan glared at his father. "I don't know what the hell happened to you. You're not the father I knew when I was a kid. You're a stranger to me."

"Take your fucking bag of shit and go."

"I'm going. And this is the last time you're gonna see me."

Frederick sat on the frayed recliner and hung his head as if ashamed, speaking in a hushed tone. "Leave me. Just like your mother."

Surprised by his father's show of emotion, Morgan knelt. "She didn't leave you. She died."

Jerking his head up, Frederick slapped Morgan across the face. His eyes burned with intensity as he pulled a beer from the shopping bag. Popping the cap off, he smiled then gulped the beer.

Exercise restraint, Morgan thought. "Look at me."

Frederick looked away.

"LOOK AT ME."

Frederick glanced at his son. "What?"

"I'm alive 'cause of you. But I'll NEVER be the man that you are."

Morgan stormed out of the house.

* * *

Ava took several dirty dishes out of the dishwasher and placed them in the sink of hot, soapy water. She cleaned the island and tossed wilted flowers into the trash can. She quickly washed, dried, and put away the dishes. Then she wiped the cabinet handles and dried the faucet to a silvery polished shine, clearly reflecting her distorted image.

Sporadic episodes of thorough cleaning and arranging furniture always provided a sense of gratification. When stressed or deep in thought, the process of making things *just right* accomplished much to ease her mind of debate and concern. Taking Morgan into their home, his Immortal turning, the death of Tirich, and Priscilla's arrival had her head spinning.

Satisfied that the kitchen looked spotless, she moved to the dining room and relocated candlestick holders and a centerpiece from the table. As she wiped the table clean, she heard the front door open and close. Glancing at the clock on the wall, she smiled and walked toward the foyer to greet Morgan.

He sat on the steps of the staircase with a forlorn expression on his face.

She joined him on the stairs and leaned back on her elbows. "What's wrong?"

"I got my stuff from my dad's house. He showed up before I left, and we got into an argument."

"Did he get physical?"

"No. Well, he slapped me. We didn't get into a fist fight."

"Why did he slap you?"

"It doesn't matter anymore." He tilted his head back and exhaled, forcing his lips to vibrate. "I got my stuff, and now I never have to see him again."

"Did you tell him how you feel?"

"Yeah."

"And?"

"He doesn't care. He's fine without me being around."

"Leave it all in the past. What's done is done. Maybe he'll surprise you by reaching out at some point in the future."

He tugged at a loose strand of fabric on the carpeted stairs. "Ha."

"Well, it's possible he'll never reach out to you. So, you gotta move forward. Set your goals. Make the life that you want for yourself."

"I know. It's just...pathetic."

"You need to take that emotion—anger, sadness, whatever—focus it on something else. Something productive. Something positive." She pressed her shoulder against his and thought a moment. Then she stood and reached out for his hand. "Come with me."

They sat on the sofa looking at the vases on the coffee table. The glass containers were of various sizes in red, blue, green, and yellow. She grouped the vases by color and situated a clear one in the center. Leaning forward, she rested her elbows on her knees and pointed. "Pick a color."

"Blue."

"It's easier to learn by concentrating on one color," she said. "We'll start with the smallest first. Concentrate on it and be aware of everything around you. The vase is the most important thing in the space all around you."

"Ignore everything else?"

"No." She thought for a moment. "Visualize the night sky. It's full of stars and the bright moon. The blue vase is the moon and everything else sharing its environment are the stars."

Morgan directed his attention to the glass. Nothing happened.

"Concentrate," she encouraged. "It's not going to instantly move."

He stared intently at the vase. Several moments later, the glass wavered ever so slightly.

"See? You're having an effect on it."

He groaned. "This is gonna take forever."

"No. It'll take a lot of work. You'll get it, eventually."

"Okay. I'll keep practicing."

"Using color will help you. A lot of Immortals try to master the ability without setting themselves up to succeed. They try. Most of them give up."

"Not all Immortals can do it?"

She shook her head. "It also takes a lot of energy to do it."

"Mental energy?"

"Yes. Physical energy, too," she said. "Pick up a blue one."

Morgan picked up the vase and glanced at her.

"Now pick up that chair with your other hand," she said, pointing at an accent chair against the wall.

"Well, duh. It takes more physical energy 'cause the chair's heavier."

"Yes, now imagine using your mind to move something that weighs five pounds versus something that weighs fifty pounds," she replied. "If you're in a fight or a dangerous situation, you don't want to exhaust yourself using the ability to move things when you need your physical energy to survive."

"Be smart about it."

"Everything that's occurred during your transformation so far...your abilities...they all become stronger. Some, once you're a complete Immortal. Others, from training."

"All right. So, I'll work on it."

"And this is a lesson about intention, too. You have the ability to create the results you want to see. Mental, emotional, verbal, or physical. So be smart about the power behind intent."

She left him seated on the sofa, staring at the vases. Pleased that he wanted to develop his ability, she caused the blue vase to move an inch. When he reacted with excitement, she smiled and strode out of the room.

* * *

The dream began with Morgan opening his eyes. Startled to see his reflection in a pool of blood, he staggered to his feet and counted seven pools of blood in the area.

A dark figure on his left emerged from the trees. A dark figure on his right emerged from the trees. They were female. Both wore long, sheer black veils from head to toe. They stepped in unison until they met in the center of the area then turned to face Morgan. The veil on the left danced in the air to the left as if a wind blew in that direction. The veil on the right danced in the air to the right as if a wind blew in that direction. They both raised their arms parallel to the ground.

"You're so beautiful," he said.

The women crossed their arms against their chest. The veil on the left danced to the right as if a wind blew in that direction. The veil on the right danced to the left as if a wind blew in that direction. In unison, they walked backward to where they had come from.

A naked woman stood among the trees in the distance.

Morgan awoke in bed. He glanced around the silent room.

He was not scared. He closed his eyes and fell asleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The first day of Christmas break arrived. Schoolwork had kept Morgan too busy to sketch, paint, or write as often as he liked. He complained that he had ignored his creativity for months. So, he wanted to spend the day working in the attic studio.

After hours of sketching with charcoal, Morgan sat and studied his creation. The progression of his work had escaped him until he analyzed the canvas in front of him. The abstract quality of his work had evolved into more realistic depictions of figures and faces. Pleased with the results, he tidied up the work area and pinned the charcoal drawing to the wall.

The doorbell rang as he neared the bottom of the staircase. The mailman handed Morgan several envelopes and a package addressed to Astor and Fischer. The inclusion of his name on the box surprised him. The return address: East Horsley, England.

Intrigued, he opened the package and pulled out a box of fancy chocolate truffles. Morgan had never seen chocolates embellished and colored in such a luxurious manner. Elegant to the eye, the enclosed purple card featured a handwritten message:

Happy Holidays, Jonathan, Ava, and Morgan. May this greeting find you in good health and high spirits. Please contact us at your earliest convenience to schedule a conference in London. We eagerly await your response. Blessed be and peace to you.

* * *

Later, Jonathan phoned the East Horsley Colony. During the brief conversation, Elder DuPont expressed interest in a member of his clan receiving a firsthand account of Tirich's demise. He insisted the meeting take place in London with his aide, Sinclair. DuPont also stressed it would be a contemptuous discourtesy if Jonathan objected. So, Jonathan agreed.

"We're going to London next week to meet a guy that DuPont's sending from East Horsley."

Morgan immediately scooted to the edge of the chair. "London? I don't have a passport."

"We can get it expedited. I know someone who will accept the paperwork the day after Christmas. We'll get a private jet and fly out Monday or Tuesday."

"And they wanna talk about Tirich?"

"Yes."

"I don't think I should go."

"Why not?"

"What if they want to kill me?"

The question saddened Jonathan because, once again, Morgan gravitated toward pessimism like a magnet to metal. "Kill you?"

"Because I helped you kill Tirich. It could be a trap."

"Tirich was banished from London. He had to be taken in by a colony in Tahoe. Apparently, no one cares that he's dead."

"If no one cares, why do we have to keep answering questions?"

"This isn't the human-world. You're living the Immortal life now. Different rules. Different expectations."

Ava leaned back on the sofa, her posture and attitude relaxed. "They could have easily come to Colby and killed you."

Jonathan agreed. "Besides, I was going to London soon anyway."

Morgan rested his head on the arm of the sofa. "Alone? Why?"

"Investment business." Jonathan squeezed Morgan's shoulder. "Don't worry. We wouldn't let anything happen to you."

Nudging Morgan in the shoulder, Ava smiled. "We're going to London. Might as well make a fun trip out of it."

"I should call my grandparents," Morgan said. "They live in Somerset."

"Let's figure out our schedule," Jonathan responded. "Maybe we can go there. Or they can spend time with you in London."

"Yeah," Ava replied. "We'll have a good time. Right, Jonathan?"

"Yep. We'll get the meeting out of the way. And we can take care of business with the Cobalt Stone Agency. Then we'll enjoy ourselves for a couple days."

* * *

Jonathan had reserved two rooms at a hotel off Oxford Street in the Mayfair District. Sinclair stayed at a brownstone in Kensington. No information was provided about the owner of the residence. But Morgan was curious if the owner was an Immortal or simply a mortal business associate.

Sinclair traveled with a Mortal Soul by the name of Emily. She accomplished daylight errands while they were in town. The night of the dinner, she was tasked with supervising the chef and housekeeper while Sinclair conducted the meeting.

She greeted the three of them at the door with a broad smile. The tone of her voice was cheerful. "Hello. Please, come on in." She escorted them to the living room. "Have a seat."

"Thank you," Jonathan replied.

Emily brushed long blonde hair from the shoulder of a stylish gray sweater. She appeared to be in her early twenties. "Let me take your coats. Sinclair won't be long."

When she smiled at Morgan, he blushed and looked away, nervously kneading his hands together.

Once Emily left the room, Ava turned toward him. "Relax."

He lowered his hands and tapped the seat of the chair with his fingertips.

Sinclair entered a minute later. He was a tall, thin, blond man with a subtle British accent. "Good evening, dear guests."

After a quick exchange of greetings, Sinclair offered wine.

Morgan hesitated.

"How old are you?" Sinclair asked.

"Eighteen."

"I certainly understand your reluctance. However, you're not limited to mortal rules and laws. If you'd like to enjoy an excellent glass of wine with us, then, by all means, indulge. Besides,"—he smiled—"you're in Europe. We don't obey American laws here."

Morgan accepted the glass. "Thank you."

"This is your first visit to London?"

"Yeah. I've never traveled outside America."

"London is an outstanding city. You'll be hard-pressed to forget it." Sinclair gestured about the room. "Please, everyone. Sit."

He continued, "It's good to be in London again. I'm pleased you could join me this evening."

Jonathan's patience faded. "I know we're here to talk about Tirich, but we discussed everything with Priscilla. We'd like to move on once and for all."

"So would I," Sinclair replied. "You traveled all the way across the Atlantic for this. And I to London, to inquire about a vampire I never cared for, alive or dead.

"It's about formalities. It's customary to document, as it were, with our own pen," he said. "You may not know, but Elder DuPont is delighted to be rid of Tirich. And, to be quite honest, Tirich should have been eliminated long ago rather than allowed to wander."

Ava crossed her arms. "Then I don't understand all this additional probing."

"Well, DuPont turned Tirich all those years ago. DuPont was the one who allowed Tirich to depart our colony. Then, as you know, that colony in California took him in. It wasn't long before they had to cast him out. So, a certain degree of responsibility reverted back to us."

The fact that the Immortal world seemed to be governed by law and order intrigued Morgan. "Why didn't he come back to England?"

"He was smart not to return. Unless he planned to beg for forgiveness and mercy," Sinclair said. "You would be more welcome at the doorstep of East Horsley. And you killed him."

Finally, spoken words that allowed Morgan to cast aside fears of impending revenge for killing Tirich. "Why was he kicked out of your colony?"

"Tirich liked power. He thought being an Immortal made him god-like. But he wasn't going to wield power in our colony. Not with DuPont in charge and me being the second-in-command. I mean, I've been in my position for over forty years. I wouldn't resign my post to an audacious and selfish vampire like Tirich."

Morgan relaxed and sat more comfortably on the sofa.

Sinclair sipped the wine. "I'm sure DuPont felt a pang of emotion at the time of Tirich's demise. After all, he had turned him. But I was delighted."

Self-assured, Morgan stated, "I'm glad I killed him."

"How did you do that?"

"I stabbed him in the heart."

"And his body?"

"Burned and buried," Jonathan answered.

"Fantastic." Sinclair clapped his hands together and smiled. "I have confirmation of death, and the claim of responsibility by the parties involved."

Jonathan jumped to his feet. "The same damn confirmation and claim of

responsibility that Priscilla had. We flew all the way to London for a two-minute conversation."

"You said you had business to take care of here."

"Yes, but it didn't have to be this week. We came now because of the implied urgency of this meeting."

"Elder Priscilla is in charge of your colony," Sinclair replied. "As I mentioned before, I'm here to document for my colony. I believe we've concluded the topic of conversation. Tirich is dead, dead, dead. As far as I'm concerned, I congratulate you. Now we can move on to more interesting subjects."

* * *

In the dining room, Sinclair said, "This is not a formal dinner. We're all guests in this home. You can sit where you'd like."

The chef and Emily served blackened tomato with crab cake. When the chef returned to the kitchen, Sinclair addressed Emily. "Please serve the rest of the meal after we have finished with the first course. Then keep the servants busy in the kitchen until it's time for dessert."

"Yes. Of course." She bowed her head and walked out of the room.

Sinclair noticed Morgan's lingering gaze. "She's pretty, isn't she?"

"Yeah, she is."

"She's American. She's been our Mortal Soul three years now."

"Just the one?" Jonathan asked.

"No. We have five at our residence."

"How many Immortals?"

Sinclair thought a moment. "Eighteen Immortals. Five Mortal Souls. Our clan is much bigger, but our colony is relatively small."

"You and DuPont are in charge. And sixteen others?" Morgan asked.

"Yes. Safety in numbers. Easier to control activity in our region," he said. "Where is your Mortal Soul? At the hotel?"

"We don't have one," Ava answered. "Caroline retired before we moved to Colby."

"You haven't had a Mortal Soul for how long now?"

"Eight or nine months."

"Morgan will be nocturnal soon enough. I'm sure you've thought about the need for one in the near future."

"Yes. Until then, we can manage."

Morgan nibbled on the sesame ginger salmon and duchess potatoes. He thought the meal was too fancy and pretentious. The salad even had mango and pickled cucumber.

Sinclair conducted himself like an important political diplomat hosting a state dinner. Morgan didn't feel qualified to participate in the discussion about a variety of Immortal topics.

Eventually, Sinclair focused his attention on Morgan. "You have this Immortal family. And you're in the process of becoming immortal. How much longer until your transformation is complete?"

"He has one feeding left," Jonathan said.

"Ah. Very soon."

Jonathan nodded.

"You won't miss the mortal ways of life?" Sinclair asked Morgan.

"No."

"College? A wife and family? A career?"

"I wanna contribute in some way. I can't live off Jonathan and Ava's money."

"That's commendable. And you're eighteen. There's so much you still had to discover among the humans. Love. Sex. Marriage. Long-lasting friendships."

"Yeah, I know," Morgan said. "But I was attacked by Tirich's wolf. Jonathan and Ava saved me."

"Well, you can have some sort of a career in the human world. It's possible. You can still have a spouse. Intimates to share physical pleasure," Sinclair said. "Of course, you'll never be able to have children since your human self will be dead. But a spouse and Intimates...yes."

Ava touched Morgan's hand. "It's rare for an Immortal to have a spouse. Human or Immortal."

"And Intimates?" Morgan asked.

"Yes, of course. You'll have many lovers over a great span of time."

Jonathan agreed. "You won't be without experience."

Sinclair smiled. "We don't have sexual identities and taboos. You're free to experience intimacy without restrictions," he said. "Actually, if someone is committed to another, then no. That's frowned upon in the Immortal world as it is in the mortal world."

Morgan raised his eyebrows. "All Immortals are bisexual?"

"No sexual identities and taboos," Sinclair repeated.

"Procreation is completely off the table," Jonathan said. "At some point, you realize that sex is not a physical act to prove monogamy or produce offspring. It's a form of appreciation. An act of expressing love and admiration. It's not being a man. Or being a woman. It's Immortal and Immortal."

"Some Immortals are strictly heterosexual," Ava added. "Most are not. Just sexual."

Sinclair tapped his fingertip on the rim of the wine glass. "Don't deny yourself the luxury of experiencing the many things life has to offer. You have a long road ahead of you. There will be many opportunities along the way."

Jonathan winked. "When the time comes, you'll follow your instincts."

Shaking his head, Morgan replied. "Right now, my instincts are with women."

After dessert, Sinclair escorted the three to the front door. "Before I bid you *adieu*, you're formally invited to the Uxbridge Estate tomorrow evening."

Jonathan accepted an invitation in a purple envelope. "Uxbridge?"

"Yes, it's a large estate for grand affairs. In Clone Valley. Very private."

"It's New Year's Eve," Morgan said.

"Do you already have a commitment for the evening?"

"No," Jonathan said. "We didn't plan on attending a New Year's Party."

"Here in England, the colonies like to celebrate the conclusion of a year. Not so much of an emphasis on a new year...resolutions and the like. We're immortal for goodness' sake. We celebrate the end of another year. Not the beginning."

"We'll think about it," Jonathan replied.

"Ah, please don't disappoint me by declining the invitation. You'll have a lovely time. You'll be well taken care of."

"Thank you. We'll discuss it," Ava said.

"I simply won't accept no for an answer. Besides, Morgan gets the luxury of living on his own with the two of you. This will give him the chance to experience the Immortal world."

"We'll call you tomorrow," Jonathan said.

"Outstanding. I will arrange for a car to pick you up at the hotel." Sinclair smiled. "Thank you for the pleasure of your company."

CHAPTER TWENTY–SEVEN

While Ava and Jonathan tended to business at the Cobalt Agency, Morgan wandered around Mayfair and strolled along Oxford Street. The events of the previous six months amazed him. And then, to walk the streets of London on a cold winter evening fascinated him.

He wondered if he'd be accepted as an Immortal at the party. Would he be shunned because his transformation was not yet complete? Would he fit in at all? Would his insecurities as an outsider return full force? When would he stop viewing himself as an outcast?

As they waited for the car to arrive, Morgan voiced his concern. "I'm nervous."

"Why?" Ava asked.

"Cause everyone is already a part of this big, secret group. Immortal or Mortal Soul. I'm the only one that's not."

"You *are* Immortal," she replied. "You're afraid you're not good enough. You're always quick to count yourself out. Let go of the baggage from your past. It's weighing you down."

Jonathan put his arm around Morgan. "Yeah, c'mon buddy. You have a whole new life now. There's no reason for you to second-guess yourself."

"Be confident," Ava added. "Be yourself."

A car pulled up, and a man got out to open the backdoor. "Good evening. My name is Samuel. I'm your driver this evening."

Comfortable in the backseat, Jonathan ruffled Morgan's hair. "Don't worry, buddy. Everything will be fine."

The drive along the M40 was like any highway trip in America. When the car neared Uxbridge, the scenery of small towns gave way to country fields and groups of trees. At Colne Valley, the driver turned onto a narrow road. Any car traveling in the opposite direction would have had difficulty passing. The

driver progressed along the road, bordered by trees on both sides, for several minutes. Without streetlights of any sort, it was extremely dark.

"This is eerie," Morgan said.

"Sinclair said it was a secluded, private estate," Jonathan replied.

Soon, lights could be seen in the distance. The car turned onto a long dirt road that extended to a perpendicular path in front of the main entrance. The four-story estate resembled a castle. Nearly all the windows emitted light from the inside.

The driver opened the door. "Let the valet know when you're ready. I'll swing 'round a couple minutes later."

"Thank you," Ava said.

"Enjoy your evening."

A male servant opened the double entrance door, and a dazzling, black British girl greeted them with a smile. "Hello. Welcome."

"Hello," Jonathan said. "Sinclair invited us."

"I know who you are. DuPont appointed me to be your escort."

Jonathan kissed her hand. "Well, thank you."

"My name is Isabella. You are Jonathan, Ava, and Morgan." She clutched Morgan's hand and smiled. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise," Morgan replied, scanning the majestic foyer.

People congregated in areas or strolled from room to room.

He expected an ensemble of men and women wearing black. Something Gothic. Something witchy. Something romantic. Everyone wore contemporary dress shirts and gowns. The modern attire put him at ease.

"Well, stop fannying around," Isabella teased. "C'mon. I'll take you to Sinclair."

She continued to hold Morgan's hand as she led them to a grand ballroom. Most of the guests eyed them as they passed. The only impressions Morgan detected were Celebration and Honor. He could not discern any other thoughts from the people. He wondered if Jonathan and Ava perceived anything different.

They reached the center of the ballroom. Glancing at the huge chandelier, Morgan recalled the moment Jonathan swung the train station chandelier into Tirich.

"Hello!" Sinclair exclaimed. "I'm so pleased you could make it this evening."

Jonathan shook his hand. "We thought we should make an appearance."

"Please, don't tell me you plan to leave before midnight. You must ring in 1998 with us."

"We'll see how the night plays out," Ava responded. "We have a full day planned for tomorrow."

"On New Year's Day." Sinclair smiled. "Must be trying to fit in as much of London before you fly back to the States."

"When do you return to America?" Isabella asked.

"Saturday," Morgan answered.

"I hope you enjoyed your time. You'll have to visit again."

Morgan agreed.

Isabella released his hand. "I need to check on a few guests. If you need anything, look for me. I won't be far."

Sinclair watched her leave the room then returned his attention to the three. "DuPont's getting dressed. He's a proper geezer...always dressed in stylish designer clothing at these affairs."

He introduced them to Immortals of the East Horsley, Norwich, and Leeds colonies.

"Our American guests are from Pennsylvania," Sinclair said. "These are the amazing folks who disposed of that terrible vampire, Tirich."

He paraded them around like prized possessions and led them to the formal sitting room. Turning to face them, he said, "Please, forgive me. I'm terribly rude. I have not offered wine or champagne or food. What would you like?"

Jonathan and Ava opted for wine.

"There's a wine bar over there." Sinclair pointed to the far wall. "Morgan, what do you fancy?"

"Um. I guess I'll have a glass of champagne."

"What about food? Are you hungry?"

"I'm fine right now."

"Okay." Sinclair turned to step away. "Let's go get your champagne."

Morgan nervously watched Jonathan and Ava walk to the wine bar.

"I'm sorry. Of course. Let's wait for Jonathan and Ava to return."

"I'll have a glass of wine instead."

"Nonsense," Sinclair scoffed. "You shall have champagne."

He glanced around the room then motioned for a guy to approach. The man appeared to be in his late twenties. The tall, extremely good-looking, and muscular guy smiled at Morgan.

"This is Nicholas," Sinclair said. "He's one of our Mortal Souls."

"Hello. It's nice to meet you," the guy said.

Morgan accepted his hand and introduced himself.

Sinclair touched Nicholas's face. "He's lovely, isn't he? It's unbelievable, really, a man this beautiful."

Morgan glanced toward the wine bar. "Uh, yeah. He is."

Sinclair chuckled. "You're lovely, too. I don't mean to make you uncomfortable."

With a tone of irritation, Morgan replied, "No, I'm fine."

"He likes to embarrass me," Nicholas said.

"No." Sinclair chuckled. "I was trying to embarrass Morgan."

Morgan squinted and cocked his head. "You wanna embarrass me?"

"Yes. All in good fun." Sinclair addressed Nicholas. "You see, Morgan learned about Intimates last night at dinner. And well, he's pretty keen to keep his toes in the heterosexual waters."

"Ah, okay. I see."

"I thought I'd tease him a bit," Sinclair explained. "Morgan would like a glass of champagne. Please be a dear and get him one."

"Of course," Nicholas replied and strode across the room.

Sinclair leaned close and whispered, "He's more stunning than most of the women here, wouldn't you agree?"

Morgan stared at him. "Yeah, I guess. Why are you trying to push him on me?"

Jonathan and Ava returned. "Who?" Jonathan asked.

"Sinclair is trying to embarrass me with this guy, Nicholas."

"Who the hell is Nicholas? Embarrass you how?"

Sinclair laughed. "I was teasing Morgan about one of our Mortal Souls. I sent him to get Morgan a glass of champagne," he said. "Are any of you hungry?"

"Please, Sinclair, don't play games," Jonathan warned. "This is a lot for Morgan to be subjected to. Let's keep the evening pleasant."

Sinclair appeared offended, but he smiled. "Of course, Jonathan. I mean no harm. Morgan is mature enough to understand that."

"Everything is fine," Morgan said. "Let's get something to eat."

Nicholas returned with the champagne. He handed Morgan a glass then raised his own as if to toast.

"Please take our guests to the buffet," Sinclair said. "I'm sure they'd like something to eat."

"Follow me."

As they turned to walk away, Sinclair motioned for Isabella to approach.

After filling their plates from a buffet table, they sat in a corner of the room. Morgan observed Nicholas for several minutes. He was wary of him but also sympathetic. "You're a Mortal Soul?"

"Yes."

"Does it bother you, the way Sinclair talks about you? Seems like he only appreciates you 'cause of your looks."

Nicholas shrugged. "I don't mind."

"What do you do for the colony?" Ava asked.

"I do courier work. I travel around quite a bit. Run errands. Take care of things at East Horsley."

Isabella appeared. "Excuse me. Sinclair would like you to join him in the ballroom. He wants you to be there when DuPont makes his entrance."

They rose to their feet, but Isabella dismissed Nicholas. "You can stay. Sinclair doesn't need you."

Nicholas appeared annoyed.

"It was nice to meet you," Morgan said.

"Yes. Thank you. It was nice to meet all of you as well."

"Maybe we'll see you later this evening," Ava said.

Isabella held Morgan's hand as she led them to the ballroom. She pointed at a painting on the wall as they walked. "I've been told that you're quite the artist, Jonathan. I can have someone show you the artwork."

"I've been admiring pieces here and there," he said.

"Maybe Emily. Or Stella. A lovely, intelligent French woman. She knows quite a bit about the art here. Nicholas certainly does not."

"You don't like him?" Ava asked.

"Oh, Nicholas? God, no. He thinks he's a real charmer. Not to say that he's completely worthless. He manages to get some work done. But he's a whore. If I left you with him, I'm sure he'd try to fuck all three of you before the night was over."

Ava raised her eyebrows. "Really? He didn't flirt with any of us."

"Trust me," Isabella replied. "He's beautiful and muscular and well-endowed. And that's why he's still around."

They joined Sinclair in the ballroom. A couple of minutes later, Elder DuPont entered. A handsome man with slicked-back hair and a nicely trimmed beard, he wore a black suit with a purple tie. He nodded at people he passed and kissed a few along the way.

DuPont pulled Sinclair's face close. "What a festive evening." He kissed Isabella on the cheek. "You look stunning."

"Thank you. I know Sinclair is eager to introduce you. I'll leave you for now."

"Don't stray far."

Sinclair motioned to Jonathan. "DuPont. This is Jonathan Astor."

DuPont offered his hand. "It's a pleasure."

"Likewise," Jonathan said. "This is my sister, Ava. And this is Morgan."

The Elder raised his hands to the air. "I have the great honor of congratulating you on the extermination of dearly departed Tirich."

Sinclair eyed the three then chuckled. "Friends. Your silence is deafening."

"I'm sorry," Jonathan said. "We've covered all of this during the investigation. It's odd to be congratulated again."

DuPont placed his hand on Jonathan's shoulder. "I can certainly understand that. Sometimes we wish something that drags on would just come to an end." He looked at Morgan. "And you, young man. It must have been a rather frightening experience that day in the train station."

"Yeah, it was. Not something I ever imagined being a part of."

"I'm quite certain that's true." DuPont winked. "Obviously, you did a fine job. I bet Tirich was astonished when you stabbed him through the heart."

"Yeah. I guess," Morgan replied. "And I had to fight with him while he was a ball of light."

DuPont shook his head. "A shameless display of abilities, all for the sake of trickery. He was quite dim, so he must have acquired the skill by eating the heart of one of the Immortals he had killed."

Morgan grimaced. "That still grosses me out. Eating the heart."

"I understand you're in transition. You have one last feeding, then you're truly Immortal. That deserves congratulations as well."

"Thank you."

"Not to exclude this lovely woman before me." DuPont acknowledged Ava. "The Matriarch of the Astor Clan."

She smiled. "We're not a clan."

"But you are now," DuPont responded and kissed her hand. "The three of you. A happy little family."

"Yes."

"Now, I'd like to introduce you to everyone. And allow everyone to applaud your accomplishment. First, I need to say hello to a few guests."

Jonathan objected. "No, you don't need to make an introduction or speech."

"Oh, c'mon, dear fellow. You've traveled all the way from America. Our honorable guests this evening. Please allow our other guests the opportunity to acknowledge you. Then, I promise, it's over and done."

"Yes," Sinclair said. "I'm sure there are some who have questioned the unknown guests among us."

DuPont bowed his head, stepped away, and greeted a woman with a kiss on the lips.

"I wasn't expecting him to be so friendly," Morgan said.

Ava nodded. "Pleasant, for sure."

Nicholas arrived with wine and four glasses. He smiled and presented the bottle.

As if he disapproved, Sinclair sighed. "Nicholas, are you trying to get our guests tipsy?"

"No, I'm trying to keep them happy."

Sinclair rolled his eyes. "Excuse me. I'll be back in a few minutes."

The Mortal Soul handed out the glasses and glanced at Morgan. "Unless, of course, you would prefer champagne."

"No, this is fine."

Nicholas poured the wine and raised his glass. "Tchin-tchin."

* * *

Observing the crowd, Morgan assumed the Mortal Souls worked the party rather than enjoying the festivities. He wondered if any other person was in a state of transition, like himself. Perhaps at least one other individual shared his sentiment of not fitting in.

Several minutes later, DuPont returned and grabbed Ava's hand, twirling her around as if in dance. He smiled. "Let's get the introductions over with."

He stepped onto a chair then onto the table. Glancing around the room, he clapped his hands three times. "Good evening, everyone. Good evening."

"Ah, so many lovely faces. I apologize if I haven't yet personally said hello. I would like to welcome everyone here tonight. We're here to celebrate the end of another year. And we're joined by special guests from America."

"Dear Immortal friends, please welcome our special guests."

The crowd applauded.

He motioned with his hands to silence the crowd then gestured to the

three. "Please welcome Jonathan, Ava, and Morgan. We're so pleased to have them this evening."

Everyone clapped and raised their glasses.

"They are of the Greenwich, Connecticut Colony overseen by Elder Priscilla."

Morgan blushed as everyone stared at them. Raising his glass, he acknowledged them with a smile.

"Now, many of you may not know that my esteemed American guests are responsible for the demise of a member of our clan. The banished vampire, Tirich."

The crowd reacted with applause and a few audible gasps.

"It is because of the actions of these three Immortals that my colony and our clan will no longer be tarnished by the existence of one of our own. And we have young Morgan to thank for delivering the fatal wound."

Again, the crowd clapped. Morgan's smile widened.

"Our comrade, Morgan, is in transition. On the verge of becoming wholly Immortal." DuPont raised his flute of champagne. "In honor of having accomplished such a feat...as a human no less...I would like to take the opportunity to present Morgan with a token of our appreciation. An expression of respect."

Unexpectedly, a man emerged from the crowd and raced toward Morgan. Incredibly fast, he pushed past Jonathan, Ava, and Nicholas. Dropping the wine bottle, Nicholas steadied Ava's balance. As the man spun around, he knocked Sinclair into the table DuPont stood on.

The man positioned himself behind Morgan. He wrapped one arm around Morgan's waist and the other around his neck. Resting his face on Morgan's shoulder, he yelled, "This boy deserves to die!" His face shifted between human and vampire beast repeatedly.

Jonathan rushed forward, but two Immortals restrained him. "What the hell is going on here?"

Morgan struggled in the man's tight grip.

"This one is going to suffer. If you take one step toward me, I will rip his head off."

CHAPTER TWENTY–EIGHT

When Sinclair lifted his arm to block Ava's approach, she slapped his hand away, causing him to stagger on his feet. "Get out of the way."

Jonathan flung an Immortal to the floor, but the other maintained his grip on him. "You set us up."

DuPont swallowed the last of his champagne and dropped the flute on the table. Nonchalantly, he crouched and rested his hands on his knees. "Look at what we have here."

Adrenaline erupted throughout Morgan's body. *I'm gonna die.*

"Kenley, the Walker," DuPont said. "FYI, the Walker is a nickname of contradiction. Kenley is a very fast fellow."

The vampire grunted and snapped his incisors close to Morgan's neck.

DuPont continued. "You see, Kenley was a very close companion to Tirich. They were turned about the same time in the same region of Spain. Isn't that right, Kenley?"

"1823 and 1824."

"They traveled together quite extensively. Looked out for one another. Always with the best of intentions for the other. Right?"

"Yes."

"You were heartbroken when we cast him out."

"Yes."

"You understood our reasoning, didn't you?"

Kenley nodded and stepped back with Morgan still in his grasp.

DuPont gently ran his hand through Kenley's hair then cradled his head. He kissed him on the cheek. "He was too impulsive. Too eager to kill without being cautious and smart about it."

A tear rolled down Kenley's face.

"Now you want revenge against the man that killed your friend. Your Immortal brother."

"I'm going to rip his heart out."

Jonathan struggled to free himself from restraint. "I will hunt you down and kill you."

Standing, DuPont addressed the crowd. "When you kill someone who is no longer human and not yet Immortal, it's called Corruption of the Soul." He swiftly forced Kenley's head back and sank his teeth into Kenley's neck.

Morgan stumbled to the floor as Kenley flailed about. Jonathan broke free from and pulled Morgan toward Ava. Then he closed in on Kenley.

DuPont raised his hand to stop Jonathan's approach and lifted his head from Kenley's neck. Blood spewed forth as DuPont thrust the broken champagne flute into the vampire's chest. He twisted the glass then pressed his fingers into the hole. Snapping a bone from the rib cage, he repeated the maneuver and tossed a bone fragment to the floor. Again, he twisted the glass then pulled out a portion of Kenley's heart.

Wiping his mouth, he jumped to the floor. "It is more often than not a forbidden act for an Immortal to kill another Immortal." DuPont held Kenley's heart in the air for all to see then dropped it on the floor. "This was the act of Immortal Elder killing a vampire."

"Kenley dared to desecrate this estate. My Immortal gathering. A vile discourtesy to my American guests. All for the sake of honoring Tirich's memory."

He pounded his fist on the table, causing it to topple over. "Do not disrespect me. I am the Alpha."

With the wave of DuPont's hand, Kenley's body slid across the floor and crashed against the table. "Who among you wants to share the same fate as Kenley?"

Eyeing the crowd, he rotated in a circle. "No one?"

DuPont paused for effect then continued. "Kenley of the Shrewsbury Colony. And how many Immortals of Shrewsbury are in attendance this evening?"

Several emerged from the crowd.

"Those of you who did not step forward, join your colony."

Eleven Immortals of Shrewsbury gathered in front of DuPont. He directed them to kneel at his feet. "Did any of you know of Kenley's plan? His intention to kill tonight?"

A woman spoke. "No. Of course not."

DuPont eyed the others. "The rest of you?"

The eleven claimed ignorance.

"I will trust your word," he said. "But I won't tolerate disobedience under my command. Sneaky, unruly scheming behind my back *then* under my nose. Before my very eyes. Obviously, Kenley had a rebellious nature flowing through his veins, just as Tirich did. I will eliminate anyone who risks the Clan or their own colony. Is that understood?"

The ballroom responded in unison. "Yes, Sir Elder."

DuPont gestured for the eleven to rise. "Get this body out of here. Take him home. Take him out back and bury him. I don't care. And get someone to clean this mess."

He poured champagne on a cloth napkin and wiped the blood from his face. Then he wrapped his arm around Morgan. "I'm sorry. Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I'm not hurt." Morgan glanced around the room. All the guests were so blasé about what had happened. They resumed the party activities as if nothing extraordinary had occurred. Yet Morgan remained flabbergasted that he'd been attacked and had witnessed the murder of an Immortal by an Immortal.

"Thank you, DuPont," Ava said.

"I'm so embarrassed. Please forgive me for making a spectacle." DuPont removed a box of matches from his pocket. He placed Kenley's heart in a glass, poured rum on it, and set it on fire.

Jonathan pulled Morgan into an embrace. "No, it's fine. Thank you."

DuPont addressed Sinclair. "Tell Isabella to bring me the box." He returned his attention to the three. "It looks like Morgan and I need to change our blood-soaked attire. Come with me to my room. Morgan can change into one of my shirts. And I want to present you with the gift I mentioned prior to the unsettling scene that unfolded."

"We should go now," Ava said.

"Nonsense." DuPont outstretched his arms to the room. "Everything is fine now. The party atmosphere has resumed."

Morgan shrugged. "I don't know."

"At least allow me to provide a shirt, so Morgan looks more presentable. I can give our gift. Then you're free to return to London. Someone can summon your driver."

Jonathan nodded. "Morgan can't return to the hotel all bloody. Let's get him cleaned up. Then we can go."

Isabella appeared with a wooden box and clutched Morgan's hand. "I'm glad you're okay."

"Yeah, I'm fine."

DuPont spoke. "Thank you, Isabella. We're going upstairs. Please see to it that no one disturbs us. We shall return to the party shortly."

"Of course."

DuPont gestured to the sitting area in the bedroom suite. "Please, sit. Make yourself comfortable. I have champagne if you'd like."

Sinclair grabbed the bottle from a bucket of ice.

DuPont smiled. "I always like to start the evening champagne. You must forgive me for having already enjoyed a glass."

After handing out the flutes, Sinclair swallowed from the bottle.

DuPont frowned. "Please, Sinclair. Don't be a fucking rotter."

Morgan accepted the box from DuPont. Heavier than expected, *East Horsley* was engraved on the lid in a fancy script.

"We'll toast after the opening of the box," DuPont said, offering a key.

Morgan inserted the key into the golden lock. Two gold coins and a reddish, crystalized stone sat on a pillow of black silk.

DuPont knelt at Morgan's feet. "These two gold coins are from La Noche Triste. A stolen treasure of gold and silver during the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire. The year 1520. So, they are about five hundred years old."

Ava reached out for the coin. "May I?"

"Can she?"

"Yeah, of course." Morgan handed the other coin to Jonathan.

DuPont continued. "This beauty in the center is a natural ruby crystal from Tanzania. It represents the heart of our Elder Queen Violamate."

"Thank you," Morgan said. He marveled at the fine, white cracks stretching across the ruby crystal's surface like spider webs. "You don't need to give me these things."

"It is my privilege to give these gold coins and ruby stone to you. These tokens are rarely presented to anyone. It is an honor to present them to you for eliminating a burden. And it also serves as a welcome to our Immortal world."

"I guess I'll have to smuggle these into America."

DuPont rose to his feet. "Let us toast this occasion. Then we shall return to the party after we have changed."

They raised their glasses to drink as Sinclair walked to the door. "I'll see you downstairs." Before he could exit, there was a knock.

"Sorry to interrupt," Isabella said. "Jonathan, would you like a tour of the art? Emily is available now."

DuPont smiled. "By all means. Please take a gander at all the wonderful pieces on display. We'll be fine. You can meet us in the formal sitting room when your tour is complete."

"I don't know."

"No, it's fine," Morgan said. "Go ahead. I'll see you downstairs."

"Ava. Of course, you're more than welcome to stay," DuPont said, removing his tie. "Or I can have Sinclair escort you downstairs."

"Are you sure?" she asked Morgan.

"Yeah. Go. I'll see you in a bit."

"We can wait," Jonathan said.

"No. Really. It's fine."

DuPont tossed his suit jacket onto the bed and unbuttoned his shirt. "We won't be long."

Once the door closed, Morgan relaxed as DuPont selected clothing from a wardrobe closet. He admired the ruby stone once again then closed the lid on the box. "Should I take this downstairs with me? Or leave it somewhere?"

"It might be wise to leave it here," he said. "Isabella can get it for you before you go."

Morgan placed the box on the table.

"Come and pick out a shirt," DuPont said, pulling on a pair of trousers.

Isabella stopped at the staircase leading to the first floor. "Emily will be here in no time. She's going to begin with the art in the long corridor to your right."

"I will take good care of Ava," Sinclair said and gestured toward the staircase. "Ladies first."

"Thank you," she said and continued down the stairs.

"Would you like something to drink first?" Isabella asked.

Jonathan shook his head. "I'm done with alcohol for the evening."

"Well, at least until midnight." She leaned against the wall and smiled.

"Would you like water?"

"Yeah, that would be great."

"Okay. When Emily arrives, I will get you water."

"Thank you."

Sinclair led Ava to the music room. "A little birdie told me you're a pianist."

She nodded with a smile.

"Perhaps you would do us the honor of playing for us."

"Oh, I don't know."

"Yes, please. It would be nice to hear you play."

"Well, I guess I could play a little something."

Sinclair's eyes brightened. "Fantastic."

"I don't want to interrupt the person playing."

"Of course not," he said. "We shall wait until he is done."

DuPont adjusted the collar on Morgan's shirt. "A little big. It looks good though," he said. "Would you like to select a tie?"

"No. I'll go casual with the top button undone."

A knock on the door reverberated throughout the room. "Enter."

Carrying a bottle of champagne, a beautiful woman with high cheek bones and wide eyes sashayed into the room. The tight white dress she wore displayed her ample bosom. "Hello. Sinclair asked me to bring this to you."

"Thank you, my dear, sweet beauty," DuPont replied. "Please, pour us each a glass."

She crossed the room seductively. Pouring the champagne, she eyed Morgan and smiled.

"Please, sit with us," he said to the woman.

"Are you sure, DuPont?"

"Yes, of course. Sit and enjoy the champagne."

Sitting on the chaise, she retrieved a used glass from the table.

Morgan sipped the bubbly, nervously glancing around the room.

DuPont removed the box from the table. "Let me put this somewhere."

He returned to the sitting area, kissed the woman on the lips, and sat. "This is Lilly. Isn't she lovely?"

"Yeah," Morgan replied.

She smiled. "Thank you. Such a compliment from two gorgeous men."

Kissing her again, DuPont caressed her breasts. He ran his hand up and down her leg then asked Morgan, "Are you uncomfortable?"

"No. I'm fine." He swallowed a large gulp of champagne.

"Good." DuPont pushed up the hem of her dress, revealing her red panties. He kissed her more passionately, glanced at Morgan, and chuckled. "Lilly, dear, please make our guest feel more comfortable."

"I'm all right," Morgan said. "I can leave you two alone."

"No. Don't leave us." She sat close to him. "We're all friends."

DuPont smiled and swallowed the champagne.

Emily arrived in the corridor with a smile. "Hello."

"Hi. It's nice to see you again," Jonathan said.

Lighting a cigarette, Isabella motioned for them to walk. "I'm gonna open the window and smoke. You can start your tour."

She watched Emily lead Jonathan to the first painting on the wall. Gazing out the window, she blew a stream of smoke into the frigid air and trained her ear on Emily. The commentary on brush strokes and the use of colors bored her.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Emily and Jonathan progress down the corridor. She checked her watch and huffed. "Come on. How long is it gonna take?"

Morgan closed his eyes as Lily caressed his knee and gently kissed his ear.

"So handsome," she said. "I thought so the minute I saw you."

"Thank you."

DuPont smiled. "Lilly is a sexy woman, wouldn't you agree, Morgan?"

He glanced at her then to DuPont. "Yeah."

"Thank you." She placed her hand on his crotch. "You're excited."

Morgan averted his gaze to the window. *I can't believe this is happening.*

While Lilly caressed his crotch, she looked him in the eye. "It's bigger than I thought it would be."

"I should get downstairs to Ava and Jonathan."

"They can wait a little longer. Don't you wanna have fun first?"

Sinclair and Ava approached the Bösendorfer piano.

"We're in for a treat," he said to the crowd. "Ava Astor is quite the accomplished pianist, and she's agreed to play something for us."

"I wouldn't say I'm an accomplished pianist."

"Ah, don't be modest. What will you entertain us with? Something classical? Something more modern perhaps?"

She thought a moment. "Chopin's *Revolutionary Etude*."

"Wonderful."

Seated at the piano, she placed her fingers on the keys.

Jonathan recognized the musical performance and smiled. "That's Ava."

"Talented," Emily replied. She looked at Isabella smoking at the window. "We can continue to follow the corridor to the right."

Once they reached the next painting, she glanced around. "I have to tell you something."

Two women emerged from a room and walked in their direction. "Let's talk about this painting first."

Morgan let Lilly unzip his pants and grasp his cock. But when she tugged to pull it out, he gently pushed her hand away.

DuPont chuckled and walked to the sofa. He kissed Morgan on the forehead. "Don't be nervous," he said. "You probably don't want an audience. I'll go downstairs to check on Ava and Jonathan." He kissed Lilly on the lips and walked to the door. "No rush."

Lilly removed her panties and attempted to straddle Morgan's lap. When he tried to stand, she stumbled back a couple of steps.

"We should go downstairs, too," he said.

"Relax. It's just you and me." She slipped off her dress. Standing naked before him, she clutched his hands. "Let's go to the bed."

What am I doing? I should go downstairs.

Lilly sat on the edge of the bed and removed the belt from his pants. Holding the strap in her hands, she smiled. "I'm guessing you don't have experience with spanking."

He tossed his shirt to the floor. "I don't have much experience."

"Really? This will be fun then. I'll teach you a few things. You'll be a fantastic lover after I'm done with you." She pushed down his pants and underwear then back on the bed. "Are you nervous?"

The wooden bed frame creaked as he joined her. "Yeah. A little."

"Don't be."

He maneuvered himself above her. Hoping she would take the lead, he kissed her neck and caressed her breast.

Wrapping her legs around his waist, she pulled him close. "Let's get me warmed up first."

Once the two women turned out of sight, Emily looked into Jonathan's eyes. "This isn't what it appears to be. This was all planned out."

"What do you mean?"

"Tonight. Your invitation here. Killing Kenley. Everything."

Jonathan's legs wobbled then stiffened. He felt like his heart had dropped to his stomach. "Everything was a setup?"

"Yes," she stressed. "This is a trap."

Isabella rounded the corner and walked toward them.

Ava continued to play the piano as more people entered the room.

Sinclair smiled and walked toward an enormous window. He closed his eyes and swayed to the music.

Jonathan glared at Isabella.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "You're not enjoying the artwork? Or did Emily say something stupid to upset you?"

Lilly directed Morgan's cock inside her as she moaned and kissed him on the lips. Suddenly, she pressed her hands against his chest. "Wait. Don't ram it all the way in."

Morgan looked into her eyes. "Sorry." He slowly inserted the length of his cock.

"That's better." She gently bit down on his shoulder.

Ava played the last note of the song and glanced at Sinclair.

He raised his glass to toast her performance. "That was lovely."

The crowd applauded.

She smiled at the crowd as she looked around the room.

A man near the entrance closed the door.

Jonathan rushed toward Isabella but stopped when two men appeared behind her.

"You bitch," he said. "This is a setup."

Isabella laughed. "What are you going on about? You're paranoid."

He turned toward Emily, standing with her back against the wall.

Two more men sprinted from the opposite end of the corridor.

Amused, DuPont stood next to the bedroom door watching Lilly and Morgan.

"Oh, you feel so good inside me," she moaned.

Kissing her breasts, Morgan thrust faster.

DuPont removed his clothes and walked toward the bed.

Smiling, Lily looked over Morgan's shoulder at DuPont.

Carefully, he climbed onto the bed.

She moaned more loudly and cradled Morgan's head against her chest.
"Don't stop."

On his knees behind Morgan, DuPont methodically moved closer; his naked body nearly pressed against Morgan's.

Jonathan charged at the two men.

Isabella jumped aside and laughed again. "Relax. You're being foolish."

He slammed into one of the men, sending them both crashing against the wall and causing a painting to fall.

The two additional men latched onto him and knocked him to the floor.

The applause ended as Ava charged at Sinclair. "What the hell?"

He shrugged and lifted his hands to the air. "Excuse me, dear?"

"You brought me in here to play the piano as a ruse."

As he rested his hand on the edge of the piano, he gazed into her eyes.
"You're paranoid."

The crowd moved closer.

With his erection against the cleavage of Morgan's ass, DuPont leaned forward and whispered in Morgan's ear. "Just relax. Don't make it any more difficult than it needs to be."

Morgan stopped thrusting his hips. "What the hell?"

Shoving Morgan's head against Lily's chest, DuPont kissed the back of his neck.

"Please." Morgan struggled to push himself off Lilly's body, but DuPont was strong. "I don't wanna be forced into doing this."

"Doing what?"

"You shoulda stayed instead of leaving. You shoulda told me what you wanted."

DuPont laughed and pushed the length of his erection into Morgan. "You think I'm going to rape you?"

Screaming out, he tried to push DuPont off his body.

DuPont steadied his balance and remained inside Morgan without thrusting. "You're paranoid."

Ava heard Jonathan's voice. "It's a trap. Ava, it's a trap!"

Staring at a small wooden table, she sent it sailing across the room into an Immortal.

She threw the piano bench to the floor and retrieved a broken leg. Swiftly, she stabbed the closest vampire in the chest. Then she assumed a defensive stance. "Who's next?"

DuPont wrapped his arm around Morgan's neck and hoisted him to his knees. He turned toward Lilly. "Go get it."

She returned from the fireplace with a branding iron.

DuPont dragged Morgan to the floor and crouched next to him. "You believe you're so handsome and sexually alluring that I'd rape you, because I can't control myself?"

"No," Morgan shouted. "I don't know what's going on."

He forced Morgan to roll over onto his stomach and straddled him. "I would have had you naked and in bed before Lilly came into the room."

"Just let me go. And I'll leave."

"This isn't about rape," DuPont said. "This isn't about you learning a lesson then leaving."

Pressing Morgan's face against the floor, he held the branding iron above the back of Morgan's neck. "This is about marking you."

Morgan screamed as the iron burned his flesh.

Pointing at Emily, Isabella screamed, "You warned him."

Emily shook her head. "Of course not."

"You're a lying bitch. DuPont is going to kill you." She pinned Emily against the wall.

Emily rammed her elbow into Isabella's stomach and quickly punched her in the face.

Touching her mouth, Isabella gasped then looked at the blood on her fingers. "I'm going to kill you before DuPont even gets the chance."

Emily swung her fist, but Isabella blocked Emily's punch and forced her to the floor.

Jonathan kicked one of the men backward while pulling another with him to a standing position. He grabbed the back of the guy's head and slammed it against a doorframe.

The other men rushed toward Jonathan as he yanked the fire extinguisher from the wall. Forcing a man to the ground, he pounded the cylindrical device against the guy's head.

He glanced in Emily's direction, rose to his feet, and charged.

Sinclair laughed. "Honestly, you think you can fight off a couple dozen Immortals with a piece of wood?"

She glared at him. "I'll die trying."

"That, you will," he said.

Ava shoved the piano against Sinclair, pinning him to the wall. She jumped on top of the instrument and used the wood to pry piano wires loose. Wrapping one around Sinclair's neck, she twisted until it cut through his throat. When he reached up to his neck, she stabbed him in the chest, but missed the vital organ that would kill him. He kicked the piano forward, causing Ava to fall as the instrument pushed several Immortals away. She sprung up and stabbed Sinclair in the heart.

When two vampires latched onto her, she twisted her body and jabbed the bench leg into the chest of one. Then she scrambled to her feet, climbed on top of the piano, and jumped through the window.

Morgan screamed as the branding iron burned his skin.

"Do you know why fire kills vampires?" DuPont asked. "Because the body can't react fast enough to heal the burning of flesh. That's how it's possible for me to mark you."

Morgan continued to groan and squirm about.

"The mark is permanent. Your body can recover from scorching. But not burning through layers of flesh." He tossed the branding iron aside and yanked on Lilly's leg. "Get out of the way."

A fireplace poker drifted into DuPont's grasp.

Jonathan removed his belt and wrapped it around Isabella's neck.

Losing her balance, she fell against Jonathan as he pulled the ends of the strap. She placed her feet on the wall and climbed, flipped over his head, and landed behind him. With the belt around his neck, she shoved him to the floor. "You're supposed to be captured alive."

He ripped the lever off the fire extinguisher and plunged it into her chest. He scanned the hall for Emily.

She ran along the corridor, checking for an unlocked door. When she finally found one, she glanced at Jonathan. "Behind you!"

A man grabbed Jonathan by the shoulders and tossed him against the wall. Jonathan knocked the man to the floor and stabbed another with the lever. Then he spun around and thrust the metal into the other guy's chest.

Ava ran toward the valet area at the entrance. Several vampires gave chase, knocking her to the ground. She struggled to crawl and rise to her feet, but they dragged her toward the entrance.

DuPont lifted the fireplace poker in the air and positioned Morgan onto his back.

Opening his tear-filled eyes, Morgan glared at him. "What do you want?"

"I want you to suffer." DuPont plunged the poker through Morgan's right upper pectoral. He pushed with all his strength, pinning Morgan to the floor.

Wildly kicking his legs, Morgan screamed out, "OH, GOD."

DuPont steadied himself with the poker then stood.

Morgan clutched the rod. "Why?"

"If I pulled it out, you would heal. But your body can't heal itself while it's still in you." He pushed Lilly onto the bed. "If I stabbed you with enough of them, you would bleed out and die."

The vampires dragged Ava by her feet through the entrance and dropped her in the middle of the foyer.

As they crowded around, she saw Jonathan ushered downstairs.

DuPont continued to have sex with Lilly as he consumed blood from her throat. When she gasped and moaned, he thrust harder and faster.

Morgan writhed in agony and listened to Ava scream his name.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Very little light illuminated the room. Terrified, Morgan clenched his teeth, hoping to wake from a nightmare. He focused on the ceiling and cried. "Where is Ava? Where's Jonathan?"

DuPont, naked and covered in Lilly's blood, moved from the bed and lay on top of Morgan. Pressing his face against Morgan's, he sighed.

"Where are Ava and Jonathan? Are they dead?"

"Shh. Don't cry for them."

"Tell me if they're dead."

DuPont placed his finger on Morgan's lips. "Quiet."

"Please tell me, DuPont. Tell me."

Touching Morgan's chest, DuPont closed his eyes.

"TELL ME."

DuPont wiped the tears from Morgan's face and sang. "We sing this song for those who've departed thee. And the sorrow we feel wholeheartedly."

Morgan sobbed.

* * *

Morgan opened his eyes and reached for the poker embedded in his chest.

DuPont emerged from the bathroom, clean and putting on a shirt. "I'm going to remove it from your chest. You're going to take a shower. Then get dressed in the suit I laid out. Do you understand?"

Morgan nodded.

"SPEAK. Tell me that you understand."

"Yeah, I understand."

DuPont knelt, placed one hand firmly on Morgan's chest, and pulled the poker with the other. Gradually, the rod loosened from the wooden floor, and he extracted it with one quick motion.

Morgan screamed out in pain and clutched his chest.

Sitting upright, he buried his face in his hands. *Oh, my God. What am I gonna do?*

DuPont tapped him on the shoulder. "Come on. We don't have time. It's going to take thirty minutes to get to East Horsley."

"We're leaving?"

"Get your arse in the shower. And get dressed in a hurry."

Morgan looked at the blood-soaked sheets on the bed, but Lilly was gone. He walked to the bathroom and slammed the door.

Stepping into the shower, Morgan noticed the chest wound had healed. He touched the back of his neck as blood from his torso and inner legs washed down the drain. Suddenly, he became nauseated. He placed his hands on the shower wall and recognized the symptoms of needing a feeding. "What am I gonna do without you?"

Alone and unprotected, Morgan feared he'd die from not receiving his final feeding. He imagined an excruciating death since his mortal and nearly Immortal self would perish simultaneously.

* * *

Three men entered the bedroom with DuPont. He glanced at Morgan on the floor, slouched against the sofa. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I need my final feeding."

"You're not dying. We gotta go."

Morgan stood with trembling legs and steadied his balance. He couldn't think clearly. The urge to vomit stirred in his stomach.

DuPont handed cash to a man. "Give this to Lilly. And make sure she gets home safely." He addressed the other men. "The Mortal Souls will get this place cleaned up. They'll destroy all the bodies and return to East Horsley later."

Two men led Morgan out of the bedroom. The estate was quiet. Most of the Immortals had departed. The several that remained watched Morgan escorted to a waiting car.

He situated himself against the far door and rested his head against the window. He didn't want to think about where they were going. While the car drove through the countryside, he tried to focus on the trees they passed.

"You're nearly Immortal as it is," DuPont said. "You'll survive."

"No. I need Jonathan."

"You don't need Jonathan's blood. Didn't anyone tell you that?"

"Yeah, of course, someone told me that. Jonathan told me!" Morgan shouted. "I don't want anyone else's blood. Or yours."

"You're being foolish." DuPont touched Morgan's arm.

He jerked his arm away. "Fuck you."

"Rest. We'll be home soon."

DuPont marched Morgan to the entrance of East Horsley and handed him off to a man and a woman. In DuPont's bedroom, they undressed him and put him to bed. Then they walked out and locked the door.

Hours later, he awoke in a panic. He clutched his stomach and chest. *I'm gonna die. I need my final feeding or I'm gonna die.*

He swung his legs over the side of the bed. The huge suite featured traditional furniture throughout the space. Long curtains concealed the huge single window. He pulled the fabric to the side and looked out at the lawn and surrounding trees.

After getting dressed, he banged on the door repeatedly. "Let me out." But his demands were ignored.

Situated on the floor next to the window, he thought of Jonathan and Ava. Images of meeting them, being turned, living with them, working on art together, and doing homework flashed through his mind. He also recalled lighthearted moments he rarely thought about. Moments etched onto paper and tucked into a pocket of his heart for safekeeping. Dancing with Ava in the sitting room and falling to the floor as Jonathan laughed. The night Jonathan filled the house with smoke while cooking. And the morning he awoke in bed with both next to him, protecting him from potential danger.

Tilting his head back, he swallowed hard. His throat was tight. His eyes burned. "I'm all alone."

As his eyes filled with tears, he willed himself not to cry.

"I don't have anyone."

He lowered his head and stared at the wood floor. "I'm all alone."

When someone unlocked the door an hour later, he jumped to his feet. DuPont entered and motioned for Morgan to follow. As they walked downstairs DuPont spoke. "You need something to eat."

"No."

"You need your strength. If you don't eat something, you'll become ill."

"I'm already sick. I don't need *food*. I need my final feeding."

"I understand," DuPont said. "It can be scary. The symptoms. I remember them well."

"I don't wanna be here. You shoulda killed me."

Seated at a long dining room table, several Immortals ate and talked cheerfully. The room abruptly became silent as soon as DuPont entered with Morgan.

"Bring us some food," DuPont ordered.

Two Immortals rushed to the kitchen.

Moving his chair closer to Morgan, DuPont offered a glass of water. But Morgan pushed it away, causing it to spill.

"You need to eat and drink." DuPont filled another glass. "After everything you've been through, you're just going to give up? Immortal suicide?"

"I'm not Immortal," Morgan muttered.

"You will be."

Nicholas entered with two plates of food. Stunned, Morgan quickly grabbed Nicholas's arm and pulled him close. "Don't leave," Morgan pleaded. "Please."

DuPont signaled that Nicholas should stay.

He sat and set the plate in front of Morgan. A heaping pile of steamed vegetables and a cooked steak.

The smell of the meat nauseated Morgan. "What the hell? Why is there a cooked land animal on my plate?"

"Seared. It's very rare."

"It's disgusting. There's blood on the plate. I'm not gonna eat a land animal."

DuPont smiled. "Ah. So, Jonathan and Ava curbed their need for blood by avoiding meat on their plate."

The information was revealing, but Morgan didn't care to discuss it with his captor.

"Eat," DuPont demanded. Morgan refused, so DuPont motioned for Nicholas to feed him.

After a moment of hesitation, Morgan accepted the vegetables and chewed. Nicholas continued to feed him as DuPont ate his own dinner. Eventually, Morgan fed himself, but he avoided the steak. Following the meal, Nicholas and DuPont took Morgan upstairs to the bedroom.

Later that night, DuPont led Morgan to the courtyard behind the estate. They sat on a stone bench in silence as DuPont gazed at the moon. "You know, the beauty of the sun cannot be admired by the observing eye. But the moon...you can stare directly at the moon and appreciate its beauty."

DuPont wandered around the courtyard as if studying the hedges and stonework for the first time. Then he pointed out the splashes of pink and yellow, courtesy of the Nepalese paper plants and witch hazel dotting the perimeter of the courtyard. As Morgan glanced around, he realized the estate wasn't a dark, sinister-looking home. The stone house probably resembled every other home in the area.

To Morgan's surprise, Emily arrived with a bottle of wine and two glasses. He stared until the surprise of seeing her subsided. "I haven't seen you around. I thought you were dead."

She shook her head.

"Poor dear got locked in the service quarters during the night," DuPont said.

"Very much alive." She poured the wine then returned to the house.

"You may have noticed that Sinclair and Isabella aren't around," DuPont said. "Unfortunately, Jonathan killed Isabella. Ava killed Sinclair. And another Immortal of East Horsley. *And* several from other colonies."

"Good."

"I had to promote Andela to Sinclair's post. You'll meet her soon. She'll be in charge when I'm not around to rule the colony."

"Andela." Morgan laughed. "Stupid, pretentious names."

"When you're an Immortal for one hundred years, you get to choose your name. Perhaps you'll be lucky enough to reach that milestone."

Clenching his fists, Morgan didn't want to hang out with DuPont under the stars. "I can't take this anymore. I feel so sick."

"Yes, I know."

"I appreciate the fact that you didn't rape me and torture me."

"Of course, I didn't rape you. I emasculated you. You're being bloody dramatic."

Morgan grunted and looked skyward. "No, I'm not."

"You don't know how lucky you are," DuPont said.

"Lucky?"

"Yes. Lucky," he said. "Come with me."

DuPont led Morgan to a stone building. "At one time, this used to be the horse stables. The condition of the building has deteriorated over the years."

I don't care, Morgan thought.

When DuPont knocked on the old wooden door, he smiled at Morgan like a great, tantalizing surprise was hidden inside the stable house.

A man stepped outside and bowed his head. "Good evening, Elder."

"Good evening," DuPont said. "Bring them out to me, please."

A couple of minutes later, a black wolf poked its head out the partially open door.

Morgan's jaw dropped. *He's gonna have the wolf kill me.*

Five more wolves walked out into the yard. They trotted to DuPont and meandered around his legs. The largest wolf growled and snapped at another, forcing it to cower and prance away.

DuPont pet the largest wolf. "The wolves of East Horsley."

"Six?"

"Yes, six. This one is the leader of the pack. The Alpha. Basilio."

As the wolf eyed him, Morgan thought of the attack by Aeron. He breathed steadily, concentrating on slowing his hammering heart.

"These wolves protect us," DuPont explained. "They watch over the estate and us. They will also hunt for us."

Morgan crossed his arms and tightened the grip around his torso.

"You might not always see them, but they are always around. Watching. If you ever run, the wolves will give chase on command."

DuPont told the stable mate to take the wolves elsewhere. He drank the last of his wine then broke the glass against the stone building. "I'm going to show you something," he said and sliced his wrist.

Morgan resisted temptation.

"You want it. Don't you?"

Morgan looked at DuPont with watery eyes and nodded.

"See? It's in your nature now. Your Immortal nature," he said. "You need blood to survive. Without it, you will eventually die."

"I know."

"I'm going to prove to you that I'm not a monster."

DuPont led Morgan behind the stable house. A coffin-sized hole in the ground caught Morgan's eye.

"Soon, you will be truly Immortal," DuPont said.

Morgan stared at him as a tear rolled down his cheek.

DuPont clapped his hands twice. A stable house door opened, and four

men carried out two coffin-like metal boxes. One box had a curved tube-like device attached and a clear-cut hole toward the top. The other box had two holes toward the top. The men arranged the boxes side by side and stood at attention several feet away.

Two other men carried a metal rack and set it next to the boxes. When they joined the other men, several Immortals walked out.

"I'm going to give you what you need and want," DuPont said. "A gift from me to you."

Biting his lip, Morgan tasted his salty tears. "My final feeding?"

DuPont motioned toward the stable house.

Jonathan, gagged with purple cloth, stood restrained by two men. His teary eyes met Morgan's gaze.

Morgan had always viewed Jonathan as a strong, indestructible force of nature. It pained him to see Jonathan defeated.

He ran and hugged him. "Jonathan, you're alive."

Leaning forward, Jonathan rested his face on Morgan's shoulder.

"Bastards." He removed the cloth from Jonathan's mouth. "Let us go."

"I'm so sorry," Jonathan said.

A man dragged Morgan to the box with two holes, shoved him inside, and slid the metal lid shut. The sound reverberated as if he was imprisoned in a large room.

He beat his fists against the box. With little room to move, he peered through the hole in an effort to make eye contact with someone. "What is this? What are you doing?"

The men placed Jonathan in the second box and slammed the lid shut. After the metal rack was positioned over Morgan's box, the men lifted Jonathan's box and flipped it upside down. They set it on the rack and slid open another sheet of metal, exposing several holes spanning the underside of the box.

The upper hole in each box allowed Jonathan and Morgan to see each other.

"What are you doing to us?"

Jonathan looked at Morgan with pleading, teary eyes. "Be strong."

"Let me outta this damn box."

"Hey," Jonathan whispered. "It's okay, Morgan. Don't be scared."

"Where's Ava? Is she dead?"

"I don't know."

"What the hell is going on?"

"Hey, look at me," Jonathan said. "I love you, buddy."

DuPont rammed a long spike through one of the holes of Jonathan's box. Morgan could clearly see the anguish on Jonathan's face. But Jonathan didn't cry out.

"No," Morgan yelled. "Stop. Please."

"Don't give up," Jonathan said.

Another spike pierced his body.

"Oh, my God. Let me outta this box."

"You can live, Morgan."

"I need you and Ava. I can't."

"Yes, you can."

Blood dripped from the metal tube into the hole closest to Morgan's mouth. Soon, a trickle of blood splattered on his chin.

DuPont rammed another spike into Jonathan. Then another.

The blood dripped more heavily onto Morgan's face. He fought the urge to lap at the liquid. But he wanted it. He needed the final feeding to complete his transition. He couldn't resist. Morgan opened his mouth and allowed the blood to flow directly into his mouth.

Once DuPont had driven the seventh spike into Jonathan's body, he turned toward the small gathering of Immortals. "Now Morgan is complete. A true Immortal is now among us."

The crowd applauded.

Although the blood continued to flow into Morgan's box, he did not drink. He stared at Jonathan's face pressed against the bottom of the box.

He's dead, Morgan cried. He's dead.

* * *

A black SUV screeched to a halt on Interstate 95. The back door swung open. Priscilla ran to the side of the road. She sobbed uncontrollably as she looked out over Greenwich Harbor. Falling to her knees, she buried her face in her hands.

Two men rushed to help her stand.

"No," she screamed. "Leave me alone. Don't touch me."

One of the men whispered in her ear. Rising to her feet, the men escorted her to the car.

* * *

Jonathan's blood had completed Morgan's transition. The human in him had died. He sensed it instantly. He was a vampire. Truly an Immortal.

Morgan heard the grunts of men lifting Jonathan's box from the metal rack. Suddenly, the lid on his box opened. He stared at the night sky. The longer he fixated on the blackness, additional stars came into focus. *Thousands...millions...billions.* Then he thought of Jonathan.

Hopeful, he jumped out and ran.

"Take the lid off," he shouted at the lingering men while he removed two wooden stakes. "Somebody take it off. Now."

One man responded, "We can't."

Two men disappeared around the corner of the building. The remaining stableman looked at Morgan. "I don't have the key. Maybe you can pry it open with something from the stables."

Morgan sprinted into the stable house and searched. An old pitchfork caught his eye. Returning to the box, he inserted the tool into a hole and pushed down on the handle. Finally, the lid gave way and popped out.

Lifting Jonathan, Morgan dropped him to the ground and untied his hands. He cradled Jonathan's head and sobbed. "This is all my fault. I love you. I'm so sorry."

DuPont appeared, yanked Morgan to his feet, and pushed him to the arms of two men.

A prisoner in DuPont's bedroom once again, anger overwhelmed him. He tossed a chair across the room. He threw a lamp. Then another. He tore the doors off an armoire and hurled them at the window. He leaned out of the shattered glass. A couple Immortals and three of the wolves looked in his direction.

"I hate you." He dropped to his knees. "I'm gonna kill all of you."

Then suddenly, Morgan refused to cry any longer. Surrendering to his anger, he stared at a blue chair in the corner. It slid across the floor and crashed into the wall.

"You're dead. Every single one of you."

* * *

The dream began with Morgan opening his eyes. A naked woman stood among the trees in the distance.

He scanned the area for the women in veils, but they had vanished.

The naked woman approached. She was beautiful. Her long black hair danced in the breeze.

Morgan noticed the pools of blood were once again water.

He studied the naked woman as she approached. Her face fluctuated between monstrous vampire and human. She revealed her incisors as if she wanted to attack then relaxed as if she wanted to comfort him. A tear of blood rolled down her cheek. She touched Morgan's face and bowed her head. Then she walked backward to the trees and disappeared among the branches.

He saw his reflection clearly in the pool of water.

Morgan awoke in bed. He glanced around the room.

It was silent. He was not scared.

He stared at DuPont sleeping next to him. *I'm gonna kill you*, he thought.

He closed his eyes and fell asleep.

CHAPTER THIRTY

During the next couple of days, DuPont tested Morgan's self-control with offerings of blood. "If you don't learn to control your blood-thirst, you'll become a reckless vampire. Like Tirich. Like Kenley. Like many others that risked exposing us due to their lack of self-control and lack of good judgment."

He filled a goblet with his blood.

Morgan knocked the glass over and slumped in the chair.

"If that's restraint on your part, good. If not, then it was a stupid mistake. Because when you need to feed, you don't want to waste a single needed drop."

DuPont escorted Morgan to the library.

"You like to read. There are hundreds of books in here. Why don't you find something to read? I'll let you stay in here instead of the bedroom."

Morgan perused the titles on the shelves. Selecting a book, he stared at the first page for a couple of minutes. "What am I gonna do?" he asked himself. "I don't know how to get outta this situation."

In Colby, he had devoted a lot of time and effort avoiding people. But at East Horsley, he was shut off from rest of the world. He was a prisoner of the very isolation he had craved in small-town Pennsylvania. Without Jonathan and Ava, the loneliness he felt far exceeded the solitude he had experienced in Colby. The sentiment weighed heavily on his shoulders like a one-ton boulder he was forced to carry uphill. And he didn't believe he was strong enough to carry it.

Finally, he read the words on the pages. A temporary escape from the world he now suffered.

A couple of hours later, Nicholas walked in with a tray of food. Before he crossed the room, someone locked the door. "Something to eat until dinner."

He smiled, but Morgan didn't smile in return.

Morgan returned his eyes to the book. "You knew all about this elaborate plan from the beginning?"

"No. I swear. I didn't know about any of it."

"I don't know why I asked. I can't trust anyone here."

Nicholas crouched next to the chair. "You can trust me. I promise."

Morgan stared at him incredulously.

"Emily knew. She tried to warn Jonathan, but it was too late."

"She knew?"

"Yes. We both want out of the colony."

"Then leave. At least you have that option."

"Not really."

"You and Emily could walk right out during the day. The sunlight will protect you."

"Once the sun is gone, they'll hunt us down."

"I guess there's no easy way then."

"I have to play along. I have to leave on good terms."

Morgan responded, "So do I." Although, he questioned whether he should have remained silent. If Nicholas was being honest, then Morgan needed to determine to what extent he could trust him. Until then, he vowed to choose his words carefully.

"You should find a book to read," Morgan said. "I don't wanna talk."

* * *

Nearly an hour later, DuPont walked in. "Back upstairs."

Nicholas retrieved the tray and waited.

"Put the tray down. Come with us."

DuPont led Morgan to the bedroom and closed the door. He turned toward Nicholas. "Break him in."

"DuPont. Why?"

"I said, break him in."

"But Sinclair said that—"

"Sinclair is dead."

Nicholas lowered his head. "Fine."

With raised eyebrows and a tilt of the head, DuPont smiled. "Is that a bit of sadness in your voice? You care about him?"

"I like him."

DuPont laughed.

"I don't wanna rape him," Nicholas stressed. "He's an Immortal. He could kill me."

"God, Nicholas. *Now* you choose to exercise restraint? You, and your sexual appetite? You, the man too eager to have sex at the drop of a hat. I give you an order, and then you turn into a limp dick."

"Why do you want him raped?"

"To torture him. All of this is to torture him. To put him in his place. To make him surrender to me."

"Why don't you do it?"

"Because he would hate me for it," DuPont said. "But if you do it, then he'll look to me for comfort and protection. So, do what you're told."

"All right." Nicholas sighed. "I'm sorry."

"Wait." DuPont cut Nicholas's forearm with a razor-tipped ring.

"Why did you do that?"

"To make it easier for things to get started."

DuPont gestured for Nicholas to enter and locked the door.

Morgan sat on the sofa, fixated on the wood beams of the ceiling. He glanced at Nicholas in the center of the room, dripping blood onto the floor. Angered, he buried his face in his hands. "What are you doing?"

"DuPont sent me."

"To torture me with your blood? Make me lose my self-control?"

"He wants me to rape you."

"What? Why?" Morgan walked to the window and looked out to the moonlit grass. A wolf sprinted across the lawn. "DuPont is twisted."

"I don't know what to do."

Morgan eyed him sympathetically, but irritation set in. "Stop dripping blood on the floor."

"I'm sorry."

"Come here," Morgan said, returning to the sofa.

Nicholas approached, but neither of them said anything.

Finally, Morgan spoke. "Does it hurt?"

"Not much."

Morgan reached out for Nicholas's forearm. He stared at the blood, always hypnotized by its dark red color. He wanted to taste it, but hesitated. The way the fluid maneuvered down Nicholas's arm mesmerized him, dancing around the grooves of his palm.

He tasted the tip of Nicholas's ring finger. Disappointed by his actions, he withdrew and gazed into Nicholas's eyes.

Nicholas placed his hand on Morgan's head. "It's okay."

Lapping the blood again, Morgan licked the trail of blood to the incision in the forearm. Placing his mouth over the wound, he drank.

For a minute, Nicholas let Morgan feed then gently pushed Morgan's head. But Morgan refused to stop. Several seconds later, Nicholas forced Morgan from his arm.

Ashamed, Morgan pressed his forehead against Nicholas's stomach. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right. I understand." He touched the top of Morgan's head. "I need to clean this up."

In the bathroom, Nicholas removed his shirt and washed the blood from his arm.

Morgan studied the muscles on Nicholas's back. He had several tattoos. Psalm 7:11 was located on his left tricep, *God is a righteous judge, a God who displays his wrath every day.*

After wrapping the tee-shirt around his forearm, Nicholas rested his hands on the vanity and stared at the drain in the sink. "Hey, Morgan."

"What?"

"Maybe we can help each other out. You can help me. And I can help you...somehow."

"What do you mean?"

Nicholas turned around and whispered, "Maybe get you out of here. You can get me out of here, too."

"I don't know how we can do that."

"We don't need a plan right now."

"How can I trust you?"

"You can. I don't want to be a part of this anymore."

Morgan contemplated, then said, "Let me think about it for a while."

Nicholas smiled. "Thank you."

"Don't betray me."

"I promise."

Morgan exhaled heavily. "Now what? Are you locked in here with me all night long?"

"I don't know. Dinner will be soon."

Once they reached the sitting area, Morgan told Nicholas to take his clothes off.

"What?"

"Get naked," Morgan ordered as he removed his shirt and unbuttoned his pants.

"I thought you didn't wanna have sex with me."

"I don't," Morgan said. "DuPont has to believe we did. So, strip. He needs to find us together like we did have sex."

Positioned on his side in bed, Morgan stared at the window to the world outside his prison. Behind him, Nicholas inspected the mark branded on his neck, lightly touching the scar. The gentle affection provided Morgan with a moment of happiness.

"Does it hurt?" Nicholas asked.

"Not anymore. What is it?"

"Lower case letter I in the center of a circle with a big X over the whole thing."

"Hmm. Pretty simple. And stupid."

Later, he nudged Nicholas in the ribs. "Someone's coming in. Snuggle up close and lay your arm across my back."

The door creaked open, and DuPont spoke. "Dinner will be ready in a few minutes."

Once they entered the dining room, DuPont ordered Nicholas to the kitchen. "Tonight's a dinner for Immortals only." He sat at the head of the table. "Sit next to me, Morgan."

A few Mortal Souls served dinner to everyone but Morgan. DuPont cut his wrist, filled a goblet with blood, and placed it in front of Morgan. "Bon appétit, everyone."

"What the hell is this?"

"Honestly, Morgan. A rhetorical question?"

"You brought me downstairs to dinner, so you can serve me a glass of blood?"

"Yes."

"Another test of my self-control?"

"Call it what you want. Test or not, it's yours."

"I don't want it."

"Perhaps I should fill it with Nicholas's blood."

Someone snickered.

Morgan threw the glass across the room.

Andela brushed long red hair from her shoulders. She revealed her incisors and snapped at the air. Then she laughed. Obviously entertained by her actions.

DuPont chuckled. "I went out last night and got you something special." He stood and adjusted his tie. "I'll be right back."

Staring down at the table, Morgan could feel the Immortal glares burning with hatred.

When DuPont returned, he set a plate in front of Morgan. "Perhaps this is more to your liking."

A severed heart rested on a bed of lettuce.

Morgan pushed the plate away. "What the hell is that?"

"You don't recognize a human heart when you see it?"

The sight repulsed Morgan. A lump formed in his throat. For a moment, he thought he might gag, but he knew his reaction would amuse everyone at the table.

"Specially for you." DuPont raised his glass of wine. "A female."

Morgan gripped the edge of the table with both hands. A tear landed on the plate. "What do you mean?" His voice cracked. "It's not Ava, is it?"

"Taste it and find out."

Unable to control his emotions, Morgan allowed himself to sob. "Take it away."

The demented Elder seemed hell-bent to seize every opportunity to torture Morgan. "Are you sure?"

"TAKE IT AWAY."

DuPont threw the plate across the room. "Ungrateful bastard."

Wiping the tears from his eyes, Morgan pushed the chair back from the table.

"You're going to remain seated until we're done with dinner."

Slouched in the chair, Morgan stared at his reflection in the silverware.

"When we're done here, go shower and shave. You look dirty and ugly."

* * *

Sprawled out on the floor in DuPont's bedroom, Morgan looked at the formal watch Jonathan and Ava had given him, still set to the Eastern Time Zone. Now it served as a reminder that he was on his own and that he was thousands of miles from home.

Asking himself questions and debating possible escape plans exhausted him. He had no clue what to do about the situation he was in. If he resigned himself to imprisonment than he allowed himself to surrender. But he didn't want to give in and give up. He didn't do it while living with his father in Colby, and he didn't want to do it in England; even if the outcome resulted in his death.

The sound of tapping on glass roused his suspicion. Sitting up, he glanced toward the window. Andela hovered outside, presenting herself in an unpleasant vampire form.

"Hey, little boy," she taunted. Her long black dress and red hair wavered in the breeze. "Wanna come out and play?"

"Go to hell, Andela."

She cackled. "You're already in hell, little boy."

Morgan rushed to close the curtains. "Leave me alone."

"Ah, c'mon, little boy. I want someone to play with."

"Go away."

"I wanna play."

He knew she wanted him to respond with an outburst of emotion and anger. But he refused to provide the entertainment and satisfaction she sought. He restricted his voice to a speaking tone. "Go fuck yourself."

She feigned shock with a gasp. "I'm going to tell DuPont that you need a swat on the bum. Little boys should not talk like that. Especially to a lady like me."

"You're not a lady," Morgan yelled. "You're a crazy bitch."

He sped across the room and beat on the door.

When DuPont finally entered, Morgan pointed toward the window. "Tell that crazy bitch to leave me alone."

DuPont threw the curtains open and watched Andela drift to the lawn.

"Andela, get your arse inside."

Morgan followed DuPont to the door. "Can I come downstairs, please?"

Without a word or a glance, DuPont walked out and locked the door behind him.

* * *

During the following twenty-four hours, Morgan didn't receive food. And he didn't drink the blood offered to him at mealtimes.

DuPont grew impatient.

"You have displayed a strong sense of self-control. But you're not doing yourself any favors," he said. "You are a true Immortal. You need the blood to survive. I know you can't control yourself much longer."

"What are you trying to teach me? What's the point to all of this?"

"Show me your true nature."

"I don't want your blood. Why would I? You killed Jonathan and Ava. And now I'm a prisoner in this place."

"There you go, being dramatic again." DuPont shook his head and sighed. "And *you* killed Jonathan. Not I."

Morgan wanted to race across the room and attack DuPont. He wanted to rip his heart out. "You took everything away from me. You took away what I cared about more than anything in the world. You took my family. You took my happiness. You took it all away."

"Ah, calm down."

Exhausted by DuPont's games, Morgan stood nose-to-nose with him. "Give me your blood. Offer it to me now," Morgan shouted. "If I drink it, are you gonna start being kind to me? Are you gonna show mercy?"

"You're finally ready to give in to your instincts?"

"Yeah. Give it to me."

"Are you truly ready then?"

"YES."

DuPont smiled then walked out.

The empty glass in front of Morgan slid across the table and shattered against the wall. "Go to hell, DuPont."

* * *

The craving for blood overwhelmed Morgan. Once he demanded it, the hunger for blood only grew stronger. Each hour that passed tortured him.

After thirty-six hours alone in DuPont's bedroom, he finally heard the door unlocked.

DuPont entered. "Come. The car is waiting."

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see soon enough."

In the car, Morgan situated himself comfortably and rested his head on the seat. When DuPont tried to sit next to him, he outstretched his leg to maintain distance. Once the car started to move, he concentrated on blocking everything out and ignored DuPont during the ride.

When the car came to a halt, the driver announced, "We're here."

Morgan opened his eyes and recognized the Uxbridge Estate lit up at night. "Why are we here?"

"Let's go."

"God. Don't tell me you're forcing me to attend another party."

"No. C'mon."

DuPont led him to a room toward the back of the estate. The small, dark space had no windows. A single door on the opposite side of the room was closed.

He wrapped a metal belt around Morgan and attached a chain that he pulled from a hole in the wall. Satisfied that it was attached securely, he stepped toward the open door.

Morgan glared at DuPont, careful not to express his panic. "Now you're gonna keep me chained in this room?"

"No. You'll go back to East Horsley later."

"Then what the hell am I doing here? Why are you chaining me to the wall?"

"The chain is many feet in length. The distance you can travel will increase in increments."

"Another way of torturing me?"

"No."

"Then I'll stand here. I won't move."

"Yes, you will." DuPont turned to leave the room. "Open the other door."

Morgan stood in the darkness and listened to his breathing. He didn't know if he wanted to cry or scream in a rage. Several minutes passed without moving. Finally, he walked toward the second door, curious but fearful of what lie on the other side.

The heavy chain dragged along the floor until it was taut and suspended in the air. When he reached the door, the chain restricted him from walking farther. Taking a deep breath, he twisted the knob and pulled the door.

His Immortal eyes allowed him to see Ava seated on the floor of an enormous and extremely dark stone room.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Morgan sprinted forward, but the restraint of the chain forced him to the floor. Out of frustration, he slammed his hand against the wall. He instantly understood that DuPont intended for him to participate in Ava's death.

The sight of Ava gagged, and her hands chained to the floor, infuriated him. He pulled and tugged on the chain with all his might, but the chain didn't budge. Restricted from entering the cool, damp room, he collapsed to his knees. "Why?"

Seven glasses of water were equally spaced out on the floor.

DuPont advanced toward Ava, from behind. "See? She's not dead."

"What are you doing to me? To Ava? Why? All of this 'cause of Tirich?"

At least twenty people sat against the far wall. *A damn audience.*

In the center of the room, DuPont outstretched his arms as if presenting Morgan and Ava to the crowd.

"One might consider immortality to be a luxury," he said. "And I would agree. I have lived through fantastic moments in history. Wars. Arts. Cultural movements. The best and the worst of humanity.

"Immortality is also a curse. Close, dear friends and family perish. I knew my parents for about fifty years. My first wife, twenty. But those of our kind, the Immortals, I have known for many decades. Some, a century or longer.

"The death of family and friends might inflict wounds upon the heart. But the death of Immortals...the infliction is a deep wound to the soul."

Morgan beat his fist against the cold stone floor. "Please, DuPont. Whatever you're getting ready to do, please don't."

DuPont walked toward him, then stopped at the first glass. Gesturing to the crowd, he drank the water and returned to Ava. He knelt and sliced her arm. The blood dripped into the glass until it was nearly full. Then he wiped

the blood from her arm with a cloth. When it healed, he returned the glass to its original spot and looked at Morgan. "Follow your instincts."

"Go to hell."

"Check the chain. Can you reach the glass?"

Morgan crawled to the glass and swung at it. The goblet shattered several feet away.

DuPont shook his head. "Such a waste."

"I'm tired of all these games. I'm sick of it. I'm not gonna look to you as a great leader or teacher."

DuPont filled the second glass with less blood than the first. He walked to Morgan and threw it in his face. With a chuckle, he placed the glass in its original spot. "Check the chain."

Morgan crawled, grabbed the glass, and threw it at DuPont.

"Did you feel the warmth of Ava's blood?" he asked. "Can you smell it? Taste it?"

Morgan pulled on the chain and fell to his knees again. Ava's blood tempted him. "STOP."

DuPont repeated the process with the third and fourth glasses. Each filled less than the glass before. Again and again, Morgan threw the glass across the room.

Several feet away from Ava, he lowered his chin to his chest. "Jonathan is dead. It's all my fault."

Clenching her eyes shut, she shook her head.

He turned toward DuPont. "I'll do anything. I'll be the Immortal that you want me to be. Just let Ava go. Please."

DuPont picked up the fifth glass. "If you drink from this point on, I will remove one of her restraints each time. The gag. A chained cuff. It's up to you." He cut Ava's arm, filled the glass, and set it directly in front of Morgan.

Morgan clutched his hair in frustration. "Oh, my God. Just kill me."

"Follow your instincts."

Giving into temptation, Morgan swallowed the couple ounces of blood and threw the glass. A droplet of blood clung to his quivering bottom lip. He felt like a traitor, committing an act of betrayal he never imagined performing.

DuPont smiled and removed the gag.

"Morgan," she cried.

He hung his head. "I don't know what to do. I'm lost without you. I don't wanna be here. I can't do this."

"You have to. And I know you have to."

"Don't make me." With clenched fists, he pressed his knuckles against his forehead until the pain caused his hands to shake. When he spoke, his words resonated with a mix of gargled saliva and snot. "I don't wanna lose you, Ava. Oh, my God. I can't do this."

DuPont filled the next glass. "Follow your instincts."

"Stop saying that," Morgan screamed. He drank from the glass and tossed it to the floor. The insatiable need for blood overwhelmed him.

"Morgan, listen to me," Ava said. "Look at me."

He didn't want to, but he glanced in her direction.

"This is the end. Don't fight it anymore. Just do it. And never forget how much I love you."

"No, it's not the end. Don't say it is."

"I love you. Jonathan loved you."

Morgan stared at DuPont. "Remove the chain from her hand."

"No."

"I drank from the glass."

"I lied," DuPont said. "Check your chain."

Morgan moved and, to his surprise, he could reach her. He wrapped his arms around her, kissed the side of her face, and cried. "Please."

"We can't fight our way out of this," she said then whispered in his ear, "This isn't about my death. This is your survival."

He fixated his gaze on a crack in the stone floor, wanting to melt and disappear deep within the crevice.

"This is it." She kissed him. "Just do it."

DuPont appeared behind Ava and sliced her carotid artery. The warm blood cascaded onto Morgan's shoulder and chest. His throat hurt from crying. Breathing had become difficult. The hunger for blood overpowered him.

He looked Ava in the eye then kissed her. "I love you. I'm sorry."

Morgan pressed his face against her throat. He sobbed as he perceived the sentiment LOVE radiating from her to him. While he satisfied the craving, he sensed Ava's heartbeat decrease. Her pulse weakened until he couldn't determine how slow it had become. Ashamed, he pulled away and let her body fall to the floor, her arms still holding onto him.

No one remained in the room.

He laid his face on Ava's chest. "Please, forgive me."

The pain of losing Ava hurt like an invisible force had punched an

enormous hole into his chest. He thought of the possibility of death from heartache. "I'm gonna die without you."

Unexpectedly, Morgan detected a heartbeat in her chest. Startled, he quickly scanned the room. Still alone, he bit his forearm and held it above her mouth.

A brilliant flash of light blinded him, forcing him to close his eyes. Then...the birth of a baby girl. The little girl's first steps. A puppy in a wagon. The first day of kindergarten. Piano lessons. A field of wildflowers. Running with a young boy. A tenth birthday party. Falling out of a tree. A broken arm. A first kiss. Cheerleading. Driving a convertible. Virginity lost. Crying on a mother's shoulder. Swimming in the ocean. Dancing at a wedding reception. College. Jonathan consoling her. A father's funeral. Unpacking boxes in a new house. A handsome man. Loving that man. Attacked and stabbed on a porch. The sight of Jonathan's tear-stained face. Sunset overlooking the Grand Canyon. Killing a man. Consuming his blood. Playing the piano on a stage. Placing flowers at a mother's tombstone. Saving a girl from a rapist. Riding cross-country on a train. Caroline.

So many moments in time flashed through Morgan's mind. Numerous memories unfolded at a speed no human could fathom. Too many moments for Morgan to witness and remember. Flashing. Flashing. Flashing. And then...looking at Morgan standing on the steps outside Fischer House. Embracing Morgan. Dancing with Morgan. Arguing with Jonathan. Scanning a dark field as Jonathan and Morgan buried a boy. Fighting the wolf. Crying as she held Morgan's bloodied body. Priscilla. Holding Morgan's hand during turbulence on a flight. Killing Sinclair. Locked in a bedroom. Watching Morgan enter the dark, cold stone room. Blood. Dying...LOVE. Dying...LOVE. Death.

The moment Morgan opened his eyes, the chain jerked him a few feet away from Ava. He tried to crawl back, but the chain pulled again. And again. Morgan resisted the entire way to the small, dark room then slumped at the doorway as if enticed by a magnetic pull he'd never comprehend. He stared at Ava's body sprawled out on the floor. Her soul had taken flight like a bird released from the confines of an ancient golden cage. *A beautiful, lifeless body.*

Then the stableman from East Horsley shut the door.

Grasping the doorknob, Morgan rested his face against the wooden barrier between he and Ava. Taking in air as if suffocating, he cried. "I'm all alone."

Minutes later, the main door opened, and Nicholas rushed in. He knelt and embraced Morgan. "Come on. We're going home."

"I don't have a home."

He removed the chain and metal wrap from Morgan's waist.

Springing to his feet, Morgan kicked the door to the enormous room and yanked on the knob. When he couldn't open the door, he fell to his knees and pushed his fingers under the door, pulling to pry it loose. But no amount of grunting and strength freed the door from its hinges.

Again, Nicholas embraced Morgan. "Let's go."

As Morgan followed Nicholas through the estate, he passed many faces. He didn't know if they were Immortal or Mortal Soul. He didn't care. But he didn't want to give them the satisfaction of witnessing his anguish. Stoic, he looked straight ahead, walking to the entrance in the lead as Nicholas paced himself at Morgan's side.

In the car, Morgan buried his face in his hands and bawled until he was so exhausted that he slept. When they arrived at East Horsley, Nicholas woke him and escorted him inside to a bedroom.

"You have your own room now."

"Why?" Morgan asked. "A reward for tonight?"

"I don't know. No one told me."

They entered, and Morgan walked to the bathroom. "I need to shower."

He stared at Ava's blood on his clothes and cried again. The blood-soaked shirt symbolized the life she had lived. Later, he might consider the shirt a pathetic attempt to hold onto the past and her memory. But at that moment, her blood was the only thing he had that was a piece of her. So, after showering, he hid the bloody clothes in the closet.

Nicholas pointed to luggage in the corner of the room. "The hotel still had your stuff. I had to pay the bill and lie, but they gave it to me."

For the first time in days, Morgan wanted to smile. But he didn't. He climbed into bed and stared at the luggage as Nicholas turned to leave.

"Don't go. Don't leave me."

Nicholas climbed into bed fully clothed and wrapped his arm around Morgan.

Although Morgan's eyes filled with tears, he did not weep. Sorrow transitioned to anger. He stared at the window and thought of revenge.

Morgan understood he needed to play a role in order to survive at East Horsley. He needed to present himself as a strong, independent person, but also willing to follow DuPont's lead. Morgan couldn't be depressed or overly

emotional about Jonathan and Ava. He needed to adapt to everything that might come his way. He recognized the need to be ruthless and smart. By doing so, Morgan could accomplish his ultimate goal: the death of DuPont.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The next day, Morgan entered DuPont's bedroom without knocking. "Now what?"

DuPont, seated at a large desk, motioned for Morgan to sit. "What do you mean?"

"I don't have a plan to avenge Jonathan and Ava. And I don't know everything about being an Immortal."

"Yes, you're in desperate need of education."

Glancing around the room, Morgan saw no signs of what occupied DuPont's time. No television. No book. The desk was void of paperwork. "How the hell could I defeat you? You've been a vampire a very—"

"To begin with, I'm an Immortal. Vampire is a derogatory term."

Morgan rose to his feet. "Then be an Immortal to me. Not a vampire." Before he reached the door, DuPont rushed past him and blocked his exit.

"Interesting. You're going to be strong-willed and place demands upon me?"

"If you're not gonna kill me, then teach me what I need to know."

DuPont allowed his monstrous vampire image to appear. "You're threatening me?"

"Do you feel threatened by me?"

Relaxed, DuPont's face shifted back to human. "Don't flatter yourself, young man."

Exerting confidence, Morgan moved closer to the door. "I'm not a man. I'm an Immortal."

"You're acting like a man," DuPont complained. "In the blink of an eye, you can be an Immortal instead of a wounded and pathetic human."

Morgan stared at him for a moment. "Why did I see Ava's life flash before my eyes?"

DuPont chuckled. "Because your consumption of her blood brought her to the brink of death, you idiot."

"But I didn't see—"

"Jonathan's life."

"Yeah. Why didn't I?"

"Did you consume from him?"

"Well, yeah. But not—"

"Not directly from the source, huh?"

"No."

Clapping his hands, DuPont grinned. "Congratulations. You're not as dumb as you appear to be."

"I'm not stupid."

Stepping aside, DuPont opened the door. "I'm in no mood to entertain you with an argument. You and I will continue this conversation after dinner."

"I was told that I had one last sunset to see after becoming Immortal. After I watch the sunset, I'll never be able to go into sunlight again."

"Yes. The Gloaming."

"Then I wanna see my last sunset tomorrow."

"Not on your own."

"I'm doing it tomorrow. I'll go with Nicholas or Emily. Figure out who you trust to go with me." Morgan left DuPont standing in the doorway.

* * *

The idea of fleeing during the day enticed Morgan, but he had nowhere to go. The only people he knew in England were his grandparents. DuPont and the others would hunt him down in Somerset and kill all of them.

He entertained the thought of searching for money to buy a flight back to America. DuPont probably stored a large amount of cash somewhere in the estate. But again, Morgan would be hunted. DuPont and the others would bring terror and death to Colby. Or if Morgan somehow learned the location of the Greenwich Colony, he'd have to reach Greenwich before the vampires captured and killed him. If he arrived at the colony, he doubted Priscilla would offer to protect him after she discovered that Jonathan and Ava were dead. He assumed that she'd kill him because he had participated in their demise.

The option of fleeing with Nicholas and Emily wasn't a viable plan either. The three would only last days or weeks on the run.

Morgan had a limited amount of knowledge about living as an Immortal.

Despite what Jonathan and Ava had taught him, he still had a lot to learn. But there had to be something he could use to his benefit. Something that would allow him to concoct a plan of escape. Strength and speed. Intention. Mental abilities. Blending in, not standing out.

* * *

After dinner, DuPont announced a meeting to take place in the library without the Mortal Souls in attendance. It was not uncommon to exclude them but doing so guaranteed a matter of importance would be discussed.

The Mortal Souls of East Horsley followed a structured daily schedule. Two Souls performed daytime duties such as cleaning, running errands, and accepting deliveries to the estate. The other Souls joined the others a couple of hours prior to the Immortals rising for the evening. All Souls managed the estate until sunset. Then the daytime Souls retired for the night.

The remaining Souls prepared and served dinner. They also performed tasks during the evening depending on the Immortal's needs. Often a Mortal Soul acted as a driver to an Immortal who needed to travel for business or to hunt victims. If an Immortal needed to take an extended trip, a Mortal Soul always traveled as a companion.

Occasionally, the Mortal Souls had to clean a bloody mess. Sometimes they destroyed evidence. Although they were often engaged in the aftermath, a Soul didn't watch the hunt or the kill of a human.

Mortal Souls did not bear witness to Immortal matters. Politics and scheming occurred behind closed doors. Unless needed for a specific purpose, Souls did not participate in Immortal affairs without invitation.

For their services, Mortal Souls received a generous weekly salary. Receiving extravagant gifts was not uncommon. When they retired from the Immortal life, they collected a large sum of money for their loyalty.

So, when DuPont announced the meeting in the library, Morgan expected Immortal scheming or another opportunity to ridicule him.

"It seems that our dear Immortal boy, Morgan, has accepted his fate," DuPont said.

Most of the Immortals were seated. Morgan stood near the bookshelves with a few others. He cast a blank stare in DuPont's direction, pacing himself as he ran his hand across the top of each chair-back he passed. "I guess. But I require something in exchange first."

DuPont chuckled. "Oh? Why do you think I owe you something?"

"Obviously, I have some value. Otherwise, you woulda killed me by now."

"I can still kill you."

"But you haven't," Morgan stressed. "You killed Jonathan and Ava. So, you owe me something in exchange. "

DuPont waved his hand dismissively. "What's done is done."

Morgan stopped behind Andela's chair and unbuttoned the left cuff of his dress shirt. "Not yet."

He quickly removed a knife from inside of the sleeve and stabbed Andela in the heart. Before she could react, he lunged across the table and drove the blade into the chest of the Immortal seated across from her. Once the Immortal fell to the floor, he jumped from the table and smiled. "See, I'm quick."

As the room erupted into chaos, an Immortal pinned Morgan's arms behind his back.

"Silence," DuPont yelled. "Everyone. Stop."

Morgan lifted his leg and kicked back, shattering the knee of the Immortal who restrained him. Then he casually sat in the chair next to DuPont. "How quickly can Immortals self-heal broken bones?"

DuPont eyed Morgan. "Are you finished with your little performance?"

He gestured with his hands palm up and smiled. "Yeah. Vampires are a lot easier to kill than I thought they'd be." He wiped the sweat from his forehead. "I want red wine."

A female Immortal stood. "You're going to let this newborn disrupt everything like this? Kill two Immortals in front of us. And do nothing?"

"For Jonathan and Ava," Morgan shouted. "You're stupid if you thought I wouldn't retaliate for the death of the two most important people in my life."

"I could kill you before you realized what I had done."

"I said I wanted something in exchange. And I took it. Now it's over and done with. So, sit the fuck down."

"You're going to bark orders at me?"

"You think I'm scared of you? Maybe when I was human you could have scared me. I'm an Immortal now. Just like you. I may be younger and new to your old-bitch-of-an-existence, but I'm not scared of any of you."

DuPont rose to his feet. "Silence. Morgan. Zylphia. Shut up."

"And I'll tell you something else," Morgan said. "I'm not gonna be the token newborn of this colony. I've earned my way. None of you have authority over me. Only DuPont."

"Silence." DuPont slapped Morgan across the face. "You're in *my* colony. Don't you dare forget it." He tossed a small table across the room and pointed at the Immortals. "Don't do anything to jeopardize what we have worked so hard for. You know what is at stake here."

The Immortals bowed their heads.

"I will handle the situation as I see fit," he said. "Of course, I'm not pleased with the elimination of Andela. But what's done is done."

He gestured to the dead bodies. "Take Andela and Patrick out of here. Everyone. Go do something. We'll continue in a bit."

After everyone left the room, Morgan jumped to his feet and apologized. "I had to do something, so they'd think twice about trying to mess with me."

DuPont pushed Morgan against the wall. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I told you. I had to show them that I'm not scared."

"Now I have to convince the others not to kill you," DuPont shouted. "You're not second-in-command. You didn't do yourself any favors."

"You and your colony took Jonathan and Ava away from me. So, I took Patrick and Andela away from you. I evened the score."

"Sit down." DuPont poured wine into two glasses. "You do have value in this colony. I have a job for you. Otherwise, you'd be dead."

"What job do you have for me?"

"I'm not yet ready to elaborate on your role. If you follow my lead, you will be instrumental in making our plan a success."

Morgan assumed there was a reason DuPont hadn't already killed him. If he managed to coax information from DuPont, maybe he could use it to his benefit. "You're gonna train me?"

"Yes. If you prove that you're worthy and loyal, then you'll help carry out the plan in America. But it's not set in stone."

"Why mention it and tell me nothing?"

DuPont sipped the wine and walked to the window. "Do you know about the Great Immortal Battle of 1273?"

"A little."

"We're preparing for the next battle."

"To take over bloodlines? Colonies?"

"Yes. Tirich had a role in America regarding the upcoming battle. His death was a major defeat for us. Basically, you'll be taking his place."

DuPont returned to his seat. "It works out perfectly, to be quite honest. You're the young man that killed Tirich. You have earned respect because of

that. Without Jonathan and Ava, you need guidance. It will be easy to convince a colony to take you in."

"You think the Immortals in America will welcome me with open arms?"

"All in due time. You won't assume your role immediately."

Morgan relaxed in the chair. "Why do you wanna take over?"

"Because we're tired of living under the radar. Restrained. Restricted by rules and Immortal obligations."

"All right. Then I'll wait until you think I'm ready."

"Good. Now you can go."

"You don't want me to stay for the meeting?"

"No. I have to get everyone on the same page as far as you're concerned. Your presence will only anger them," DuPont said. "Lucky for you, I'm the Elder. They obey my authority. I can keep you safe and alive. But don't do anything stupid."

The retaliation Morgan had suffered for killing Tirich had seemed sadistic and severe. He didn't understand why the death of a banished vampire elicited such a violent response. DuPont's revelation provided a motive Morgan never could have imagined. Clearly, he, Ava, and Jonathan weren't punished for killing Tirich; they were punished for disrupting plans for the next Immortal Battle.

When the Immortals returned to the library, Morgan rushed upstairs. He grabbed the luggage and searched each bag. Holding the clothes produced a moment of sadness. But sentimental feelings would consume valuable time, so he put the clothes aside.

Morgan removed all the personal documents. He perused the driver's licenses, passports, and other paperwork. Not knowing what to search for, he opened Jonathan's personal planner and studied the pages.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The following afternoon, Morgan prepared to observe his final sunset. DuPont had agreed to let Emily and Nicholas accompany him to the viewing area. He demanded that two wolves follow the three to the lookout area. When they returned to the estate, Morgan's final sunset would be celebrated at dinner.

Morgan stepped out into the sunlight with Emily and Nicholas. Still fearful of the sun's rays, he closed his eyes and held his breath, half-expecting to burst into flames.

They didn't talk until they had walked far enough away to do so without being overheard. Speaking in hushed tones, they discussed their planned attack on DuPont and the other Immortals. And if they failed, at least they went out with a fight.

"A couple hours after sunrise, we'll take out the easiest and weakest," Morgan said.

Emily nibbled on her thumb, keeping her head lowered as if it further restricted the volume of her voice. "Gotta be quick."

"That's why we take out the weak first. Once they're sleeping, Nicholas will axe their throat, then I stab 'em in the heart."

"What if you don't kill them right away?"

Nicholas rubbed her shoulder. "The axe will keep them from screaming and warning the others. And Morgan will probably puncture the heart on the first try because they're sleeping and immobile."

"Can't we just chop their heads off?" she asked.

"No," Morgan replied. "They need to be on a solid, flat surface for that to work."

"Then DuPont and the others will find us at the church?"

"That's why the Gloaming is so important," Morgan said. "Gives us time to set up the church. Plus, the sun won't have the power to kill me yet. And when they find us, we fight until death."

"All right."

Nicholas squeezed her shoulder one last time and kissed the top of her head. "We're going to be fine. We can do this."

Morgan worried that he had convinced Emily and Nicholas to strike against the Immortals before they were ready. As the leader of their small group, he hoped that he had not somehow manipulated them into fighting. Although death was a strong possibility, he didn't want to be responsible for their demise. Even if DuPont and the others killed him, he wanted Emily and Nicholas to be free of the Immortal life.

"Oh, man," Morgan sighed. "It's really tempting to run."

Emily agreed.

"We could," Nicholas said.

"No, we can't," Morgan replied. "I mean, yeah, we could. But we have a plan and we're sticking to it." He looked at the estate. "Let's walk a little more. Then put the hood over my head."

Nicholas cupped the back of Morgan's neck. "Are you sure about this?"

"Yeah. And I wouldn't blame you if you ran away. It's up to you. But I can't protect you once they come looking for you."

"I know."

"I have to do it this way," Morgan said. "I can't run away like a coward. I promised myself that I would see this through. I might die doing it, but I owe it to Jonathan and Ava. And myself."

Passing through the front gate, they followed a path through a group of trees.

Nicholas gripped Morgan's arm. "I'm gonna put the hood on you."

"When we're outta here, I'll help you guys any way I can."

After placing the black silk hood over Morgan's head, Nicholas and Emily led him to the sitting area. When they reached their destination, they seated Morgan on a stone bench.

"This is the spot for the final sunset," Nicholas explained.

Emily positioned Morgan so that he perfectly faced the sun. "Okay. We're ready."

Morgan gripped the edges of the stone bench. "Only describe what I need to know. I'll repeat it to myself."

"It's 5:12. The sunlight is fading," Nicholas said.

Although the hood restricted his sight, Morgan closed his eyes and listened to Nicholas and Emily speak.

"I'm sitting on the bench facing the sunset." "The trees behind me lead to

a bigger forest area." "There is a small stone mausoleum directly behind me." "In front of me and to the right is another group of trees." "A dirt road leads north to the right." "A half mile away on the left is the abandoned church." "Walk through the archway." "The pile of rocks is against the back wall on the right under the window."

"We gotta go," Emily said.

Nicholas agreed. "We have a good twenty minutes or so. We'll be back as fast as we can."

Morgan shifted his position and straightened his posture. "You got everything, right?"

"Yes," Emily responded. "Everything's in its place. We'll get it and take it to the church."

"Good. Hurry, but don't run. The wolves will chase you."

"Don't worry. As fast as we can."

Morgan listened to them trot off. The setting sun didn't allow much time. The three of them needed to return to the estate before DuPont became suspicious. He ignored a fleeting moment of fear that they might not return.

Alone, he exhaled heavily. "Facing sunset. Trees behind me. Forest. Mausoleum directly behind me. Trees on the right. Road leads north on the right. Church. Half mile on the left. Through archway. Pile of rocks. Back wall on right. Under window."

* * *

Morgan listened to the many birds chirping in the trees. Again, he contemplated running. *Maybe I should try to get as far away as possible*, he thought. *Maybe I can't defeat DuPont and the others. What if it's a suicide mission?*

The impending confrontation with DuPont caused an intense feeling of dread. Morgan couldn't relax. He wanted to think that he had everything under control. But he knew that he had no idea what he was doing. Their great plan was the only strategy he had concocted.

The sunlight retreated from the mausoleum sitting area. In minutes, the sun would sink below the horizon. Morgan sensed the blackness approaching like a giant shadow. However, he wasn't aware of Zylphia creeping from the darkness of the trees behind the mausoleum.

Long strands of black hair covered her face. Her piercing blue eyes were

bloodshot with rage. Her cheekbones and forehead protruded in beastly proportions. Her incisors rested against her red-lipstick-lips.

Zylphia inched closer, using her claw-like hands on the mausoleum wall to steady her approach. As the sun continued to retreat, she advanced closer until she could almost reach Morgan and seize him by the neck.

The birds in the trees suddenly took flight with a squawk. Morgan rushed several feet in front of the bench. He spun around. "Nicholas? Emily?"

The idea of killing Morgan aroused her. Willing to tolerate the sunlight burning her skin to pull him into the darkness, she lunged forward.

Morgan tumbled to the ground and crawled.

Zylphia whimpered as the sun singed her skin. "Your blood is mine." She dragged him toward the bench. "I'm going to kill you and scatter your bones all across the land."

Nicholas charged forward and pushed her to the ground. As she flailed about, he managed to pin her arms.

Emily screamed, "Where's the knife, Nicholas? Where's the knife?"

"Don't let her outta the sunlight!" Morgan shouted.

Zylphia tossed Nicholas aside and scurried toward the mausoleum. He clutched her feet and jerked her back into the sunlight. She reacted by revealing her bat-like vampire wings.

Crawling toward the scuffle, Morgan called out, "Where are you?"

Nicholas tried to grab Morgan's arm, but Zylphia continued to pull away from his grasp. Her cries transitioned into full-on screaming as the remaining sunlight continued to burn her flesh.

"Shut her up," Morgan ordered. "Shut her up."

Nicholas attempted to cover her mouth, but she snapped her incisors repeatedly as she thrashed about on the ground.

"You're all dead," she shrieked. "Death will embrace you."

Emily appeared and smashed a large stone against Zylphia's face. Then Nicholas pounded the rock against her head until she ceased to scream and move about.

Morgan rose to his feet. "Help me back to the bench. Hurry."

Grabbing his hand, Emily tugged him to the mausoleum.

"Is the sun gone?" he asked.

"You can take the hood off," Nicholas shouted. "It's dark."

Morgan ripped the hood off and stared at Nicholas and Zylphia. He turned toward Emily. "Where's the knife?"

"I don't know."

The wolves paced near the trees.

Morgan sped to Nicholas. "The knife."

Nicholas pointed toward the mausoleum. "Under the loose stone of the third step."

Arriving at their side, Emily presented the knife.

Morgan plunged the blade into Zylphia's heart. She screamed and kicked about while he twisted the dagger. Once she was dead, Morgan glanced up at the moon. Catching his breath, he wiped his bloody hands on his pants.

He looked at Nicholas. "You gotta clean your hands on her clothes."

After wiping his hands on Zylphia, Nicholas stuffed the hood into the sleeve of his jacket.

"Get back to the bench," Morgan demanded.

Awestruck, the three stood in front of the mausoleum, triumphant but disoriented.

Emily covered her eyes and shook her head. "That was close."

The wolves abruptly sprinted toward East Horsley.

Morgan handed the knife to Nicholas. "Cut me."

"What?"

"Cut me. I need my blood on me. It has to look like she attacked me, and I defended myself. Hurry."

Uncertain, Nicholas hesitated, then he sliced Morgan's chest.

"My arm. A few times on my back and shoulders."

Again, Nicholas ran the blade across Morgan's body.

Morgan cleaned the knife on his pants and gave it to Emily. "Put it back under the stone."

"Are you okay?" Nicholas asked.

"Yeah." Morgan wiped his blood on Nicholas's shirt and face. He placed his bloody hands on Emily's chest and pushed her. "Okay. Now it looks like I pushed you away to save you, and Nicholas tried to help me."

He tore a thick twig from a tree and ran to Zylphia. Falling to his knees, he rammed the stick into her heart. "Don't say anything unless DuPont asks."

The pack of wolves growled as they emerged from the trees. DuPont and a few Immortals were close behind.

He stared at the three then Zylphia's body. He rushed to Morgan and knocked him to the ground. "What the hell did you do?"

"That stupid bitch tried to kill me."

"You lie."

"Why the hell would I lie about that? You know she had it out for me. Why else would she be out here?"

DuPont eyed Morgan, then glared at Nicholas and Emily. "And what say you?"

"Yes, it's true," Nicholas responded.

Morgan stood tall. "She said she did it 'cause of Andela and Patrick. She didn't like me being close to you. She thought I was gonna corrupt you and destroy the colony. She said she was gonna drink my blood and scatter my bones."

DuPont pulled Morgan's face close. He stared deep into Morgan's eyes then licked the blood on his neck. "It's his own blood. It's not Zylphia's."

He inspected Morgan's body for signs of an attack. Then he tasted the blood on Morgan's hand. He turned toward the other Immortals. "Her blood is on his hands."

The Immortal named Gabriel stepped forward and nudged Nicholas out of the way. He too tasted the blood on Morgan's hand. "Your death was a plan she kept from us?"

"Do you think DuPont woulda let her kill me?"

Gabriel eyed the other Immortals. "Did anyone know about this?"

The silence was cut short by Eldon. "She told me she wanted to kill him."

DuPont casually paced himself to Eldon and shoved him to the ground. "You said nothing to me."

"She didn't say she was going to do it."

Gabriel flashed his incisors. "Why did she trust you with her secret?"

Eldon shook his head. "I don't know."

DuPont clenched his hands and stomped a foot on the ground. "This is madness. A total cock up. The colony is suffering because of all this internal conflict."

Eldon looked away. "I'm sorry, DuPont."

"Her act of revenge could have set us back once again." DuPont crouched next to Eldon. "She betrayed me. And you betrayed me."

"No," he protested.

DuPont held Eldon against the ground and sank his teeth into his neck. He drained a large amount of blood, spat it to the ground, and pointed at the body. "Bleed the traitor. Drain him dry. Burn him and Zylphia to ashes."

CHAPTER THIRTY–FOUR

DuPont seized Morgan. "You're more trouble than I expected."

"It's not my fault."

"It *is* your fault. Do you know how many Immortals we've lost because of you?"

Morgan shrugged. "Five?"

"Seven, you little bastard. My colony is down from eighteen to eleven."

"I'm a member of your colony now," Morgan said. "It's twelve."

DuPont spoke to the Immortals. "Take Emily and Nicholas to the house. Don't let them out of your sight."

"No. Wait. Why?"

DuPont pounced, forced Morgan's head to the side, and sank his teeth into Morgan's neck. The wolves gathered, pacing and growling.

As the Immortals escorted Emily and Nicholas to the estate, Morgan struggled to push DuPont away. At that moment, Morgan envisioned his planned attack on the Immortals crumbling into a pile of useless rubble. He understood that he needed to kill DuPont or die at the hands of monstrous vampires.

DuPont siphoned a mouth full of blood then spat in Morgan's face. "I don't trust you. I should kill you right here."

"You never wanted to kill me. You just wanted to torture me. Now, here's your chance, asshole."

DuPont pummeled his fists against Morgan then stepped away. "You're being presented to the Elders tomorrow."

"What Elders?"

"Tomorrow at Uxbridge. All the Immortals that watched you kill Jonathan and Ava."

Jumping to his feet, Morgan shouted, "You made me put on a show for the other Elders?"

"They had to see the process of claiming you. They had to trust you were the right choice and that you would surrender and voluntarily join us."

Morgan swung his fist at DuPont's face.

"There's that lack of self-control again." DuPont grinned and rubbed his jaw. "You're going to fight now? Are you telling me that you don't want to be a part of this?"

Play along. "I told you I would do what you need me to. You gotta give me something in return for my commitment."

DuPont hurled Morgan across the lawn. "A reward?"

The wolves stood at attention as if they waited for the signal to attack.

Don't fight back. "I can't be treated as a newborn any longer."

DuPont removed his jacket and threw it to the ground. He manifested into the hideous vampire as he pinned Morgan to the ground. "You want some sort of payment? Some honor to be bestowed upon you?"

"I want protection."

"Protection from what?"

"Protection from the Immortals. Here. At East Horsley. You know they want me dead."

"You did that to yourself."

"If I have value, then I need to be protected. When I'm presented to the Elders, that will give me the protection I need. No one would dare kill me knowing that they would summon the wrath of the Elders."

DuPont forced Morgan onto his stomach; his face pressed against the cold, wet soil. He clutched the branding scar on Morgan's neck. "You're marked as a traitor and a killer of Immortals. Your life will be short-lived if you run from this colony."

Morgan jerked DuPont to the ground.

"Ah, yeah, now you've got some fight in you."

"I'm not gonna fight you. But I'm not gonna be pushed around anymore."

"Doesn't matter," DuPont said. "You're not being presented tomorrow as a decoy in America."

"What?"

"That was the plan, but you can't be trusted. It was a mistake to believe you could be broken down."

"Then it was your mistake not to kill me on New Year's Eve."

"Your loyalty has always been with Jonathan and Ava."

"Why would I be loyal to you? Why would I bow down at your feet after everything you've done?"

"Jonathan and Ava didn't give you shit. They turned you. Now they're dead," DuPont yelled. "Still, you think you have to honor their memory."

"They gave me everything."

"Rubbish. You don't know anything about life and the world. You're a stubborn arse who thinks he knows it all. You know nothing."

Morgan charged at DuPont. He swung his fist, but DuPont blocked the move. "I know you're a monster."

DuPont laughed.

"Everything I believed about vampires before any of this happened to me, that's you. The monster. The hideous creature that should be killed."

"I will drag your arse into the ballroom and offer you to be terminated once and for all. For all to see."

"Because you're too much of a pussy to do it yourself."

"Having the Elders kill you protects me from being held accountable for your death. I won't be blamed for disrupting the plan."

"You think your clan is gonna take over? And you'll have authority over all Immortals?"

DuPont punched Morgan in the face. "Let's go."

"Your mistake is that you misjudged me."

"No, my mistake was not killing you."

Morgan huffed with a chuckle. "Your biggest mistake was underestimating me."

"Start walking to the house."

* * *

Morgan sat at the dinner table casually drinking a glass of wine. The Immortals did not engage him in conversation. A few angry glances convinced Morgan not to interact. Although DuPont was no longer an ally by manipulation, he breathed a sigh of relief when DuPont entered the room.

"Of course, you all know that Zylphia and Eldon are dead. And nothing is to be done in response to their deaths."

"Immortal killing Immortal," one shouted.

"Morgan is being presented to the Elders tomorrow night at seven o'clock. He'll have the chance to prove himself to our clan. It's up to him to convince the Elders...convince all of us...that he is with us, not against us." He relaxed in a chair. "I'm going to recommend death."

The Immortals reacted with approval.

"Whatever animosity and resentment you have...rid yourself of it now. Let the Elders make their decision. That decision will be final and law."

"You can't trust him," one of the Immortals said. "Can't you see that he's been the direct cause of chaos in this colony? We should kill him now. Take him out back and flay him."

DuPont's anger exploded. "Don't question me. I told you the Elders will make their decision tomorrow night. I told you that I will recommend death. Still, you doubt my words. You doubt my intent. You doubt my authority over you."

"No."

"Yes, you do. If I kill Morgan now, then I should kill all of you who question my rule over this colony. Is that what you want?"

"Of course not," Gabriel replied. He looked at the Immortals. "End this internal conflict now. As much as Morgan is to blame for the chaos in this colony, you have played a part in it. Cease with the debate and retaliation fantasies."

"Everyone is going to Uxbridge tonight," DuPont said. "We're not waiting for tomorrow. We have to prepare for the presentation."

"Let the Mortal Souls do the work," one female complained.

DuPont threw a wine bottle across the room. "You're not listening to me."

He waved his hand, causing all the silverware and glasses to slide from the table to the floor. Enraged, he lifted the table and pushed it several feet.

The Immortals jumped to their feet in shock.

"I'm not going to argue with you. Everyone shut the fuck up."

"I apologize," she said.

The anger DuPont directed at the Immortals surprised Morgan. But he was also secretly pleased.

DuPont pointed at the woman and man who had questioned him. "Both of you, get out. Go eat in the kitchen. Go outside and eat fucking rats or birds or something. I don't want to look at your fucking faces during dinner. Get the hell out of here."

As the two left the room, the remaining Immortals fell silent.

DuPont slammed his hand on the table. "Get this place straightened up so we can enjoy our dinner." He looked at Morgan. "Go to the kitchen and tell them to serve us in five minutes. And get your arse back in here within a minute."

Morgan rushed to the kitchen. "Serve dinner in five minutes."

"Are you all right?" Nicholas asked.

"Yeah." He turned his head to the side and whispered. "Tomorrow night at Uxbridge. Seven o'clock in the ballroom."

Nicholas nodded and started arranging food on the plates.

* * *

True to his word, following dinner, DuPont instructed all Immortals to prepare for their trip to Uxbridge. He glanced at Nicholas. "You're going, too. Emily can stay."

Nicholas objected. "Me? Why?"

"I no longer trust you either. Take your arse to Uxbridge and get to work. Prove that you have value. Convince me that you're trustworthy, and I won't kill you."

"What have I done to make you think otherwise?"

"You're going to question me?"

"I haven't done anything."

DuPont slammed him into the wall. "You never broke him in like I told you to. You allowed yourself to get too close to an Immortal. So, your companion or fuck buddy or whatever the hell he is to you, Morgan will stay here with Emily and me."

"Fine!"

"You're the Mortal Soul in charge," DuPont said. "Don't fuck it up."

"I won't."

"The next twenty-four hours is your test. Gabriel will keep an eye on you." He turned toward Emily. "Get your bag ready, too. When it's time to go tomorrow, we're walking out the door without anything slowing us down."

She nodded. "What about tonight?"

"You're in no better position than Nicholas. Do your job or suffer the consequences tomorrow," DuPont warned. "I have a very important affair to take care of. Then I can concentrate on getting this colony back in order. Do as you're told. Or think about what your last words will be."

In frenzied activity, Immortals rushed about the house preparing for their departure. Mortal Souls ran around performing tasks. Panic seemed to motivate everyone. Morgan, however, lounged in his room after a shower, pleased with the state of alarm taking place.

When several cars arrived, Morgan stopped Nicholas at the front door. "Be careful."

Nicholas pressed his forehead against Morgan's. "You, too." Then he quickly kissed Morgan on the lips and darted to the car.

Surprised, Morgan looked to see who had witnessed the kiss. "You kissed me on the lips."

"I don't know if I'll ever see you again. Seemed like the appropriate thing to do."

Morgan watched the cars drive away. Then he briefly smiled and walked into the estate.

* * *

Once the estate had become silent, Morgan sat in the living room alone. He hadn't foreseen his great plan unraveling. Only a couple aspects of his strategy could still occur as planned. Forced to construct Plan B, he needed to eliminate the colony and DuPont. But if he was going to succeed, he would have to—

DuPont entered and sat on the sofa. He crossed one leg over the other and asked, "Do you have any thoughts about tomorrow night?"

Morgan rubbed his eyes. "Why do you care?"

"Because I'm curious. I'm intrigued by the thoughts that must be running around your head. I mean, I'm sure you didn't expect any of this."

"Any of this?" Morgan cocked his head. "Killing Jonathan and Ava? Torturing me day after day? And now this conference at Uxbridge? Is that what you're referring to?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"You're a psycho."

DuPont laughed. "Really? Is that your professional diagnosis?"

Emily entered and placed a bottle of champagne and two glasses on the coffee table then stepped away.

"Wait," Morgan said. "I don't want any champagne. I'm not celebrating anything. I'd rather have wine."

DuPont flicked his hand toward the door. "All right, all right. Get him a bottle of wine."

"And cigarettes," Morgan demanded. "I'm sure packs are lying around in practically every room of the house."

"Now you're a smoker?"

"I might die tomorrow. Might as well live it up."

DuPont raised the flute of champagne. "True. Too true."

Emily returned within a couple minutes. She poured wine into a glass and handed Morgan a cigarette. She reached out to light it, but he took the lighter from her.

"You're not my servant," he said, looking at her with irritation.

She appeared offended. "Is there anything else you need?"

DuPont waved his hand. "No. Don't go far. We might need something at some point."

Morgan glared at her as she walked out. He faced DuPont and exhaled a long stream of smoke. "So, what the hell do you wanna talk about?"

"To start, let's discuss your psychiatric evaluation of me."

"Psychology. Observation versus personal treatment."

"Ah, okay. Psychology."

Morgan rose to his feet. "You're the classic definition of a psychopath."

He continued, "Your projection and deflection. Obvious signs. I assume you've been this way your entire life. Or you went off the deep end at some point as an Immortal."

"Perhaps. Assuming your diagnosis is correct."

"You locked me in the library numerous times. Do you even know half the books you have in that room?"

DuPont shrugged. "I'm a busy man."

"Vampire. You're a busy vampire."

"Oh, Morgan. Piss off."

"See? You take no personal responsibility for your actions and words. Always placing the blame on others. And your anger...that's deflection. When the topic hits a little too close to home, yeah, that's deflection."

"Stop pacing about the room. Sit down."

Morgan returned to his seat. "Should we talk about something else?"

"What does it feel like knowing that you're responsible for the death of Jonathan and Ava? Educate me about the guilt and pain you must feel having killed the only two people that loved you."

Sadness overwhelmed Morgan, but he didn't share the sentiment with DuPont. "Your tricks are obvious. I won't cry for your entertainment. And I'm not gonna beg you to spare my life."

DuPont walked toward the staircase. "Go to the library and read a fucking book."

"What? Are we done in here?"

"I have other things to do tonight. I'm not going to babysit you. Go occupy yourself. I will come and get you when it's time for bed. You're sleeping in my room."

Morgan rolled his eyes. "Oh, God. Is this the night you're gonna rape me?"

DuPont raced across the room and threw Morgan to the floor. "If, by a miracle, the Elders allow you to continue living, your life will be short; because I will hunt you down and kill you myself. And no one will ever know."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Morgan climbed into DuPont's bed and laid his head on the pillow. He watched DuPont write feverishly in a book and drink wine. Occasionally, DuPont crossed something out, pondered a thought, then continued writing in a frantic manner. Amused, Morgan stifled a chuckle.

DuPont glanced up from the page. "Why are you watching me?"

"It's more entertaining than staring at a wall or the ceiling."

"You should go to sleep. You'll want to be clear-headed for your presentation."

"Is that your speech for tomorrow night?"

"Don't concern yourself with what I'm writing. Worry about whether you'll be dead or alive tomorrow night."

"Yeah, you're right. So, what time are we leaving for Uxbridge?"

"Six o'clock. An iota of sunlight won't harm us if darkness is within minutes."

"A car is picking us up?"

"Of course," Dupont shouted. "Shut up and go to sleep."

"You should close the curtains. The sun will kill us both."

DuPont slammed the book on the table. He closed the curtains and poured himself another glass of wine. "Satisfied?"

"Thank you," Morgan replied. "Sweet dreams."

"Bloody hell. Shut up!"

* * *

At some point during the day, Morgan awoke. He stared at DuPont sleeping next to him. He didn't have much time to accomplish his goal.

If I die tonight, it was all worth it.

Morgan attempted to climb out of bed, but DuPont grabbed his arm. "Jesus," he exclaimed. "You scared me."

"Where do you think you're going?"

"One, I need to piss. Two, I'm gonna take a shower."

"Go tell Emily that I want breakfast food."

"Fine. Right after I take a piss."

"Make it quick. I'm a bit peckish."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'll use the bathroom downstairs, so I can give Emily your orders as quickly as possible."

Once the door closed, Morgan rushed to Emily's bedroom. She wasn't there. He hurried downstairs and found her drinking coffee in the kitchen.

"DuPont wants breakfast food. Now." He sat at the small table and poured a cup of coffee.

"Geesh. I'll get right on it."

"If I don't survive tonight, I need you to get all the documents from the back of my closet. On the bottom left under the floorboard."

"And do what with it?"

"Give it to Nicholas. He'll know what to do with it."

"Take the bloody shirt, too."

"Your bloody shirt?"

"Um." His voice cracked. "It has Ava's blood on it."

"What if we're all dead tonight?"

"DuPont isn't gonna kill you guys. He might punish you. But he's not gonna think you had anything to do with my planning and disloyalty."

"How can you be sure?"

"You two have been here for years. I've been here, for what...ten days?"

"Yes."

"If I'm dead, get that stuff outta my room before he does."

"Okay. I will."

Morgan kissed her. "Thank you."

She walked to the refrigerator.

He stopped at the door and whispered, "Whatever you hear upstairs, don't go into his room. Run and hide."

Morgan rushed to the bathroom to urinate then returned to DuPont's bedroom. He tore a portion of a cigarette and discarded it into a vase on a table in the hall. Before entering, he lit the remainder of the cigarette. "She's getting the food ready. I'm jumping in the shower."

"Smoking already?"

"Could be my last day."

"What time is it?"

He glanced at the clock. "Damn near four o'clock."

"Outstanding," DuPont replied. "We have plenty of time."

"Good. I'll eat something after my shower."

"You're really calm, considering your looming death."

"It is what it is, DuPont. I don't have the time or energy to get caught up in another one of your intellectual discussions."

Morgan closed the bathroom door then quickly turned on the shower. He searched the drawers for razors and cuticle scissors then placed them within the folds of a towel. As he stepped into the shower, he gave himself a pep talk. *This is it. You can do this.*

After drying his body, he wrapped the razors and scissors in the towel. Naked, he walked out with the towel in front of his crotch.

DuPont sat near the window. "Where are your fucking clothes?"

"In my room."

"And modesty? For goodness' sake, I saw your cock in Lilly's hand."

"Did you think about it while you fucked her?"

"Just go get dressed in slacks and a dress shirt."

"Fine." Morgan lit a cigarette then placed the pack and lighter on the table. "Is there anything you want me to do while you're in the shower?"

"Wipe that fucking smile off your face."

Morgan dressed and ran downstairs to the living room. First, he sliced his forearm and filled a water glass with his blood. He poured it into an empty wine bottle and repeated the process until the bottle was nearly half-full. Then he placed it outside the front door in the bushes.

He took several bottles of liquor from the living room bar then rushed to the kitchen. He removed a bottle of champagne from the freezer. Next, Morgan arranged everything on a silver tray and carried it upstairs. After he retrieved the bath towel from his room, he returned to DuPont's bedroom.

Morgan hid the razors under a cushion of the chair. He placed other tools in various spots about the room. He unplugged the digital clock and yanked the cord out. With the cuticle scissors, he cut a small hole into the fabric of the chair-back and inserted the cord until only the tip remained accessible. Then Morgan grabbed the book DuPont had written and ran to hide it under the floorboard in his bedroom closet.

When Morgan returned to the bedroom, he surveyed the area, certain everything was the way he wanted it. He closed his eyes and concentrated on decreasing his accelerated heartbeat.

DuPont emerged from the bathroom shirtless. The tray of alcohol caught his eye. "What the hell is all that for?"

"Personally, I wouldn't consider it a celebration, but, a good drink to mark the occasion."

"I won't argue with that."

Morgan motioned to the table. "Rum, absinthe, vodka, brandy, and, of course—since you're a whore for champagne before an event—a vintage bottle of Dom Pérignon. And I'm not referring to the harvest of the grape. I'm referring to a very old bottle. This Rosé is 1971."

"Sat in the library and looked it up?"

Morgan smiled. *—Turn the tables, take control.*—"I've read stories about absinthe. You need cold water and the sugar cube has to dissolve. Seems like too much work." He picked up a bottle. "I'm gonna have vodka with this cranberry-ginger-mint concoction one of the mortals made. And you?"

Looking at Morgan incredulously, DuPont buttoned his white dress shirt. "You really need to ask?"

"Oh, yeah. Duh. Champagne-whore. Of course."

"You know, this newfound attitude you got going on here...it's amusing. Your cocky, know-it-all demeanor is entertaining. Continue with your performance. I'm enjoying it, actually."

Reel him in. "It's not a performance. You didn't notice until you wanted me dead." He grabbed the champagne from the bucket of ice and gestured to the chair.

"It'll be interesting to see how you present yourself to the Elders."

Morgan handed the flute of bubbly to DuPont and sat across from him. "Think so?"

"Yes. I'm sure you have a raging hard-on from acting this way around me. But with the Elders, you don't stand a chance."

Stroke his ego. Morgan raised his cocktail. "Cheers, Elder."

"Now you choose to be respectful." DuPont chuckled as he crossed his legs. "I don't yet know what to do about Emily and Nicholas."

"They haven't done anything to jeopardize your colony or your plans. If anything, they've been a bit lazy with their Mortal Soul duties."

"Is that right?"

"Won't make a difference to me if you kill them. But they've been with you a long time. I don't know why you'd wanna go through all the trouble of

replacing them. I mean, you already have to increase your Immortal number in the colony."

"Ah, yes. Thanks to you."

Morgan shrugged. "If that's the way you see it."

"If that's the way I see it? Man, you're a real piece of work. And you said that *I* didn't take responsibility for my actions."

Morgan noticed DuPont's glass was almost empty. He reached for the pack of cigarettes and spilled the cocktail on his shirt. The cranberry-color stained the sleeve. "Dammit."

"Tipsy from half a glass?"

"No. Just clumsy. I suppose I have to change shirts."

"Yes. You can't go to Uxbridge looking a mess."

"Can I borrow one of yours?"

"Not an expensive designer. I don't want your blood destroying one of my best dress shirts when they kill you."

Morgan selected a navy-blue shirt and tossed the stained garment to the floor. When DuPont swallowed the last drop of champagne, Morgan said, "Let me refill your glass."

He poured the champagne then gulped from the bottle. "Damn. This is good. But, next...brandy for me."

"No hangover if you're dead."

Morgan stood behind DuPont's chair. Cautiously, he pulled the cord from the hole in the fabric. "Did you eat?"

"Yes, when you were in the shower."

"I'll eat something soon."

"Should have requested a special last meal."

Morgan stretched out the cord with both hands. Once DuPont lowered the glass from his lips, he wrapped the cord around DuPont's neck and pulled the ends taut.

Dropping the champagne, DuPont kicked his feet as he reached to grab Morgan's hands. While he forced his weight forward, Morgan continued to strangle him, pulling the chair backward.

"This isn't gonna be easy for either one of us." Morgan grunted and heaved the chair backward.

DuPont crashed to the floor. Before he could stand, Morgan hit him on the head with the champagne bottle.

Momentarily stunned, DuPont punched Morgan in the face. "You're not going to make it to Uxbridge tonight."

Morgan swung the bottle, but DuPont grabbed it and tossed it aside. He punched Morgan again and grinned.

The strength of the blow and the ringing in his ears surprised Morgan.

Lunging forward, DuPont sliced Morgan's chest with his razor-tipped ring.

While Morgan maneuvered away from the sitting area, he blocked DuPont's fist and smashed his elbow against DuPont's face.

The taste of his own blood infuriated DuPont. Growling, the monstrous vampire instantly manifested. Fingernails transformed to talons. Sharp teeth glistened. He tore off his dress shirt and outstretched his arms to reveal bat-like wings.

They charged and tackled each other into a heap. Morgan smashed the champagne bottle against the floor, using the broken glass to slash DuPont's stomach.

The vampire howled in pain and staggered backward as Morgan sliced his wing with the shard of glass.

Morgan bolted forward, jumped, and thrust his knee against DuPont's stomach. When they tumbled to the floor, Morgan reached for a fireplace poker under the table.

DuPont smirked and raised his hand. The rod soared out of Morgan's hand and crashed against the wall, causing Morgan's arm to collapse to the floor. DuPont laughed. "You thought you were going to stab me with *that*?"

A second poker glided into Morgan's grasp from underneath the bed. "No. This one."

He plunged the rod into DuPont's upper left chest area. The vampire screamed out as Morgan pushed with all his weight.

Satisfied, Morgan jumped to his feet and kicked DuPont in the head. Breathing in deeply, he seized one of the wooden posts from the bedframe.

DuPont glanced at Morgan and snapped his teeth. He laughed again. "Now you're going to stab me in the heart?"

"With this?" Morgan swung the post and hammered the fireplace poker into the floor.

DuPont howled and kicked his legs. "I'm going to kill you slowly. You're going to beg for death."

Morgan stepped on DuPont's right hand, thrust the other rod into the right upper chest area, and hammered it into the floor.

Seated again, he wiped the sweat from his face then inspected the laceration on his chest. "Man, you cut me deep. But it's almost healed."

"I should have sliced you open and pulled your guts out."

Morgan retrieved the razor from underneath the seat cushion. He sliced the interfemoral membrane from DuPont's arm to rib cage. Then he sliced the other wing.

Returning to the chair, he said, "When you stabbed me with the fireplace poker, I didn't feel the intense pain at first. It felt like a punch to the chest. I didn't register pain until my brain processed what had happened, and I saw the blood."

He gulped the cranberry juice. "Is that how it felt for you?"

"Piss off." DuPont tugged on the rods in his chest.

"Not gonna be easy to pull those out. Especially with the position you're in. You need better leverage. Or at least one free arm."

"You better kill me quickly. The Immortals and Elders will hunt you down once they realize that we're not at Uxbridge."

One of the rods vibrated as DuPont stared at it.

"Trying to remove it with your telekinetic abilities?" Morgan hammered the poker again. "Good luck. You'll exhaust yourself trying." The wooden post flew out of Morgan's hand. He looked at DuPont. "You shoulda thought of that sooner."

"What's your plan now? Kill me and run back to America?"

"I'm not done yet." Morgan picked up the decanter of brandy. He removed the stopper and smelled the liquor. "Wow. Pretty strong." He stood over DuPont, sipped the brandy, and coughed. "Geesh. Not sure I'll ever become a fan of drinking this."

He poured the liquor onto DuPont's body and held the container high above DuPont's face. "Eighty to one hundred-proof alcohol has a low flash point," he said and released the decanter from his grasp.

DuPont caused the glass to fly across the room.

"You know what a flash point is, right?"

DuPont groaned and again tried to pull a rod out of his chest.

"A flash point is the lowest temperature that a liquid evaporates and catches on fire." He returned to the table and selected another decanter. "This particular rum...high alcohol content. All the liquors have a high alcohol content. Absinthe. Even the vodka."

Morgan poured the liquors onto DuPont and watched him squirm. He dropped each decanter, forcing DuPont to use his ability to cast it away.

"I don't drink any of this shit," Morgan said. "The vodka cocktail was all right though."

He turned away from DuPont and lit a cigarette. "I don't smoke. But I had to get a flame in here without you becoming suspicious."

Morgan flung a lamp toward DuPont. Before making contact, it careened across the room.

On his knees, he crept toward DuPont. He stopped at DuPont's feet and stared at him for a few seconds. "You're trying to force the lighter outta my hand, aren't you? But what you can't see..."

DuPont kicked Morgan in the chest.

Morgan winced and coughed. "I admire someone willing to fight till the end. You shoulda admired that about me," he said and ignited the cuff of DuPont's slacks.

DuPont flailed about as the flames climbed his legs and spread across his torso.

"You told me fire kills vampires 'cause the body can't react fast enough to heal and survive. Of course, you'd have to burn awhile. You don't instantly burst into flame and die like in the movies. Although, you're gonna wish you did."

Morgan flicked the cigarette at DuPont and walked to the bathroom. He dumped the contents of the trash can onto the floor. Before returning to DuPont, he filled the container with water.

"Nope. Didn't kill ya." He dumped the water onto DuPont then rushed to fill the trash can once again to extinguish the flames.

"The smell is awful." Morgan squatted and tapped DuPont's cheek. "Yeah. Hot."

DuPont groaned.

"I didn't want to brand you with some stupid initials. I burned you so you'll always be a monster."

"You're dead. You won't stand a chance. I'm too powerful for you to defeat."

"The fat that seeped outta your skin woulda kept you burning for a while," Morgan said. "I'm curious to see the end results of your branding."

DuPont grunted out of frustration and stomped the heels of his feet against the floor.

"Then I'll cut your heart out," Morgan said, sitting in the chair. "We both know you can't recover from that. No matter how powerful you like to claim you are."

A few minutes later, Morgan hammered the rods again. He walked toward the door. "Don't worry. I'll be right back."

Calling Emily's name, Morgan rushed downstairs. She ran out of the kitchen with a knife in her hand.

Morgan laughed. "You were gonna try to kill him with a butcher knife?"

"I didn't know what to do. It's a big one."

"You could have gotten an ax or something from the stables," he said. "I have to finish him off."

"He's not dead?"

"He will be."

"You need to kill him. It was stupid to leave him alive."

"I wanted to check on you," Morgan said. "You need to get the stuff from my room. Leave as soon as you can. If I don't make it, give everything to Nicholas and go with him."

"I can wait, and we can leave together."

"No. Once I'm upstairs, go get it and leave. Don't wait. Just go."

"Okay, I will."

Morgan took the knife. "Leave as soon as you can."

As he reached the top of the stairs, the bang of metal crashing against a surface startled him. He rushed to DuPont's room and swung the door open. Half of a fireplace poker lay on the floor.

DuPont broke the second rod in half and pushed himself up from the floor. "You're a fucking idiot." He picked up a broken rod and threw it as Morgan sprinted forward. The metal pierced Morgan's side, causing him to fall to his knees.

Rushing forward, DuPont kicked Morgan in the chest.

Morgan sailed backward and crashed to the floor. As DuPont lunged for his throat, Morgan stabbed the kitchen knife into DuPont's back.

Propelling himself to a standing position, DuPont reached for the blade.

Morgan yanked the rod out of his body and hurled it into DuPont's chest. Clutching his side, he ran to the door.

DuPont regained his composure. "Scared now, aren't you?"

"That would make it too easy for you." Morgan raced downstairs, rounded the corner, and grabbed a lamp from an accent table. He pulled the cord from the wall and crouched next to the table.

DuPont sprinted downstairs.

As soon as DuPont was within sight, Morgan swung the lamp into his face then sped to the front door.

A large wooden chest slid across the floor and crashed against the entrance. Morgan stared at it and sent it soaring into DuPont.

Sunlight penetrated the darkened house as Morgan yanked the door open.

"You bastard," DuPont yelled.

"I know." Morgan smirked. "No Gloaming for me."

Enraged, DuPont retreated to the dark area of the living room. He threw furniture about, growling like a wild animal.

"I'm smarter than you," Morgan shouted. "I'm faster than you. And in your burned condition, I'm more powerful than you are."

"I'm going to kill you. You're dead."

Morgan retrieved the wine bottle from the bushes. He glanced back inside at DuPont and smiled. Then he turned to sprint from East Horsley.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Four wolves snapped their teeth and growled as they steadily advanced toward the entrance.

DuPont laughed loudly and heartily. "What are you going to do now, smart arse?"

Death by wolves frightened Morgan more than DuPont or any other vampire.

"Are you faster than the wolves? More powerful than the wolves?"

Morgan stepped back.

"Yeah. Come inside, Morgan." DuPont cackled.

If Morgan closed the door, DuPont would attack him within seconds. If he allowed the sunlight to shine through the open door, the wolves would enter and attack him.

Basilio appeared with the sixth wolf. The alpha released a low guttural growl and moved ahead of the others.

Morgan had planned to lead DuPont to the abandoned church by leaving a trail of blood collected in the wine bottle. He intended to kill him, burn him, and bury him there.

He released the bottle from his grasp and slammed the door shut. "Let's finish this."

"Yes." DuPont smiled. "Let's do that."

They charged at each other and collided in the center of the room.

DuPont threw Morgan crashing into the coffee table. He leapt over the sofa and landed in a stance above him. He pressed his claws into Morgan's chest and pushed down with his weight.

Morgan screamed.

Curling his fingers, DuPont started to pull his nails through Morgan's skin. "Your death will be the one I cherish the most."

Morgan tore the interfemoral membranes from DuPont's arms.

Roaring, DuPont withdrew his talons and inspected the damage to his wings with amazement.

"Fire destroyed them beyond self-repair," Morgan said as he jumped to his feet.

The anger on DuPont's face reached epic status. He practically foamed at the mouth as he rushed forward.

Morgan grabbed him and forced their bodies to the side. He banged DuPont's head against the drywall, cracking the sheet rock.

DuPont growled, raised his knee into Morgan's stomach, and hurled him across the room. "Why did you have to take it this far? Everything could have worked out perfectly for everyone involved."

"Except for Ava and Jonathan."

"Ava and Jonathan. Jonathan and Ava," DuPont mocked.

Morgan unclasped the silver watch gifted to him and let it slide to his knuckles. He bolted forward, grasped DuPont by the neck, and swung his watch-adorned hand at DuPont's face but missed. As DuPont laughed, Morgan stepped forward and jabbed until he contacted DuPont's face. Assuming the boxing stance, he twisted his body into the punch that caused DuPont's head to snap back. DuPont's skin split from the corner of his mouth to his cheekbone. His left canine and incisor teeth fell to the floor.

Grinning, Morgan snatched the wine bottle from the floor.

DuPont spun around and stormed forward.

Morgan maintained his stance. When DuPont neared, he squatted, sending DuPont flying into the door. He smashed the bottle on the floor, twisted around on his feet, and thrust the broken bottle into DuPont.

With wide eyes, DuPont did nothing as Morgan plunged the glass repeatedly into his chest.

The vampire collapsed onto his back and howled. He grasped Morgan's neck, but his grip weakened. Then his arms fell to the floor.

Morgan didn't know if he had simply subdued DuPont or killed him. He reached into DuPont's chest and pulled his heart out. "Your death will always be the one I cherish the most."

The sound of a car approaching caught Morgan's attention. He assumed it was the driver tasked to take them to Uxbridge.

He sprinted through the house. Outside, in the courtyard, the pack of wolves waited. Five of the wolves advanced toward Morgan, but Basilio let out a long, vicious growl and the wolves stopped. Morgan remained stationary as Basilio snarled and continued to emit low barks and growls.

Morgan doubted he could outrun the wolves, but he had to try. He tossed DuPont's heart to the pack.

Basilio stood at the edge of the courtyard. The five wolves maintained their stance behind him. He released a loud, ferocious bark. The wolves retreated as Basilio snatched DuPont's heart. Then the other wolves sprinted in Morgan's direction.

Morgan closed his eyes and braced himself for the attack. But the wolves pushed past him and entered the house.

Not wanting to alert the driver by running toward the gate, Morgan raced through the courtyard. He jumped over the stone wall and sprinted to the forest.

He ran in no particular direction and soon realized he didn't know where he was going. The road he needed to find was west.

The wolves howled in the distance.

Sunlight continued to fade, but the woods were already dark. He made a quick judgment and ran to his right.

Racing through the trees, twigs snapped at Morgan like whips designed to subdue him. He shielded his face and ran until he recognized the back of the stone mausoleum. When he reached the small building, he became less frantic. He walked along the stone wall, relieved he wasn't lost. Startled by a noise inside the mausoleum, he sprinted out into the open and stared at the structure.

Out of the corner of his eye, Morgan noticed the stableman walking toward him. The man reacted with surprise and began to run forward. By instinct, Morgan rushed into the forest and ran in the direction of the road.

When he emerged from the trees, he spotted the road that led to the crumbling church. He bolted through the tall grass and collapsed where the field merged with the gravel road.

The gentle breeze provided a sense of comfort and cooled his wet skin.

Morgan's body ached. Sweat stung his eyes. He rubbed his hands on his bloody, torn tee-shirt then placed them on the rocky ground. His arms shook with fatigue, but they supported his semi-seated position. He glanced over his shoulder at the expanse of tall trees.

He questioned the species of those leafless trees. Oak? Walnut? Birch? Ash? Morgan had no clue. Even in the moment of creeping dread, he contemplated. The tall trees of twisted limbs and branches afforded Morgan a brief period of protection from the bloody scene he had fled. The pack of wolves. The driver that would no doubt warn the Immortals at Uxbridge.

He needed to find the old church because Emily waited there. And Nicholas might arrive at some point during the night.

Notified of DuPont's death, the Immortals would hunt for him. They would conduct an exhaustive search until they found him. And he knew they would likely torture him to death.

He looked at the forest once again. The layout of trees took on a menacing appearance as the sunlight faded. They were creepy. They were intimidating.

The sun sank toward the horizon. He squinted his eyes at the bright orb and considered the possibility of his death. He chuckled and said, "Not even Pennsylvania."

Morgan's thoughts of Colby surprised him. He had long yearned to escape the small town that collected his experiences and memories like a librarian organizing books on a shelf. In that moment, he considered a safe return to where he had been born and raised. He thought of his mother. The sadness and loneliness he experienced living with his father. He reflected on everything that had transpired after meeting Jonathan and Ava. Then the blur of thoughts dissolved into despair.

He laid down with his face on the ground and wept. His muffled wails caused small clouds of dust to rise as he sobbed uncontrollably for Jonathan and Ava.

Their absence was a stabbing torment that refused to recede. Again, he questioned whether he would have been better off killed by DuPont rather than seeking revenge. Then he quickly scolded himself for thinking of such a grim outcome.

Morgan noticed the ground bathed in the dark, radiant blue hue common at dusk. He stared at the sky and admired the remaining shades of orange, red, yellow, and pink that colored the horizon.

He turned toward the field. Something or someone moved toward him in the tall grass. His heartbeat thumped in his chest like a war drum, becoming louder and stronger with each beat. He stared at the grass and positioned himself on his knees, prepared to fight.

Suddenly, Emily was in sight. She ran toward him, carrying everything collected from his room.

He rose to his feet and kissed her. "You should be at the church."

Emily panted and smiled. "Sounds like we're getting married."

"What happened?"

"I was stuck in the house the whole damn time. I got everything like I was supposed to and hid in my room."

"Then what?"

"After a while, I went downstairs to see what was going on. And the wolves were eating DuPont's body."

"Did you see the guy in the car?"

"Yes. I guess he ran when he saw the wolves. One of the wolves crawled through the window of the car and killed him." She took a deep breath. "I figured that was my chance to run."

"I'm glad you're okay." Morgan kissed her again. "You don't know how Nicholas is doing?"

She shook her head.

Casting his gaze to the sky, he said, "The Gloaming." He sat on the ground and wiped tears from the corner of his eyes. "Everything's changed forever."

The bright orange, fiery orb had nearly vanished. Dark-blue and purple hues colored the horizon as clouds blended with the blackness of the sky. When the last shades of pink and red faded, Morgan recognized the power and importance of the moment. But the Gloaming didn't produce a poetic moment that sparked an epiphany. The truth of the moment passed through him like thread through the eye of a needle.

The Immortal transformation had signaled a great detour in his life. But viewing his last sunset truly indicated the end of his human existence. Now that the sunlight could kill him, living as a creature of the night further reinforced the belief that the young man he used to be could no longer be stitched at the seams. Morgan no longer sought to mend the young man he had been only months ago.

Shaking himself out of a trance-like state, he stared at the dried blood and dirt on his hands. "Okay. Let's go. We don't know if it's safe to be out here."

* * *

Nicholas assisted with seating the Elders and other Immortals in the ballroom. He retreated to the kitchen and rushed to the telephone. "Okay. Everything is set...Yes, all of them are in there...I think some Mortal Souls are still in there, too...They'll be out soon...Yes...Okay, I will...Thank you...I promise."

Soon, Nicholas spotted lights emerging from the surrounding trees and bushes. The lights were mounted on guns carried by men dressed in black military-like attire approaching the estate.

He rushed outside with his hands in the air. "I'm uncorrupted. I'm uncorrupted."

One of the men raced toward him. "Be quiet."

Astonished, Nicholas watched dozens of soldiers gather.

The man lowered the black garment that covered his mouth. "What's your name?"

"Nicholas. I'm uncorrupted."

The man spun around. "Uncorrupted Soul. Take him to a jeep."

A man forced Nicholas to walk toward the trees.

Two of the black-clad men opened the double doors to the ballroom. The Elders and Immortals reacted with shock. A few of the Elders stood, as if ready to attack.

"Sit," Priscilla demanded as she entered.

An Elder approached, but a soldier shot him in the heart with a steel-tipped dart from an air rifle. The other Immortals panicked.

"Silence," Priscilla yelled. "Sit in your seat."

Two dozen soldiers filed into the room. Other soldiers secured both entrances and the windows.

In the middle of the room, Priscilla stated, "DuPont is dead. The upcoming Great Immortal Battle is no longer a secret. You will all be terminated."

"Priscilla," an Elder shouted. "You must honor the commitment to investigate."

"Your termination is a part of that process."

"But you must grant us the right to confer with you."

"No." Priscilla walked toward the double doors. She turned and addressed the room one last time. "I grant you a quick death."

She nodded at a soldier. He gestured with his hand, and the soldiers fired their guns.

In the hall, Priscilla stopped at a group of men ushering mortals into a room. "We need to question all the Mortal Souls and search for documents and any evidence regarding the Immortal Battle. I want confirmation that every single Immortal is dead. Once the place is swept clean, burn the ballroom and the bodies. Then extinguish the flames before humans snoop around."

"Yes, Madam Elder."

"Get it done before the sun rises."

A small fire illuminated the inside of the stone church.

"How long do you think we'll have to wait?" Emily asked.

"I don't know. Until Priscilla gets here."

"And Nicholas?"

"Hopefully, he'll be here soon."

"I hope so," she said. "What did Priscilla say when you told her?"

"Nicholas called her first. He explained everything. I never had the chance to talk to her because I was always with DuPont or locked in his room. And I didn't want to risk calling her from the estate."

"What did she say to him?"

"She planned an extermination at Uxbridge. And that she'd let me kill DuPont. If I survived, then she'd meet me here."

"Well, it should be soon then."

He laid down on the floor. "I gotta sleep. I'm exhausted."

Hours later, Morgan opened his eyes with a start and glanced at Emily.

She pointed to the door.

The wolves entered with Basilio in the lead. The alpha stared at Morgan and bowed his head.

Emily clutched Morgan's arm and clenched her eyes shut.

To his surprise, the wolves laid down on the dirty floor as Basilio continued to walk. Several feet ahead of the wolves, he laid down as well.

"Emily," Morgan whispered. "I think they're here to protect us."

She opened her eyes. "Thank God."

Morgan let Emily sleep. He worried Nicholas and Priscilla wouldn't arrive before sunrise.

He gently shook her shoulder. "The sun will be up soon. I need to hide."

"Where?"

"You're gonna have to bury me."

"Maybe we can make it to East Horsley."

"No. We don't know who or what we will find there."

"Okay. What do you want me to do?"

Morgan surveyed the church. He removed a wood panel and a pipe from the wall. "We can use these. I'll stay buried until darkness comes again."

Emily's eyes widened.

"I'll be fine," he said. "You'll be fine."

"Okay. Let's hurry."

He broke a corner off the panel and threw two bottles of water into the hole once meant for DuPont's burial. Then he jumped inside. "Okay. Lay the panel over me. Stick the pipe in at a slight angle so I can get oxygen. Then bury me."

Morgan situated himself more comfortably in the box. He could have easily let his mind wander and repeat the events of the previous six months. But he wondered about his future.

He hoped Priscilla arrived soon to take him back to the United States. He didn't know where he would live. Could he return to Colby and live in the house without Jonathan and Ava? How would he survive financially? Would he need to ask Priscilla if he could live in her colony? Would she teach him everything he needed to know about living as an Immortal?

Morgan thought about that first Monday morning of summer break. Many things had changed for the better. He had become confident and driven. He was eager to pursue life and everything the future had to offer.

He no longer allowed the perception of others to influence his view of himself. He was quick to stand up for himself. More importantly, because of Jonathan and Ava, Morgan finally believed he was lovable.

* * *

Roused by voices, Morgan squinted his eyes at the darkness. He recognized Emily's voice. But Morgan couldn't identify the muffled male voice. Hopefully, Nicholas had finally arrived.

Someone removed the pipe and lifted the make-shift lid.

Morgan rubbed his eyes. The stableman stood next to Emily. Confused, Morgan sat up and wiped the sweat from his face.

The man helped him out of the hole.

"What's going on?" Morgan looked at the man. "What are you doing here?"

Emily hugged Morgan. "This is Lawrence. The man from the horse stables."

"Yeah, I know. He's from East Horsley. What is he doing here?"

"Morgan," a male voice said.

A lump rose in Morgan's throat. His eyes filled with tears as he spun around. "Jonathan," he cried. "How? I don't understand."

Jonathan opened his arms. "Come here, buddy."

Morgan hugged Jonathan tightly. Submitting to Jonathan's warm embrace, he never wanted to abandon the protection Jonathan's touch provided. "I thought you were dead. I thought I killed you."

"I fixed him," Lawrence said.

Jonathan cradled Morgan's head. "They didn't bleed me out."

"Left it to me to clean the mess," Lawrence said. "I made things right again. I put him in the mausoleum."

"You can recover from less than fifty percent blood loss," Jonathan reminded him. "With help."

"I did it before," Lawrence replied. "Years ago. Young lady. She left after."

Morgan turned toward the stableman. "You were there the night I killed Ava. You couldn't save her?"

Lawrence shook his head.

"Why not? Why couldn't you fix her, too?"

"Lost too much blood. Her artery was severed. I'm sorry."

"I don't understand." Morgan looked at Jonathan. "DuPont staked you seven times."

"My body started to heal when they were removed."

Dropping to his knees, Morgan cried, "I killed her."

Jonathan knelt and clutched Morgan close. "DuPont killed her."

"No. I drank her blood. I killed her. She's dead 'cause of me."

Jonathan tightened his embrace.

"I'm so ashamed," Morgan cried. "She's gone forever."

Two hours later, a black SUV screeched to a halt outside. The headlights illuminated the inside of the church like spotlights searching for survivors in the darkness of some great abyss.

As everyone stared at the entrance, Nicholas ran inside. He acknowledged Jonathan and Lawrence with a passing glance then hugged Emily and Morgan. "You're both alive."

Jonathan rushed to greet Priscilla as she entered with two military men. She latched onto him and kissed him passionately. "I thought they killed you."

"I'll explain later," he said, cradling her head on his shoulder.

She smiled at Morgan. "I'm glad to see you survived. I had my doubts. And I questioned your desire to kill DuPont."

"I had to kill him on my own."

"I understand," she said. "Where's Ava?"

Jonathan shook his head.

Priscilla touched his arm and reached out to Morgan. "I'm sorry."

"It's my fault," Morgan said.

"Not now," Jonathan muttered. "I don't want to discuss it right now."

The sting of each word lashed at Morgan's soul. Wounded, he cast his gaze to the far side of the church.

Priscilla introduced herself to Emily and Lawrence then faced Morgan and Jonathan. "We have to leave now."

"Where?" Morgan asked.

Priscilla stepped toward the entrance with the two men at her side. "Back to America. Plane departs from London City at midnight. We don't have time. Let's go."

"What about our stuff at East Horsley?"

"Doesn't matter. East Horsley is burning."

"Emily and Nicholas?"

Priscilla looked at the Mortal Souls. "You're welcome to join us. We can get you in the States somehow. If you stay, I can't guarantee you protection."

"From what?" Emily asked.

"All the Elders are dead. The Immortals that remained at their own colony...some of them will seek revenge."

"We're not safe here?" Nicholas asked.

"We can take you to America. Or I'll have one of the men take you where you want to go. I suggest leaving England though."

Morgan stepped toward her. "I thought you stopped the next Great Immortal Battle from happening?"

"Retaliation is the nature of many. There will be a small war soon. None of us are safe in England right now."

"I will not go," Lawrence said. "I need to get a new home for the wolves. I will get back to my family on my own. You go."

Morgan extended his hand then hugged him. "Thank you."

Lawrence bowed his head. "Go."

As the driver maneuvered the SUV onto the gravel road, Priscilla discussed confiscated documents with Jonathan. She pointed out something of interest in DuPont's book. "They were already in the process of extending their plan outside England."

Nicholas sat with his eyes closed and hands folded on his lap.

Emily quietly talked to one of the guards.

Morgan stared at his dirty and bloody reflection in the window. Relieved his ordeal at East Horsley had ended, he rested his forehead against the glass and exhaled, his breath fogging the window. Wiping the condensation away, he stared at East Horsley again.

The flames burning the estate illuminated the night sky. *Destroyed like it had never existed*, he thought. *But it didn't destroy me.*

It didn't destroy me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BEFORE THE SUN RISES, the follow-up installment to DARKNESS ON THE HORIZON, will be released on August 6, 2019. And the stand-alone novel, THE BUTTERFLY HOUSE, will be released on March 31, 2020.

Visit www.christpherrenna.com for information, the latest news, and updates.

If you enjoyed this novel, send me a message or tell a friend or post a review. Or do all three. And thank you in advance.