

SEPTEMBER - TUESDAY - 10:15 P.M.

Ronnie and Gloria Bennett snuggled-up on their brand new couch with its dark brown leather base and beige microfiber cushions and enjoyed some long overdue one-on-one time. Ronnie usually put in fourteen-hour days, if not more, at work. By the time he returned home each evening, he was so tired that it eradicated any chance of being intimate with his wife of sixteen years even though their ten-year old son, Kenny, had gone to bed hours earlier. Yet, despite this relentless work ethic, he was laid-off Monday morning from his job as the most experienced and well-respected heavy equipment operator for one of the largest construction companies in Triton. His boss gave him two months of severance, an apology, and a promise to bring him back once the pride of blood-thirsty mountain lions, which apparently had been roaming unseen through the city streets, was caught and business picked up again.

Ronnie wasn't pissed off at his boss or anyone else for that matter about the unfortunate situation; he knew the economy was in the tank. The housing market had been hammered by a landslide of foreclosures that some people in various media outlets speculated was in part due to the rash of homeowners that went missing and stopped paying their mortgages over the past six months. In any case, Ronnie was extremely grateful for the extra month's income. His boss wasn't playing favorites - he was merely aware of Ronnie's financial struggles that were spiraling out of control at no fault of his own. Still, Ronnie didn't say anything about it to the other hardworking folks on his crew. They had received only a month's severance when the proverbial ax fell. In spite of the moaning and groaning that followed, it was still better than the measly two-week pay everyone else in the city was getting when similar bad news was delivered.

The Bennett's new couch was delivered around lunchtime as promised by the store manager the night before and was the lone piece of furniture purchased from an actual department store in over two years. It took a full thirteen months of scrimping and saving, and a sliver from Ronnie's severance check, to pull it off, but was worth every penny. The new addition's only flaw was its stark contrast in appearance compared to the rest of their furnishings. Four one-gallon buckets were flipped upside down on the floor in the center of the living room with a sheet of plywood laid across it. During the day, they used it as a coffee table and at night, a dinner table. An old-fashioned, five-drawer dresser, given to them by Gloria's parents, was nestled in the opposite corner. It kept their underwear and other personal items hidden from view and supported a twenty-seven inch tube television with built-in VHS player.

The one-bedroom condo didn't offer much in the way of creature comforts either. It didn't have any store-bought decorations or conversational keepsakes except for the occasional family photo in a non-descript frame. There wasn't any expensive artwork

carefully hung on the wall by wire wound tightly around a screw in case a significant earthquake struck and violently shook the ground. The original builder's flat white paint still blanketed every wall from floor to ceiling except in Kenny's bedroom, which had recently been repainted a dark blue. And, the first floor condo didn't shout out the blood, sweat, and tears Ronnie and Gloria put into it to make it their own little piece of heaven.

Ronnie and Gloria spent a considerable amount of the summer sanding down their kitchen cabinets and refinishing them in a rich, mahogany stain. They ripped up the linoleum flooring, too, and replaced it with the stone tiles they had found in a trash dumpster behind a local hardware store. Then, they continued with their renovation and headed into the living room where they pulled up the carpet and laid down beautiful hardwood flooring courtesy of a construction project that had an overabundance of material. Ronnie purchased the excess for pennies on the dollar from his boss. All their hard work was in pursuit of making family and friends feel more welcome in their home during the holidays. Even before the improvements, no one could deny the love and support that filled every room. It was a nine-hundred square foot space that felt like a mansion.

Contrary to how most of their friends shopped for a home, Ronnie and Gloria purchased the condo site unseen, but for three very good reasons. First, they had taken multiple tours of the builder's model, which was an exact replica of what the other units would look like when finished, and fell more in love with the layout every time. Second, it was within their price range, in a good area, and came with some nice extras. Most importantly, it was close to Kenny's elementary school where he still had friends to play with even if he wasn't able to run around with them like he used to.

An added bonus that came with purchasing a first floor unit was the attached one-car garage. It was spacious enough to park the minivan and still have plenty of room for Kenny's wheelchair. They installed a sturdy, narrow ramp from the kitchen to the garage, so he could easily guide the wheelchair to the minivan's rear passenger sliding door without getting stuck or scraping his knuckles on the wall. This was a critical element of both his physical and mental rehabilitation. He needed to feel safe and secure in his environment, and Ronnie and Gloria made it their top priority.

At the moment, an old gangster movie starring Al Pacino from 1983 flickered on the television screen, but neither Ronnie nor Gloria watched it. They were making out on the couch like a couple of teenagers in the backseat of an old 1970 Plymouth convertible at a drive-in theatre. It had been too long since Ronnie was afforded the luxury of time to arouse his wife with a little foreplay action and he didn't miss a beat. Their passion after two decades of being together rivaled that of most newlywed couples'.

Ronnie pulled his lips away and wiggled his eyebrows. "What do you say we test out our new bed?"

"I like the way you think," Gloria said, giggling. "I'll get us a glass of water. I'm sure we'll need it."

"Don't take too long," Ronnie replied.

"I won't," Gloria said, hurrying excitedly into the high-efficiency kitchen while Ronnie picked up the piece of plywood from off the empty paint buckets and set it by the dresser.

* * *

Luckily for the Bennett's drained checking account, the kitchen had been gutted during the renovation project from apartments into condominiums. Theirs came with brand new appliances, including a side-by-side fridge. They had used their entire life savings for the required twenty percent down and managed to secure a home loan at a very low rate. Since then, every dollar Ronnie made went to paying the mortgage, monthly utility bills, and the mountain of medical expenses delivered daily into their mailbox. Scathing letters from the other driver's car insurance showed up at least once a week as well. Each one stated the same legal garbage: until a declaration from the judge presiding over the case was handed down, they wouldn't pay another cent toward Kenny's medical care since their client was serving time in jail as punishment for the crime.

With each callous letter, Gloria's Irish temper flared and she'd rant about the injustice of the situation to anyone who would listen, which was mostly Ronnie. Kenny had been in the backseat of her car on their way to soccer practice when a drunk driver blew through a red light and t-boned them in the intersection, almost tearing the compact car in half. Gloria was knocked unconscious and suffered a few broken ribs, but Kenny took the brunt of the impact. It stole his ability to walk, but at least he was alive.

Once all the evidence related to the accident was presented and the defense gave its closing argument, the judge excused the jurors to deliberate behind closed doors. After about four hours, the prosecutor came into the coffee bar where the Bennetts and other members of their immediate family gathered to announce that the jury had reached its decision. Gloria considered waiting outside the courthouse in case the jurors felt pressured into letting the young man responsible for the accident go free because his father was the Mayor of Triton City. If not for Ronnie's constant assurance, she would have missed the moment when the jurors unanimously came back with a guilty verdict.

Gloria resisted clapping her hands together out of respect for the young man's family. They weren't to blame for the accident or her son's paralysis. Still, she couldn't understand why they glared at her and Ronnie throughout the trial as though they had been the ones responsible for the accident. They weren't, of course, nor would they wish this on their worst enemy. It was simply a matter of choice. The young man's demons led to his inebriation and the consequences that followed it. A ten-dollar cab ride home would've altered the course of all their lives, especially Kenny's, but there wasn't a court in the world that could right *that* wrong.

The young man convicted for almost killing Kenny that fateful day was awarded an early parole hearing on account of his good behavior and finding God behind bars. Gloria chuckled cynically when she heard the news from the prosecutor and promised to be at the parole hearing in January. She'd gladly testify on the numerous reasons why the young man needed to finish serving out his six-year sentence, which was a pathetic punishment in her opinion. Kenny was still confined to a wheelchair like a prisoner and probably would be for life.

Gloria's game plan was simple: tell the truth. She'd tell the parole board everything Kenny excelled at prior to the accident and the overwhelming hardships that followed it. Next, she'd let them know how often she begged and pleaded with God to heal her son so he could play soccer with his friends once again and not be confined to the sidelines. And last but certainly not least, she'd stress the irrationality of allowing the man responsible for getting behind the wheel of vehicle with a blood alcohol content of

2.0 any leniency because he conveniently found God in jail. Life wasn't fair, but it would be a cold day in hell before she'd let him get a free pass out of jail without a fight.

* * *

When Gloria returned from the kitchen, the cushions were off the couch and Ronnie had pulled out the full-size sleeper bed. He sat on the edge of it, held up a new set of sheets, and flashed a goofy smile. "Would you help me put these on?"

"Sure," Gloria said, setting the glass of water on the dresser next to the television set.

Ronnie tore open the package and removed a couple cardboard inserts. "I still can't believe we'll be sleeping on an actual bed tonight," he said, shaking out the fitted sheet. "No more floor for us!"

Gloria chuckled. "Keep your voice down," she whispered. "You might wake him."

"It's not *my* voice we need to worry about," Ronnie said slyly.

"We'll see about that."

"Is that a challenge I hear?" Ronnie asked, tucking one end of the fitted sheet beneath the mattress.

"It might be, but only if you're up for it," Gloria said, seductively swaying her hips from side-to-side.

"Oh, I'm up for it," Ronnie said with a devilish grin spreading across his ruggedly-handsome face.

They finished making the bed, stripped off their clothes, and slipped between the cotton sheets. Their bodies were drawn together like magnets. Ronnie had forgotten how incredible it felt to hold his wife in his arms. "You feel so good," he whispered.

As their hips found a familiar rhythm, Ronnie picked up the television remote off the couch's armrest, pressed the power button, and tossed it onto the floor. Without the ambient noise from the gangster movie, muffled sounds reminiscent of a bar fight penetrated the glass of their sliding patio door. Gloria's body tensed. "What is that?"

"I don't know or care," Ronnie said, rocking his hips a little bit harder. "My focus is solely on pleasing you tonight."

"You could please me by checking out what that ruckus is all about," Gloria said sweetly. "It's awful."

"Raccoons," Ronnie said, kissing her neck. "It's just raccoons."

The double pane windows installed throughout the condominium complex was an added incentive to buy right across the street from the bustling Triton City Credit Union. The benefit was two-fold. It cut down on the heating and cooling expenses and kept the hectic street noise to a minimum, especially during rush hour traffic and Friday afternoons when it seemed everyone headed to the bank to deposit their paychecks. After the Mayor's warning on Monday, the usual bustling traffic dwindled down to a car or two an hour and no one dared go outside after dusk.

A few of the Bennett's neighbors left the city to stay with out-of-town relatives until the precautionary curfew was lifted. Still, Ronnie and Gloria never had any intention on leaving their home despite the many long-distance calls from worried friends and family members urging them to do just that. News had spread like a wild fire about the

vicious attacks on both the track and football teams at Triton University. They weren't going to be coerced into using their available credit for a couple nights' stay at an overpriced hotel because of a friend's superstitious mumbo-jumbo or a politician's plea to abandon ship at the crack of dawn.

Nevertheless, Gloria began thinking about their options as she lay beneath Ronnie and listened to the alarming chaos that unfolded outside. "Do you think we should at least call the police?"

"And say what?" Ronnie countered.

"The truth," Gloria replied.

Ronnie shook his head. "You really expect me to call the police and say that I'm just too busy making love with my wife to check out some suspicious noises, so they need to do it?"

"What's wrong with that?" Gloria said. "It's the truth."

Ronnie rolled off Gloria, tossed aside the sheet covering them, and strutted toward the sliding glass patio door without bothering with his underwear. The romantic mood between them had been annihilated by whatever was going on outside. "I'm telling you that it's nothing more than raccoons," he said, pulling aside the drapes.

The metal trash cans were untouched within the narrow patio enclosure. Ronnie flipped on the outside porch light, but didn't see anything to explain the noise. Then, he glimpsed movement across the street in the bank's parking lot. As his frantic mind came to terms with what his eyes were seeing, he flipped off the light and quickly backed away from the glass.

"What do you see?" Gloria asked playfully. "A killer raccoon?"

"Get dressed," Ronnie said. "We have to leave."

"Stop trying to scare me," Gloria said, getting up and making a beeline for the patio. "That reverse psychology crap doesn't work on me. It doesn't get me all hot and bothered."

Ronnie stepped in front of her and grabbed her by the arms. "Don't."

"What's gotten into you?" Gloria said, pulling away from him. "You act like you've seen a ghost."

"It's worse than that," Ronnie said, catching one of Gloria's hands. "Trust me."

Gloria held his gaze. "Worse than a ghost?"

"Yes," Ronnie replied, releasing her hand. He snatched up his jeans off the floor and pulled them on.

Gloria rolled her eyes. "I'll believe it when I see it." She peeled back the drapes, wrapped it around her to shield her body in case anyone was out there watching, and flipped on the porch light. "I don't see anything."

Ronnie sat on the edge of the sleeper bed and shoved his bare feet into a worn out pair of tennis shoes. "Look across the street."

Gloria stood on her tiptoes so she could see past their small privacy fence and noticed the silhouette of a very large man standing on top of a car in the bank's parking lot. He was easily over six feet tall with broad shoulders and thick arms. His agility was extraordinary for someone two hundred-plus pounds and he leapt effortlessly from the car to the sidewalk directly across the street from their single-car garage. "What do you think is going on?"

Ronnie pulled out a duffle bag from the coat closet and tossed it onto the sleeper bed. “You don’t want to know.”

Gloria was completely spellbound by the man’s almost superhero-like abilities. Suddenly, he turned and sneered at her, his white fangs glistening beneath the fluorescent street lamp. The moisture evaporated from her mouth and she instantly flipped off the porch light. “That can’t be real,” she said, struggling to formulate a cohesive sentence. “They don’t exist.”

“They do now and know we’re home,” Ronnie said, leading her away from the patio door. “So let’s not wait around for them to knock on the door and ask to be invited in.”

* * *

Kenny jerked the flannel sheet and dark blue comforter over his head and cowered beneath them for protection. The ravenous snarls outside his bedroom window had grown louder and closer in proximity, forewarning him that the monsters of his dreams were indeed real and steadily approaching. “Please go away,” he mumbled, wishing he could shrink into the size of a pea and roll beneath his pillow or leap out of bed and sprint to the living room where his parents were probably sleeping. Save for him crying out in sheer terror like a baby, neither option was a viable one.

His bedroom door creaked open and fear stole his ability to move his arms or even breathe. He knew the faceless monsters had found their way in to him and apparently his parents couldn’t stop them. *Probably killed in their sleep*, he thought grimly. There was nothing he could do, but lay perfectly still in his own pool of nervous sweat and pray that if the monsters found him, they wouldn’t waste their time on such an insignificant morsel. Perhaps, he would get lucky and they wouldn’t even notice him in the darkness.

His current and only source of comfort was his trusty wheelchair parked right alongside the bed, but it held no magical powers or secret weapons. If he tried to reach for the wheelchair’s armrest, the monsters would undoubtedly spot his movement. They would drag him into the abyss beneath the bed and devour him alive. He would never be seen or heard from again.

A beam of light swept back and forth across his bedroom. He could see the glow through the covers, but made no effort to investigate it. He squeezed his eyes shut as the light grew more intense above where his head lay on the pillow as if honing in on a target. Then, he felt something brush up against the bed and could almost sense the horrible monster debating whether to toy with him a little longer or start munching on his fingers and toes like a sizzling appetizer plate of deep fried mozzarella sticks. *I don’t want to die*, he pleaded silently.

Without warning, the covers were ripped from his grasp and stripped off his body. He opened his mouth to scream, but a hand clamped down over it. “It’s okay, my little bed bug,” Gloria said softly, setting the flashlight on his nightstand. “It’s just me.”

Kenny opened his eyes, threw his arms around her neck, and sobbed loudly. “I’m so scared, mommy,” he said. “There’s something outside my window and it sounds like it wants to eat me.”

“I know it does, baby, but everything is going to be just fine,” Gloria said soothingly. “Now, let’s get you into your chair, grab a change of clothes, and get to the garage so we don’t make Dad worry about why it’s taking so long.”

“Are we going somewhere?” Kenny asked.

“Yes, we’re going to see Grandma and Grandpa Bennett in Chicago,” Gloria said, helping Kenny into the wheelchair. “Dad’s already packed the van with food and supplies, so all we need now is you.”

* * *

Ronnie flung open the minivan’s rear passenger sliding door and hurried around to the other side. A minivan hadn’t been on his list of must-own vehicles growing up, but throughout his life, especially over the last two years he’d learned there was some truth to life being alot like a box of chocolates. No one really did know what was in store for them. He and Gloria opted to buy the minivan with the insurance money allocated to replace her compact car decimated in the crash. It was a perfect fit for Kenny’s new medical condition. They sold their second vehicle in order to purchase an ultra light, titanium wheelchair with high-performance wheels and custom painted it for Kenny in his favorite color, dark blue. Neither of them looked at selling the other car as a sacrifice. The probability of someone Kenny’s age surviving a crash of such magnitude was slim to none. By the grace of God they still had their son, but there were plenty of others who couldn’t say the same thing about a loved one after such a terrible tragedy.

Thirty seconds earlier, Ronnie had been in the living room gathering a few last-minute items from the dresser when the outdated metal trashcans on the patio toppled over and made a horrific crash. He didn’t need to investigate what had caused it; he already knew and it sure wasn’t a family of starving raccoons. “Hurry up, love,” he said nervously. Five minutes hadn’t passed since he first glimpsed what was transpiring in the bank parking lot across the street. To him, time had sped up and ticked faster than his heartbeat.

Ronnie checked to make sure his wallet was still in his back pocket and slid in behind the steering wheel. He angled the rearview mirror so he had a direct line of sight into the kitchen. No matter his terror, he wouldn’t leave without his family even if it meant giving up his life. An eerie scraping sound came from the outer shell of the garage door reminding him of someone prying open the top of a coke can with a flathead screwdriver. He stared through the windshield at the suddenly too thin sheet of metal separating him from whatever lay on the other side. He wondered if his imagination was getting the best of him as he pictured Dracula’s minions setting up an elaborate dinner table with cloth napkins on the sidewalk. Nevertheless, he’d seen what was out there and it sure in the hell wasn’t mountain lions.

A sudden flash of color reflected in the rearview mirror and Ronnie turned around so quickly that he almost gave himself whiplash. Gloria sprinted through the kitchen; her facial expression twisted in sheer panic as she pushed Kenny in front of her. He was still in his pajamas and a small duffle bag rested on his lap. They sailed down the ramp so fast it was like they had crested the first drop-off of a roller coaster and needed the momentum to survive the next section of the ride. They skidded to a stop at the passenger door.

Gloria grabbed the duffle bag and tossed it into the van. Then, she scooped up Kenny into her arms and kicked the wheelchair aside; toppling it over just as breaking glass resonated behind them. She carried Kenny into the van and dropped him gently onto the bench-like seat. “Go, go, go,” she said, sliding shut the rear passenger door.

“What about my wheelchair?” Kenny said.

Gloria fumbled with the security harness that worked similar to a seatbelt in Kenny’s specialized section of the seat. “We’ll get you another one.”

“Calm down, sweetheart,” Ronnie said, pressing the button on the small rectangular control box clipped to the van’s sun visor activating the garage door. “We’ll be on the road in no time.”

“I’ll calm down when we’re on the road and far away from here,” Gloria said.

Ronnie glanced in the rearview mirror and saw a creature staring at him from the open kitchen doorway. When their eyes met, the decaying creature launched itself onto the minivan’s roof. It drove its elongated nails through the fiberglass shell and pierced the interior.

“Get down,” Gloria shrieked, covering Kenny’s head with her hands.

When the garage door finished its slow ascent, a group of creatures congregated in the driveway as if waiting for an all-you-can-eat buffet to open up for business. Ronnie hit the automatic lock button. “Shit,” he said, adjusting his grip on the steering wheel.

The creatures stared with menacing yellow eyes and sniffed the air. Rotting flesh hung from their bones and a few were missing vital parts of their faces, such as an eye or nose or both and all that remained were gaping holes. There was no reason to wait around and ask them what they wanted; it was obvious by the blood caked around their mouths and the obnoxiously long fangs that flared outward from their decomposing gums. They wanted to sink their teeth into the red river of life flowing through the Bennetts’ veins and there was no way Ronnie would let that happen.

The creature atop the minivan drove its sharp talons through the minivan’s roof again and into the driver’s seat headrest. It was all the encouragement Ronnie needed and he stomped on the accelerator. The van shot forward, smashing into the creatures, and hurtled their bodies like rag dolls over the hood and through the air. Ronnie did his best to shake off the creature clinging to the roof. He jerked the steering wheel left and right, struck a fire hydrant that unleashed a geyser of water into the air, and sideswiped a couple cars parked along the street.

Gloria crouched down into the cramped space between the front and middle row of seats. She could see the terror on Kenny’s face and took his hand. “It’ll be okay.”

Kenny struggled for his breath. “Sure, mom.”

The creature on top of the roof ripped his nails out of the headrest and then back down again, falling shy of filleting Kenny’s cheek. Gloria screamed and grabbed the closest thing in proximity: a bright orange-colored emergency safety hammer tucked into the back sleeve of the driver’s seat. She slammed the iron point of the emergency hammer repeatedly into the creature’s nails and broke off a couple before it could rip those that remained out of the roof.

“Slam on the brakes!” Gloria shouted, bracing herself between the seats.

Ronnie obeyed her request and drove his heel down onto the brake pedal. The creature flew off the minivan’s roof and landed on the pavement in front of them. It struggled to get back up on its feet, but had suffered compound fractures in both legs

making it impossible to do so. The other creatures were drawn to the blood flowing freely from the multiple wounds on the creature's head and legs and wasted no time in letting their intentions be known.

"They're like flies on shit," Ronnie said, turning his face away as the creatures fought like rabid dogs over which one would get the first bite. When he found the strength to look again, the injured creature was nothing more than a sacrificial lamb drained of every last drop of blood. The other creatures were rejuvenated and stared at the minivan with a disquieted rage in their glowering yellow eyes.

A large shadow passed in front of the minivan's headlights and another appeared beside the driver's side door. Ronnie swallowed the terrified lump of emotion caught in his throat and turned to face the vampire that was certainly the same one he saw on top of the car in the bank parking lot. The dark-skinned vampire rapped on the window, but made no attempt to peel open the door like a banana and enter the vehicle, which would have been easy for him to do if his large, muscular arms were any indication.

Kenny's eyes grew wide with fear. "I think he wants to talk to you, Dad."

"I think you're right," Ronnie said, biting down hard on his bottom lip. He lowered the driver's window about half an inch. "Please, don't hurt my family," he said, struggling to keep his voice from cracking.

Lawrence Williams glared at him. "We'll clear the road, but don't come back or you'll die, got it?"

Ronnie nodded his head. "Yes."

Without another word, Lawrence walked toward the front of the minivan where his companion kept the creatures at bay by snarling and growling at them. The creatures were smart enough to realize that what was in front of them could inflict serious bodily harm and most likely death due to the others that had surrounded the bank, but they still didn't have the slightest clue on how to defeat the hairy beast.

Ronnie rolled up the window and gripped the steering wheel. "I can't believe this is happening."

Kenny stared at the two unlikely allies taking their positions like tag team wrestlers in front of the minivan. "I didn't know they were friends."

Gloria peeked between the front two seats and over the dash. Lawrence's companion leapt forward and attacked the first encroaching creature with a mighty swipe of its claw, ripping its' face clean off. Gloria shrunk back down behind the seats and clenched her hand against her chest. "Please God... save us."

SEPTEMBER - TUESDAY - 10:35 P.M.

Lawrence turned and flashed his menacing fangs one last time in warning at the stunned minivan driver. He knew this terrifying theatric was needed in order for the driver to understand that they were not friends and this was his only chance to escape the city unscathed. If the driver hesitated or had an abrupt change of heart about leaving his home, neither Lawrence nor his companion, Robin Michaels, would be around a second time to save him and his family. This was a one time offer. His and Robin's split-second decision to help out these foolish strangers and keep them from being eaten alive by the ravenous creatures put both of their lives in higher peril than their escape from the bank did. It, also, left Julie Chang alone in the front seat of a car some thirty feet away.

Robin's transformation into a werewolf was a triumphant moment in tipping the scales in favor of their personal survival when it came to the vast number of creatures encircling the perimeter of the bank. Her animalistic fury and razor sharp claws held true to their legendary status and proved beyond a doubt that she was indeed a force to be reckoned with. An uprising of others like her, the vampire's rumored enemy from centuries past, would have a devastating impact on both humans and vampires' continued existence. Lawrence couldn't help but wonder how quickly he could melt down his father's rare silver coin collection into bullets and if it would help keep the werewolf population from wiping out mankind and perhaps *his* kind. Then again, silver bullets might be as effective as crucifixes against vampires, utterly useless, but he didn't know where else to start.

Together, he and Robin had fought their way out of the rear emergency exit of the bank and kept Julie tucked safely in between them the entire time. Robin sliced through the encroaching creatures rotting flesh with the efficiency of a blender through butter. Then, she decapitated each one with the indifference of a child popping off the head of a flower stem. Once they reached the middle of the parking lot, Lawrence leapt onto the roof of an abandoned car to get a better view of where they were and how many creatures were standing between them and their getaway car. *Too many*, he had thought, but didn't voice his opinion.

Brenda Ryan was gracious enough to loan out her private collection of exotic cars to assist the team in staying one step ahead of Dr. Cohn and his minions. So far, none of the vehicles were returned in their original condition, including the least expensive of them, the H2 Hummer. Justin drove it to football practice and after a terrifying chain of events; Jennifer was forced to crash it into a tree to save him from being murdered on its roof by another vampire. The decision nearly killed Julie.

Later on that very evening, Colleen Summers and Calvin Whitmore brought back Brenda's cherished Lamborghini Diablo with a hundred or so new bullet holes in its

exterior after encountering a mob of ruthless citizens taking advantage of the curfew issued by the Mayor. They employed cement blocks to shatter the large window panes of profitable businesses and stole everything they could get their greedy little hands on. If a lowly security guard or anyone else for that matter tried to intervene, the looters would change their minds by leveling automatic weapons at them. However, karma had a way of balancing the scales. When the mob encircled the Diablo in an attempt to forcibly take it, Calvin and Colleen's lives were spared by the sudden arrival of a group of creatures searching for their next meal. Calvin and Colleen escaped without suffering any physical harm, but the same couldn't be said for the classless mob.

Upon their return to the Ryan's estate, Calvin exchanged the Lamborghini for a flashy silver Jaguar with leather seats. He volunteered to drive Lawrence, Julie, and Antonio to Ideologies Pharmaceuticals to see if they could uncover the truth about Lawrence's dad's death. Unfortunately, Calvin and Antonio's lives were tragically cut short and the responsibility of the Jaguar transferred to Lawrence and Julie. They left it parked right across the street from the bank believing it would be safe. Now, it was surrounded by creatures waiting for dinner to come to them.

The sudden intrusion of a gleaming porch light from a first floor condominium a block down the street captured the creatures' attention and lured them toward it. Lawrence grasped the opportunity to leap over to the sidewalk and get a better view of the person responsible for the distraction. It also afforded Robin the time she needed to get Julie to the car without too much interference. They waited for Lawrence to join them, which he did within seconds, to unlock the driver's side door. Julie dove into the front seat, scrambled over the leather console to the passenger side, and dropped onto the floorboard. She curled up into a ball, wrapping her arms around her knees and burying her head. Fear had taken a hold of her again, but there wasn't time to calm her down. All Lawrence could do was lock the door as the next battle summoned them with the opening of the condo's garage door.

Lawrence and Robin kept up their assault on the creatures determined to get as close to the minivan as possible like groupies at a rock concert. The creatures fought back hard, using combat skills obviously taught to them by someone expertly trained in military and/or police tactics. They exchanged punches, threw kicks, and tried to sweep out Lawrence and Robin's feet from underneath them. The creatures might have fared better had their human side not been so compromised by Dr. Cohn's caustic vampire serum. Their bones snapped like toothpicks with every hit, given or received, and they were quickly reduced to heaps of rotting flesh with nothing solid left within their bodies except, perhaps, their teeth. Lawrence knew they were from one of Dr. Cohn's earlier experimental groups and it wouldn't have surprised him if some were from around the same time as Eric Monroe's unplanned indoctrination into the clan.

Once they had fatally wounded or killed every creature in close proximity of the minivan, Lawrence motioned at the driver to get a move on it. The child sitting in the second row of seats had his frightened, pale face pressed against the passenger window. His expressive brown eyes reflected complete bewilderment as if wondering what he'd done so wrong in his young life to be caught up in such a horrific situation. As the minivan rolled past, Lawrence tried to ease the boy's apprehension and smiled, but the boy shrunk away from the window in fear. The reaction mimicked Lawrence's own

younger brother, Anthony's, the first time he saw the fangs. It was heartbreaking to invoke such emotion when offering the kindest of gestures.

Ignoring the memories and emotional baggage that accompanied a life he didn't call his own anymore, Lawrence focused on the task ahead. He was weak and needed to replenish his energy, but gorging on a creature's blood wasn't ideal. The side effects from Dr. Cohn's first few attempts to create the perfect serum were devastating and he avoided anyone exposed to it, except for one, Eric Monroe. Dr. Grosse had developed an antidote that would stave off the side effects for a short stint and administered it to Eric on a weekly basis for the last five years. Lawrence couldn't fathom, given the doctor's track record, why he even helped Eric in the first place. Perhaps all those years ago, he was an entirely different man and had a reserve of decency hidden somewhere within his being that slowly dried up, but Lawrence doubted it. There had to be another reason.

There wasn't a misgiving in Lawrence's mind that Eric would lose his battle to maintain his humanity in Romania if it took longer than the forty-eight hour window Emily Radcliffe estimated it would to complete their mission. If everything went smoothly, they'd land in Bucharest, head to the Ryan's abandoned diamond mine, collect DNA samples, and return to Triton City late Wednesday or early the following morning. Eric wouldn't have to suffer through the awful side effects because Dr. Grosse's antidote staved them off for four days and he had received his last shot on Sunday. But, if for any reason they were held up, Eric would start to change and whatever damage was done to the human side of him would be irreversible. Even if the plane landed right in front of Dr. Grosse's house, it would be too late for the anti-serum to have any real effect.

Lawrence tried not to think about the agonizing decay of his friend's body if time got away from them. Emily would be the first to notice and offer assistance, but there wouldn't be anything for her to do. The flight home would prove to be too much for Eric and he'd evolve into the worst kind of vampiric creature, unable to distinguish between friend and foe. The others would have to kill him and burn his body immediately upon landing without having the opportunity to say good-bye to an integral member of their team.

Julie's high-pitched squeal pierced the air and obliterated Lawrence's thoughts. He looked toward the Jaguar and saw two creatures circling it like vultures. They growled and hissed, snapped open and close their mouthful of jagged teeth, and gestured threateningly to decapitate the other one with their serrated, black, nails if it got in the way. Lawrence recognized this display of aggression. The creatures were engaged in a cockfight to see who got first dibs at the meager human appetizer inside the car. It was a bizarre sight to witness, but a noble one for the supposed mindless creatures.

While Robin took care of additional creatures cowering in the shadows, Lawrence sprinted toward the car. He didn't see another one of Dr. Cohn's creatures clinging to a window ledge overhead, but the moment he was beneath it, the creature released its grip and dropped onto his shoulders. The impact knocked both of them onto the ground. Though disoriented, Lawrence quickly regained his bearings and tackled the creature before it had a chance to regain its footing. He drove his black nails into the creature's chest, found its heart, and crushed it with his bare hand. He'd learned from his frequent run-ins with the creatures and Dr. Grosse's constant complaining about them that vampires and anything remotely similar had few vulnerabilities. The trick to surviving chance encounters was beating them to the punch. Plunge a sharp instrument into their

heart, chop off their head, or set them ablaze, but do it fast and do it first before they had time to do it.

The first night Lawrence returned to Triton City after his disappearance in June, he ran into Antonio Maggiano and Dr. Grosse on the football field at Triton University. They were out searching for Dr. Cohn's creatures dead set on extinguishing their miserable existence by either a wooden stake to the heart or a swift slice of a sword blade through the neck. After a few more unscheduled run-ins, Lawrence came to the conclusion that Antonio was a good man and could be trusted, but the same didn't hold true for Dr. Grosse. He sensed a purposeful deception behind the *good* doctor's dark brown eyes and knew it reflected how full of shit he was when he downplayed his involvement in the vampire epidemic. And, it was an epidemic.

Initially, quite a few students were tricked into taking the serum based on the unsubstantiated rumors of its ability to eradicate ailments. For those who participated in the first few years of clinical trials, they either died because of complications within their cell structure or survived long enough to see their humanity deteriorate right in front of their eyes. Regardless, no one stayed among the living long enough to report Dr. Cohn's indiscretions to the proper authorities, and he and his minions quickly got rid of the bodies.

Due to well-placed propaganda, more students were coerced into trying the serum. They submitted to the twelve week regimen of injections like hapless guinea pigs all in the name of perfection. Most got it, but it was very short-lived. Once the injection phase was over, the students returned to their normal routines and basked in the joy of their new, improved selves. Then, the craving for blood bubbled up within them and took precedence over everything else in their lives. It even invoked horrific nightmares if they tried to sleep through it. Many sought help right away and discussed the nauseating side effect with Dr. Cohn. His reply was always the same: perfection had a price and this was it. Then, he tempted their willpower with an overflowing medieval goblet of human blood, which he placed on a table in front of them, and left the room. It didn't take long for the students to pick up the goblet and drink the contents even if they were repulsed by the idea an hour earlier.

Once the students had sucked down every last drop of the copper-tasting liquid and as expected, asked for more upon Dr. Cohn's return, he agreed to get them another cup but on the condition they did something for him swear their loyalty to his secret society. Most of the students eagerly agreed and scribbled their name in red ink along the bottom line of a written contract that stated violation of the listed terms would result in swift, harsh, and lethal punishment. Ninety percent of the students didn't bother to read the contract and signed it because their desire for perfection trumped all rationale.

Over the next few weeks, the students evolved into hideous-looking creatures with an insatiable thirst for blood and no way of telling anyone what happened as their ability to speak had deteriorated right along with their humanity. Dr. Cohn trained his new inductees to target people walking alone at night. The primary goal was to use their newly-acquired vampiric instincts to overcome prey and satisfy their bloodlust. He wooed anyone not fond of the nightly slaughter with fabricated tales of infallible business success, stunning beauty, and insatiable sex drives by others before them. He kept it up until the student gave in completely to the vampire within and no longer acknowledged their human side at all. If anyone appeared skeptical of his stories, refused to participate

in the hunt, or just seemed to be snooping around, his kind demeanor vanished and he would have them killed instantly. Only one person had managed to escape Dr. Cohn's army of death dealers, but the young man met his fate a short time later by staggering onto a highway right in the path of a fast-approaching semi-truck with a full load in its trailer.

Lawrence challenged Dr. Grosse on how it was that he knew so much about Dr. Cohn's operations if he wasn't in some way equally responsible for the current vampire epidemic. Dr. Grosse defended his position by repeating a wild tale about how he got roped into the early stages of the project by Dr. Cohn's insistence to combine their impressive resumes and find a cure for cancer. Dr. Cohn theorized if they could figure out how to manipulate the longevity of telomeres in the human body, they might unlock the secrets to living a healthy and exceptionally lengthy life.

According to Dr. Grosse, he wanted out when the investigational phase of the serum shifted from rats to human subjects because he knew the devastation it caused in the rodents. Dr. Cohn wouldn't hear of it and made it crystal clear that anyone who turned their back on the project would wind up regretting it. Dr. Grosse decided to stay involved, but took a solemn oath to avenge the deaths of countless students tricked into taking the serum. His main purpose in continuing with the project was to find a way to permanently wipe out Dr. Cohn and his loyal followers from the face of the earth ... or so he said.

Thus far, Lawrence hadn't seen any evidence to support that righteous claim. Dr. Grosse's obvious glee in tracking down every last one of Dr. Cohn's creatures, who were once students, and mercilessly killing them was an absolute contradiction to it. After a few months of what boiled down to nothing but servitude, Lawrence concluded that if he didn't continue to go along with what the *good* doctor asked of him, he would be next to get staked and in time, probably would anyway. He confided his suspicions in Antonio and much to his dismay, Antonio was in complete agreement. They came up with the perfect plan for him to escape the city and be out of the country long before Dr. Grosse even noticed his absence. However, an unexpected wrench was tossed into the mix and drastically altered their anticipated course of action.

The final round of students attending Dr. Cohn's cure-all forum arrived at his laboratory on campus the previous Thursday and answered the customary survey questionnaire. Dr. Grosse reviewed the answers and selected the ones he wanted as part of the control group. He waited to begin his well-rehearsed spiel about the program until the others destined to be a part of Dr. Cohn's experimental group disappeared into an adjoining room. After a quick introduction, he gave everyone in the room one last chance to change their minds and leave if they wanted to, but no one did. The promise of eternal beauty and phenomenal health was too much to resist. He instructed Antonio to give each person in the control group an injection that was supposed to be the standard placebo solution, but in actuality was the vampire serum he had stolen from Dr. Cohn's office a few days earlier.

Lawrence never trusted Dr. Grosse, but when he learned of his latest con involving the students it was the final nail in the coffin. His decision to leave was absolute until Antonio confided his long-time friend, Brenda Ryan, had been part of the control group. They had been friends since grade school and had learned through the grapevine that she never stopped searching for him after his disappearance. There was no

way he could turn his back on her now and walk away after all she had done in hopes of finding out what happened to him. There was no doubt she was a tough cookie and would survive the gut-wrenching side effects invoked by the serum, but he didn't trust Dr. Grosse to keep her safe. She needed a guardian angel and he nominated himself for the job.

From what Lawrence had observed over the past few months, in conjunction with the events of the week prior, the pieces of the puzzle were finally falling into place and creating a terrifying picture. Dr. Grosse was a Nobel Prize Winning serial killer. He pretended to care about the students suckered into the project, but was the co-conspirator for the whole mess from the beginning. His motivation for switching it up was his selfish need to finish tweaking the werewolf serum. When Dr. Cohn's creatures started to get out of hand and interfering with that, there was nothing left for him to do but inject the control group with the serum. He believed a band of good vampires would distract Dr. Cohn and his minions just long enough to complete his pet project without distraction. He was wrong.

Another terrifying scream escaped Julie's lips as one of the creatures rammed its fist into the Jaguar's side window and shattered the glass. Shards rained onto the passenger seat. The creature reached inside and grabbed Julie by the hair. She cried out and flung her body toward the opposite side, leaving short, black and blond-streaked strands of hair in the creature's hand. The creature immediately crawled through the window after her. Julie opened the driver's side door, tumbled out onto the street, and slammed the door shut behind her. The second creature darted from around the rear bumper and cut off her intended escape route toward Lawrence. She grabbed the driver's side mirror, hoisted herself up, and hobbled backward trying to keep weight off her injured ankle. The creature crept closer with a mixture of pus and saliva dripping from its mouth.

Out of nowhere, Robin leapt over the Jaguar as though it wasn't larger than a child's toy car and landed on the creature, pinning it to the ground. She stomped down onto the creature's neck and crushed its windpipe before driving her deadly talons into its chest, swiftly ensuring it wouldn't get back up. Lawrence rushed over to the passenger side door and stopped the first creature from escaping. It had reversed direction as soon as it saw Robin glare at it through the driver's side window. He snatched it out of the seat by its throat and whipped it over his shoulder, slamming it into the sidewalk and splitting its head open like a melon. It died instantly.

"Our work here is done," Lawrence said.

"We should go then," Julie said, refraining from putting too much weight on her ankle. "There may be more on the way."

Lawrence sniffed the air and furrowed his brow. "Smells that way," he said, strutting over to the driver's side door. "Let's get to Brenda's and see if the others made it back yet."

Julie climbed into the Jaguar's swanky, but ultra cramped backseat and looked out the window. She saw Robin moving away from them. "Where's she going?"

"I don't know," Lawrence said, bending down so he could see into the backseat. "I'll go talk to her."

"You're not leaving me alone in this car again."

“She saved our lives,” Lawrence reminded. “We wouldn’t have survived five minutes against all those creatures if not for her.”

Julie crossed her arms in front of her chest. “I know that,” she said. “Can’t you just ask her to come with us without leaving the car? Please? I’m already scared shitless the way it is.”

Lawrence knew Julie spoke the truth. He could see it reflected in her almond-shaped eyes. Any more excitement and she’d succumb to hysterics. They had lost Calvin and Antonio earlier in the day and the night before, her parents. She was on the verge of a complete mental breakdown. “You win.” He straightened up and cupped his hands over his mouth as the stench of death grew stronger. “Hey, there’s plenty of room in the car if you want to tag along!”

Robin paused in the shadows cast upon her by an intermittent-working street light and cocked her dog-like ear in their direction. Lawrence walked around to the other side of the Jaguar, opened the passenger side door, and swept off the glass from the seat. “Come on,” he said, patting the seat. “We can really use your help.”

Robin lowered her head and stared at the thick layer of coarse, reddish-brown hair covering her body. Julie leaned forward. “Tell her I can find her something to wear at Brenda’s.”

Lawrence shrugged his shoulders. “Julie will hook you up with something to wear at Brenda’s.”

Robin dropped onto all fours and was at the car in no time flat. Werewolves were exceptionally fast especially when they incorporated all their extremities. She leapt into the passenger seat, which instantly broke from her massive weight. Julie barely got out of the way before the seatback crashed down against the seat she was sitting in. “Damn, that was close,” she said, gasping for breath.

Robin looked back and whined.

Lawrence climbed into the driver’s seat. “I think that means she’s sorry.”

“Yeah, I figured that out on my own,” Julie said sarcastically. “So, now what?”

Lawrence’s hands trembled as he gripped the steering wheel. He needed food, but not the kind found at a convenience store. “We head to Brenda’s and pray we don’t run into any more creatures.”

“And if we do?” Julie asked.

“I’ll need to have a few pints of your blood,” Lawrence said matter-of-factly.

Julie’s entire body shook. “You’re so not funny right now.”

“I wasn’t trying to be,” Lawrence said, angling the rearview mirror so their eyes met. “I’m extremely weak and your blood may be the only way I can keep us alive.”

“I thought you didn’t like Chinese food.”

“Every rule has an exception,” Lawrence said. “Let’s pray we don’t run into any more of the decaying ones.”

“If we do, then we’re turning this fucking car around and hauling ass in the other direction,” Julie said. “I refuse to be a walking blood bank.”

SEPTEMBER - TUESDAY - 10:53 P.M.

Blood trickled from a severed section of small intestine that dangled off the white arch trellis in Dr. Grosse's well-manicured front lawn. It swayed in response to the cool night breeze and sprinkled droplets of red onto the green grass blades like cast-off from a painter's brush accidentally flicked at a wall. Decayed flesh slid off a couple bronze crane statues and collected on the ground like malleable clay. Two creatures fought over a stash of severed limbs they had discovered between a family of ceramic gnomes and a darkened garden orb with swirling hues of purple, blue, and black on its surface. This was all that remained of another one of Dr. Cohn's creations. It had been obliterated by the front grill of a car. Neither creature showed remorse for filling their bellies with whatever parts of it were still edible.

Justin Monroe didn't pay any attention to the creatures' depravity or sickening appetite. His sole focus was on finding a way to save the love of his life, Jennifer Langstrom. The initial stake launched from Dr. Cohn's crossbow remarkably missed its mark, but the second one hadn't. It struck him in the chest, tunneled through his pectoral muscle, shredding the tissue, and exited out his back. Then, it slammed into Jennifer, who was standing directly behind him. It plowed through her slender frame and pinned her to the trunk of very large Coulter pine tree. Her vampiric DNA instantly went to work on repairing the damage, but the stake interfered with the pumping action of her heart and impeded her ability to heal.

Justin slid Jennifer's body off the stake and gently laid her on the ground. Death was stealing her away and he didn't know how to stop it. His brown eyes were swallowed up by a toxic blend of grief and hatred, turning them as black as coal along with his fingernails. As the vampire within took over, he left Jennifer's side and strode toward Dr. Cohn, fixated on nothing else, but killing him.

Dr. Cohn saw Justin's rapid advancement and quickly reloaded another stake into the crossbow. He pulled the trigger and watched the wooden stake plow into Justin's stomach, but there was no reaction from the impact on his face. He simply reached up, pulled it out, and dropped it on the ground. Dr. Cohn fired a fourth stake that sunk into Justin's thigh, but the effect was the same. It should've made him stumble, vampire or not, yet his anger blocked out all other emotion except for the raging agony of his broken heart. It was quite apparent that he would have his revenge if it was the last thing he ever did.

Dr. Cohn wasn't able to load another wooden stake fast enough and tossed aside the crossbow to go toe-to-toe with Justin. Anyone with a smidgen of intelligence knew

that was a bad idea. He lashed out and raked his nails across Justin's face, filleting the skin beneath his left eye.

Justin didn't flinch and wasted no time in answering the attack. He speared his black fingernails deep into the soft tissue of Dr. Cohn's chest and twisted his hands around, so the palms faced in opposite directions. He slipped his fingers underneath each ribcage and, jerked apart his hands, tearing open Dr. Cohn's chest cavity. As blood spilled forth from the gaping wound, he snatched out Dr. Cohn's heart and stared at it for a split-second before tossing it to a nearby creature that gobbled it up without hesitation. Dr. Cohn collapsed to the ground and bled out within seconds. It was a fitting end for the man Justin felt was responsible for destroying all he loved.

When Justin returned to Jennifer's side, he fell to his knees and gazed upon her angelic face, which inevitably soothed him. His anger dissipated right along with his vampiric appearance. It wasn't fair for her life to be cut short when the stake had been meant for him. The more he dwelled on that, the more determined he became to save her. First and foremost, he needed to stop the bleeding, so he stripped off his shirt and tore it into two pieces. He tucked the first piece into the hole in her back where blood seeped out like a leaky faucet and then pressed the second piece against her chest. The tips of her brown hair were already tinted a rust color from the blood that pooled beneath her shoulders. Her soulful blue eyes no longer glimmered with the crystal clear clarity of a cloudless sky; now they resembled a dismal, gray one. It didn't matter to Justin. He was determined not to give up and nothing would change his mind.

There was no doubt Jennifer needed an urgent blood transfusion and a miracle from the man upstairs to overcome this latest brush with death. Justin knew if God blessed him with the time and tools to save her one more time, he would do everything in his power to abolish the deviant snakes slithering within the realm of His Garden of Eden. He had already killed one of the men responsible for the deaths of countless students and wouldn't rest until the other man was punished for his heinous crimes against humanity, too. Whether it was hashed out in front of a jury here on Earth or angels in the afterlife, he wouldn't rest until the job was done.

Justin never saw eye-to-eye with his parents on the subject of religion. He believed in a deeper truth - one that held God as an all-loving being who never asked or wanted to be feared, just respected. They believed a society needed to be God-fearing in order to hold onto their morals. Justin had witnessed the hypocrisy by many of these so-called believers who dropped to their knees each Sunday morning, confessed their sins, and begged to be forgiven. Then, they went out the following day and repeated the same sins. His father was one of them, sometimes going to church with liquor still on his breath.

Justin closed his eyes and prayed with all his might for God to look over Jennifer and heal her if He saw fit. He also asked God to grant him the strength to tackle the next round of obstacles that would inevitably come his way. Then, he opened his eyes and drove his fangs into his bottom lip, allowing the resulting blood to drizzle onto her tongue. It was absorbed instantly and he found hope in that. Still, there was one more issue to contend with before he could whisk Jennifer to the only doctor in Triton City that might be able to save her with God's help. An old friend had unexpectedly shown up and it was a tough call to know which side he played for now: good or evil.

* * *

Bradley Coolidge knelt to the ground and tucked away the crossbow he had used to eliminate a couple of Dr. Cohn's creatures into his gym bag. He placed it on top of the last bundle of wooden stakes concealed inside. Only ten or so stakes remained of the original thirty. After everything he had seen, especially within the last twenty-four hours, there was no doubt in his mind that he would need a lot more if he wanted to stay alive. The thorough search of his father's office for anything of significance in regards to Dr. Cohn's next plan of action revealed clues that led him to his current location at Dr. Grosse's house. It was a purposeful step away from the path of damnation he had started out on and he had no plans on going back.

There wasn't any reason for Bradley to worry about his blatant disregard of the strict household rules as he ransacked his father's office. He didn't even need the tiny silver key his father wore dutifully around his neck to access the locked filing cabinet. His father was dead and gone. He hoped his father's body was picked apart by ravenous birds or eaten by something much worse than a hungry coyote by now. He felt nothing but hatred for his father. On the other hand, his mother's death was a brutal blow to his heart. He loved her something fierce. His father had taken her away from him and he had made him pay dearly for that.

The locked filing cabinet was no match for Bradley's anguish and need to find answers. He yanked on the metal handle and popped open the top drawer as easily as the lid to a can of stackable chips. It made a horrific noise as the locking mechanism failed to withstand the brutal pressure and the internal security bar collapsed unveiling a treasure trove of information hidden within the filing cabinet. The bottom drawer contained a stack of manila folders related to some sketchy business dealings his father had with the recently departed CEO of Ashton Enterprises, Brian Levine. The drawer above it held the wooden stakes.

Bradley zipped up the gym bag, slung its strap over his left shoulder, and stood up. He searched the shadows surrounding the Tudor- and Victorian-style houses for anything that moved in contradiction to the wind. The stench of decaying flesh hung in the air and filled his lungs like thick molasses with every breath. He knew more of Dr. Cohn's creatures were scheduled to arrive, but had no idea from which direction. "I know you're there," he muttered.

It didn't take long for the creatures to show their ugly faces. They crested a hill on the south side of Dr. Grosse's extensive property and made their way swiftly toward Bradley and the others. Their advanced stages of decomposition hampered their progress, but didn't slow them enough to make Bradley feel confident in dilly-dallying around for another second or two. He remembered a story his mother used to tell him about a fabled race between a slow, but steady tortoise and the lightning-fast hare and who inevitably won. He wasn't going to be the foolish hare and underestimate the tortoise, so he sprinted to where Justin was performing CPR in an effort to save Jennifer.

"It's too late, man. She's gone," Bradley said. "Stop wasting time and let's get out of here."

Justin wiped away the sweat glistening on his brow. "It will be too late if I have to dick around with you," he growled.

Bradley was taken aback. "I didn't come here to fight with you."

“Are you sure about that?” Justin said. “Because I have plenty of proof to the contrary.”

“Look asshole,” Bradley said, balling his hands into fists. “If I had wanted you dead then you would be dead, but I took out some creatures saving your dumb ass tonight, so shut up and listen.”

“I’m all ears,” Justin said sarcastically.

“I came here to help put an end to this bullshit once and for all, but if you’d rather handle it all on your own that’s fine with me,” Bradley said heatedly. “It’s no sweat off my back.”

Justin glimpsed the horde of creatures breaching the outer limits of Dr. Grosse’s property line. “Tell me why I should believe you,” he said, slipping his arms beneath Jennifer’s limp body. “How do I know you can be trusted?”

Bradley shook his head. “We don’t have time for this shit.”

“I have plenty,” Justin said, refusing to budge.

“Let’s just say I saw the error of my ways in my mother’s eyes,” Bradley replied. “I made her a promise to be a better man.”

“Did she get it out?” Justin asked.

“No,” Bradley said, choking on the answer.

Justin lifted Jennifer off the ground as Tommy tore threw the grass in another one of Brenda’s flashy loaners and came to a screeching halt not more than five feet away. Justin held Jennifer close and inhaled a ragged breath. “I’m sorry about your mom...None of this shit is fair.”

Tommy coughed up more blood, rolled down the driver’s side window, and spat it onto the ground. “You’re telling me,” he said, laying his head against the steering wheel. “This fucking sucks.”

Colleen Summers flung open the passenger side door and leapt out with shotgun in hand. Her green eyes settled on Bradley as she leveled the shotgun at him. “What’s he doing here?”

“He’s here to help or so he says,” Justin replied, carrying Jennifer over to the car.

“Uh-huh,” Colleen said, keeping the shotgun trained on Bradley. “Are you sure about that?”

“No, but I don’t really give a damn one way or the other right now,” Justin said. “All I care about is getting Jennifer to Brenda’s house as soon as possible. Samir is the only one who might be able to save her so I’m not wasting any more precious time on this shit, okay?”

Colleen lowered the shotgun. She opened the rear passenger door for Justin and raced around to the other side. She climbed into the backseat where the scent of vomit still lingered from Tommy’s earlier puking fit and closed the door. “Hold on, Justin,” she said, tucking the shotgun beside her leg with the barrel pointed toward the floorboard. “I’ll help you.”

Justin eased Jennifer into the car where Colleen was instrumental in cradling Jennifer’s head. She kept it stable as Justin slid in and got situated. “This entire area will be crawling with military personnel tomorrow,” he said, looking back out at Bradley. “If you want to live, you’d better get in the car.”

“The military?” Bradley questioned. “What are you talking about?”

“I don’t have time to explain,” Justin said.

Colleen looked past him. "You've run out of time to do anything else anyway," she said.

Bradley glanced back at the creatures that were now less than fifteen feet away from them. "Why can't these fucking things go away?"

"Just get in," Justin said, closing the door.

Bradley climbed into the front passenger seat and quickly slammed the door close. He pressed the automatic lock button as a creature went for the door handle. "I don't have anywhere else to be anyway," he said nonchalantly, ignoring the grotesque face staring incredulously at him through the glass. "All I've ever loved is gone, so there's no point in going home."

* * *

Tommy steered Brenda's car between the two towering cast iron gates that protected the main entrance onto the Ryan's twenty-plus acre property and sped toward the imposing mansion at its center. Justin had used his cell phone to call ahead and make sure the preparations for their arrival were followed to the letter. They had to be certain everyone at the house, especially the security personnel, knew about Jennifer's critical condition so there weren't any frivolous delays. Still, it was eerie to see the front gates standing wide open and the security guards lined up along the its' perimeter. They wore tactical apparel and were equipped with an arsenal of weaponry, including flame throwers.

The amount of security the estate usually had on hand was tripled and none of them looked to happy to be there. As Tommy and the others drove by, the guards avoided making eye contact. This didn't leave Tommy feeling all warm and fuzzy inside. He had only been to the house twice before - once when he brought Brenda home after she had too much to drink to drive home safely from Sulli's Pub and then earlier in the day when he snuck onto the property through a hidden entrance only known to the Ryans.

The security guards abrupt change in behavior and resistance to acknowledging their late-night arrival was very distressing. Tommy remembered how cordial they had been to him the first time he pulled up to the gate with Brenda passed out in the passenger seat. Now, the guards were frighteningly different. They seemed to have a solid handle on what was really going on and were well-informed of the various stages of infection that four out of the five passengers in the car were suffering from.

Tommy raised his foot off the accelerator as he neared the seven-car garage and darkened helipad with perimeter lighting and wind cones. He pressed down on the brake as the car rounded the Renaissance fountain and Toscana pool and rolled to a stop next to the Jaguar parked right in front of the house. Dr. Samir Mahida waited for them on the cedar landing with a stretcher.

Bradley stepped from the vehicle into the brisk night air and nodded in greeting at Samir. He grasped the rear passenger door handle and opened it. "Come on," he said. "We need to get inside before any more of those creatures show up."

Justin slid out with Jennifer cradled in his arms. There was a faint scent of dog and heated rubber in the air. "Did the others just arrive?"

"Fifteen minutes ago," Samir said, gripping the lapel of his long, white lab coat. "They're inside."

"Did they bring a dog back with them?"

“Not exactly, Justin,” Samir said.

Bradley grabbed one end of the stretcher. “Why aren’t they out here helping us then? She’s bad off.”

Colleen took the other end of the stretcher from Samir. “Did they find anything at Ideologies?”

Samir ran his fingers through his thinning black hair and stepped aside so Justin could lay Jennifer down on the stretcher. “I’ll answer all your questions later,” he said. “Right now, Jennifer needs our attention.”

Justin brushed aside a few strands of dark brown hair that had fallen in front of Jennifer’s lifeless eyes. “Hold on a little while longer, baby,” he pleaded.

Samir held a small mirror beneath Jennifer’s nose and checked for breath, but there no change to the reflective surface. “I’m sure you’re all tired,” he said. “There is some fresh coffee in the kitchen and a plate of cold cut sandwiches on the dining table. If that doesn’t work, I’ve rigged up another type of pick-me-up, but Lawrence is using it right now.”

Bradley gritted his teeth. “He’ll be so happy to see me.”

“We’re all in this nightmare together,” Colleen said, struggling not to drop her end of the stretcher.

“Hopefully Lawrence remembers that,” Bradley said. “Our last run-in proved fatal for my almost new girlfriend.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Colleen said indifferently.

“Yeah, well, shit happens.”

Justin took the end of the stretcher from Colleen. “Can you get the door?”

“Sure thing,” Colleen said.

Samir pressed the stethoscope against Jennifer’s chest and listened to her heart. There was a faint sound. “Let’s go,” he said. “She doesn’t have much time.”

“I’m going to stay here,” Tommy said, dropping onto the landing’s front steps. “I’ll keep an eye out for any unwanted visitors.”

“Whatever,” Bradley said dismissively.

In the glow of the porch light, Colleen saw the skin around Tommy’s eyes had turned jaundice and was beginning to peel away from the sockets. “Can I bring you anything?”

“No,” Tommy said. “I’m fine.”

“We have to lock the door,” Samir said. “You won’t be able to get in once we’re inside. Are you sure you want to stay out here?”

Tommy gazed across the darkened landscape. “It’s for the best.”

Samir nodded. “Understood.”

Colleen held open the door as the others quickly went inside leaving her and Tommy alone on the cedar landing. “I’m sorry,” she said, staring at the gauntness of his face. “I wish there was something I could do.”

“There is one thing,” Tommy replied. “Well, as long as you don’t mind being a messenger.”

“Name it.”

“Tell Julie I’m sorry and sincerely wish things could have ended different between us,” Tommy said. “I loved her so much and all I wanted was to protect her from this evil.” He hung his head. “Now, I’m becoming part of it”

“It’s not your fault,” Colleen said. “You have to remember that.”

Tommy glanced up as an eerie rumbling erupted in his stomach. “You better get inside before I can’t tell whether you’re something I should eat or not, okay?”

A solitary tear slipped from Colleen’s eye and plummeted onto her cheek. “Good-bye,” she whispered sadly, before moving inside the house, quietly closing the front door, and locking it. “

Colleen glanced at the clock to the right of the floor-to-ceiling mirror with the twenty-four-karat gold leaf frame and took note of the time. It hadn’t even been twelve hours since Tommy’s encounter with the creature at Ashton Enterprises and the swiftness of his deterioration was mind-boggling. She quickly rejoined Justin and Bradley, who carefully balanced Jennifer on the stretcher between them.

They followed Samir down the hallway, past the kitchen and dining rooms, and into the living room with its museum-like artifacts. Then, they turned right and proceeded into the Ryan’s expansive library where one side of an oak bookcase was pulled away from the wall. Behind it was a staircase built of rock and cement that led beneath the house to an underground stronghold built similar to the Federal Reserve Bank in New York. It had thick, granite walls, security cameras mounted to the ceiling, motion and infrared-detectors at every turn, and a main blast-proof door, which was standing ajar at the base of the stairwell.

Samir continued deeper into the underground stronghold. They followed, passing by additional rooms with closed doors, but were nothing compared to those that resembled the watertight doors on submarines. A low whistle escaped Bradley’s lips. “And I thought my father was well off,” he said. “What in the hell does Brenda’s parents do for a living? Sell drugs?”

Colleen rolled her eyes. “Yeah, that’s it;” she scoffed “They’re huge in the Columbian drug cartel.”

“Bite me,” Bradley said. “I was just asking.”

“Knock it off,” Samir said, pausing outside one of the submarine-like doors. He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “It doesn’t matter how they earn their money. All you need to know is that this is one of the most sophisticated safe houses on the west coast and my bet is we’ll need it to be.”

Samir knocked three times on the door, opened it, and proceeded into a large room with approximately two thousand square feet of work space. Scientific lab equipment was setup for use at various workstations, stacks of medical supplies such as bandages, gauze, and bottles of rubbing alcohol lined metal shelves, and there was a wall of large, clear plastic tubs packed full with food rations. Lawrence was in the back corner hooked up to an I.V. machine receiving a fresh supply of blood. Julie was curled up in a chair with an icepack on her swollen ankle. And the third person, pacing back and forth like a caged animal in front of a four-tiered shelf full of glass beakers, stainless steel instruments, and safety glasses, had nothing but a white, fluffy robe on.

“Who’s she?” Colleen asked.

“Her name’s Robin,” Lawrence said, glaring at Bradley. “She helped us out tonight.”

Julie leaned forward. “Where’s Tommy?”

Colleen shifted uneasily. “Outside.”

“Why?” Julie asked, crossing her arms to fight off a chill.

“He was infected by a creature earlier,” Colleen said. “He’s starting to change and thought it best to stay outside.”

Julie’s face grew pale. “I need to see him.”

“You can’t,” Colleen said, instinctively stepping in front of the door. “He did ask me to tell you that he’s always loved you and wished things could have worked out differently.”

“I want to hear that from him,” Julie cried out, removing the icepack off her ankle and tossing it onto the seat next to her.

Colleen stood her ground. “His body can’t adapt to the changes,” she replied gently. “He’s deteriorating from the inside out and in record time I might add. I’ve never seen anything progress so fast.”

“And you left him out there to die alone?” Julie said, tears spilling from her almond-shaped eyes.

“It wasn’t *my* choice,” Colleen said. “It was his, and by God, I’m not going to deny the man his last request.”

“He’s so stubborn,” Julie said, standing up.

“Enough,” Samir shouted. “Sit your ass down and keep off that ankle.”

Julie bowed her head and collapsed back onto the seat. Robin swiftly crossed the room, picked up the icepack, and sat down beside her. She wrapped her arm around Julie’s shoulders. “Hang in there,” she said. “Everything is going to be okay.”

Lawrence’s eyes narrowed. “Does anyone else have something they want to get off their chest?”

“Are you talking to me?” Bradley said, squaring his shoulders.

Colleen shook her head and moved away from the door. “Both of you need to grow up,” she said angrily. “Life’s too short for this bullshit. So can anyone tell me where Calvin and Antonio are? I didn’t see them upstairs.”

“They didn’t make it,” Lawrence replied flatly.

“What?” Colleen said, her immense feelings for Calvin rippling across her face. “That can’t be.”

“If it makes it easier,” Lawrence said, softening his tone, “he died heroically.”

“So did Antonio,” Julie sobbed.

Colleen backed up and leaned against the wall for support. “It never ends.”

Bradley looked over at her. “What doesn’t?”

“Losing people I love,” Colleen said.

Samir inserted a catheter into a large vein in Jennifer’s arm and used a tube to connect it to the bag containing the blood for transfusion. “Alright,” he said, picking up a pair of scissors to cut off Jennifer’s shirt. “Everyone needs to head back upstairs except Justin and Lawrence. They’re going to help me perform a miracle tonight.”

SEPTEMBER - WEDNESDAY - 1:13 A.M.

Emily Radcliffe crawled as fast as she could across the dirt-covered cavern floor and dove behind a cluster of stalagmites rising from the ground like an ancient forest of trees. The stalactites, which had developed over the centuries due to a continual chemical reaction between limestone and water, hung from the earthen ceiling. A few of them met up with their stalagmite counterparts and formed beautiful columns. Others resembled the icicles that dangled off the rain gutters of Emily's childhood home after brutal winter storms. Yet, she had absolutely no desire to break one off and lick it like the icy versions back in Massachusetts. It was just another reminder of one of the many reasons why she chose to leave there in the first place.

It had taken a lot more effort than Emily ever dreamed to convince her parents that attending an out-of-state college was as good, if not better than, going to their much-adored Boston College to achieve her educational goals. Initially, they argued the cost of a local college was much more practical on their budget. She argued that it didn't matter how much tuition ended up costing; they weren't responsible for it anyway. She had earned a perfect 4.0 average throughout high school and various colleges had offered full-ride scholarships because of it. She selected Triton University because it had a phenomenal teaching staff and an impressive academic curriculum that included advanced degrees in two of her favorite subjects: chemistry and genetics. Also, Triton guaranteed job placement for the top five percent of each year's graduating class. And though she had no interest in football or any other sport for that matter, they had a highly-respected athletic program, which included a few pro-football success stories.

Emily pleaded her case for two months before her parents' warmed to the idea and finally gave their blessing. Of course, it was hinged on the condition that she promised not to do anything foolish. She swore on her aspirations to follow in Dr. Alan Grosse's footsteps, a Nobel Prize Recipient in Chemistry and a teacher at the university, that she would make them proud. Unfortunately, he wasn't the man everyone, including herself, thought him to be.

To that end, there was no way of knowing how her parents would react to her current predicament if she survived long enough to tell them about it. Perhaps, they'd find her curiosity to experience firsthand what Dr. Cohn's research forum was all about the previous week completely naive since it had a direct correlation to her present location. Then again, maybe they would think of her as daring and heroic considering how high the stakes were to succeed for the good of mankind. Either way, there was nothing she could do about it at the moment. She was trapped in a perverse game of roulette with every spin a possible step closer to her demise.

If Emily was given the fantastical opportunity to go back in time and enroll in her parents' preferred college, essentially erasing everything she'd witnessed over the past five days from memory, she wouldn't do it. Sure, snuggling up on her parents' sofa with a cup of hot chocolate after a long day of classes at Boston College probably sounded a whole heck of a lot better to most people than freezing their ass off in a god-forsaken cavern half-way around the world, but she wasn't them. Her parents were overbearing and at times it felt like they were purposely trying to snuff out her dreams so she would follow theirs. She knew going back home would extinguish her passion for life and considering all that she'd been through already, there was no question she was living on borrowed time. She had no intention on wasting any more of it.

Although Emily cherished her parents, she knew they would never understand the importance of her role in the mission. To their credit, she also never imagined that after a superior first year and barely a week into her sophomore year, she'd throw it away to be in Romania trying to save mankind from the horrible evils that men do in their quest to be God. As strange luck would have it, there was a little bit of a bright side that came with the terrifying darkness even if her parents wouldn't see it that way. She had fallen in love for the first time in her life and though it wasn't with her dad's ideal man of a doctor or lawyer, she didn't care. Yes, Greg Ashton was a vampire, but he clung to his humanity with every ounce of strength left within him. And, he kissed her with such tenderness on the plane that it made her legs feel like they had vanished beneath her.

Now, Greg was using every bit of his vampiric ability to stay alive and keep the gang of bad vampires distracted so they wouldn't notice her valiant attempt to stay hidden behind the stalagmites. As she stared up at the ceiling trying to gather the courage to do anything than just sit there in debilitating fear, her imagination transformed the stalactites into terrifying fangs capable of chomping down on her if she moved a muscle. The other rock-like formations that surrounded her were grayish-brown in color and didn't appear menacing, but their tips glowed with a golden hue due to the light cast upon them from two torches flickering wildly on the other side of the room taunting her with silent messages of doom.

The torches were propped up against the main entrance into the cavern. The unexpected arrival of Steven Banks, Debra Reed, and the other vampires in their entourage had derailed the team's task of keeping the cavern brightly-lit for those who required it. The other torches had fallen victim to the continuous drip of the mineral-rich water that was responsible for the amazing sculptures of natural art within the cavern. Only two of five torches, including the one Thomas Ryan brought with them into the mine, still burned. Emily couldn't fathom the veil of darkness that would encase her if they were allowed to burn out, too. She had to get her hands on at least one of them or suffer the consequences of her own inner light being extinguished as well.

Emily knew her every move was a calculated risk, but one that had to be taken to stay alive. She kept her focus on survival, swallowed her fears, and moved swiftly from one stalagmite to the next, passing unseen behind Greg as he battled one of the vampires. He'd been struck in the shoulder by a stake seconds earlier, but his sister, C.J., had intervened and saved his life. She flung one of two razor-sharp tipped kamas, which was the shortened version of an old-fashioned farming sickle, at Wyatt Green, the vampire responsible for firing the stake. The half-moon shaped kama blade sunk in his chest about two inches deep making it difficult, but not impossible for Wyatt to fire another one. C.J.

didn't wait to see if that would come to fruition. She winged the other kama through the air like a fan blade and it sliced into Wyatt's neck, decapitating him.

By that time, Greg had ripped out the stake and sprung to his feet with vengeance etched in the creases of his young face. The fight for their lives had begun, but he took his eyes off the advancing death dealers for a brief second to be sure Emily had taken cover behind the stalagmites. Once he knew she was safe, he turned to confront the advancing Ray DiSanto, who sported a very expensive gray Italian suit, donned well-polished black shoes, and had enough gel in his black hair to last most people a couple months of daily use. In fact, Ray looked more like a mafia member than one of Steven's undead henchmen and the only reason anyone other than Steven's group knew his name was because he announced it like a sports commentator before a boxing match.

Ray took off his coat, draped it over the closest stalagmite, and loosened his tie before engaging Greg in an all-out street brawl. They exchanged vicious blows and it was hard to tell who had the upper hand. It appeared that Ray was extremely familiar with beating people to a pulp, vampire or not, and avoided the blood splatter that erupted with almost every hit. Greg, on the other hand, was quite resilient in taking a beating and dishing out some of his own retribution. Emily knew whoever had the most determination would win and prayed it would be Greg.

Emily darted to another stalagmite and zeroed in on C.J. and Damon West, who were forced to team up and take on the infamous Mike Richter. She'd seen his mug shot on the late night news as someone wanted for questioning in the brutal deaths of his former gang members by the F.B.I. He was an intimidating-looking man in appearance and stature, and his long, straw-like hair was tied back with a ponytail. He didn't wear a t-shirt beneath his black, leather vest and walked toward C.J. and Damon with an amused smirk on his face like there was an inside joke and only he knew the punch line.

C.J. made the first move and threw a spinning hook kick that clocked Mike in the side of the head with her heel. He stumbled back a couple steps, but swiftly answered her effort with a powerful punch to the face that lifted her off the ground and knocked her back ten feet. Damon attacked next and pummeled Mike in the stomach with a succession of punches. He avoided staring at the disturbing tattoo of an anaconda devouring a sweet-looking puppy dog on Mike's chest. Mike countered with a brutal uppercut that sent Damon sailing into a fragile stalagmite cropping, crushing them under his weight. He and C.J. staggered to their feet, bruised and bleeding from their injuries, but refusing to admit defeat against the colossal giant.

Emily squatted as low as she could get to the ground and darted to another cluster of stalagmites. She took a deep breath to calm her nerves once she got there and stole a look from behind it surveying the most successful route to take. The wet gritty surface of the stalagmite felt strange on her cheek, but she refused to pull away as Brenda Ryan and Seth Jacobson sized one another up. There weren't many people who would ever such a match-up and she wasn't about to miss it.

Emily was familiar with Seth Jacobson because of a recent, black-and-white photograph of him that accompanied a news article about the death of his little sister. The paper reported his parents came home after a dinner party one night and discovered their eight-year old daughter was missing. A few days later, the police conducted another thorough sweep of the house for the source of a horrible stench and discovered the little girl's lifeless body beneath the crawlspace of the home. After the autopsy was performed,

the coroner released a detailed statement on how the girl died and it wasn't from ingesting too much dirt as her older brother, Seth, suggested. It was from manual strangulation, but the handprints around her neck were distorted because of the extreme decomposition from the extraordinary heat wave over the weekend. The lead investigator fingered Seth as a prime suspect, but Seth emphatically denied the allegation and thus far, there was no proof to the contrary.

Despite his self-proclaimed innocence, Seth was downright evil. He implemented various tactics in an attempt to quickly gain control of Brenda, including wrist grabs, choke holds, and glancing in different directions in hopes that Brenda would take the bait and look, but she didn't work. Brenda countered his every move with a swifter block, side-step, or counter-attack. At times, there seemed to be the makings of a smile on her face as if subconsciously amused by his infantile behavior. For Emily and anyone else watching for that matter, it was an exceptional battle between a sociopath and a socialite. If it had been arranged by a big-time sponsor at a stadium-size arena, the event would have been sold out and ticket scalpers would be raking in the dough.

Former Secret Service Agent, Maria Gonzalez, and Brenda's father, Thomas Ryan, were betrothed in a perilous game of cat and mouse against Doug Harrison. Maria was the mouse, darting around the cavern to keep Doug the cat distracted while Thomas scoured the floor for the semi-automatic weapon that she had tossed onto the ground minutes earlier. Emily made note of how hesitant Maria had been to part with it, but understood the decision. As soon as they arrived at the site and discovered the vampire skeletal remains were missing, Thomas unleashed his wrath on Brenda. His reaction was uncalled for and pissed off everyone so much so that Emily knew each of them wanted to snatch Maria's gun out of her hip holster and shoot him, but none more so than Maria. The look that came over her face during his tirade was one of a mother's love and protection.

Emily nearly nibbled through her bottom lip as Maria brought her hand to her hip holster, unsnapped the strap securing the gun in place, and drummed her fingers on the stock. Time stood still or so it seemed as Emily waited to see if Maria would rip out the gun and kill Thomas with a firestorm of bullets. Alas, she pulled out the gun and tossed it on the ground. Emily hoped things would calm down if given sufficient time, but then Steven and his clan showed up.

Anyone who spent a substantial amount of time with Thomas realized he had a natural ability to get underneath people's skin. Emily and the others had learned that firsthand. He had gone on and on about Brenda's ignorance in her blind trust of people and this latest example he would make her pay for. Of course, Brenda had nothing to do with the vampire remains disappearance and neither did any of the other people in their group. Emily couldn't speak for Thomas, but his temper-tantrum spoke volumes. Equally apparent was his quickness to point the finger at anyone but himself when things didn't go according to plan. There was no way any of it could be his fault.

Emily wondered if that mentality was Thomas' way of dealing with the fallout when things went wrong while pillaging a country's secrets with hired help. She knew there had to be quite a bit of money at stake. Still, it wasn't acceptable when he used such a lame tactic against his only daughter. How Brenda could have had a hand in the heist no one knew, but Thomas divulged his theories on various scenarios that he believed would cause Brenda to sell her soul to the devil and betray his trust. After a few seconds,

everyone stopped listening to him and began searching for anything the thieves might have overlooked or left behind.

Even in the minimal lighting, Emily recognized Doug as the same man that had been lingering around the science building. She hadn't been interested in conversing with him then and definitely not now. It was obvious he was close to the same age as her father and stared at her in a way that made her feel violated. On her way to class the previous Thursday, he had asked her to dinner and she politely declined, but he wouldn't take no for an answer. He followed her across campus and into another building where her next class was held, suggestively flicking his tongue and speaking about how good of a time they would have together. This frightened her and she picked up her pace, and so did he. She was on the verge of hysterics when she collided with a student in the hallway and spilled her books onto the floor. The young man apologized and helped her gather up her belongings, but she didn't have time for idle chitchat. She'd lost track of Doug and could think only about getting to the safety of her classroom. She was almost certain Greg would never speak to her again after that, but at Dr. Cohn's research forum that same night he was very kind to her and didn't bring up their brief encounter though she could tell he remembered it.

Emily knew Steven Banks had his sights set on Eric right from the get-go. She watched as Steven rushed him, but Eric squared his shoulders and shifted into a fighting stance. He wasn't feeling well and had grown visibly weaker since their arrival at the airport in Bucharest. Emily didn't believe the others had noticed his deterioration yet, but would if his zest for life depleted any further. His energetic pace through the dense forest diminished considerably once they reached the diamond mine's entrance. She knew full well it had nothing to do with making sure no one was following them; though in hindsight, that would've been a great idea. Eric was the first to sit down and rest after ten minutes of searching for the vampire remains, and she noticed the skin around his eyes had turned slightly jaundice in color. To make matters worse, he seemed to need the artificial light from the torches as much as she did. That wasn't a good sign either.

Nevertheless, his and Steven's fight was by far the bloodiest out of any of them. They delivered blow after bone-crushing blow and the sound resonated throughout the chamber. Emily could almost feel the intensity of each hit. She cringed at the mere thought of being struck with such force. The inevitable damage inflicted to their inner organs had to be catastrophic.

Emily knew it wouldn't be much longer before Doug stopped wasting time with Maria and stepped up his game. He would no doubt snatch a hold of her long, dark hair, jerk back her head, and kill her with a strike as swift as a King Cobra's to the side of her neck. Then, he'd eliminate Thomas by sneaking up behind him while he searched frantically for a weapon that only had the power to slow down a vampire, not kill it. Emily could just imagine Doug's satisfied expression as he snapped Thomas' neck like a twig and then joined Ray DiSanto to finish off Greg.

Of course if all this came to fruition, the good guys would lose and Emily would be devoured alive. She couldn't allow that to happen. She was the only one on the team that needed to stay alive if there was any hope in returning to the States with a viable sample of vampiric DNA. If she perished, so did their plan. Patience was a virtue, but it was now or never to make her move. As she readied her footing to make a dash for the torches, she noticed one member of Steven's party was unaccounted for. As the hairs on

her neck rose, she knew with every fiber in her being that Debra Reed was right behind her.

Emily heard the soft click of a stake as it was loaded into a crossbow and made a quick side-step just in time to miss being impaled. The wooden stake sunk into a nearby wall, which was quite impressive if one considered that the cavern was supposed to be made of limestone. Emily responded quickly by spinning around and sweeping her foot along the ground. She struck Debra in the ankle and knocked her off balance. The crossbow fell out of her hands and tumbled in between two stalagmites, accidentally releasing another stake. It sliced through the air and hit Mike Richter in the lower back.

* * *

Mike howled in agony and twisted around to remove the stake from his back. C.J. seized the opportunity and dive-rolled over to Wyatt's lifeless body to retrieve her weapons. One of her kamas was lodged deep within his chest and the other lay freely beside his severed head roughly five feet away from her position. Deciding she didn't have the time to play tug-of-war, she lunged for the latter, but an iron-clad grip clamped down onto her ankle just as her fingertips brushed by the handle.

Mike jerked back hard on her leg. "Not so fast," he said.

C.J.'s shirt rolled up away from her jeans as Mike dragged her away from the kama. She felt the harsh, unforgiving cavern floor unleash mayhem on the delicate tissue of her stomach and eat away at the epidermis. As she passed by Wyatt's body, she knew it was now or never. She reached out and grabbed the handle of the kama wedged in his chest, momentarily halting her backward momentum. She worked it back and forth feverishly to free it. Mike yanked harder on her ankle and inadvertently helped to rip out the kama from Wyatt's chest. He instantly realized his mistake and readjusted his grip on her ankle. He spun promptly and lifted her off the ground before releasing his grip and flinging her into a nearby wall. C.J.'s head struck the rocky surface with a solid thud and she collapsed to the floor without as much as a whimper escaping her lips.

"You, son of a bitch!" Damon shouted, leaping onto Mike's back and driving his talon-like nails into the front of Mike's chest.

Mike reached over his head and grabbed Damon by the hair. In one swift motion, he ripped Damon over his shoulder and slammed him into the ground. "You ain't so tough now, are you?" he growled, glaring down at Damon.

C.J.'s arms trembled as she pushed her aching body off the cavern floor. Somehow she'd managed to hang onto the kama and rose to her feet with it clenched in her hand. Mike was poised over Damon and ready to strike. "I wouldn't do that if I were you," she said.

Mike turned and flashed a devilish grin, raising his foot approximately over where Damon's heart would be. A steel rod descended from the heel of his biker boot. "Go ahead," he said, watching C.J. struggle to maintain her balance. "No one can stop me from killing this piece of shit, especially a girl. You can't even stand up on your own."

C.J.'s eyes narrowed. "You want to bet?"

"How about after I'm through with him," Mike said, circling his heel tauntingly over Damon's chest, "I come over there and show you what a real man feels like before I kill you?"

C.J. squeezed her grip even tighter around the kama's handle and spun it in a figure eight formation. "Sorry, but that doesn't work for me," she said, slinging the kama against her arm so the blade pointed away from her elbow. She pressed the button on the back side of the handle and heard the inner mechanism release. The steel stake concealed inside the handle rocketed out of the wooden housing and struck Mike dead-center in the chest, knocking him back and dropping him to his knees.

Mike reached up and grasped the stake sticking out of his chest. "How is this possible?" he muttered, looking bewildered at C.J.

"My parents, you stupid asshole," she replied, "and they send their regards."

Mike collapsed face-first onto the cavern floor and drove the stake deeper into his chest. Damon leapt up and quickly moved away as Mike exhaled one last ragged breath. "I owe you one," he said.

"I'm sure there will be plenty of opportunities for payback," C.J. said.

* * *

Emily and Debra were oblivious to the life and death struggles their comrades were engaged in as their own wrestling match demanded their complete attention. They rolled back and forth on the cavern floor, each striving to gain the upper hand, but failing miserably at it. They were each other's equal in physical stature and quick wit. Emily managed to pin Debra's arms with her knees and popped her in the nose with the heel of her hand. Tears sprang to Debra's eyes, but that was it. She came back with a swift, hard slap across Emily's face, which sent Emily scrambling for control again. After a few seconds of struggling, she was back on top but it didn't last. Debra thrust her hips upward, bucking Emily off to the side. She immediately pounced onto Emily's stomach, pinned her arms, and began choking her.

Steven watched from afar, wanting to clap his hands together or shout out his support for the way Debra was handling the situation, but was too busy with Eric to do so. Yes, he was smitten with Debra's intellect and insatiable sex drive, but more so because she had given him the means to achieve something far greater than a mere position on some pathetic NFL team. She knew how to keep Dr. Cohn and Dr. Grosse distracted while they set her secret plan into motion. All she asked was for him to follow her instructions to the letter. If he did, she promised they would rule the vampire race together from their new home inside the Oval Office. He couldn't wait.

At that exact moment, Steven noticed C.J. and Damon sneaking over to Emily and Debra. He knew they were on their way to rescue Emily and would probably kill Debra in the process. His anger rose with stunning velocity. He turned his attention back to Eric and delivered a devastating roundhouse punch to the side of his face, knocking him down to all fours. He immediately followed the hit with a vicious kick to the ribcage where the resulting sound of breaking bones mimicked twigs snapping underfoot as one trekked through an ancient Transylvanian forest.

Although Eric had lost a considerable amount of blood and couldn't stand, he refused to give up. "Is that all you got?" he said.

Steven kicked Eric one more time right in the face, his foot connecting with Eric's chin, which sent his fangs through his lower lip. Blood spilled onto his chin. Steven grabbed Eric's sweat-drenched hair and jerked his head back. "You're so pathetic."

“And you’re a coward,” Eric replied.

Steven shoved Eric to the ground and reached into his pocket, retrieving a stick of dynamite. “That’s enough,” he growled, “Or so help me, I’ll blow this whole fucking place sky high.”

Everyone froze in their tracks except for Debra who continued to strangle Emily. Greg caught site of their battle and put immediate distance between him and Ray. “That’s real smart,” he said sarcastically.

“Don’t patronize me,” Steven said.

“We all need to calm down,” C.J. said, taking another bold step toward Emily and Debra. “We’re all after the same thing.”

Steven held the stick of dynamite next to one of the burning torches. “Don’t test me,” he said. “I know what you’re up to.”

C.J. stopped in her tracks. “You wouldn’t dare,” she said. “You don’t have the guts to kill yourself.”

“Who said anything about that?” Steven said. “On the other hand, I don’t have any problem in killing you and your friends unless you want to drop to your knees and plead for your life. I’m sure we can work something out.”

Steven undid his belt and unzipped his jeans. C.J. held his gaze. “You disgust me,” she spat. “I would rather die then service you.”

“Is that so?” Steven said. “That’s a pretty strong declaration. Sure you don’t want to reconsider?”

“Positive,” C.J. replied.

Steven shrugged his shoulders. “Your loss,” he said, zipping up his jeans. “Now, my guys and I need to get a move on it. Our work here is done.”

Ray DiSanto snatched his coat off the stalagmite and retreated toward the entrance with Seth Jacobson by his side. “This ain’t over,” he said, glaring at Greg.

“Not by a long shot,” Greg replied.

Debra released her hold on Emily’s neck and smashed her elbow down onto Emily’s face, causing blood to gush from her nose. “Just returning the favor,” Debra said icily. She wiped off her hands on her pants and stood up. “Let’s see how well your *friends* will take care of you now.”

The coppery-aroma of human blood filled the air and smelled as enticing as freshly baked cookies to each vampire in the room and Greg knew it. He rushed to Emily’s side as she pressed her fingers against her nose in an attempt to stop the bleeding. He sensed his own desire to feast on the fresh food source and knew the others were experiencing the same thing. Without warning, C.J. darted out from behind some stalagmites and crept closer to them. Damon followed her lead, but his approach was more direct and his razor-sharp fangs appeared to glow in the almost darkened cavern.

Greg searched C.J.’s face first and discovered that though her face was morphed into a vampiric rage, her eyes still held human kindness. He did not raise his hand as she neared and sighed in relief when she pivoted around and took a protective position next to him. Damon did the same and soon the others were joining them in a valiant show of camaraderie. Maria and Thomas were the last to arrive. They had grabbed Eric by the arms and dragged him over to Emily, both of them in desperate need of medical attention.

“You were saying?” Greg said.

Steven laughed and took Debra's hand as she stepped beside him. "You're so foolish," he said. "You think your camaraderie makes you stronger than us, but it doesn't. Eventually, each of you will succumb to the bloodlust and kill the other just to get at a mere taste of what you crave the most."

Debra held up her arm to Steven's mouth and he drove his fangs into her wrists, sampling some of her blood. "It tastes so good," he said, pulling away. "You don't know what you're missing."

"You're sick," Thomas said.

"Am I?" Steven said, motioning the others to vacate the cavern and move into the tunnel. "It's the survival of the fittest, but I'm sure you don't understand that philosophy. All you care about is money and how much you can get of it at the expense of others."

"You're such an asshole," Maria said.

"Well, that may be, but at least I'm an honest one," Steven said, almost scathingly.

"Really?" Damon questioned, defiantly crossing his arms in front of his chest. "If that's true, why don't you enlighten us on how you knew we were here in the first place then?"

Steven's lips spread into a wicked grin and he held up a portable GPS tracking device. "Well, since it won't matter in a few seconds, I'll tell you," he said. "Two of your friends ingested tracking devices so Dr. Grosse could keep tabs on your movements. He just didn't realize it would benefit us, too."

"You're lying," Brenda said. "None of us would have volunteered for that."

"Sure about that?" Steven said. "I wonder how we were able to find you then. Don't you, Greg? Don't you wonder who the traitors are in the group?"

Greg's eyes narrowed. "Shut your mouth."

"Or what?" Steven said, lighting the dynamite's wick on the torch.

"Come over here and find out," Greg replied.

"Hmm, I'm afraid I don't have the time," Steven said, glancing at the burning wick. "See you... in the afterlife." He turned and walked hastily into the tunnel after the others.

"You're pathetic," Greg shouted after him.

"Does anyone know if there's any truth to his claims about the tracking devices?" Thomas said.

"Doubtful," Greg said.

"Are you sure?" Thomas said in a venomous tone. "Maybe you and C.J. are the traitors."

"Yeah, that's it," Greg said condescendingly.

C.J. took a deep breath. "He might be right," she said, shaking her head.

"No fucking way," Greg said. "I'd remember if we slept with the enemy."

"We took those green pills," C.J. said, stroking her chin. "Maybe they were tracking devices."

"They were for pain," Greg said emphatically. "Emily gave them to us."

Everyone turned and stared down at Emily, who with Maria's help had almost stopped the bleeding by pressing a shredded piece of material from Maria's shirt against her nose. "Rebecca told me to give them to you," Emily mumbled through the piece of cloth. "I didn't question it."

“Perhaps the pills had a dual purpose,” Brenda said, glancing at C.J. “Julie offered me one, too, but I didn’t take it; I stashed it inside my jeans pocket.”

“The ones you’re wearing now?” Maria asked.

“No,” Brenda said. “They’re at home.”

“That’s not good,” Maria said.

“You’d rather have had her taken it?” C.J. asked in astonishment.

“No,” Maria said, “but if the pills are tracking devices than Dr. Cohn’s minions know exactly where to find the others.”

“Shit,” C.J. said.

“And, it still doesn’t solve the problem on how we’re going to get rid of the ones inside of us if that’s what they really are,” Greg said.

A stick of dynamite suddenly flew through the air landed at the opening of the cavern. Another one followed it. Eric was the only one who noticed as he lay in a fetal position on the ground next to Emily. “Hit the dirt,” he muttered, but it was barely audible.

“What was that?” Greg said.

A horrendous explosion erupted and caused the rocky ceiling to collapse, burying them all beneath it and obliterating the exit.