# 1

Aleksandar stared down at the photograph in his hand as Stoyan drove the luxury sedan towards their new home. Theodore smiled up at him from the crumbling paper, his grin the mix of boyish mischief and sadness that had first captured Aleksandar's attention so many years ago.

A small, sad smile of his own touched Aleksandar's lips as he reached out and delicately touched the ancient photograph. His mind flashed back to the moment it was taken.

1910. Flash photography had been invented not long before. Drawn in by the new invention, as always, Theodore immediately purchased one and hosted an elaborate party to display his new toy. He had lugged around the contraption all night, taking photographs of everyone he could.

It was the last good night.

Theodore was in great spirits that night, despite the troubles that rocked the Shadow Council; troubles that later spilled out into the rest of Europe, sparking the first Great War. His boyish grin marked every moment, and his wonderful laugh still rang in Aleksandar's ears; a haunting of happiness.

Four years after that party, Theodore was dead and the world plunged into chaos. The old world order collapsed in blood and bullets and the imperial reign of the Opyri, so carefully crafted for centuries, ended.

In the present, Aleksandar Svetoslav was a young heir come to America from Britain to claim his inheritance. That was, at least, the official story. The truth was that the Opyri house that had come to the New World had been destroyed by constant internal power games that left them susceptible to hunters. The hunters discovered and destroyed the Prince of House Üstrel and his entire retinue. Not one Opyri survived the hunters who pursued them. The Shadow Council, the collection of the princes of the ten remaining Opyri Houses, had sent Aleksandar to restore the Opyri hold in America.

Virtually untouched by the Opyri, the Americas had long been overlooked by the Shadow Council, mentioned only with disdain. Their presence there was mostly a side note in their plans. But America had potential. Aleksandar had almost literally been handed an empire.

"We're almost there, my Lord," Stoyan said. He had mostly retained his Bulgarian accent despite having lived in Britain since 1917.

Aleksandar twitched, the sound of Stoyan's deep voice bringing him back to the present sharply. The prince of House Svetoslav slipped Theodore's photo back into his wallet and adjusted his aviator sunglasses. He could tell from Stoyan's expression in the rear view mirror that his loyal servant had seen him.

"Please, Stoyan," Aleksandar said, his British accent only slightly coloured by his eastern European heritage. "Don't call me that."

"What should I call you then?"

"By name."

Stoyan flashed a grin in the rear view mirror. "Master, then."

"Stoyan…"

"It is proper. I am your bodyguard and chauffeur, yes?"

"You are my friend, Stoyan."

Stoyan shrugged. "Master Aleksandar, then."

Aleksandar opened his mouth to protest then shut it again. Stoyan was as stubborn as they came. This was a considerable compromise for him.

"Fine," Aleksandar muttered.

Stoyan laughed.

The luxury sedan pulled up to what used to be a gated driveway. The gate had been destroyed some time ago and the once beautifully paved driveway was a weed-filled ruin of gravel created by neglect.

Stoyan drove the car up the derelict driveway, looking up as enormous yew trees arched, reaching aching branches over the gravel. The yew trees gave way as the driveway ended, revealing a sprawling, but dilapidated, manor house.

A man in a suit stood at the door, holding a briefcase. He straightened as the sedan stopped and two men emerged.

"I'm supposed to get the door," Stoyan muttered darkly as Aleksandar stepped from the vehicle.

Aleksandar smirked. "Next time."

"As you will, my Lord."

"Petty, Stoyan."

Stoyan grinned.

"Mr. Svetoslav?" The man in the suit had come forward, extending his hand. "I'm Mark Andersen. We spoke on the phone?"

"Yes," Aleksandar said, taking Mark's hand. "It's nice to put a face to the name. I am Aleksandar Svetoslav."

"I trust you had a good flight?"

"Let's discuss this inside, yes?" Aleksandar asked. "I'm afraid my pale European skin is unused to this American sun."

"Of course. Of course."

The three men entered the house. Inside, it was cool and dry, but appeared no better than the outside. The foyer must have once been grand. A tiled floor, though covered in mud, ash and plaster dust, revealed a little of the hypnotic mosaic that once covered it.

A grand double staircase, now burnt in places and suffering from dry rot in others, dominated the space. On the ground before the first step laid a chandelier, the crystal shattered, scattered or stolen.

Graffiti decorated much of the once-white walls. Most of it was nothing more than artist tags, all jagged-edged and stark. One, however, was a beautiful illustration of a flower.

Four pillars filled the space at regular intervals. Once white, like the rest of the room, they were now covered in soot and stained by smoke.

"As you can see," Mark started explaining nervously. "It really is a wreck."

"It is structurally sound, though?" Aleksandar removed his glasses, revealing eyes as black as the thick curls that sat on his head.

"Yes. We've had three different inspectors come in. The fire didn't compromise the structure. They all say the same."

"But?"

"Well, it's a hell of a fixer-upper. You might be better off just buying a house in the city and demolishing this… mess."

Aleksandar observed Mark a moment. Mark shuffled uncomfortably under the direct and intense gaze.

"This house has been in my family a long time," Aleksandar said softly. "Besides, I like the idea of fixing it up."

"By yourself?"

Again, Aleksandar watched Mark. The man shifted and forced a smile.

"Of course it's none of my business."

Satisfied by that answer Aleksandar let Mark free from his gaze and walked further into the foyer. He looked around a moment. Mark, meanwhile, mopped his sweating brow with a handkerchief. "I see the family resemblance," he muttered.

The Üstrel family all had those same intense, midnight eyes. Mark had never been a superstitious or even religious man, but looking into those hypnotic eyes had always terrified him. It was an irrational fear he could not explain. He resented being their estate lawyer most of the time.

"Um," Mark said meekly. "The paperwork still needs your signature."

Aleksandar turned and smiled. "Of course."

He beckoned Mark to come closer. Mark did, holding the briefcase in front of himself as he walked, an unconscious creation of a barrier between himself and the powerful man he approached.

Aleksandar noted it with little more than a smirk.

"Everything is in this briefcase. I imagine you'll want to look it over properly before signing it." Mark handed

Aleksandar the briefcase.

"Yes, thank you."

"This is my card," Mark said, pulling a small business card from his breast pocket and handing it to Aleksandar. "Just give me a call or drop by the office when you're done."

"Thank you, Mr. Andersen. "

"Mark, please."

"Mark."

"I should be getting back to the office. I shall see you soon."

"Certainly."

Aleksandar watched impassively as Mark made his rapid exit. After the lawyer was gone, Aleksandar's lips split into a grin. Stoyan matched the grin.

"He was in a rush," Stoyan noted, walking to Aleksandar's side.

"Instinct is a powerful thing."

"I do not like the way he smells," Stoyan said, wrinkling his nose. "I don't like the way this country smells. It's what they eat, I think."

Aleksandar grunted and turned his attention back to the house. "We have our work cut out for us," he noted.

"Just like the Council," Stoyan muttered. "They never liked Theodore. They hated his rise to head of Euphrosyne's House. They don't much like you, either. I think they are planning something."

Aleksandar shrugged. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

"What now, then?"

"We should settle our business affairs first, I think. House Üstrel had a private hospital listed amongst its assets, as well as several medical research facilities and a controlling share in the university here. There is a lot of potential, if we do this right."

"Can we?"

Aleksandar looked at his friend and smiled. "Yes, Stoyan. I believe we can."



"So, the Big House is occupied again," Detective Strauss said, looking down at his morning newspaper on his desk.

"Oh?" his partner asked in a tone of voice that indicated he could not care less.

"Yeah. Some heir to the Üstrel fortune, it seems."

Detective Wade looked up. "I didn't think the Üstrel's had any children."

"They didn't. This is a distant cousin or something. Aleksandar… weird spelling… Svet… Svot… Svetzo… something or other."

"Give that here." Detective Wade snatched the newspaper from his partner's hands.

"Hey!" Detective Strauss complained.

"Svetoslav. Aleksandar Svetoslav. Huh."

"What?"

"Oh… nothing. Just… the notice says he's British."

"So?"

"His name isn't British. It sounds Hungarian or something."

"Right, 'cause families never immigrate."

"Shut up."

"Can I have my paper back, please? I want to do the Sudoku."

Rolling his eyes, Wade tossed the paper at his partner and returned to his breakfast.

"Hey," Detective Wade said as a young police officer walked past. She was relatively new to the central city precinct, and, with her caramel skin and thick dark hair, was pretty enough for Detective Wade to make an effort. He stood. "Heard you were involved in the Green murder case."

Alicia Wilde raised an eyebrow. She might have been new to the force, but she had been around more than her share of self-impressed men. "Yes, sir," she said guardedly.

Wade mistook her searching gaze for one of appreciation and he grinned. "That was beautifully done, the whole thing."

"Well, it wasn't just me. Detective Brody did the lion's share."

Taking a moment to glance across at Detective Brody, who sat hunched at the desk he shared with Officer Wilde,

staring down at a newspaper and looking as dishevelled as ever.

"Come on," Wade said. "You don't need to be modest. Everyone knows what a flake Brody is."

Officer Wilde scowled and Wade knew he had overstepped his bounds. "Anyway," he said quickly. "We should get a drink to celebrate."

Alicia shook her head. "Thanks, but I'm pretty busy." She lifted a file and shook it. "Work, you know?"

"Another time, maybe?"

"Maybe."

Alicia offered a mirthless smile and moved on to her desk.

"When are you going to leave that poor girl alone?" Strauss asked, not looking up from his paper.

"Never. Latina ladies are spicy; just the way I like 'em."

Strauss rolled his eyes and Wade sat back down, finally logging onto his computer.

"Wade giving you trouble?" Brody asked without looking up as Officer Wilde sat heavily in her chair opposite him.

"Nothing I can't handle," she replied with a smile. "Are you sick? You've gone grey."

Detective Brody shook his head and folded the newspaper away. Alicia snuck a glance at the article he had been reading. The "Big House" as the residents called the sprawling, ruined estate that sat on the hill on the outskirts of the city was once again occupied, the heir of the Üstrel fortune having apparently been found.

"Bit of a fixer-upper," Alicia noted, nodding towards the image of the burnt-out shell the mansion had become.

"They should just demolish the thing," Brody growled.

Detective Brody's story was well known amongst the detectives of the Inner City Precinct. He had been a bright young detective whose star was on the rise until his daughter went missing. He had blamed the disappearance on the Üstrel family, but had little proof to back it up. Obscenely wealthy with friends in very high places, the family was impossible to touch. It had almost driven Detective Brody out of his mind. His rabid quest to find his daughter destroyed his marriage.

Finding his daughter's body destroyed his life.

He took to drink to cope and was sent on forced leave as a result. In that time, he had gone insane, rambling about bloodsuckers and the fundamental evil of the Üstrel family.

Everyone knew the Üstrels were as crooked as they came. Justice became a pipe dream the minute they moved into the house. Law enforcement had their hands busy with missing persons reports, drug crime, gang-related incidents and internal corruption. No one doubted it was the Üstrel family's doing. They were crooked and they were connected. With tendrils in the highest levels of law enforcement and government, they were untouchable. It was entirely possible that they were responsible for the death of Brody's daughter. It was never proven, though.

And never would be. The Üstrels were all dead, targeted by some gang no one had ever heard of, or heard from since, and their house was torched. Several members of the Üstrel family had been tied up inside when the house was razed. It was a gruesome few weeks of clean up.

After the news of the sudden demise of the entire family, Brody seemed to recover some of his sense. He enrolled in Alcoholics Anonymous, got himself cleaned up and re-sat his fitness evaluation. When he passed, five years ago, the captain welcomed him back with open arms. Not a cop in the precinct protested. Brody had had it rough, and he got back on his feet. Others would not have managed it.

Detective Brody never mentioned bloodsuckers again.

Two years ago, after his three-year probation, Officer Wilde was assigned to Brody as part of a buddy cop system. She was hoping to make detective, he needed someone to stop him from going over the edge. Despite their differences, they made a good team.

"I think we should pay them a visit," Brody mused. "Just to get a feel for them."

"Not sure that's a good idea, Brody," Officer Wilde said.

"The last thing we need is another crime lord moving into the neighbourhood."

"There's nothing saying that's what he is. From what I heard it's some young Brit."

"Anyone connected with the Üstrels is trouble, Alicia."

"Assuming trouble before there is trouble makes trouble."

"It's just a friendly visit, that's all."

Alicia sighed and leant across the desk, looking her partner in the eye. Brody's steel blue eyes held steady, revealing no wildness or hidden agenda. She sighed. "Clear it with the Captain," she said. "And then we can go."

"Just who is senior?" he demanded, though he fought back a smile. He stood and made his way to the Captain's

office. Alicia shook her head, claimed Brody's paper and opened it up to the article about the Big House. She noted, with some disappointment, that the young heir had declined an interview. There was also no photograph of him, only of the destroyed house.

"He's right, though," she murmured to the fictionalised image she had of the heir to the Üstrel fortune. "Should just tear the place down."

"Get your coat, youngin'," Brody said, making Alicia jump. "We're off to say hello."

"Seriously?" Alicia demanded. "The Captain let you?"

"I made a promise not to get hardnosed. Now let's go."