

# INTRODUCTION

*TICK. TOCK. TICK. TOCK. Tock. Tick.*

The hands of the invisible clock rolled over and over.

This was nowhere. But time did indeed subsist in this place. The sound of the clock reminded nowhere's company of the inescapability of nothingness. A form of torture to know that time continued to move forward for everything else—and everyone else—in a place where they still existed, while those who had gone lay lost, wrapped in the fabric of the unknown.

Thoughts, only thoughts, here at the center of a room. Only there were no walls, no floor, and no ceiling. No longer possessing a physical form, all that was here were my erratic, barely conceived thoughts.

Thoughts that wondered if this was nature. If this was what happened when everything you were just stopped and no other worldly force intervened.

But then, someone had put that clock in here.

All thoughts were fragmented and stifled, but they struggled on regardless—anything to block out the sound of the maddening

*tick tock* by concentrating on the faintest smudge of an imprinted memory.

A strange image of an object—small and thick with a jagged edge around its top—flashed into thought.

Focusing on *it*, and yet no comprehension as to what *it* was.

The object started to fuzz and blur, but this mind wasn't going to release it so easily. Think and remember.

*King*. A word. Recognition. *King*. It had a name.

Now it existed.

The *tick tock* filtered back in and made it harder to concentrate. And, somehow, the sound of those malevolent hands was getting louder.

*King*. *King*. *King*. Its name now resounded in time with the strikes—balancing it, holding the image steady.

*Check*. A new word forming. *Check*. My king was in check. My king.

*Me*.

Me. I. I wasn't me. I wasn't anything. I didn't exist. And then the idea started to dissolve. . . .

*Lailah* . . .

The word almost whispered into life, and repeated: *Lailah* . . .

A name. Things that didn't exist didn't have names. But I had a name. One I swore I would never forget again.

*Lailah* . . .

Strange . . . at the end of the room, a circle appeared.

The *tick tock* quickened.

A window. A glass window with an image locked inside—someone beautiful sat at the foot of a bed. I knew him. On a table before him sat a chess set.

I concentrated on the king, and a spark of light flowed through my mind. Though I began to feel something, whatever it was quickly receded as the face before me dulled with a shadow of sadness.

“No.” My voice bounced off the sides of the room that were now forming. “No!” I shouted again. As I did, the king moved for me; it moved itself out of check.

*Command the choice to decide.*

*Command the choice to decide.*

As the familiar words looped themselves in my mind, a chill crept up from below.

The room had a floor, and I had feet.

*Tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock . . .* The clock sped up, booming with every strike, almost deafening my mind into silence once again. And with every turn of the big hand, it was as if my head were being pounded and smacked against the newly formed wooden walls.

I was locked inside a grandfather clock. I was a nonexistent prisoner of time. But I was beginning to exist once more, so time would have to halt long enough to release me.

I could see my hands now, and as the floor started to fall away and the ceiling began to cave in, I placed my palms against the window in desperation, watching him.

The glass shattered as the space bounced and rocked from side to side, and his image left along with the shards, shortly to be replaced with a new window, a way back to the world.

Heavy chunks of wood came crashing down around me. I squeezed myself through, staring down into oblivion. I stood straight and teetered on the ledge of its gold pane.

Three perfect spheres lined up in a row. One was a luminous white. The second was an amalgam of sapphire blue and emerald

green. The third was a black ball with gray clouds that swirled as though a storm was trapped inside.

I cast my gaze to my right, and as the prison broke apart, I saw a number: 9. Debris rained down from above, and I struggled to retain my balance. I snapped my attention to the left. Another number—3—cracked and fell away.

My head thumped and throbbed. I kept my balance, but the clock's hands twirled at an incredible speed, so fast everything was spinning.

I had commanded the choice; now I had to decide.

“I want to go home! I want to live!” I shouted at nothing and no one.

The heavy brass pendulum swung as the hands finally slowed and hovered at 12. The casing that had enclosed me broke away as the clock chimed for its last time, sounding the beginning of a new day.

I remembered his face as I closed my eyes. His name formed at the fringes of my consciousness, and I fell from the ledge of my prison.

The clock stopped ticking.

Every clock in every world stopped. Just for me.

# PROLOGUE

LUCAN, IRELAND  
FOUR WEEKS AGO

ALTHOUGH IT WAS THE onset of a deeply bitter winter, a deceptive sheet of sunlight fell over the Emerald Isle—nothing but crystal-blue sky above.

Reverend Cillian O'Sileabhin noted this with annoyance. On a day such as this, the rain should have lashed down and the heavens should have cried. It was the least his son Padraig deserved.

O'Sileabhin carried the white lie on his shoulder, bearing the coffin's weight without flinching. He looked to his other—and now only—son, Fergal, who was struggling to balance the heavy wood on the opposite side. Fergal was weak compared with Padraig; perhaps he should have beaten Fergal as a child. It certainly seemed to have made a man out of his eldest.

Though O'Sileabhin had, on countless occasions, raised his hand to his youngest son, he had never been able to bring it down upon him. Fergal would cower, kneading his fingers through his messy blond hair around his temples, and peer up through the wayward strands with fear. And in Fergal's wide eyes, O'Sileabhin would see

his wife's staring back at him. He would once again hear her whisper "good-bye" the night she had fled. And with Padraig only too willing to receive a beating on his brother's behalf, he had borne the brunt of O'Sileabhin's retribution.

But now, with Padraig gone, he would need to be harder—more stringent—with Fergal. An upbringing with a good balance of faith and discipline—that was what made leaders. Though Fergal was younger than Phelan, the son of O'Sileabhin's brother, Diarmuid, Fergal was still the offspring of the eldest O'Sileabhin brother, which meant he would become leader when the day came, even if Phelan happened to be better suited to leadership than Fergal. This was the way it had always been.

The task of protecting this town—this congregation—from the Devil's brood, as O'Sileabhin's great-great-great-great-great-grandfather would have expected, demanded nothing short of valiant and intrepid servants of God.

And Reverend Cillian O'Sileabhin led by example.

As the men approached the gated entrance to the long path that led to the coffered panel doors of the church, the sun rose just over the peak of the church turret and momentarily blinded Cillian.

Refrains of "Danny Boy" softly called them inside the place of worship. As the arched doors swung open and the sweet song sang down the long aisle, the coffin was carried through on a freezing breeze that swept its way over the silver hinges and fastenings, causing them to clank and clatter.

Cillian passed his beautiful daughter, Iona, who sat waiting for him in the pews. Her plump lips strained in a sorrowful smile and wistful tears fell from her gray-blue eyes as Cillian acknowledged her with a small nod.

Diarmuid delivered the service, though Cillian barely listened to his brother's words about the righteous who had fallen in the Lord's name. How Padraig had been an honorable and fearless young man. Words would bring little comfort on this darkest of days.

As the service drew to a close and the song replayed, Cillian took Iona's hand and squeezed it reassuringly. "'Twas a grand choice, munchkin. Padraig would have liked it."

Once the church had emptied, he allowed his daughter to guide him from the pews. She hesitated, and Cillian waited for her to speak. Instead, she unfastened her clutch purse and pulled out his gold cross.

Cillian had removed it, feeling disillusioned after Padraig had been lost to the Devil's servants. But despite his daughter's sadness, she had shown strength, and now she was asking him to do the same.

Iona dropped the gold cross into his palm, and he placed a kiss on her forehead in reply. Satisfied, she stepped into the aisle. The reverend considered the necklace and chose to tuck it in his pocket. He would wear it when he was ready to speak to the Lord once more.

Cillian took a moment to glance back, to see Fergal with his hand spread over the face of the closed casket, sobbing. Cillian shook his head in quiet irritation. Making a man, let alone a leader, out of Fergal would not be an easy task.

AS WAS CUSTOMARY, THE solemn service was followed by a wake at the local public house before the sun set. Cillian leaned against the wood-paneled wall and sighed. They had been here too often over these last few years.

Stories of Padraig's bravery and tales of his antics—his way with women, his loyalty and friendship—were swapped among the brave men that were still left. But with every story told, there was fear deeply

set in the eyes of these soldiers as they, perhaps, recognized that it could be any one of them next.

Eventually the Reverends O'Sileabhin made their way to the gardens at the back of the pub, where they pulled out two fine cigars to smoke in Padraig's honor. A tradition, shared between them, to mark and show respect for those who had fallen for the cause.

The sun was nearly set and the dust of the land could be seen rising into the air where the light above the door illuminated a stripe ahead of them. The wind picked up, whistling toward the doorway, and the particles swirled and dispersed as day prepared to give way to night.

Cillian struggled to keep the flame from his match alive, but then the bitter breeze dropped. As the flame grew strong and high, the end of his cigar turned red. The reverends inhaled the tobacco while an eerie stillness crept over the gardens. The noise from the wake inside seemed to fade, and a figure stepped out from the shadows.

Neither O'Sileabhin brother was prepared for the golden-haired woman who suddenly presented herself. She was not human. No mere mortal could be so breathtaking.

"I need your assistance," she began.

Dumbfounded, the O'Sileabhin brothers glanced at each other before staring back at the beauty before them.

"You come to us from the Lord?" Diarmuid asked.

"I am what you would call an Angel, and *I need your assistance.*" She repeated the phrase, the words gliding from her tongue. Though her features were soft, she had a look of steely determination beaming from her wide eyes. "There is little time. Reverend Cillian O'Sileabhin, are you still the leader of the band of men known as the Sealgaire?"



Cillian placed his hand to the top of the revolver in his waistband. "You know my name; tell me yours."

Diarmuid wrapped his hand firmly around the barrel of the revolver and pushed Cillian's arm down. "Brother, no! She comes to us from the Lord." He furrowed his brow and turned back toward the Angel. "That we are, Seraph. How is it we may assist you?"

"Your name?" Cillian demanded once again.

The Angel shifted her weight from side to side as she considered that the darkness was fast approaching. Finally she said, "Aingeal."

Cillian lurched backward, and his fingers tightened around the base of his cigar.

"There is a girl. . . ." the Angel began, her words pausing before rushing forth. "I need you to seek her out. I need you to save her."

"What girl, and what does she need saving from?" Diarmuid asked quickly.

"She needs saving from herself. She resides too closely to a large Vampire Army. If they find her, if they know her . . ." She trailed off. As the darkened shadows of night began to draw across the surrounding land, the wind returned, almost acting as a warning. "I must go. I will send word of where she resides."

"How will we know who she is?" Diarmuid pushed.

"I gave her the name Lailah. But she goes by many. If your heart is truly pure, you will find her; she will look like me." With that, she turned on her heel.

"Wait!" Cillian found his voice. Stepping forward, he reached for the Angel's arm and looked her square in the eye. "You knew her. You helped her. Tell me, did she make it?"

The Angel contemplated and then finally replied. "Yes. She is safe with the sea."

Diarmuid shook his head in confusion; he did not understand what it was his brother had asked the Angel nor the reply she had given.

The Angel's eyes darted around as the light above the door flickered, and she feared she had stayed too long. With no further hesitation, she proceeded to slink into the gray of night.

Diarmuid shouted after her. "Dear Angel, please, I don't understand!"

The Angel Aingeal stopped, grinding her heels into the grass. "Reach her, before they do." She tipped her weight backward and peered over her shoulder. "Or the battle line between the worlds shall be drawn here in the blood of mortals, and everything will turn to ash."

And then, she was gone.

Fueled with a new sense of purpose, Cillian stubbed out his cigar and hurried back into the pub to gather the men.

Diarmuid turned to follow, but the sound of brambles snapping in the tree line that bordered the gardens caused him to halt. Cautiously, he trudged through the bare undergrowth, pushing past the tangled, low-hanging branches. Nothing could have prepared him for who stood waiting.

The Angel was not the only one to deliver a message that evening.

# ONE

THEY SAY THAT DEATH is a part of life. And that the only thing in life that is truly certain is death.

But “they” never met me.

I gasped and air filled my lungs, circulating some form of life back into my sleeping body. My senses were dulled. Everything around me seemed to move slowly, frame by frame. Or maybe it was just him. Not moving, merely staring at me with the most remarkable, utterly unreadable expression.

Rays of sunlight shone through the trees, creating shadowed stripes across his face, but nothing could darken those sapphire eyes.

Everything was utterly serene.

I released a steady breath and the frost of this new day tingled on my lips. It was as though I was blowing a bubble through a magical sphere, as the image of him and the snowy landscape behind seemed to stretch. Gently, as I exhaled, it expanded. He and the scenery around him became caught in my bubble.

I was holding the whole world trapped within my first full breath.

It was beautiful. He was beautiful. And I was home.

But then a dark, swirling cloud appeared, and when it dispersed, a new pair of mesmerizing midnight eyes blemished the beauty of the snowy scene. The stranger stood not far from the blond guy, where he watched me.

His black orbs pulled me in, sucking and destroying the light and peace I had felt. And before I knew what was happening, my gaze became imprisoned by his eyes.

Panicking, I inhaled sharply, and the bubble I had created rocketed back toward me. A strange new scent rode the breeze and rushed all around me, finally catching in the back of my throat. From zero to a thousand, the whole world slapped me in the face as the bubble burst.

Without warning, peace erupted into chaos, and everything became audible at once. The sound of a bird chirping miles away stabbed my eardrums; the distant noise of the wind hitting tree trunks felt like tidal waves smacking me underneath them. And that step he took toward me—the sound of his shoe in the snow down underfoot—almost caused my eardrums to rupture as the ice crunched from his weight.

I bolted upright, craning my neck toward the origin of the overwhelming scent. I regarded the shadowed stranger daring to look back at me, daring now to approach me. But my attention was drawn away from his dark eyes, to his elbow, where the smallest trace of blood was smeared against his pale skin and where I witnessed the final moments of a wound healing.

A strange sensation flooded me as my teeth fractured into fangs and my top lip quivered. My skin crawled with an intensifying heat,

rising from inside me. I wasn't in control of what happened next. My legs swung off the large stone that I had been placed upon and found their way to the ground. I let out a low moan and my body attempted to stretch, but it wasn't fully awake yet and I stumbled down to the snowy blanket beneath me. I clawed my way to my feet, getting ever closer to that scent, as my body propelled itself in the stranger's direction. I came to an abrupt stop as strong arms wrapped themselves around my waist, turning me away from the stranger.

I struggled against the restraint, but he whispered, "Lailah, no," and the coolness of his breath skimmed my earlobe.

I paused, and my red-hot skin simmered against him. My gums ached as my new fangs receded. My body weakened, but he held me tightly and eased me to the ground, cradling me in a protective embrace.

"You need to go." His hurried voice cut through the jumbled noise invading my hearing.

"But . . ." The stranger's footsteps moved closer from behind me, and I growled and dug my fingernails into the earth beneath the snow.

"Go," my protector said. "Now."

The stranger hesitated for only a moment before the wind whipped against my warm cheeks as he sped away through the clearing.

My ears throbbed, and I covered them with my hands as I rocked back and forth, letting a scream escape from my lungs.

"Shhhhh," my protector said, "it's all right. I'm here, shhhhhh. . . ." He cupped his hands over my own.

A trickle of liquid seeped between our entwined fingers, and I knew my eardrums were bleeding.

As the sun rose higher, the glow of twinkling stars moved around me. It was a sight I'd seen before. But, this time, the flashes of ice crystals came from my skin as well as his. His light wrapped itself around mine, and a sudden explosion of energy filled me. As the crystals from his skin and my own merged, our connection rekindled.

He held me for what felt like an eternity, and I closed my eyes, allowing the sun's rays to sink into my new skin. Finally, the noises dulled into a low hum, but I still didn't feel right; I was dizzy.

He helped me to my feet, and I hesitated, stumbling as I broke away from him. I sensed him following me, but I held my hand in the air, signaling for him to stay back. I stood, precariously balancing my weight, barefoot in the snow. I breathed in and out, forming a rhythm, taking my time. He waited patiently.

"I may not remember you, but I never forgot you," I whispered. "One shared light, split into two . . ."

As though I was staring through a kaleidoscope, memories, thoughts, feelings all took new shape, each becoming more prominent than the last as it moved into focus.

"Styclar-Plena," I said. "The third dimension. Earth. Home—choice. I had a choice. . . ."

The blur that filled the space in between the luminous charms brought with it a different type of memory: a scar, reimprinting itself, damaging me again.

Michael—a Second Generation Vampire, killed by his Gualtiero (Pureblood Master), Eligio—when his plan to hand me over to the Purebloods backfired on him.

Ethan—the fiancé from my first life, who had fled after accidentally killing me only to be changed by a Pureblood Vampire. After

seeing me alive, over a hundred and fifty years from when he thought he had ended my life, he chased me down and ultimately met his demise in his attempt to seek revenge.

Frederic—the first Second Generation Vampire I could recall knowing. Whom I had foolishly befriended, and who had dragged me through the woods with a sharpened hook lodged in my back, and whom the girl in shadow—me—had then mercilessly killed.

Bradley—the not so gentlemanly gentleman in the club in Limoux. He had also fallen victim to my extreme dark side—to the girl in shadow. And just like the others who had crossed me, Bradley was no longer alive to tell the tale.

And now she was gone; the girl in shadow was ended. I had died, but I was back. He led me home—his face, the thought of him, and the thought of me.

I bowed my head and my bangs shielded my eyes. I turned slowly toward him. His dimples dipped at the sides of his cheeks as he frowned. His pupils expanded. He was anxious to hear what I was about to say.

“Gabriel.” A small smile crept across my lips before I added, “My Gabriel. You waited for me.”

The knots in his body loosened. He murmured, “I knew to wait for you this time.”

Stepping cautiously toward me, he tilted my chin with his index finger. He swept my bangs away, clearing my vision, and then cupped my cheek with his palm. He looked me square, exploring my eyes. But he looked away—fast. Too fast.

I had fought my way back, and yet with that one silent glance, I knew a great chasm was already forming between us. What I didn't

know then was that it wasn't the appearance of my new sapphire eyes flecked with black spots that had caused Gabriel to look away, but instead, it was his fleeting thought of what lay behind them.

I sighed heavily and began to pace through the clearing, oozing a false sense of confidence, as though I knew where I was going when really I knew nothing. But I was afraid that the longer I stood there the greater the unspoken divide between us would become.

He raced to my side and took my hand with his own. "Do you remember . . . everything?" he asked tentatively.

"I remember . . . I remember the last six years. I remember the memories and the dreams I have had for the same time. I can't recall anything before. And I know the things she did. The girl in shadow." I gulped. "Me."

"She was an extreme darkness, Lai; she's gone now. You accepted both sides of yourself before your heart stopped. It's probably why you haven't forgotten."

As we moved through the snow underfoot, the trees' bare branches seemed to bow, as though they pitied me.

"I'm different. Again, I'm different." I sighed and let my hand drift away from Gabriel's.

"No. It's just now, for the first time in your existence, you know where you come from. You know what you were born out of and into. You're you. What gifts you have, how they work on this plane, is something we will find out together."

I wasn't sure how right he was about that. I didn't feel human anymore. I was born into human skin, having been birthed here on Earth. And when I died at seventeen nearly two centuries ago, I awoke having inherited my immortal lineage.



“I smelled blood, and fangs broke through my gums, Gabriel.” I paused to allow the weight of that fact to sink beneath Gabriel’s sea-of-glass exterior. “I’m light and dark; I know it to be true now. And I don’t even really know what that means for me yet. But Azrael said I could exist and keep my form in any of the three dimensions. So the Arch Angels will come from the first dimension, and the Purebloods will come from the third to find me. They will all seek me out, here in the second.”

He stopped dead in his tracks; at last something I’d said had caused a reaction.

“Yes,” he said, “they will. If they find out you are alive, they will hunt you down, and they won’t stop until they have you. So, we cut all ties and we leave together. We’ll hide. You have been through enough. It ends here.” Gabriel’s jaw locked and his eyes widened with conviction.

No longer softening the blow for my benefit, he seemed to have hardened. Either that or he was taking my choices away from me, perhaps for my own good. I wasn’t sure.

WE HADN’T WALKED FOR long when a château fort came into view. It stood alone, with a brewing fog clouding its base.

I looked at Gabriel with raised eyebrows. “*This* is where you’ve been staying?”

Gabriel seemed to have more money than sense, and I made a mental note to ask him where his wealth came from.

“It’s very small. I couldn’t take you back to the barn. Han—” He stopped.

Hanora. The very suggestion of her name made my toes curl

instantly. Sadly, I hadn't forgotten her. In fact, there were a few things concerning that particular Vampire that I would have gladly left behind.

"It wasn't safe," he finished.

Standing now only meters away from the entrance, I rocked back on the heels of my feet dubiously. Gabriel halted and reached for my hand. As he slipped his fingers between mine, I knew he could sense my unease.

I didn't know how long I had been trapped between life and death, but he hadn't seemed to change. His broad shoulders and strong arms made me feel safe. He was an unbreakable wall, protecting me, and I knew he'd meet his end long before he'd let anyone pry me from him again. And God, he was gorgeous.

"I love you, Lailah."

Those words surprised me.

"I. Love. You," he repeated firmly. "I should have said it sooner," he continued. "I didn't think I had to, because I felt it. I have always felt it, and so I thought you knew it. Every day we have been together, I *should* have said it."

Right now, I had no inclination to debate the specifics of the love he was proclaiming for someone whose eyes he had struggled to meet only minutes ago or to question what that meant for us now. Instead, I smiled, though I was sure that the sadness at the edge of my lips was obvious enough for him to read. Having faced the end—the real end—and come through the other side, I was suddenly so tired. I was done with the complications of Pureblood Vampires, Arch Angels, and being a pawn in a battle between the two. I wanted it all to stop. I wanted my life back.

I had loved Gabriel in my first life, and though I had wandered

this world for nearly two centuries without him, he had always been with me, buried in my memories and in my heart. I loved him still.

I tightened my grip around his hand and said, “And I, you. I’ll do what you say; I will go wherever you want to take me, for as long as you will have me.”

It was true. I’d woken from my cocoon a Hedyliidae, not a Morpho butterfly like him. But if he felt for me even a fraction of what I felt for him, I would flap my confused wings as hard as I could and follow him to the ends of any and every world, without question.

I immediately felt a sense of angst swelling within him. As he tilted his head, his blond curls fell slightly into his vision, stopping me from being able to read the message his eyes were writing.

Finally he said, “Really?”

“Really,” I said. I had no idea why he seemed so surprised.

Gabriel let go of my hand and began rolling his fingertips in circles within his palms. “What about Jonah?”

I scratched the tops of my arms pensively before I replied, “Sorry—who?”