

Stargazer

Book 2 in the Evernight Series

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Prologue

Frost began to creep up the walls.

Transfixed, I watched lines of frost lace their way across the stone of the north tower's records room. The pattern swept up from the floor, covering the wall, even icing the ceiling with something flaky and white. A few small, silvery crystals of snow hung in the air.

It was all delicate and ethereal—and completely unnatural. The room's chill cut deeper than my skin, down into my marrow. If only I hadn't been alone. If somebody else could have been there to see it, I might have been able to believe it was real. I might have been able to believe I was safe.

The ice crackled so loudly, I jumped. As I watched, my eyes wide and breath coming in thin, quick gasps, the frost etching its way across the window obscured the view of the night sky outside, blocking the moonlight, but somehow I could still see. The room possessed its own light now. All the many lines of frost on the window broke this way and that, not at random but in an eerie pattern, creating a recognizable shape.

A face.

The frost man stared back at me. His dark, angry eyes were so detailed that it seemed as though he were looking back at me. The face in the frost was the most vivid image I'd ever seen.

Then the cold stabbed into my heart as I realized: He really *was* looking back at me.

Once, I hadn't believed in ghosts—

Chapter One

At midnight, the storm arrived.

Dark clouds scudded across the sky, blotting out the stars. The quickening wind chilled me as strands of my red hair blew across my forehead and cheeks. I pulled up the hood of my black raincoat and tucked my messenger bag beneath it.

Despite the gathering storm, the grounds of Evernight still weren't completely dark. Nothing less than total darkness would do. Evernight Academy's teachers could see in the night and hear through the wind. All vampires could.

Of course, at Evernight, the teachers weren't the only vampires. When the school year began in a couple of days, the students would arrive, most of them as powerful, ancient, and undead as the professors.

I wasn't powerful or ancient, and I was still very much alive. But I was a vampire, in a way—born to two vampires, destined to become one myself eventually, and with my own appetite for blood. I'd slipped past the teachers before, trusting in my own powers to help me, as well as some dumb luck. But tonight I waited for that darkness. I wanted as much cover as possible.

I guess I was nervous about my first burglary.

The word *burglary* makes it sound sort of cheap, like I was just going to barge into Mrs. Bethany's carriage house and ransack the place for money or jewelry or something. I had more important reasons.

Raindrops began to patter down as the sky darkened further. I ran across the grounds, casting a few glances toward the school's stone towers as I went. As I skidded through

the rain-slick grass to Mrs. Bethany's copper-roofed carriage house, I felt the queasy pull of hesitation. *Seriously? You're going to break into her house? Break into anyone's house? You don't even download music you haven't paid for.* It was kind of surreal, reaching into my bag and pulling out my laminated library card for a use other than checking out books. But, I was determined. I would do this. Mrs. Bethany left the school maybe three nights a year, which meant tonight was my chance. I slid the card between door and doorjamb and started jimmying the lock.

Five minutes later, I was still uselessly wiggling the library card around, my hands now cold, wet, and clumsy. On TV, this part always looked so easy. Real criminals could probably do this in about ten seconds flat. However, it was becoming more obvious by the second that I wasn't much of a criminal.

Giving up on plan A, I started searching for another option. At first the windows didn't look much more promising than the door. Sure, I could have broken the glass and opened any of them instantly, but that would have defeated the *don't-get-caught* part of my plan.

As I rounded a corner, I saw to my surprise that Mrs. Bethany had left one window open—just a crack. That was all I needed.

As I slowly slid the window up, I saw a row of African violets in little clay pots, sitting on the sill. Mrs. Bethany had left them where they would get fresh air and perhaps some rain. It was weird to think about Mrs. Bethany caring for any living thing. I carefully pushed the pots to one side so I would have room to hoist myself through the window.

Getting in through an open window? *Also* much harder than it looks on TV.

Mrs. Bethany's windows were pretty high off the ground, which meant I had to kind of jump to get started. Panting, I began to pull myself through, and it was difficult not to just fall flat on the floor inside. I was trying to come down feet-first. But I'd gone through the window headfirst, and I couldn't exactly turn around halfway through. One of my muddy shoes hit a windowpane hard, and I gasped, but the glass didn't break. I managed to lower myself the rest of the way and flop onto the floor.

"Okay," I whispered as I lay on Mrs. Bethany's braided rug, my legs still up above my head, braced against the windowsill and sopping wet from the rain. "So much for the easy part."

Mrs. Bethany's house looked like her, felt like her, even smelled like her—strong and sharp with lavender. I realized I was in her bedroom, which somehow made me feel like even more of an intruder. Though I knew that Mrs. Bethany had traveled to Boston to meet "prospective students," I couldn't help feeling as though she might catch me at any second. I was terrified of getting caught. Already I was shutting down, withdrawing deep into myself the way I did when I was afraid.

But then I thought of Lucas, the guy I loved—and had lost.

Lucas wouldn't want to see me being scared. He'd want me to stay strong. The memory of him gave me courage, and I pushed myself up to get to work.

First things first: I took off my muddy shoes, so I wouldn't track any more muck into the house. I also hung my raincoat on a nearby doorknob so it wouldn't drip water everywhere. Then I went to the bathroom and grabbed a handful of tissues that I used to clean up the mess I'd already made, plus my shoes. I tucked the tissues in my raincoat

pocket, so I could throw them away somewhere else. If anyone was paranoid enough to go through her own trash can to find evidence of an intruder, it was Mrs. Bethany.

It was surprising that she chose to live here, I thought. Evernight Academy was grand, even grandiose, all stone towers and gargoyles—very much her style. This place was hardly more than a cottage. Then again, here she had privacy. I could believe that Mrs. Bethany might treasure that above anything else.

Her writing desk in the corner looked like the place to begin. I sat in the hard-backed wooden chair, putting aside a silver-framed silhouette of a nineteenth-century man, and started rifling through the papers I found there.

Dear Mr. Reed,

We have reviewed your son Mitch's application with great interest. Although he is obviously an exceptional student and a fine young man, we regret to inform you—

A human student who wanted to come here—one Mrs. Bethany had rejected. Why did she allow some humans to attend Evernight Academy but not others? Why did she allow *any* humans in one of the few vampire strongholds left?

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Nichols,

We have reviewed your daughter Clementine's application with great interest. She is obviously an exceptional student and a fine young lady, and so we are pleased to—

What was the difference between Mitch and Clementine? Fortunately, Mrs. Bethany's organized filing system led me straight to their applications, but studying those didn't offer any answers. Both of them had scary-high GPAs and tons of extracurricular activities. Reviewing their lists of accomplishments made me feel like the world's biggest slacker. Their pictures made them both look pretty normal—not gorgeous, not ugly, not fat, not thin, just regular. They were both from Virginia—Mitch lived in an apartment building in Arlington, and Clementine in an old house in the country—but I knew that they both had to be rich as sin to even think about going to school here.

As far as I could tell, the only difference between Mitch and Clementine was that Mitch was the lucky one. His parents would send him to a regular high-class boarding school on the East Coast, where he would mingle with other megarich kids and play lacrosse or go yachting or whatever they did at those places. Clementine, meanwhile, would be surrounded by vampires every second. Even though she would never know that, she would sense that something here was terribly wrong. She would never feel safe. Even I never felt safe at Evernight Academy, and I would become a vampire—someday.

Lightning brightened the windows, thunder following only a few seconds later. The storm would get harder soon; it was time for me to get back. Disappointment settled heavily upon me as I refolded the letters and put them back where they'd come from. I'd been so sure I would get answers tonight, but instead I hadn't learned a thing.

Not true, I told myself as I slipped on my raincoat and glanced at the flowerpots. *You learned Mrs. Bethany likes African violets. That's going to be REALLY useful.*

I straightened the violets on the windowsill just the way they'd been and left by the front door, which luckily locked automatically. How like Mrs. Bethany to not leave even that to chance.

The wind whipped the rain against my cheeks so that they stung as I ran back toward Evernight Academy. A few windows of the faculty apartments still glowed golden, but it was late enough now that I wasn't worried about anyone seeing me. I put my shoulder to the heavy oak door, and it swung open obediently without even so much as a creak. Shutting it behind me, I figured I was home free.

Until I realized I wasn't alone.

My ears pricked, and I peered into the darkness of the Great Hall. It was a vast open space, with no nooks to hide in or columns to duck behind, so I should've been able to see who it was. But I couldn't see anyone. I shivered; it suddenly felt much colder to me, more as though I were in a dank, forbidding cave than within Evernight's walls.

Classes wouldn't start for another two days, so the only ones at the school were the teachers and me. But any of the teachers would've immediately started scolding me for being out on the grounds so late in the middle of a thunderstorm. They wouldn't spy on me in the dark.

Would they?

Hesitantly I stepped forward. "Who's there?" I whispered.

Nobody answered.

Maybe I was imagining things. Now that I thought about it, I hadn't actually heard anything. I'd just *felt* it, that weird sense you sometimes have that somebody is watching.

I had been worrying about people watching me all night, so maybe the worry was catching up with me.

Then I saw something move. I realized that a girl was standing outside the great hall looking in. She stood, draped in a long shawl, on the other side of one of the windows, the only window in the hall that was clear instead of stained glass. Probably she was my age. Though it was now pouring outside, she looked completely dry.

“Who are you?” I took another couple of steps toward her. “Are you a student? What are you—?”

She was gone. She didn’t run, she didn’t hide—she didn’t even move. One second she was there, the next she wasn’t.

Blinking, I stared at the window for a couple of seconds, like she would magically reappear in the same place. She didn’t. I walked forward to try and get a better view, saw a flicker of motion, and jumped, startled—but I realized it was my own reflection in the glass.

Well, that was stupid. You just panicked at the sight of your own face.

That wasn’t my face.

But it had to have been. If any new students had arrived today, I would’ve known, and Evernight was so isolated, up here in the hills, that it was impossible to imagine any stranger wandering by. My overactive imagination had gotten the better of me again; it must have been my reflection. It wasn’t even that cold in here, once I thought about it.

Once I’d stopped shaking, I crept upstairs into the small apartment my parents and I shared over the summer, at the very top of Evernight’s south tower. Fortunately, they

were sound asleep; I could hear Mom's snoring as I tiptoed down the hallway. If Dad could sleep through that, he could sleep through a hurricane.

I still felt creeped out by what I'd seen downstairs, and being soaked to the skin didn't improve my mood. None of that bothered me as much as the fact that I'd failed. My big bad burglary attempt had come to nothing.

It wasn't like I could do anything about the human students at Evernight. Mrs. Bethany wasn't going to stop admitting them just because I said so. Besides, I had to admit that she'd protected them, policing the vampire students to ensure they didn't take even one sip of blood.

But knowing Lucas had made me aware of how little I understood the existence of vampires, even though I'd been born into that world. He'd made me see everything in a different way, made me more likely to ask questions and need answers. Even if I never saw Lucas again, I knew he'd given me a gift by awakening me to the larger, darker reality. No longer would I take anything around me for granted.

After I stripped off my wet clothes and curled up beneath the covers, I closed my eyes and remembered my favorite picture, Klimt's *The Kiss*. I tried to imagine that the lovers in the painting were Lucas and I, that it was his face so close to mine, and that I could feel his breath on my cheek. Lucas and I hadn't seen each other in almost six months.

That was when he'd been forced to escape Evernight because his true identity—as a Black Cross hunter of vampires—had been revealed.

I still didn't know how to handle the fact that Lucas belonged to a group of people dedicated to destroying my kind. Nor was I sure how Lucas felt about the fact that I was a vampire, something he hadn't realized until after we'd fallen in love. Neither of us had

chosen what we were. In retrospect, it seemed inevitable that we would be torn apart.

And yet I still believed, down deep, that we were destined to be together.

Hugging my pillow to my chest, I told myself, *At least soon you won't have so much time to miss him. Soon school will start again, and then you'll be busier.*

Wait. Am I reduced to HOPING for school to start?

Somehow, I have discovered a whole new level of pathetic.