

B E F O R E  
T H E  
S U N  
R I S E S

Christopher Renna

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to Janet Longhofer-Killough  
for always being a beacon of light



## CHAPTER ONE

As Morgan contemplated the return flight to America, he stared at the moonlight shimmering on the ocean's surface like an undulating tapestry of black and silver. Tired, his mind wandered from one question without an answer to another. The constant drifting...the ebb and flow of thoughts exhausted him. Closing his eyes, he rested his head against the window. Surprised by the coldness of the plexiglass, he adjusted his position and focused on the ray of light in the darkness outside.

Sleep eluded him. He desperately wanted to wake up in the warmth of his bed at home. Everything that had happened in England would have been a dreadful nightmare. A horrible series of events that his mind had concocted during REM. He would sit up in bed and relax once he realized he was safe at home, with Ava and Jonathan. The Christmas break would soon be over, and he'd return to school to finish his senior year. Then he'd set out to conquer the world with his painting or his writing, and maybe he'd provide a wife with a great, comfortable life. Or maybe he'd live forever with Ava and Jonathan as one happy family.

*Oh, I wish, I wish, I wish,* he thought.

Every time Morgan closed his eyes to sleep, two images tormented him like a glitch in a film trapped in a ruthless loop. DuPont spitting vicious threats as if he produced venom capable of killing within minutes. And Ava's lifeless body on the cold stone floor of Uxbridge.

That Morgan had killed DuPont produced a sense of great

satisfaction. However, the solace in DuPont's death didn't subdue Morgan's anguish over losing Ava. Being responsible for her death haunted every molecule of his being. Her demise burned the fibers of his DNA like embers ever glowing in the deepest recesses of his soul. Her last heartbeat had scorched a dark imperfection that would never fade away, a permanent scar like the branding on the back of his neck.

He traced a fingertip across the embossed symbol DuPont had burned into his skin. "You're marked as a traitor and a killer of Immortals," DuPont had said. In Morgan's eyes, Tirich, Andela, Patrick, Zylphia, and DuPont were vampires...monsters, not Immortals. The scar on his neck represented triumph. But it also signified shame, because Ava was the true Immortal and killing her scarred him more than a symbol burned onto his body ever could.

A sudden jolt of the private jet quickly overpowered the thoughts in his head. Turbulence provoked a fear not easily conquered. He couldn't ignore the trembling jet and see it as a minor inconvenience, as Jonathan and Priscilla were capable of doing. So, when the vibrating continued to escalate, he gripped the beige leather armrest of the chair and clenched his teeth.

The plane had sailed smoothly over most of the Atlantic during the trip. But as the jet neared America, Morgan feared they might not reach their destination. *I killed five vampires. Now I'm gonna die crashing into the ocean*, he thought as he glanced about the narrow cabin.

Emily, Nicholas, and two of the militiamen slept. Priscilla continued to read papers seized during the raid on DuPont's estate at East Horsley. Jonathan rubbed his eyes as if he had awakened only moments prior. When he looked at Morgan, he offered a smile.

The jet heaved forward and tilted slightly to the left. Vibrating, swaying, rattling...all of it caused Morgan to panic. Although he wanted to jump out of his seat, he remained seated.

Jonathan sensed Morgan's anxiety and approached. As he squatted and tapped Morgan on the knee, the plane dropped.

Squeezing Jonathan's wrist, Morgan inhaled as if it was his last breath. "We're going down."

"No, we're not."

"I don't like it."

"It's just bad turbulence. Nothing to be scared of." Jonathan raised his hand horizontally as if it was the jet. "We're still moving forward. Even if we drop, we're not literally falling out of the sky. The plane's still flying over five hundred miles per hour. It's a bump in the road."

Morgan scoffed. Although Jonathan's demonstration provided an explanation, it did little to calm his nerves. "A bump in the road. Behind the wheel, at least I'd be in control."

Finally, the jet stabilized. The roaring hum of the engine buzzed in Morgan's ears. He looked out the window at the blurry lights far in the distance. "Thank God. I think we're gonna land soon."

Jonathan peered outside. "Finally, back in America. Home sweet home."

Morgan released Jonathan's wrist. "Is it really?" He lowered his head. "It's just the two of us now."

"You and I will be fine."

"What are we gonna do? Are we going straight to Colby?"

The overhead lights brightened as a flight attendant entered the cabin. "We're going to land soon," she said. "Seatbelts on for our arrival in White Plains, New York."

Jonathan patted Morgan on the knee. "Buckle up, buddy." Then he returned to his seat next to Priscilla.

Morgan glanced at the silver watch Ava and Jonathan had given him. After using it to intensify a punch to DuPont's face, it might never work again. And despite his frayed nerves, he smirked at the memory. "What time is it?"

Yawning, Nicholas stretched his arms. "Almost four o'clock."

"My concept of time is shot." He observed the American coastline. "I don't even know what the date is."

Priscilla placed a stack of papers in a briefcase. "It's the twelfth of January, my dear."

*Holy crap, Morgan thought. Almost two weeks away from home. The Christmas break ended. School already started again. Since Ava and Jonathan were also gone, people probably think they kidnapped me. They*

*probably believe Ava and Jonathan killed the people around town, too. Returning to Colby isn't gonna be fun.*

He gripped his knees as the plane wobbled. Doing his best to project a calm demeanor, he noticed Emily looking at him. He smiled. And she smiled in return.

\* \* \*

When the jet stairs extended to the runway, three SUVs parked on the tarmac before anyone stepped off the plane. An airport attendant greeted Priscilla at the bottom of the stairs. He welcomed the group to New York and mentioned *customs*, but a balding man in a dark suit appeared, flashed a badge, and waved him away.

The man in the suit extended his hand to Priscilla. "Welcome home. Who traveled with you?"

"Two security and four American citizens."

"And all four of them—"

"Two are mortal."

The man peeked over her shoulder to scrutinize the others. His face displayed no emotion. Apparently satisfied with what he saw, he turned and stepped toward a vehicle. "Fine. Carry on with your business then."

As the car sped away, four men emerged from the two remaining SUVs. The obvious leader of the group addressed Priscilla with the faintest smile. "Happy you're home. Shall we take all of you to the main estate?"

"No. Two will go to the second home." She addressed the group on the stairs. "Jonathan and Morgan, you'll ride with me. Emily and Nicholas, your car will take you to the second estate. Lois will be expecting—"

"What?" Morgan protested. "Why are they going to a different house?"

Priscilla's voice became stern, her expression less cordial. "You and Jonathan are going to the main estate with me. Emily and Nicholas will be well-taken care of by Lois, the Mortal Soul next door."



"But...I don't want them to feel abandoned."

Nicholas stepped closer. "It's okay, Morgan. We're all exhausted. We'll meet up later."

Priscilla reached for Emily's hand. "Everything will be fine. Lois will take good care of you. Then I'll summon for your arrival at my estate in the afternoon."

"Thank you for bringing us back to America," Emily said. "We really appreciate it."

"Get some rest. Eat. Relax and enjoy yourselves. We'll see you soon." Then Priscilla walked toward the nearest SUV and climbed into the backseat.

"All right," the main security guy bellowed. "Let's hit the road. Rye Lake to Cliffdale."

Before Morgan could say anything, the security team ushered Emily and Nicholas into the other car and drove toward a gate at the edge of the tarmac.

Seated in the SUV, Morgan buckled his seatbelt and sighed. "Why can't we all just stay together?"

"There are Immortals who live at my home with me," Priscilla said. "There's no room for guests at my estate."

He relented. "Fine."

"And Morgan, you haven't been an Immortal long enough to question my authority."

"I'm sorry."

Jonathan cupped the back of Morgan's head and pulled him close. "Relax, buddy. Let's get to the colony and eat. Then we can get a good night's rest."

Within a couple of minutes, the driver caught up to the other SUV.

Morgan looked at Priscilla. "Who was that man with the badge?"

"Federal agent."

"FBI?"

"No. A federal agent."

"Like the CIA or something?"

"Dear, there's a lot you don't know. You're going to learn a lot over the next few days. At some point, I'll explain who he was."

He stared at the back of the driver's head and listened to security talk to each other between cars on walkie talkies. *No traffic. Smooth sailing, boys...Simms, you got the first watch...Cliffdale to Riversville.*

Priscilla rested her head on Jonathan's shoulder and her hand on his knee.

A surge of jealousy surprised Morgan. He discretely eyed Priscilla, concerned she might somehow threaten his relationship with Jonathan. He didn't want another female joining their family unit like she could replace Ava.

To Morgan's dismay, Jonathan seemed receptive to Priscilla's affection and attention. Although, Morgan really couldn't blame him or hold it against him. A woman's admiration and touch were something Jonathan probably needed at that moment.

*Riversville to Porchuck.*

Maybe it was exhaustion. Maybe it was nervous energy. He couldn't help but smile. *Porchuck? Oh, poor Chuck, poor Chuck. Whatcha gonna do? Oh, poor Chuck, poor Chuck doesn't give a fuck. He's gonna...he's...he's gonna...*

Morgan couldn't stop yawning. "How much longer till we get there?"

"Five minutes or so," Priscilla said.

"The other Immortals will be waiting for us?"

"I'm not sure. They must know that we're arriving soon. But I don't know if they're home or not."

"Fine by me. I don't think I have the energy to meet a lot of new people, anyway."

*Porchuck to Old Mill.*

He continued, "I'm so tired, I don't think I can even eat anything."

"Try," Jonathan said. "If not, then go to bed."

"I feel like I could sleep for days."

"You've been through a lot. You need proper rest."

*BRACE YOURSELF. IMPACT. IMPACT.*

The explosive sound of crashing metal astonished Morgan. Lurching forward, he couldn't see anything outside in the darkness.

No streetlights. No headlights. Only darkness. Then the shine of a silver grill appeared as a car screeched alongside the SUV, banging and pushing the vehicle aside. Before Morgan could process what had happened, the security driver slammed on the brakes and jumped out of the SUV. The man aimed his gun at the speeding car and fired his weapon.

A loud whine of tires penetrated the silence of the night as the car came to a halt in the middle of the road.

Morgan looked out the windshield at the first SUV, off the road and on its side. Reaching for the door handle, he yelled, "Holy shit! That sounded like a bomb."

"Wait," Priscilla yelled. "Don't get out."

"I have to see if Emily and Nicholas are okay."

The remaining security guy shouted, "Stay put! Do not exit the vehicle." He joined his partner on the road, and they raced toward the unknown car.

Glancing at the first SUV, Morgan said, "I have to check on them."

Jonathan unfastened his seatbelt. "All right. Let's go."

Morgan saw the security men toss someone onto the road. Then he sprinted toward the crashed SUV as gunshots fueled his adrenaline.

The vehicle had landed with the driver's side on the ground. He and Jonathan jumped on top of the car. The door windows were still intact, but neither handle worked.

"Cover your face." Jonathan smashed his foot against the glass and lowered his upper body inside. "Can you get out?"

Nicholas groaned. "I can't get the seatbelt off, and I think my arm is broken."

"What about Emily?" Morgan asked.

"I'm okay," she said. "My foot's stuck under the driver's seat."

Morgan looked through the front passenger window. A security guy, semi-unconscious, moaned and clutched his shoulder. The driver appeared to be dead.

"I can't get his seatbelt undone," Jonathan grunted. Several seconds later, he complained. "I gotta get in there."

"No, wait," Morgan said. "I'll go in. Then you can pull Nicholas out."

Once inside, he pressed his forehead against Nicholas's and reached for Emily's hand. "Thank God, you guys are okay."

"Yeah, but get us out of here," Emily said.

He pointed to the left side of her face. "You're bleeding."

"My head hit the window. I don't think it's bad."

Morgan shredded the seatbelt threads with a shard of glass then pulled the strap until it snapped in two. Not wanting to cause further injury, he carefully supported Nicholas's weight while Jonathan pulled him outside. "Take him to the other car. I'll get Emily."

Jonathan jumped to the ground. "I'll be right back."

Despite his best efforts, Morgan could not free Emily's foot. He huffed. "How the hell?"

"I don't know. I think the front seat got pushed back when the car hit us."

"Did you guys see it coming?"

"It headed straight for us and rammed into the driver's door."

"It hit our car, too. The security guys shot the tires, and I think they killed the driver."

"Wonder who he was."

"Someone who wanted us dead."

Emily whimpered as she tried to pull her foot from under the seat.

Bracing himself against the seat back, he said, "I'm gonna push my feet against the front seat as hard as I can. Try to pull your foot out, okay?"

"Yeah. Hurry. It hurts."

Grunting, Morgan pushed with all his might. "C'mon, c'mon."

"Almost!"

He drew in a deep breath and pushed again. "C'mon. Pull, pull, pull."

The loud clink of metal startled them.

"I got it," she shouted. "My foot's out."

"It's not broken, is it?"

"No. It hurts like hell, though."

He chuckled. "Well, I think I just gave myself a hernia."

Emily situated herself upright and pointed toward the window above. "Let's get out of here."

"I'll boost you out. Then I gotta check the security guy."

Unexpectedly, Jonathan yelled in the distance. "Morgan. Morgan. Morgan!"

A blinding light illuminated the inside of the SUV as the sound of an engine neared. The impact of the collision sent Emily and Morgan crashing against each other while the SUV careened down a slope, slamming into the trees.

The hiss of escaping air and shifting metal aroused Morgan's senses as he opened his eyes and touched the back of his head. Disoriented, he pushed himself into a seated position. "Holy crap. I feel like I could pass out."

"You're okay?"

"Yeah. You?"

"I think so."

Morgan then realized the SUV had flipped over. "We're lucky we weren't thrown from the car."

The sound of running feet caught his attention. Suddenly, a body shot inside the vehicle.

For a moment, Morgan thought it might be Jonathan. Then he realized it was a stranger, a man in vampire form. His bloody face only enhanced the distorted appearance of the monster's protruding cheekbones and fiery eyes. Swiftly, the man crawled over Emily and seized Morgan's feet, propelling himself closer and closer toward Morgan's head.

Emily screamed as she repeatedly kicked the man.

The stranger grunted like a wild animal.

A pair of hands jerked Morgan toward an opening out of the car.

The vampire's expression of rage intensified. He lunged forward and ripped a chunk of flesh from Morgan's side. Spitting the thick layer of skin from his mouth, he dove for Morgan's torso.

Screaming in pain, Morgan snatched the guy by the hair as

someone continued to yank him outside. The vampire twisted his head back and forth, snapping his teeth at Morgan's hand.

Another person dived into the car and latched onto the vampire's legs. Morgan recognized the voice of a security member. "Eliminate subject!"

Morgan let go, and the security man wrenched the vampire's head backward. Then a gunshot rang and echoed in his ears as blood and brain matter splattered onto his face.

Safely outside the vehicle, he looked at Jonathan on the frozen ground behind him. Astonished by the pool of blood on his shirt, he touched his side and groaned in agony. Struggling to stand, he rested on his knees and stared at the dead attacker.

Jonathan pressed his hand against Morgan's. "It'll heal faster with pressure to stop the blood flow."

Catching his breath, Morgan winced. "Fuck, that hurt like a motherfucker."

The security guy scrambled to his feet. "Get up. Get up. You gotta go."

Rising, Morgan noticed a man carrying Emily to the undamaged SUV. When Morgan arrived at the car, he steadied his balance on the hood. Broken glass and metal littered the street. The smell of burning rubber lingered in the air.

Without a word, Jonathan doused Morgan's head with bottled water and swiped blood and brain fragments to the ground.

A black pickup arrived on the scene. A man in a trench coat and jeans approached with two additional security personnel. When he walked into the path of the headlights, he smiled. "Elder Priscilla. Looks like trouble followed you home."

The African American man shook his shaved head as he surveyed the crash debris. His face brightened when he noticed Jonathan. "Oh, man, buddy. It's been a long time."

"A long time," Jonathan repeated as the men embraced. "Good to see you, Victor."

"Let's go!" Priscilla demanded.

Victor briefly spoke to the security men then jumped into the SUV with the others.

Crammed into the vehicle, Jonathan inspected Morgan's wound. "It's healing already."

"The pain's almost completely gone," Morgan said as he tilted his head back and stared at the upholstery on the ceiling of the car. No doubt, the vampires of England were already out for the kill. But Morgan didn't want to vocalize his thoughts during the intensity of the moment. Especially since everyone probably had the same thought.

As the SUV raced along the street, he leaned against Nicholas and held Emily's hand. "Welcome back to America."