

Prologue

After five hundred years, guilt and an inescapable sense of betrayal pressed heavily against John Wright's chest. The very people he vowed to protect so long ago had trapped him in this appalling, never-ending existence. Was it any wonder he felt torn continuing his guardianship of the Viccars family?

But he could not break his vow any more than he could become human again.

He watched the woman, Gwendolyn, return to her house at dusk. When she showed no inclination to take another foolhardy walk down the lonely, unpaved road to her mailbox, his shoulders relaxed in relief. His gaze followed her. She appeared so innocent—even foolish—and supremely unaware of her surroundings as she climbed out of her convertible.

God's teeth, she looks young. The last of the Viccars family in Virginia, and a female to boot.

The irony brought no sense of amusement. If she truly possessed the relic, or knew of its whereabouts, the irony only doubled. She could not use the circlet of gold. Only a male could gain, and control, the power. But only a female survived.

He shifted uncomfortably in the cramped quarters of his car. Once more he scanned the fields around her cottage. His eyes lingered on the encircling trees in the dark, distant haze. No sign of Atoan's clan. The Tartar chieftain and his horde had been quiet the last two nights.

John's weariness ate at the fringes of his mind, dulling and distracting his attention.

Am I wrong once more?

He had followed Atoan across the country and even back to Europe, hoping to stay between the Viccars family and Atoan in a centuries-old game of hide-and-seek. The relic sang its siren song to Atoan and the clan king followed. And John followed him, always true to his oath to hold fast and protect the Viccars family and relic from the unthinkable.

Atoan can't win. Not this time.

John watched and waited in the shadows, wishing he could preserve Gwendolyn's blithe ignorance. But time was growing short.

Atoan was tiring of the hunt. John knew only too well what happened when Atoan lost his patience. And he was afraid Gwendolyn would soon be drawn into the game, innocent or not.

Chapter One

Ever since her return to Virginia, Gwen had felt a brooding sense of danger and the distinct impression of being watched. And then there was the note stuffed into her mailbox. She glanced at the plain white paper in her hand. Someone had written the phrase "Have you forgotten?" in the center of the sheet in flowing cursive letters.

The note was proof, at least, that her uneasiness wasn't just due to her imagination.

"I'm going back," Gwen blurted out before emotion silenced her voice. She shifted the phone to her right ear and stared out her kitchen window into the growing darkness. Only a few new, green shoots were visible amidst the desolation of her March garden, but even this hopeful evidence of spring couldn't ease her sense of frustration and anxiety.

Just saying the word "home" induced another nearly uncontrollable surge of emotion. Her pulse raced as she repeated her decision silently.

She was going *back*.

“You can’t go home again,” her closest friend, Theresa Blackstone, replied.

“You read too much literary fiction. And Thomas Wolfe had his own problems. I’ve died twice—there has to be a reason. I need to know why. I have to remember everything, not just what you’ve told me and what I’ve read in the newspapers.”

A sigh floated over the phone lines like the draft from angel wings. “There’s a reason for what happened to you. You just don’t know what it is. You may never know.”

“So says a woman who knows why she’s alive.” Gwen Carter laughed, trying to disguise the underlying bitterness. “I’d like to remember more than a few scattered fragments.”

“Be glad for that. Anyway, memory isn’t like a movie. It’s more like a box of photos reflecting certain moments.”

Gwen sighed with irritation. While she dillydallied through life, painfully aware of her lack of purpose, Theresa ran a convent-turned-orphanage called The Weeping Madonna. She protected and cared for children left shattered and destitute by the loss of their families “under peculiar circumstances.”

She had a firm purpose—something that Gwen lacked.

“I want—”

“More? We all do. But you’ve got to face facts. You don’t remember because of the trauma,” Theresa said. “It’s a mercy. What if you do remember everything and you become an emotional basket case because it’s too terrible to deal with?”

“Then at least I’ll understand what happened, when they’re strapping me into a straitjacket.” *And I’ll know what’s going on.*

“I’ll go with you,” Theresa said in the exasperated tone used by psychiatrists when they finally give up, and give in, to their patient’s delusions.

“No, you won’t. You have a job. People depend upon you.”

“And that’s exactly my point. You obviously know it’s dangerous. That house is old—you could fall through the floor and break a leg. There’s nothing there but dry rot and spider webs. All you’ll find is dust. There are no answers.”

“Look, I’m not stupid. I’ll take someone with me. And my cell phone. I just have this need—oh, I can’t explain it! Maybe I can find something to jog my memory. Something to help me make sense of my life. I can’t take this uncertainty any longer.” She turned to stare at the smooth, bland vanilla paint covering her kitchen ceiling. Unfortunately, her mind was equally blank.

“Who are you going to take with you?” Theresa asked sharply.

“My neighbor. He’s been angling for dinner—maybe he’d like a little postprandial exercise to work it off.”

“I thought you suspected...” Her voice trailed off as if reluctant to express her thoughts openly over the phone.

Gwen had no such qualms. “A vampire?”

“Did you *sense* it?”

“No. I didn’t even try.” She laughed at Theresa’s hushed, almost awed reference to Gwen’s odd ability to see the aura of a vampire if she was willing to get close enough and open her mind. “Anyway, whether he is or not, I can’t think of anyone—or anything—better suited to accompany me.”

“You can’t and you know it.”

Gwen shrugged, knowing her silence would convey the gesture as clearly to Theresa as any words.

“You just can’t,” Theresa repeated.

“I’m not going to get involved with him. Look, it’s just dinner and a quick tour through the old homestead to see if anything jogs my memory. That’s it. And if I fall through the floor, I’m pretty sure he can rescue me.”

And in the back of her mind was the thought that if they met anything worse than a few mice, he could deal with that, too. As far as she was concerned, a vampire was the best protection she could have. Assuming he was one and not just a guy desperate for a date.

In either case, he was a better alternative than endangering her one and only friend.

And unfortunately, other than Theresa, she didn’t know anyone in the area. A quiver of desperate loneliness shook her. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d been out with a man.

She sighed and hoped that wasn’t the reason she had decided to accept a dinner date with a vampire.

“If he touches you—tastes one drop of your blood...” Theresa paused dramatically to allow Gwen’s mind to fill in the blanks.

“I know. You don’t have to beat me over the head with the obvious. If he drinks my blood, we both die. Spectacularly.” Gwen laughed. “Maybe that’s my destiny. To take out a vampire by spontaneous combustion.”

“Don’t be melodramatic. I—”

“You also told me my memories would return. And they haven’t.” Gwen’s calm tone made the words sound harsher and more brutal than intended. “You said all of this was for a purpose—what purpose? I lived through *hell*, and I only remember a few random moments! Vague shadows and the feeling that I’ve forgotten something—something important. I have to know what happened to me that night—not just what you told me. Did I want to become a vampire at thirteen? Did I let them in to slaughter my family and change me? Was it my fault?”

“I doubt it,” Theresa answered carefully. “You’re a good person—”

“So you say. But if I’m so good, why do I write jingles for television instead of doing something worthwhile like you?”

“It’s your choice.”

“Because I’m good at it.” Gwen’s talents—if she had any—lay in shifting the aching void inside her to others. Each day, millions of television viewers rushed to the store with the firm conviction that the hole eating away at them could be filled with mouthwash or sexy underwear.

Nostalgia brought in money, but no real satisfaction.

“Then be happy. Marry. Raise children. Do charity work. Pretend to be normal.”

“And let the pretence turn into reality?” Gwen asked.

“It’s what you want, isn’t it? A home and family?”

“Yes. But I’d also like the year to be 1959 again. That’s just as likely. And what if I do marry and it happens all over again?”

“Protect against it. Life is risk, so get used to it.”

“Life without a sense of your past sucks.”

“Let it go, Gwen. Move on. And avoid the vampire next door. I know it’s hard, but you have to start living. Stop waiting for answers, because there aren’t any.” Her voice sounded like she was grimly smiling. “Enough platitudes for you?”

“Yes. You’re all heart. As usual. But thanks. Listen, I’ll call you later—maybe we can go for pizza or something later in the week.” Gwen tried to sound happy, or at least normal.

“Don’t go, Gwen. I mean it.”

“No worries.” The note she gripped rustled as her hand clenched, crumpling it into a ball. She stared at the wadded paper and opened her mouth to tell Theresa about it. At the last minute, she stopped. “Gotta go,” she said instead, tired of arguing.

Have you forgotten?

The frightening answer was *yes*. She had. The weight of her frustration crushed her, making her feel small and vulnerable. The answers to her past existed somewhere. And so was whatever she had forgotten in her family’s abandoned home in a small town outside of Chesapeake, Virginia.