

The Soccer Field Is Empty

Act 1 The Beginning

Scene 1 The Boy of My Dreams

Mark

September, 1980...

I first laid eyes on Taylor at a Thursday night high school dance. Usually all the dances were on the weekends, but sometimes they were during the week. I guess my school was just weird. I had never seen him before; without a doubt, he was new. Our school wasn't so big that he could have escaped my notice, and there was no way I could have forgotten him. Others maybe, but never him. I couldn't take my eyes off Taylor. My gaze followed wherever he roamed. Usually I was far, far more cautious. One in my situation had to be, but for once I just stared. I couldn't help it. I had no control whatsoever, neither over my eyes, nor my heart.

I'd checked out guys before. I'd found myself looking at them with a distinct, almost painful yearning. Just before I'd spotted Taylor, I was gazing at a well-muscled youth wearing a tight tank top. The knotted muscles in his arms and shoulders fed a hunger that sometimes threatened to devour me. Yes, I'd checked out guys many times, but something stirred inside me, that had not stirred before. Here was the difference between hungering with the body and yearning with the soul. There was something about Taylor, something that drew me to him. My eyes had often been drawn to attractive young men, but never my heart, until the moment I laid eyes on *him*.

There was plenty to attract both my eyes and my heart. Taylor was, without doubt, the most beautiful boy I had ever beheld, but it was more than that—he radiated a kindness and cheerfulness that was so distinct, it was practically a visible phenomena. I felt myself drawn to him, as if by some irresistible force. I fell for him on the spot. With one look I was taken. What happened after was unimportant; from that first moment I was, and always would be,

his. Somehow I knew in my heart it was true.

A boyfriend was the last thing I expected to find at a dance. I usually shied away from dances. It wasn't that I didn't like to dance, any sort of physical activity attracted me. It was something quite different that kept me away. I was popular at school; athletic, good-looking, just the sort of boy that drew girls to him without effort. That was the problem—the girls. What would have been to most boys my age an opportunity, an arousing, exciting possibility, was to me a predicament. I feared girls as a vampire does the mirror. They were an instrument that could expose me for what I was.

I often thought of myself as a vampire. Like those mythical creatures of the night, I lived a secret life. I hid my true nature, protecting myself from those who could not, or would not, understand. I pretended to be just like my friends and classmates, but I was something vastly different from the boy they saw before them each day. I cloaked myself in secrecy. There was a part of me that I dared not let others see. No one must ever know that I was not the same as they.

I must admit that my secret added a touch of excitement to my life, a certain thrill that an ordinary boy could not possibly experience. I walked among those ordinary souls unnoticed, undetected. I derived a certain pleasure and sense of superiority knowing that those around me hadn't a clue as to what I was. The girls that flirted with me, the boys that admired my prowess on the soccer field, not one of them suspected what was hidden behind the facade I created for them.

My secret made me feel both powerful and vulnerable. I had no doubt I was special, even superior in a way, but I knew that danger lurked around every corner. Every friend could fast become an enemy. Every situation carried with it the potential for disaster. Being unlike all the rest carried with it a great price. I couldn't take the slightest risk of exposure. Like the vampire, if I was discovered, I would be destroyed. There would be no stake driven into my heart, but my fate would be nearly as unpleasant.

The very reason I shied away from dances was why I was there—the girls. I'd avoided having a girlfriend for as long as I could. Every other guy at school had one, or wanted one. Every boy that had a girl paraded her around like he was toting some trophy hard won from a dangerous and highly competitive contest. Those boys that wanted a girl and didn't have one were even more obvious. They practically drooled over every girl in their path. If they hadn't looked so desperate, they would probably have had a girl long ago. They were too needy. Girls didn't go for that. They were attracted to strength. They all wanted to date someone confident, bold, and brave. For all their talk of wanting someone sensitive and caring, they always went for the jocks. They acted like they wanted a sensitive guy, but the truth was those were the guys they wiped their shoes on. They weren't interested in caring boys, and desperate boys even less; they wanted *jocks*. They wanted guys like *me*.

If the truth were to be known, I was a sensitive guy, but that was one of the things I was wise enough to keep well-hidden. I was openly kind and considerate, but I took pains to never appear too caring—just like I didn't let anyone know I kept a journal, or loved laying on my back and looking at the stars. It just wouldn't do to have anyone know those things about me. Everyone had to think I was nothing but an ordinary jock, and everyone did.

I didn't want a girl. They did nothing for me. No matter how beautiful they were, I found them about as sexually stimulating as a stack of steaming dog shit. Not that I had anything against them. There was nothing wrong with girls. I didn't think they were inferior

or anything; they just weren't *guys*. It was that simple. To me, being a guy was the ultimate experience. I didn't look down on girls, but sometimes I pitied them for not being male.

I didn't want a girl, but I needed one. I knew if I didn't get one soon, all the guys would get suspicious. I was sixteen and it was high time I was dating. Already there had been questioning glances from my friends, wondering looks that silently asked what was wrong with me. I knew there was nothing wrong with me, but I knew as well that my buddies would not see it so. A guy who didn't go nuts thinking about feeling a girl up wasn't "natural" in my friends' way of thinking. There was something wrong with a guy like that. He was some kind of freak, maybe even some kind of *monster*. I knew my friends were wrong, but I also knew no one could ever convince them of that. That's why I could never let them know what I was.

My facade wasn't all that difficult to maintain. I was so unlike all the stupid homosexual stereotypes that few would even begin to guess what I was. The only things that could expose me were my yearning glances at other young males and my lack of a girlfriend. I hid my glances as well as I could, and I was at the dance to find a girl. Not having a girlfriend made me vulnerable to suspicion. That's why I needed one, even though a girl was the last thing I wanted. I had to at least *appear* to want a girl, or be found out for what I was.

I knew it was not wise to gaze upon Taylor as I was doing, but at such a distance it would be difficult for anyone to discern what had so captured my interest. I was wise enough not to draw close, but to admire him from afar. Besides, I couldn't help but look at him. I felt drawn to him as I'd never felt drawn to anyone. There was a danger, but what was life without risk?

Others found Taylor just as attractive as I did. He was surrounded by half a dozen girls, all of them gazing at him with adoration in their eyes. Taylor had the look of one who was unaware of his own good looks and was embarrassed by the attention others gave his features. The way he shyly smiled and glanced at the floor spoke of both his modesty and a certain awkwardness at being admired. Such mannerisms made him all the more attractive. Taylor absentmindedly ran his fingers through his long, blond hair, vainly attempting to keep it back behind his ears. Even that made him more appealing. Taylor spoke little, but the girls around him hung on his every word. I found myself wishing I could hear his voice.

I was so entranced by him that I was nearly unaware of my surroundings. Everything else seemed unimportant. A voice mere inches away startled me.

"What?" I said, turning to see who it was.

"That girl over there—she's really lookin' you over, man." It was Brandon. I was so lost in my own thoughts that I hadn't even noticed him approach. I hoped he hadn't been there long.

"Huh? Oh, which one?"

"Laura. Haven't you been watchin' her?" he said curiously.

"Oh, yeah. Sure I have," I lied.

I looked across the gym floor. Laura was standing just a few feet in front of Taylor. I hadn't even noticed her before, but I guessed Brandon thought I was watching her, when I was really checking out Taylor. I feared I was being a little too obvious if Brandon had noticed. No harm was done, however. If Brandon thought I was looking at her, so would everyone else. No one would suspect I was drooling over a boy.

I never dreamed that Laura thought of me as a potential boyfriend. I guess that such

a thing was so far from my mind that I just hadn't considered it. I'd never seen it because I wasn't looking for it. I wondered how long she'd thought of me like that.

I looked directly at Laura. She turned quickly away, visibly embarrassed, as my eyes met hers. That was proof enough that she was looking me over with more than casual interest. I'd seen that look in the eyes of girls before. I knew what it meant. That look frightened me.

I couldn't keep my eyes or mind on Laura. Taylor drew my attention away from her. I couldn't help but look at him.

"Huh?" I asked when I became aware Brandon was speaking to me again.

"Are you goin' deaf or somethin'?" asked Brandon, raising his voice over the loud music blaring in the gym. "I said, 'Why don't you go over and ask her to dance?'"

"I don't know," I protested, shaking my head.

"Mark, it's not like you to be so backward. Are you afraid of girls or somethin'?"

Shit, that struck too close to home. I was afraid of them, but not for the reason Brandon suspected. The vampire feared the mirror.

My gaze drifted to Taylor yet again. In addition to the girls, a couple of guys were with him too. They looked at Taylor with the admiration that boys give other boys who are exceptionally good-looking, or athletic—sort of an envious, admiring look filled with a desire to look, or be, the same. I knew that look. I caught it in the eyes of my teammates and classmates often enough. Don't get the idea that I'm conceited—nothing could be further from the truth. My looks were an accident of birth, my talent on the soccer field was part genetic, and part just plain, hard work. I was a better player than my teammates, but I put a lot more work into it than any of them. I was not conceited, but I was aware of my own efforts, and good fortune. Perhaps I possessed a touch of pride in my prowess and appearance, but nothing more.

The boys near Taylor caused a touch of jealousy to rise in my chest, but I knew it was needless. Their interest in him wasn't at all the same as mine. No, I had no need to be jealous. They weren't looking for a boyfriend. Besides, I was getting way, way ahead of myself. I was interested in him, but the chances that he would feel the same about me were practically nil.

I glanced to the left. Laura was looking at me again. She was definitely interested. If only Taylor would look at me like that. Her interest frightened me, but wasn't such interest what I needed? Wasn't it the very reason I was there? Brandon standing at my side, prodding me to approach her, was a powerful reminder of what was expected of me. I was a soccer jock and I was expected to fuck, or at least date a girl and claim I fucked her. How much longer could I wait before the other boys figured out why I didn't date? If I'd been really shy, or unattractive or something, maybe I could have gotten away with not having a girl, but guys like me were expected to have a girl on their arm. It wouldn't take my buddies long to figure out why I didn't date. I'd gotten away with not dating for sixteen years, but I knew my time was running out.

Even as such thoughts flowed through my mind, my eyes were upon Taylor. I was completely taken by him. I knew it was foolish. I knew it would never come to anything. The girls surrounding him were a sign that he could never be what I wanted. I knew I had set my sights on the unobtainable, and that my failure to achieve it would crush me into dust. I couldn't help being taken, however. I couldn't help but bear the slightest hope that maybe—just maybe—he would feel the same as I. My heart hoped, while my mind warned me of the danger. I was a moth flying into the flame... a vampire stepping into daylight.

I feared I was kidding myself. How could he possibly be like me? Hell, I knew I'd never even have the balls to approach him. It just wasn't me. On the soccer field I was bold, fearless, sometimes reckless, but this... this was something quite different. I had long ago cloaked the real me, hidden myself from the gaze of all others because I knew they would not understand. My teammates, my family, my friends, all of them perceived the me that I wanted them to see. To them I was the outgoing, popular, friendly, and much-envied soccer stud. I knew that the real me was far more complicated. There were whole realms to me that few would have guessed. Even those closest to me had no idea of who I really was. That fact sometimes saddened me, but such secrecy was a necessary evil.

I was bold elsewhere, and with other things, but approaching Taylor posed far too great a risk. There was a difference between courage and stupidity. One was not a coward for stepping out of the way of a speeding truck. Taylor was quite likely that very kind of danger. He was certain destruction bearing down upon me, ready to run me over if I didn't have the sense to step out of the way.

"Mark?" said Brandon, asking with but one word why I wasn't acting on such an obvious opportunity. It was clear he could not comprehend why any boy wouldn't make a play for an attractive girl who was checking him out. I'd almost forgotten again that Brandon was standing beside me. I was distracted and I knew why.

"Maybe I'll go over and talk to her later," I said. I was making up excuses for both Brandon and myself.

"Coward," said Brandon smiling.

Brandon was a good friend, but his humor cut a little too close to the truth. He had to be wondering what was wrong with me. Laura wasn't exactly hot, but she was very pretty. I was surprised some guy hadn't snatched her up. I hoped one would so she'd stop gazing at me.

"You're hopeless!" he quipped, shaking his head. "Catch ya later, Mark." Brandon slapped me on the back and walked across the dance floor, making for a cute little blonde he'd been eyeing while he prodded me to approach Laura.

Hopeless. He had no idea. With Brandon gone, I scrutinized Taylor more thoroughly. I simply couldn't keep my eyes off him. It wasn't just that he was incredibly good-looking; there was something more. I'd seen plenty of great-looking guys, but none of them was like Taylor, not one of them had made me feel the way he did.

Laura was still looking at me now and then, but as I gave her no encouragement, her interest waned somewhat. I was glad, and yet I wondered if I wasn't making a mistake. I'd come to the dance to pick up a girl, but when it came down to it, I just couldn't do it. It just wasn't me.

Laura looked pretty disappointed. I felt like a jerk for not at least going over and talking to her. I hated to make anyone feel bad like that, but what could I do? I didn't want to encourage her when I wasn't interested in her. Talking to her, building her hopes up, wouldn't be an act of kindness. I sighed. No, it was better that I show no interest. A little pain now would be better than more pain later.

Taylor was another matter completely. He was exactly what I'd wanted all my life. In fact, I don't think I'd ever wanted anything quite so badly. I looked at Taylor and it was as if nothing else mattered. Once I set my eyes upon him, I felt like I'd been waiting on him forever. I thought of going over to him to strike up a conversation.

No, the danger just wasn't worth it, especially considering that the boy who so took my breath away could never feel the same about me. On that path lay disappointment, pain, heartbreak, and things far worse. A deep sadness overcame me, like the loss of a near and dear friend. I was torturing myself with possibilities that had little chance of seeing the light of day.

Taylor

I loved the dance, even though I wasn't dancing. The crowded gym, the flashing lights, and most of all the loud music filled me with excitement and anticipation. On a night like this, anything could happen.

I knew not a single soul there, except for Kim, my new next door neighbor. She had invited me, and I was glad. I was already making friends. I'd always had a knack for that. I'd always made new friends easily, with both boys and girls. Maybe it was because I thought of everyone as a friend. To me, a stranger was merely a friend I hadn't met yet.

I was talking to several girls near me, and a couple of guys. I didn't really say all that much, but the girls in particular seemed keen on hearing about my old school in Ohio. I missed it, but I already felt at home in Verona, even though I'd only lived there for two days and had yet to start school.

I looked around at the gym. It was practically new. It wasn't at all like the gym in my old school—that one was ancient. This one even had a pool, and the faint scent of chlorine was in the air. I found it oddly enjoyable.

On the walls were some championship banners. The ones that had immediately caught my eye were for soccer. I loved soccer; I lived and breathed it. The one thing I truly hated about leaving Ohio was having to leave my team in the very beginning of the season. I was a center forward and it wasn't an easy spot to get. I knew I wouldn't even have a shot at it in Verona, coming after the season had already started. I just hoped I could get a spot on the team. Even if I ended up spending most of my time on the bench, I had to be on the team. I'd just die if I couldn't play soccer!

I glanced at a huge photo on the wall behind me. It was of the soccer team of 1979-80, just the year before. There was a big trophy sitting on the ground between the boys in front. The photo didn't say what the trophy was for and I couldn't make out the writing on the trophy itself in the picture. No doubt the school had a good team if they'd won some kind of championship.

The girls kept talking to me. I was kind of shy by nature, but I always enjoyed the company of others. The girls really seemed to like me. It was the same way in Ohio. Sometimes it could be a pain. I'd even had a few girls ask me out; that was an awkward situation that left the girl feeling rejected and me embarrassed. I hoped it wouldn't happen here. I didn't see any reason that it should. There were loads of guys around. Was it just my imagination, or were the boys in Indiana better looking than the ones in Ohio?

I looked across the gym and saw an extremely good-looking boy with dark hair and eyes gazing at me. I didn't know how long he'd been looking at me, but he was so very handsome. I loved guys with dark hair. Our eyes locked for a moment and I felt something I'd never felt before. I couldn't even put it into words, but there was some sort of connection there. There was something between us, even though we'd never met.

The boy even looked familiar—but how could he? I didn't know anybody in Verona. The answer dawned on me. I turned and looked at the photo on the wall again. Yes—it was him. The boy across the gym was in the front row of the photo, right next to the trophy. So he was not only handsome, he was a soccer player too. Cool!

I looked back at him and our eyes met once more. He looked away, but he was soon looking at me again. I felt drawn to him, as if we were supposed to meet. I felt as if my whole reason for being at the dance, even my reason for moving to Indiana, was just so that I could meet him. The feeling was so overpowering that I knew that the moment our eyes locked marked a pivotal point in my life. From that moment, nothing would ever be the same again. I grew more excited than ever as I wondered what might lie ahead.