



bad
BLOOD
THE GODBEARER BOOK 1

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BAD BLOOD

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BLURB

The bitch is back.

It's me. I'm the bitch. And thanks to my traitorous bestie Sarah's vampire cult having a funny definition of "virgin sacrifice," I'm back from the dead rather than back from a much-needed vacation in Cancun.

Now I'm possessed by their snarky deity, and my afterlife depends on keeping it a secret from her cult of four reincarnated vampire lovers. Budget Edward--I mean Cyrus--and his way more obnoxious twin, Cameron, are at the helm. Then there's Sam, the guy I thought was my friend, who apparently takes backstabbing way too literally. And because things just couldn't get any shittier, my soon-to-be ex-boyfriend Alex is involved. Ex-alive, that is.

They say revenge is a dish best served cold, which is perfect considering the frosty new powers at my disposal, but I think I took it a little too far. When my plan goes sideways and all I get is the attention of a hunter, the cult doesn't try to kill me a second time. I fall under their unwanted protection instead, and they claim I belong to them now--body and soul. And it turns out hate--and heat, which is a whole new experience for me, just like being with a guy is a whole new experience for them--spices things up.

Are enemies with benefits a thing?

CHAPTER
ONE

CHASE

“He said, ‘OK.’ Just the ‘O,’ a ‘K,’ and a period. Who does that?” I cried, pacing the length of the living room sofa.

Sam was perched on one end, his head propped up on a stack of pillows and his sneakers kicked up on the armrest because I was too upset to say anything about it, and he knew it.

Back when we were kids, he had been the shy emo boy, and he'd kept some of that aesthetic as an adult. He still had the same straight black hair that fell into his eyes and a penchant for wearing too much eyeliner. Like his amber eyes weren't already striking enough against his russet skin. He was a hell of a lot buffer than he had been back then, though, and bigger in general.

So much for those five minutes I'd been taller than him.

"You're going to wear tracks in the hardwood," Sam warned.

I looked over at Sarah, hoping she'd have something more constructive to offer. Sam was a sweetheart, but he was hopelessly hetero, and there was only so much he could understand about the fine art of keeping a boyfriend.

Sarah, however, was a million miles away even though she was sitting just across from him on the couch, staring down at her phone.

"Hm?" she mumbled absently, like she hadn't even been listening.

I folded my arms and scowled at her until she looked up. "Don't let me disturb you," I said. "I'm just in crisis here."

She sighed and put her phone down, but she didn't even bother to close the display. "It's a text message, Chase. It's just not that deep."

"Of course it is! This is Alex we're talking about here. Mr. Cryptic, King of the Mixed Signal." I threw my hands up in the air and walked to the other end of the couch again. "It took him, like, three years just to decide he wanted to ask me out, and now he's gone totally MIA for days. When I finally muster up the courage to text him and ask if he wants to get together to talk, he just sends, 'OK.' With a period. Something is definitely going on."

"He's right, Sarah," Sam said dryly, flipping through his magazine. I didn't even know they still made the damn things in paper format. He was such a hipster. "It's definitely cause for concern. Practically a Dear John letter."

I grabbed a throw pillow off the couch and pitched it at his head. Guess that was where the name came from. "It's not funny!"

He just caught the pillow with a laugh.

Sarah sighed heavily. "Listen, if you're that worried about how he's been acting, just tell him. I don't see why you need to make such a big deal out of it."

"Of course you don't. Cameron and Cyrus have been fawning over you since they came to town." I looked over at Sam. "Then there's this idiot who's been your stalker from kindergarten."

He flipped me off half-heartedly.

Sarah raised an eyebrow, and I realized maybe I sounded a teensy bit bitter. It wasn't that I envied the gorgeous twins who had been fighting over her ever since senior year, and probably even before that. I'd been too busy pining after Alex to say for sure. It was just that everything was so easy for Sarah, and always had been.

For as long as we had all known each other, it was like she was the sun and everyone else just revolved around her. The fact that she didn't even seem to

notice made it more infuriating, but it wasn't like I could blame her for that. I felt guilty enough for being jealous. It wasn't her fault she had lustrous raven hair and big brown eyes that made every guy who looked at her swoon.

"I'm just saying, you've never had to worry about them drifting away from you," I clarified.

She returned her attention to her phone. "That's not true."

I frowned, wondering what to make of that cryptic remark, but Sam chimed in before I had the chance.

"Look, take it from Alex's best friend, you're reading way too much into this," Sam began, sitting up to face me. "He probably has no idea what he said wrong. Sarah's right—just talk to him if you're worried."

At least someone was paying attention. I considered his words and was leaning toward following his advice. After all, he was close to Alex. All of them were close to the point where sometimes I felt like the sixth wheel, but Sam and Alex had an epic bromance going on. If I didn't know for sure Sam was straight, I would've been jealous.

"He's right," Sarah began, still typing something on her phone. "Or you could just date one of the fifty billion other guys at Winterhaven University."

I stared at her, waiting for the punchline, and when I realized there wasn't one, my jaw gaped open. "Are you serious? You've known me since we were toddlers in the sandbox. Alex isn't just some guy, he's my soulmate."

Sarah didn't respond, and if I didn't know better, I would've thought she'd rolled her eyes. Before I could call her on it, the door opened, and my least favorite member of her entourage strode in like he owned the damn place.

To be fair, Cameron was the kind of guy who was used to owning anything and anyone he wanted. He had dark hair and green eyes sharp enough to kill, plus the bone structure of a Hollywood actor and the devilish smile to match. Unfortunately, his personality was pure vitriol toward everyone whose name wasn't Sarah Andrews, but even I had to admit, he was decent eye candy.

So was his twin brother, if I was being honest with myself. Cyrus was obnoxiously hot, too, more like a supermodel than the kind of guy you'd date just to piss your mom off. Cyrus's hair was sandy blond, and his eyes were as blue and cold as ice, so it was hard to believe they were twins other than their muscular builds and alabaster skin that was even paler than most of the sun-starved residents of Winterhaven.

They certainly had the exact same taste in women, though.

"What is this, an intervention?" Cameron quipped, letting the door slam shut behind him hard enough to jar the bones of the old house.

I chewed the inside of my cheek. It was always a struggle not to say exactly what was on my mind when Cameron was around. We had gotten into it enough times that I was bored of the same old song and dance, and tired of Sarah playing peacemaker. She never took my side, of course. Just pretended to be neutral while totally backing up whatever bullshit he was peddling.

And to be fair, he was her boyfriend. One of them, anyway. I just wished she would stand up for me just once.

"Therapy session," Sam corrected with a heavy sigh. "We're debating whether one can infer a relationship's status from a one-word text."

"Depends, I guess," said Cameron. "What's the word?"

Before I could tell her not to, Sarah answered, "'OK.' With a period," she replied, mocking me in a grave tone.

I was gonna bite through my cheek if I didn't watch it. Cameron was the last person I wanted to know about my relationship troubles with Alex, especially since I was sure he'd run back and blab it all to him just to spite me. He didn't actually give a shit about anyone else's drama. He was way too much of a narcissist for that.

Cameron snorted. "Sounds like something I'd say to a clingy chick I wanted to get rid of."

"See?" I cried. Cameron was a total dick, but if nothing else, I could trust him to be honest.

Cameron rolled his eyes. "Should have guessed you were the 'clingy chick' in question. Definitely on brand."

"Suck my dick, shithead," I snapped, flipping him off with one hand while checking my phone with the other. Like some other message would just materialize on the screen.

Nope, still the same one-word reply.

By the time I looked up, Cameron had already pulled Sarah to her feet and into his arms. He kissed her like he was trying to suck all the red tint off her lips, and she draped her arms around his neck, returning it just as passionately.

I couldn't hide my disgust, but at least this time, Sam's face was echoing it.

"If you guys are gonna go all soft-core, can you at least take it up to your room?" I asked dryly.

Cameron looked at me like I was something he'd scraped off the bottom of his shoe, which was a considerable upgrade from how he usually did. He must've been in a good mood.

"Come on," he said, taking Sarah's hand and leading her to the front door. "We're meeting at seven instead of nine."

Sarah frowned. "Why?"

"Cyrus thinks we got the date wrong," he said, lowering his voice and glancing at me, making it clear he was uncomfortable talking about the subject in my presence.

I was used to the whole clandestine routine. Ever since high school, Sarah, Sam, and Alex had started acting like they were all in some secret club.

Actually, scratch that. They *were* in a secret club. A club I had been told in no uncertain terms—and on more than a few occasions—I wasn't welcome in.

Sarah's explanation was always the same, and always vague. She'd only say it had to do with their weirdo families. It was decent, as far as cryptic and bullshit explanations went. The Andrews and Callaways were royal blood in Winterhaven, and the little town fancied itself something of a northward

Salem. Its occult societies weren't limited to the college campus, and all their little secret rendezvous made my coed fraternity look like a youth group in comparison.

"Right," Sarah said, clearly troubled by this new development even though there never seemed to be any real rhyme or reason to the times they met. It wasn't like it was always on the same day of the week or anything. It seemed totally random, except that they met on a full moon more often than not. That had always seemed weird to me, but I figured it was just more of the vaguely occultic tradition every other group in town had a fetish for.

Sam stood and set his magazine down on the coffee table.

"Wait, you're leaving, too?" I asked.

He gave me an apologetic look. "Sorry. I can't miss it. We'll finish this another time, yeah?"

I wanted to tell him the next time we saw each other, there was a damn good chance I was going to be drowning my sorrows in a pint of Cherry Garcia, but Sarah's whispered tones distracted me. She and Cameron were leaning in close, and not in the usual sucking face and making everyone uncomfortable way. It was more of a conspiratorial whisper kind of way.

I could barely make out her saying, "We don't even have a candidate yet."

"A candidate for what?" I asked.

They both looked up sharply and stared at me, like they had forgotten I was there. Or at least they were surprised I could hear them. Sam looked uncomfortable, too.

It wasn't the first time I had found myself in this situation. Sure, I understood that whatever was going on between them, it didn't involve me. After all, my parents had only moved to Winterhaven when I was a baby, and my dad split soon after that. We didn't have any real roots here, at least not by the standards of the close-knit locals. Still, I couldn't deny that it hurt to always be the odd one out. Even with my best friends and boyfriend.

No, especially with him.

Cameron just scoffed and brushed past me, the sleeve of his leather jacket grazing my arm. I glared at the back of his head on his way out the door, then turned to Sarah for an explanation.

"It's nothing," she said, touching my arm. "Don't wait up, okay? We'll probably be out late."

"Of course you will," I muttered.

Sam squeezed my shoulder. He towered over me, and even Sarah, who had modelesque height in addition to everything else she had going on. Sam had always been the shrimp of the group before he went through a major growth spurt sophomore year.

"It's gonna be okay," he said. "You know Alex. He always has his head up his ass, but he'll come around."

I gave him a strained smile and nodded. When the door closed behind them, I dropped back down onto the couch and let out a heavy sigh.

And just like that, I was alone on a Friday night.

Again.

At least I could get caught up on my history paper. I usually enjoyed Western Civilization, but after three years of French language and a weekend with the flu spent watching *Les Miserables* on repeat, I was so over the French Revolution.

I reached over the arm of the couch for my notebook and brushed my fingers across something that felt like it, given the length of the binding. When I picked it up, I realized it was Sarah's journal. The one she was always writing in and never let me see.

Sure, we'd shared all our social media passwords when we were younger—which was basically *the* declaration of trust in junior high—and she knew all my deepest, darkest secrets, but the journal was off-limits.

I chewed my bottom lip and stared down at the plain brown leather book. It looked ancient, and I was pretty sure the pages were made of vellum. It had

that dusty old smell of library archives or an old church. My fingers itched with temptation, just to crack the cover a little bit...

The second my fingers brushed the crinkly pages inside, I snapped the book shut and threw it onto the chair across the room to fight the temptation.

No. I was not going to invade my best friend's privacy just because I was curious.

Even if she had been acting totally shady lately, coincidentally at the same time my boyfriend started getting super weird and distant.

And even if they did disappear all the time...

Together...

Well, maybe just a peek. It served her right for telling everyone in high school about that time I wet the bed at a slumber party when we were eight.

I opened the book slowly, like something was going to pop out at me. Maybe a monster who devoured shitty friends. Instead, I found an empty couple of pages, followed by what looked like a dedication.

The Grimoire of Prudence Whitmore.

I frowned, studying the cursive scrawl. It was similar to Sarah's handwriting, and the name "Whitmore" sounded familiar. Wasn't that her mother's maiden name?

I turned the page and found more writing. It was in Latin. I was a little rusty since I hadn't taken it in a semester, but I remembered enough. Death factored in a lot, along with all kinds of different metals and planetary references, plus the word for "goddess."

Holy shit, this was a grimoire. An old one, too.

But that made no sense. Sarah had been writing in this book since forever, but now, it was some distant relative's witch diary?

I took it as my cue to stop snooping before I saw something I couldn't unsee. I was feeling guiltier by the second, and while I'd always known Sarah was into some witchy stuff, I didn't know she was that hardcore about

it. I had probably unleashed some ancient mummy curse just by touching the book without permission, so I quickly set it back where I found it and grabbed my own notebook.

I went back to my paper, but my heart wasn't in it, and neither was my head. I couldn't stop thinking about the weird notebook and Sarah's even weirder behavior. Maybe it really didn't have anything to do with Alex. Then again, who knew what it was about? He was as wrapped up in all this spooky stuff as anyone.

Sarah was the one who'd always wanted to play amateur ghost hunters when we were kids. She had an EVP recorder and a spirit board that totally freaked me out. She was the cause for more sleepless nights than I cared to count, and while I was always petrified, she seemed enthralled by all of it. There wasn't an ounce of fear in her, not when it came to that stuff. What if she'd gotten herself involved in something serious?

Her and the guys...

No. That was crazy talk. Just because everyone in this town liked to play up the whole haunted aspect didn't mean there was any truth to it.

Mom would've laughed at me for even thinking this way. Surgeons were nothing if not analytical, and while it kind of sucked that she'd chosen to move away as soon as I graduated high school, I couldn't really blame her. All the superstition got to me, too, and I'd grown up in Winterhaven.

Yet somehow, after twenty years, I still didn't feel like I belonged.

Sometimes I wondered why I even bothered. It wasn't like Winterhaven University had the best pre-med program or anything. I'd miss Sarah and Sam if I left, but I'd miss them a hell of a lot more than they would miss me. I'd asked Alex once if he would ever think about moving with me, just as a casual aside one night while we were in bed together, and he'd just laughed it off like the idea was ridiculous.

After that, I never brought it up again. Maybe it was because I knew if I did, if I ever asked him to choose between me and this place, I knew what his answer would be.

So I stayed, and I continued to exist on the fringes of Winterhaven—not distant enough to be a tourist, but not involved enough to be considered a local.

I shook myself out of my melancholy and picked up my phone. Filming a livestream always helped me feel better. When it felt like no one in real life was actually listening to me, I could always count on my subscribers to care, even if it was only because they saw my life as a train wreck they couldn't look away from.

And judging from more than a few of the comments, they did.

"Hey, Martians," I said in the brightest tone I could muster, walking into the kitchen with my phone in hand. I opened the fridge and pulled out a couple of wine coolers, holding them up to the camera. "So I'm alone on a Friday night as usual, and I thought I'd come on and do a stream. Q&A time, bitches. I'm an open book."

A few people jumped on right away, then a few more, and before long, I had a couple hundred people asking me all kinds of random questions—and a creep who asked if I'd walk around in front of the camera in my roommate's lingerie.

Blocked.

If only it were so easy to get rid of assholes in real life. I would've blocked Cameron a long damn time ago.

CHAPTER
TWO

CHASE

It was Sunday, and I still hadn't heard from Alex. I was tempted to send another text, but the last thing I'd said to him had been to let me know when he wanted to get together, and he obviously hadn't. It wasn't like he didn't know where to find me.

Hell, Sam, Cyrus, and Cameron spent more time over at the house than he did.

Sarah had come back so late the night of their Super Secret Meeting that when I woke up in the middle of the night to get a couple of aspirin for my hangover—I'd had way too many wine coolers, because digital peer pressure is totally a thing—the door to her room was still open with the light on and the bed made. She'd been just as scarce over the weekend, so it wasn't like I could pepper her for details on Alex.

Truth be told, I was fine with that. I couldn't get that creepy book out of my head, and while it had been gone when I went downstairs Saturday morning, I couldn't help but be freaked out.

I was worried for Sarah more than anything. Her and my guys. Cyrus and Cameron could get fucked as far as I was concerned, and even though they had magically appeared out of nowhere in high school, I still didn't trust them any further than I could throw them. And that wasn't far, because they were both stupidly jacked.

Most of the stuff that went on in town was just pomp and tradition, but there had been a series of murders during fifth grade, no matter how much

Winterhaven's residents wanted to pretend everything was fine. No one really knew what had happened, but according to a mysterious source from the Winterhaven Police Department, they suspected foul play related to some cult in the area at the time.

If anyone was an ideal virgin sacrifice, it was Sarah. Sure, she wasn't an actual virgin, but she had that whole good girl thing going on. The guys ate it up.

I had tried emulating her once upon a time. Copycatting may have been a less generous way of phrasing it, but I'd failed abysmally either way. It turned out it's kind of hard to be mysterious when you can't keep your mouth shut.

I was knee-deep in reworking the section of my history paper Professor Douchebag found so lackluster when my phone buzzed. I practically flung the coffee out of my hand in an attempt to reach it, hoping it was Alex.

Nope. Just a twenty-percent-off coupon from my favorite boutique.

I never thought I would be so fucking annoyed by a deal.

That was it. I had to get out of the house before I went insane. I was literally turning into *that* guy. The one who sat by the phone all weekend, waiting on his boyfriend to call.

My rink bag was already in the closet, so I grabbed it and headed out to my SUV. She wasn't fancy, but I'd had new tires put on last winter, and she ate up the snow that stranded our neighbors more often than not. Sometimes the battery wouldn't start when it was cold, which was almost always—Winterhaven was a pretty good name, I had to admit—but at least campus was a short walk away.

Of course, if I lived in the Greek housing on campus, it wouldn't be a walk at all. Juniors were allowed to live off campus, and sometimes I wondered if I had made a mistake by taking the school up on that freedom. Sure, sharing a cute little Victorian with Sarah had been my childhood dream, but it wasn't quite as quaint in reality. Not when I had to hear her fucking her boyfriends at all hours of the night. That was on the rare occasion she was home at all.

When I arrived at the athletic center, the parking lot was nearly empty. I ran my student ID through the badge reader on the door and walked in.

"Hey, Chase," the girl behind the counter said brightly.

"Hey, Steph," I said, smiling back. Steph was a recent pledge, as chipper and idealistic as they came. She was already on track for future chapter president, just as I'd been when I first joined. I was a shoe-in as a legacy, but I'd turned down the offer my sophomore year to focus on school, which was code for being available for Alex and moving in with Sarah.

Sometimes I regretted everything I had given up, and for what? It wasn't like anyone had asked me to do it, so I couldn't even be bitter about that.

And sometimes I wondered what people would think if they knew the truth beneath my cheery exterior. After outgrowing my lengthy ugly duckling phase, I had finally achieved popularity the summer after freshman year of high school, and that was an image I carried over into college and clung to desperately. Would they laugh if they had any idea I spent my weekends drowning in my own insecurities, playing second fiddle to my best friend?

My subscribers probably would. Hell, if they knew the real me, I wouldn't even have a channel, and all those sponsorships that made it possible to live independently without begging my mom for money would go out the window.

After a bit of chit chat, I excused myself to go into the locker room and changed into my blue leotard and skates. The moment my blades hit the ice, I felt the tension melt away. The rink was empty, which was a miracle considering we were knee-deep in hockey season, but lunch on a Sunday was kind of an off time. Everyone else was busy having a social life. Go figure.

I hadn't skated competitively since my knee injury senior year of high school, but the rink was still the one place I truly felt like I belonged. It wasn't really that no one judged me here. I'd fallen flat on my ass as many times as any other beginner, and sure, I'd been laughed at for being a guy in a leotard, but it was more like I didn't care.

When I was skating, I enjoyed it so much that I didn't feel like I was in my own head anymore. I didn't feel like myself, and contrary to the image I tried to keep up of being the guy everyone else wanted to be, I'd never really felt comfortable in my own skin. Not before my high school glow-up, and not after. It had changed the way people treated me—at least, some people—but it sure as hell didn't change the way I felt about myself.

Maybe that was why Sarah and I had stayed friends. At least, it was probably why I clung to our relationship. It was old and comfy, like a pair of jeans that fit perfectly, and at least when she ignored me now, it wasn't any different from the way she'd behaved back then. It wasn't like all the people who'd started hitting on me when I came back from summer break with no braces and abs, as if they hadn't bullied me mercilessly for years before then.

Sarah wasn't the best friend, but at least she was consistent.

Skating usually cleared my head, but I realized that for once, it was just giving me the chance to mull over my problems in greater detail. My brain just took the blank space and used it as a projector for the movie it was always playing in the background of my thoughts.

I tried pushing for a more intense workout since I wasn't ready to go home and face down a paper I was less and less happy with the more I tweaked it. I landed the axel, but chickened out on the double. The moment my skates hit the ice on the way down, the sound of clapping from the stands alerted me to the fact I wasn't alone.

I thought it was just some asshole who'd wandered over from the gym to gawk, since that was a pretty common occurrence, but when I saw Alex standing there, my heart skipped. Only he could look hot in a parka.

I skated over to the edge of the rink and leaned on the railing. "What are you doing here?"

Considering he couldn't even be bothered to answer my texts, I was surprised he had shown up in person. Weirdly, he was holding his arms behind his back, like he was hiding something he didn't want me to see.

"I came to apologize. I know I've been kind of distant lately," he replied, pulling a bouquet of red roses out from behind his back. I was mildly allergic, which he definitely knew, but that hadn't kept him from getting me roses for every Valentine's Day since I had told him that.

Oh well. It was the thought that counted, right?

I took the flowers, looking down at them admiringly. "They're beautiful," I said. And they were. Definitely worth the inevitable sneezing fit later.

Being distant was the understatement of the year, but apologies from Alex were as rare as solar eclipses, and I wasn't going to ruin the moment with all the things I'd told myself I would say the next time I saw him.

"And you don't need to apologize," I added. "It's fine."

Wow. I almost sounded like a chill boyfriend. Maybe Sarah was rubbing off on me.

Of course, it was easy to be chill when you had three guys slobbering over you at all times. I just wanted the one to think of me every so often, and maybe send a cute little emoji text or two throughout the day. The flowers were a good start, though.

Maybe Sarah and Sam were right. Maybe I was totally reading into Alex's texts—or lack thereof—and imagining the distance. He probably had something else going on, and yeah, I wished he would trust me enough to communicate, but Alex had always been a closed book. I knew that when we started dating. It was part of the reason we worked. Opposites attract and all that.

"Come on. Get dressed, I want to take you somewhere."

I hesitated. I was sweaty and exhausted, and if it had been anyone else asking me to do literally anything, I would have said no, but this was Alex and I didn't want him thinking I wasn't interested.

"Where?" I asked.

"I can't tell you." He flashed me that grin that had always been my Achilles' heel. "It's a secret."

My heart skipped again. "Give me half an hour to get ready?"

He seemed annoyed, but he nodded. "Sure. I'll come pick you up at the house."

So he wanted to take me out on an actual date, somewhere off campus. That was a good sign, wasn't it?

The entire drive back to the house, my brain was torturing me with all kinds of what ifs, like what if he was just taking me out to break up with me because he didn't want me to make a scene? If he thought cloth napkins and shrimp cocktails were going to keep me from losing my shit in public, he really didn't know me at all.

No, I was probably just being paranoid. Again.

Trust and space, just like that relationship coach on YouTube said. Trust and space.

Maybe if I repeated the mantra enough, it would sink in and transform me overnight into the cool, confident guy I had everyone else convinced I was.

CHAPTER
THREE

CHASE

After showering and changing into some skin-tight black jeans and a nice shirt, I put on the finishing touches, speed-drying my hair and doing what I could with it. No sooner was I finished than I heard the familiar rumble of Alex's sports car at the curb, followed by a long honk.

I rolled my eyes and went downstairs to grab my coat and lock up. It was weird to me that Sarah hadn't been home yet, but she was probably just over at Cyrus and Cameron's. She practically lived there lately, anyway.

I climbed into the front passenger's side of Alex's car. It turned out he was wearing a blazer under the parka, which he'd chucked in the back seat. He was the only person who had a sports car in a town known for its heavy snowfall, but he couldn't be persuaded otherwise, and I had to admit, it was a stylish ride. Not a smooth one during the cold months, but stylish.

He looked me up and down, raising an eyebrow when I shrugged out of my coat since he had the heat blasting. "You're not gonna be cold in that?"

"You're not taking me skiing, are you?" I asked dryly.

"No," he snorted, pulling onto the road. "Definitely not."

He took the corner like it was the Indy 500, but I didn't say anything. He hated backseat driving and to him, that counted, so I kept my mouth shut. I just gripped the door handle and tried to be subtle about it.

"So, you're really not telling me what this super secret place you're taking me to is?"

“Nope,” he answered unapologetically, turning up the stereo.

I’d kind of hoped we would have the chance to talk, but Ozzy had other ideas. I settled into my seat and told myself to be grateful things were going as well as they were.

I took out my phone and decided to send a quick text to Sarah. Something felt off, and if anything had happened to her and I hadn’t even bothered to check, I’d never forgive myself.

Hey, you okay? I haven’t seen you all weekend.

A minute later, she saw the message, but she didn’t reply.

Huh. Well, if she had her phone, at least I knew she hadn’t been kidnapped or anything.

Unless the kidnappers had her phone, which seemed entirely plausible if not likely, now that I was thinking about it.

I was still weighing whether I was being paranoid, or whether this was one of those moments you always hear about on primetime news where someone gets a feeling that turns out to be totally on the money, when she texted back.

I’m fine. With Cam.

I liked to think that wasn’t something a kidnapper would say, if only because it was low effort, so I slipped my phone back into my pocket and decided not to encroach on her romantic evening with Cameron any further.

Beyond his good looks, charm, and seemingly bottomless inheritance, I had no idea what she saw in the guy. But to each their own.

I turned my attention back to the frosted pines flying by outside the window. We’d passed every exit I’d expected Alex to take, and as far as I knew, there weren’t any highway exits out this far in the boonies.

Then again, some of my friends had been raving about this cute little Italian restaurant in the middle of nowhere on a lake. It was supposed to be fine dining, and totally romantic.

That had to be it. There was nowhere else he could be taking me. Alex really was trying.

I just had to pretend like I was surprised when we got there.

When he turned down another rural road that finally opened up into a long driveway in front of a stately home, I didn't have to pretend. There were a bunch of other cars in the lot, one I recognized as Cyrus's.

My heart sank a little. This definitely wasn't a restaurant.

"What is this place?" I asked, looking up at him. "Is there a party here or something?"

"Of a sort," Alex answered cryptically, parking next to Cyrus's car before he got out.

I pulled my coat on before getting out and following him up the freshly shoveled walk to the door. He opened it without knocking, and the vast entryway was empty.

Inside, I realized it was more like a boarding house than a family home. It was huge, and there was a room just off the front hall lined with bookshelves and old furniture. The kind rich people paid good money to buy just because it was distressed. I knew because Cyrus and Cameron's place was filled with the stuff.

"Here. Let me take your coat," Alex said, helping me out of it.

He was really pulling out all the stops tonight.

"Thanks," I said, looking around. "This place is gorgeous, but who does it belong to?"

"My family," he answered casually, like he was just telling me he'd bought a new pair of running shoes. I must have been gawking at him because he added, "It's been here forever."

"This is the first I'm hearing about it," I replied, taking another look around with the knowledge that this place was his. And he'd never mentioned it. Not in the eighteen years we'd known each other, or the years we'd been dating. On and off, sure, but still. That had to count for something, didn't it?

“This is where we meet,” he said, as if that explained it.

And it kind of did. Every bit of wallpaper and every inch of crown moulding seemed to take on a new, sacred ambience as I realized this was it. This was the place they were always disappearing to. Their secret clubhouse was definitely not what I’d pictured.

I realized only then that my mental image hadn’t changed from the days when I had assumed it was a literal clubhouse.

“It’s amazing,” I said, looking up at him. “But why did you bring me here?”

“You’ve always said you wanted to know. Well, here it is.”

“Right,” I murmured. Once the shock settled, I felt a glimmer of excitement. “What about the cars out front? Are the others here?”

“They’re just parked here. They took Cyrus’s SUV out to the lake, so we’ve got the place to ourselves. Come on,” he said, walking up the stairs.

My heart thundered as I followed him. Yeah, the choice was a little weird, but he’d not only shared this piece of his world with me. He’d planned a romantic getaway, too.

“Here,” he said, coming to a stop in front of a door at the end of a seemingly endless hallway. “Go in and get changed. I’ll wait for you out here.”

“Changed?” I asked in confusion, looking down at my clothes. I felt pretty sufficiently dressed up for a nice restaurant, let alone just the two of us in a remote house in the middle of the woods.

“It’s part of the surprise,” he said, flashing me a grin that made it hard to question anything. Or remember my middle name.

Matthew. Definitely still Matthew.

“Okay,” I said with a nervous laugh, slipping into what turned out to be a bathroom. A lavish bathroom that was more like a spa, but a bathroom nonetheless.

Sure enough, there was a garment bag on a hanger on the other side of the door. I unzipped it, expecting to find some kinky bondage gear since Alex had always been a fan of that kind of thing, but instead, I found a long white robe made of silk as soft as a cloud.

Definitely not his usual taste, or mine, but... okay.

I looked around to make sure there wasn't something else I was supposed to change into instead. When I didn't see anything, I reluctantly put on the white robe. It was definitely made for someone taller, and it nearly brushed the floor. I'd have to struggle not to trip on the hem. It tied in the front with a red cord, which was weird. Definitely not color coordinated.

At least it was kind of flattering.

I fussed with my hair until it fell in a way I liked before going back out to find Alex leaning against the wall, looking down at his phone while he waited. I cleared my throat and he finally looked up, but it wasn't the va-va-voom reaction I had hoped for, considering I was wearing what he'd obviously picked out with a very specific purpose in mind.

"You look nice," he said absently, putting his phone away.

Nice. That was even worse than "OK" with a period.

I pushed my insecurities aside and followed him further down the hall to another flight of stairs. They had to go up to the attic.

Okay, this was an odd enough choice for a weekend getaway, especially coupled with the not-so-sexy lingerie, but the attic was too weird. I stopped on the stairs, my hand on the railing.

Alex turned to look at me with an impatient frown. "What's wrong?"

"This is weird," I muttered. "What's going on?"

I couldn't displace the strange sense of apprehension that had plagued me all evening and gone into overdrive when we'd pulled up to the mansion. Either this was the weirdest fucking breakup of all time, or the weirdest fucking romantic getaway of all time. Either way, I wanted answers.

He gave a sigh of exasperation, like we'd been on the stairs for all eternity. "Look, if you want to just go home and forget about it—"

"No," I said quickly. A bit too eagerly. "No, it's fine. I'm sorry."

I followed him the rest of the way, and as we drew closer, I could hear what sounded like soft, rhythmic chanting, barely above a whisper. It was the kind of soundtrack that might be playing at a new age store or something. Not exactly bow-chicka-wow-wow music, but it put me at ease a little.

Maybe he'd arranged a couple's massage or something. That would explain the robe, but why wasn't he wearing one?

There was a sliver of light under the door, and when Alex opened it, the chanting stopped.

I followed him into the attic room and realized it sure as hell wasn't anything like my grandma's attic. It had a high vaulted ceiling with a skylight on the right side that let in the full light of the moon, illuminating the stone table in the very center. In fact, the table was the only piece of furniture in the room.

That wasn't what caught my attention, though. It was the fact that there were four figures cloaked in fabric the exact same blood red shade as the sash around my waist.

I turned back to Alex in hopes that he would make some sense of this bizarre joke—or maybe it was a dream—but before I could fully turn around, someone clamped a hand over my mouth and pressed a white cloth to my face. The smell was pungent and made my head feel light, like the last time I'd been to the dentist and had laughing gas, only instead of seeing patterns on the ceiling, I blacked out.

CHAPTER
FOUR

CHASE

When I opened my eyes from that awful dream, my body felt heavy. I knew this feeling. Sleep paralysis. I hadn't experienced it since I was a kid, but it wasn't the kind of feeling you ever forgot.

I heard familiar voices around me, but none of them belonged to Alex. Cameron, though—I'd know his anywhere, if only from the way it enraged me.

It took all the willpower I had to pry my eyes open, and when I finally did, the sight of the full moon staring in through the skylight brought all the horror and realization rushing in at once.

Oh, fuck. This wasn't a dream.

This was a nightmare.

"He's awake," said Cameron. The others stopped speaking.

One of the hooded figures walked over to me, stopping too far away to get a look at his face behind the shadow. I could feel him studying me, though. Watching in silence.

There were five of them now. Cameron lowered his hood first, and hatred filled me to the brim.

I still didn't know what was going on, and my head was still throbbing from whatever they had drugged me with, but I wasn't surprised he was involved.

Of course he was.

“Let me go,” I snarled, only realizing I was bound by my wrists and ankles when I finally regained the motor control to attempt to move.

Cameron was close enough that I could see his eyes glimmering with amusement, even more green and catlike in the glow of the moon. He looked like the devil in that robe, or at least one of his favorite emissaries.

“Let you go? The fun is just beginning,” he taunted.

Two of the others walked toward me, and I strained in renewed earnest. “Where’s Alex? What have you done with him?”

Cameron and one of the other hooded figures exchanged a look. There was something familiar about him. About all of them, even though my thoughts were still as sluggish as my body.

“Cyrus?” My voice cracked as I spoke his name.

He lowered his hood, his face expressionless. It usually was. He was one of those people who never smiled. At most, he just kind of coughed a laugh, or nodded, and that was when he was really feeling gregarious. He was the polar opposite of his twin, as if when their personalities had formed, they'd both agreed to just flaunt the stereotype as much as humanly possible.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. This was actually happening. It wasn't a dream or a nightmare. The restraints digging into my wrists hurt too much for that. Dream pain was always kind of dull, more psychic than physical. This was sharp. Hyperreal.

“Let's get on with it,” Cyrus said in a solemn tone. “The moon is already at its peak.”

Yeah, this definitely wasn't some secret ritual to bond us as besties forever. This was some fucking cult shit, and Alex and I had just walked straight past the gates of Jonestown.

The straps weren't budging. They were solid leather, the kind that would take forever to saw through even if I had a knife. My breath was only coming in short gasps, not enough to fill my brain with oxygen. I was about

to have a panic attack, and I felt like I was going to pass out again even though that was impossible. I was way too keyed up. The adrenaline coursing through my veins was trying to prepare me to fight or flee, but neither was an option.

One of the other figures stepped closer. He didn't stop until he was right next to the table. Fear and disgust made my skin crawl until he pulled his hood back.

Then, I felt nothing.

And not "nothing" like an awkward kiss where there aren't any sparks. Like someone took a fucking ice cream scoop and hollowed out everything inside of me nothing. Then the betrayal set in as those familiar dark eyes bored into mine without a hint of remorse or fear.

"Alex?"

"He really isn't quick on the uptake, is he?" Cameron asked, folding his arms impatiently, like he had another satanic moonlight ritual to get to.

"Shut up," Alex muttered. He pulled something from his robe and handed it off to one of the still-hooded figures, who walked around the table to my other side.

I didn't know who to keep an eye on. Then, my gaze drifted over to the figure on the furthest side of the room, the one who seemed to be trying to fade into the shadows as far away from the table as possible.

"Sam, get over here," Cyrus said, tugging at the restraint on my right wrist, as if it might suddenly have come loose. "We need your blood."

My heart sank as the distant figure reluctantly approached.

No, no, no.

I didn't even care what the others were doing. All I could focus on was that figure as he slowly drew his hood down.

Sam. My Sam.

His usually bright, smiling face was sullen and dour, and he looked like he'd aged ten years in a day. He held out his hand, and Cyrus wordlessly cut his palm with the blade Alex must have given him. Sam held his hand over a bowl Cameron offered him and clenched his fist, letting the blood trickle in. It was half full already. Evidently, I'd woken up in the middle of the festivities.

I turned my head to find Alex standing next to the last fully cloaked figure, watching me with an unreadable look on his face.

"Make them stop," I pleaded. I still wasn't sure beyond a shadow of a doubt that this wasn't some awful, cruel prank, but the fear gripping my chest told me otherwise. "Please, don't do this."

Alex ignored me, nodding to the figure next to him. "It's time."

There was a long, diagonal cut on his palm, still bleeding but not as much as it should have been.

My heart thundered like a war drum, pounding so hard against my chest it felt like it was shaking the room. The last figure lowered their hood, and while the realization that both Sam and Alex were involved in this—whatever the hell this was—had been devastating, it was the sight of Sarah looking down at me with a solemn gaze that left me absolutely shattered.

I thought my heart had broken all the myriad times me and Alex had broken up temporarily, but now I knew the truth. Now I knew just how many shards I could become. How any part of me was still solid enough to be bound by the restraints, I didn't know.

"Sarah, no," I pleaded, as much with reality as with her.

"I'm sorry, Chase," she said quietly.

And the most fucked-up part was, I could tell she meant it. It was the first time she'd apologized to me in our entire friendship. It was also the first time she'd done something that warranted an overt apology, rather than me just sweeping it under the rug because I was probably just overreacting.

Those words on her lips made me laugh. The sound just bubbled up in my throat, and it must have been an odd reaction because even Cameron was

looking at me uneasily.

"This can't be happening," I said. It didn't sound like the words were coming from me, though. It didn't even feel like I was in my body anymore.

"You always did say you wanted to be involved," Sarah said, holding her hands up. "Now you are. Welcome to the coven."

"Coven?" I echoed. "You mean like witches? Actual hex-throwing, broom-riding witches?"

Cameron rolled his eyes.

"Something like that," said Sarah.

Cyrus passed her the ritual blade. It was still dripping with blood, but she dipped it in the bowl for good measure.

"Why are you doing this?" I asked. My thoughts were racing, darting back and forth between the present and the past few weeks, trying to find anything that would explain it. Any signs I'd missed. The only thing I could keep fixating on was that damn book. "Is this because I looked at your stupid grimoire?"

The look of surprise on her face told me it wasn't. Well, shit, I could've done without volunteering that bit of information. Not that this was going particularly well, anyway.

"It's nothing personal," said Cyrus. "We needed to sacrifice a virgin, and we were in a time crunch."

"Virgin?" I laughed in disbelief, looking over at Alex. "You want to fill them in on the bad news, or should I?"

"It's not a literal virgin," he said flatly, his arms folded. "You're a Virgo. That's the astrological sign of the virgin."

My grandmother always had said horoscopes were dangerous, and I'd just kind of rolled my eyes because she felt the same way about rock music and raw cookie dough, but damn, did she ever pick a time to be right.

"You're a cult," I said slowly. "A literal cult. And you're going to sacrifice me to your, what? God? Demon?"

"Goddess," Cameron corrected shamelessly. "The blood goddess, specifically."

"Of course," I said with a bitter laugh. "If only I had a nickel for every time someone tried to sacrifice me to a blood goddess. You're insane. All of you. You know that, right?"

That was the biggest shock of all. Not the ritual, not the knife, but the fact that I had grown up with three of these people, and I still didn't know them at all.

I'd always suspected I meant less to them than they meant to me. I'd convinced myself it was paranoia, the leftover impostor syndrome from my days as an ugly duckling, but now I knew it was true. All of it.

No, that was too generous. I didn't just mean less to them, I meant nothing.

"Let's get on with it," Alex said gruffly.

I wasn't sure if he was afraid he'd have second thoughts, or if he just had somewhere better to be. Probably the latter.

"Please don't," I cried, my voice newly frail as Sarah raised the blade. I noticed for the first time there were strange markings all over it. Runes, it looked like, painted in some kind of silvery coating.

Her eyes met mine, and for a few eternal seconds, she said nothing. Your life is supposed to flash before your eyes right before you die, but all I saw was a slideshow of our friendship. Memories of playing in the snow, building powdery white castles our childish imaginations made splendid. The awkward first kiss we'd shared in the second grade, which was simultaneously the moment I realized I was gay and that the way I loved her was so much deeper than a crush. Boys came and went, but we were forever. And that was still true, but forever had come a hell of a lot sooner than I had ever imagined.

It flash-forwarded to us both getting ready for our first dance, laughing and crying over boys. Holding her while she cried over her parents' divorce.

Her being there to hold my hair back the first and last time I got trashed at the party neither of us was old enough to be at.

So many insignificant, meaningful, petty, beautiful memories, all washed away to nothing. All they ever were was nothing. I knew that now. Sarah had known all along. She was a sister to me, but to her, I was just Chase. Just a roommate. Just expendable.

I didn't even feel the dagger when she plunged it into my heart, but maybe that was because there was nothing left to wound. They say there's a limit to how much pain the human body can feel before the brain just shuts down. I always thought that applied solely to physical pain, but in my last moments alive, I knew better. I had already felt everything there was to feel for Sarah and Alex and Sam. All the love, all the anger, all the sadness, all the jealousy.

In the end, there was nothing left.

CHAPTER
FIVE

SAM

"What the hell do you mean, it was for nothing?" I demanded, echoing the words Cyrus had just muttered under his breath. I wasn't like him and Cameron. I didn't have freakishly good hearing. But there was no mistaking what I heard.

"He's right," Sarah said, her voice as blank as her gaze. She had been like that all night, but between her, Alex, and me, she was definitely the least affected by Chase's death. I wasn't sure why that surprised me. Why it bothered me. I certainly didn't have any room to talk about betrayal.

My best friend was dead, and even if I hadn't been the one to literally stick the knife in him, I had twisted it in his back all the same. Chase's blood was on all our hands, but no one's hands were stained more than mine. Except maybe Alex's, but he hadn't really been there all evening, either.

Once we had all finally come to accept that the ritual hadn't worked and Sarah wasn't possessed by the goddess, Alex had gone totally despondent. Hell, I wasn't sure I looked much better from the outside.

Chase's body was still on the table, growing cold. Every now and then, I'd hear the sound of his blood dripping.

Drip. Drop.

I was never going to forget that sound. I knew I didn't deserve to. For all I knew, Chase was already haunting me. Part of me wished he would. The idea of never seeing him again...

It was all too surreal. His screams, his pleas for mercy...

Fuck. Fuck, what had we done?

What had *I* done?

Alternating waves of numbness and dismay washed over me while the others continued to argue about what could have gone wrong. Cyrus insisted that we had followed the ritual down to the letter. He was clearly trying to convince himself more than us at this point. Meanwhile, Cameron was probably the most fucked up out of all of us, and I hadn't heard him speak a word or seen him so much as blink in the last ten minutes.

Of course, he didn't give a shit about Chase. I was pretty sure Sarah was the only human he was actually capable of caring for, and there were times I wondered if that was only because she was Ichor's vessel.

Or at least she should have been.

"Can we undo it?" I wasn't aware that question had left my mouth until everyone was staring at me.

"What the hell do you mean, 'Can we undo it?'" Cameron asked, finally speaking up. "It's a human sacrifice. There is no rewind button."

I forced myself to look back at Chase's body. Somehow, I was convinced it would've disappeared in the two seconds I'd been distracted. Maybe it was just wishful thinking.

"There are all kinds of spells in Sarah's grimoire. And the two of you are technically dead. Maybe—"

"You can't turn someone into a vampire after they're dead, Sam," Cyrus said slowly, like he was speaking to an idiot or small child. I was probably both in his eyes.

I clenched my jaw, trying to ignore the mounting panic that was overtaking the numbness. "You must have fucked something up. You said it was going to work. You said it was a guarantee."

"It was!" Cyrus snarled, his eyes glowing with rage. He was usually so calm that his uncharacteristic reaction probably would've scared me shitless if I

had any shits left to give. He masked it as quickly as it had appeared and shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know what happened. I don't know why it didn't work. Everything was in place."

"It's the stars," Sarah muttered. "It has to be."

It finally occurred to me that she wasn't actually upset about Chase. She was upset about the fact that the ritual hadn't worked. They all were.

What the hell was I doing with these people? What was I a part of?

Before I could form an answer I knew I wouldn't like, Alex spoke up. "We can't just leave him here."

He seemed to be having the same trouble looking over at the body as I was, and I knew it wasn't because he was squeamish. His voice was rough, and he looked about ten shades paler than usual.

"He's right," Sarah said in a quiet tone that gave me hope. Hope that maybe she actually did feel something resembling the guilt that tainted my every breath. "We should get him to the morgue. We need to start thinking about our alibis."

So much for that.

"Alibis?" Cameron hissed. "You think that matters now?"

It was the first time I'd ever heard him raise his voice to her. He treated her like what she was—the sacred vessel of the goddess he had been obsessed with for countless lifetimes. We all had, and even though my memories of those past lives were a little shaky, I still felt the same devotion and love for Ichor as the others.

It was just that I was also capable of feeling it for the human boy I'd grown up alongside, even if it wasn't the same.

"Of course it matters," Sarah shot back, seemingly unbothered by his outburst. "We can't fix this if we're all in prison, can we?"

Cameron gave a bewildered laugh and raked a hand through his hair as he paced the small attic room. "Fix it. Right. There is no fixing it!" he cried,

turning on her. "This was a once-in-three-centuries opportunity, and we failed. We blew it. It's over."

"That's enough," Cyrus barked. Everyone in the room fell silent, even Cameron. Cyrus looked between us as if he didn't really know what to say now that he had our attention, but he was the calm and collected one, and we were all looking to him for what to do next. "Alex is right. We need to get the body to the morgue. We'll figure out the rest from there."

"There's a gaping hole in his chest," said Cameron. "We have to fix that before anything else. No way that's going to go unnoticed in Hicksville."

Cyrus was already walking over to the stone table, and my stomach turned as I watched him dig his nails into his own palm. His face was a mask of stone as he held his bleeding hand over the wound in Chase's chest. There was something almost gentle about the way he filled the wound with his own blood. At first, I wasn't sure what he was doing. Then I remembered the healing properties vampire blood had—ironic, really, considering they were parasites in every other way—and ventured close enough to see the wound beginning to seal itself shut.

A second was enough. I looked away, and my eyes met Alex's for the first time since it had all begun. His face said everything we were both thinking—*what the fuck?*

"Once Cameron takes him to the morgue, what then?" I asked, trying to ignore the sudden chill in the room. Maybe that ghost theory wasn't too far off, after all. I couldn't stop thinking about the prospect of Chase's ghost watching me. Of him looking over the scene of our betrayal. He might not have believed in any of this stuff while he was living, but I had no doubt he would make one hell of a vengeful spirit.

"The rest of us will go home," Sarah answered. "I'll report him missing in the morning. I'll tell the sheriff he didn't come home last night, and I'm sure they'll want to talk to Alex."

Alex froze. "Me?"

"Yes, you, dipshit," Sarah snapped. "You're the one who decided to get involved with a human in the first place. They always suspect the boyfriend

first."

"I didn't know he was going to be a sacrifice!" Alex protested.

This was all so surreal. I kept thinking I was going to wake up at any moment. Hoping.

"You're not going to prison," Cyrus said, his calm and diplomatic self once more. "I'll compel the sheriff if I have to, but I'd rather not do it unless it's absolutely necessary."

His answer seemed to appease Sarah, but Alex understandably looked like he thought it was pretty fucking necessary. He didn't say that, of course. We had all just participated in a cold-blooded murder, and if the look on his face was any indication, he was feeling every bit as out of his element as I was.

No turning back now, I told myself. Not that it made it any easier.

"You need to get your shit together," Sarah said, looking at Alex before she turned to me. "Both of you. They're going to call his close friends to identify the body, and there's no way his mom is going to get here in time."

His mom. My heart sank into an even deeper pit, but Sarah wasn't even slightly phased.

"Right," I mumbled. And she was. She might have been a stone cold bitch, but she was right, and I had to get my shit together or this disastrous night was going to turn into an inescapable nightmare.

According to the others, "all we had to do" was identify the body. I spent all night thinking about it, since sleep wasn't an option, and by the time the sun rose, I was no closer to feeling remotely together than I had been before.

I was about to go crazy waiting for the phone to ring, and when it finally did, I picked it up without looking at the display. To my surprise, Sarah's voice was on the other line, not the sheriff's. It just wasn't any more of a relief.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"Home," I answered, looking around the room. "Why? Where are you?"

"The morgue," she said, lowering her voice to a whisper. "Something went wrong."

My heart pounded. What more could possibly have gone wrong? "Did they ask you to identify the body?"

"No," she said in a grave tone. "There was a body when I got here, but I don't know whose it is."

It took me a moment to process her words, but when I finally did, they were no closer to making sense.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"It wasn't Chase," she answered. "It was the guy who watches the morgue at night. His throat was ripped out."

"What the fuck?" I cried, my thoughts racing. It didn't take long to come to an unsettling conclusion. "Cameron—"

"It wasn't him," Sarah said impatiently.

"What makes you so sure about that?"

"Because he wouldn't lie to me."

It took me a second to think of a response for that. The guy had no moral compass to speak of, so it was kind of hard to believe he drew the line at lying to his girlfriend. Maybe Ichor, but contrary to what Sarah had declared so proudly for years, the two of them were not one and the same. Not by a long shot. That was clearer now than ever. I just wondered when it was going to sink in for her.

"Okay," I said slowly. "So where the fuck is Chase?"

She fell silent for long enough that I started to think either she'd hung up on me or we had lost the connection.

"I don't know," she finally answered. "I only called because I hoped you might."

"I don't," I said, shocked she had even asked. All I knew was that this was indeed a nightmare, and it was only just beginning.

CHAPTER
SIX

CHASE

Earlier

Dying wasn't something I had given a lot of thought to in years.

Weirdly, I'd been kind of obsessed with death when I was a kid, long past the normal stage of development where you were supposed to process it and learn to accept your own mortality.

It wasn't that I was goth or anything. I didn't have the right undertones to wear all that black.

It had started with my aunt's funeral. She wasn't close with my mother, and I only saw her at holiday gatherings, but when I saw her lying in that casket—her face serene and full of life thanks to the mortician's efforts and the magic of theater makeup—something in my six-year-old brain just snapped. I could still remember the shrill scream I let out without even realizing it was coming from me until Mom grabbed me by the hand and dragged me out of the room.

I wasn't sure what I was expecting. Mom had told me Aunt Phyllis was dead, but somehow, I hadn't made the connection between the goldfish we had flushed down the toilet a year prior and the news we had gotten over the phone. For the next six months, I slept with the light on, convinced that death was a monster waiting in the darkness, ready to snatch up healthy little boys and ailing aunts without discrimination.

Of course, my logical, scientific mother tried to explain how statistically unlikely it was for a young child who lived a life of relative privilege to just drop dead for no reason. Aunt Phyllis was a smoker, and she had done her share of partying in her youth. She had a stressful job, and she had never gone to the doctor when she saw the early warning signs of a stroke. There were reasons these things happened, and as upsetting as they were, there was no point in worrying about it. Certainly no point in screaming and disturbing an entire room full of mourners.

She was right, but it did little to allay my fears. Death became an obsession, and I was convinced it was coming for me around every corner. I didn't really even understand what death was. I just knew I didn't want to end up in a wooden box, with people crying and gawking at me.

Throughout the entire phase that followed, and the subsequent pediatric therapy sessions when my fears became an inconvenience, I learned it wasn't death itself that haunted me.

Even in the depths of my obsession, I had never really put much thought into what came after. We weren't religious, and while I had been baptized as an infant according to my Catholic grandmother's wishes, Mom never put any stock into it. I had asked her once where people went when they died, but she'd just said it was a silly question and that was that.

When I died and whatever part of me that was capable of awareness kept going, I realized I probably should have been as persistent about the answer to that question as I was about the location of my Christmas presents.

I'd say all there was in the place I woke up in was darkness, but that wasn't really true. Darkness only existed in relation to light, and there had to be something in order for there to be nothing in contrast. Instead, I just sort of... floated in no particular direction. I floated for what felt like forever, until something did happen. Something that reminded me that as improbable as it was, I still existed in some form or another. At least part of me. At least enough of me to think about whether I existed or not.

I had deliberately tested out of freshman year philosophy for a reason. That shit made my head hurt, and I had the same aversion to the existential as most of my classmates had to advanced calculus. As I found myself moving

toward the proverbial light, I wished I'd paid more attention in high school. Maybe then my own personal interpretation of the afterlife wouldn't be so banal.

And it had to be my interpretation. There was no way any of this was real. Nothing more than the misfiring of a brain in the process of shutting down. I couldn't even feel anything attached to the thoughts. I'd left behind whatever it was that felt fear and curiosity and betrayal in that ritual room, on that stone table where my body had probably already gone cold.

Moving didn't take much effort, but I wasn't really sure how I was moving either. Or, if I had no physical form, if it could really be considered moving at all.

The closer I drew to the light, the more defined the shape of it became. It went from being a nebulous blob of a glow in the distance to a long, horizontal slit, like the glow beneath that attic door. It was close enough to touch, and then the door I'd been imagining swung open as if my thinking about it had brought it into existence.

A river of red rushed out, blood the color of wine and the texture of... well, blood. I had bagged on the ice enough times to know it well. It swept me away and dragged me along with it, a sanguine current flowing into the meaningless void.

All of a sudden, I did have a body. A body with arms and legs flailing as I struggled to stay above the surface, and lungs that were filling rapidly with thick, sticky, wet blood. I gasped instinctively, which just made it worse, and the current pulled me under.

Great. Now I was going to die all over again. Like the first time wasn't bad enough.

Part of me just wanted to give up, to surrender to the inevitable, and hope that was really the end of it.

No. No, I wasn't going to give up that easily. If there was any emotion I was still capable of feeling, coming back more and more by the second, it was wrath. Pure, palpable wrath flowing through my veins like adrenaline. It gave me the strength I needed to rise above the current, and I swam like

my fucking life depended on it, even though I didn't technically have one of those to lose anymore.

The waves of blood buffeted against me like a stormy sea and kept throwing me under, but whenever it felt like my body was going to give out, I reminded myself I didn't really have a body. The feeling I was imagining was nothing more than my brain's reproduction of the process of chemicals breaking down in the muscles—and I didn't even have a brain anymore, either. If I could overcome the resistance during a workout, I could surely overcome it when it was nothing more than a bad dream.

Or something like it, anyway.

It felt like it went on forever, this battle between me and the bloody red sea. If this was some kind of metaphor brought on via my gender studies class, I was gonna be really pissed.

Then it occurred to me. Whatever this was, whether this world existed or not in any real sense, it was a product of my mind. It had to be. That was all that was left, and if I had created it, I could destroy it.

I stopped fighting and gave myself to the current, letting it plunge me under the way it had been trying to for what felt like forever. It went against every survival instinct I had, but those were pretty much useless now.

I drifted down deeper and deeper, and when the blood filled my lungs, I told myself the pain in them wasn't real. There was nothing of substance to that hot, burning sensation, and all at once, the pain subsided.

I closed my eyes and focused. Imagining things in my mind's eye had never been one of my strong points, so I focused on the feeling of my feet touching solid ground.

And they did.

I had never been so relieved to stand on anything in my entire life, and while the surface I'd found such tentative purchase on was shifting like sand on the ocean floor, it was something. Something I had created.

That meant I could create more. I wasn't sure what rules applied in my imaginary world, but it was my fucking world, so I might as well try.

I imagined the relief of my head bobbing above water, breaking the surface tension as the blood sank lower and lower. I could feel it peeling off my shoulders like a satin robe, droplets gliding over my skin as they retreated to the sand below.

When I finally dared to open my eyes, I saw it again—the door. The same door the ocean of blood had come rushing through, with light pooling beneath it.

The blood was only up to my ankles now, and I waded through it easily. I found myself walking toward the door instinctively, and I couldn't make myself stop. There was probably another tidal wave waiting behind that door, a repeat of everything I had just been through.

Maybe this wasn't my mind at all. Maybe I had died and gone to hell, or at the very least, purgatory. That infant baptism had to be good for something, right?

As I reached for the doorknob, I knew there was a good chance that I was just going to end up reliving the same scenario over and over ad nauseam until whatever was left of my mind broke and the illusion finally subsided, but there was nothing else I could do. I opened the door, but all that was waiting on the other side was darkness.

Shit.



MY EYES FLEW OPEN, and I sat up with a gasp that came out like a wheeze. The breath that left my lungs was as painful as the breath that entered it again, and I had no active control over either.

This time, I definitely had a body. I wasn't quite sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing, especially since every inch of it felt frostbitten. It was the pain of a deep freeze rather than from any physical source, but it was plenty intense. So was the gnawing, aching hunger in my stomach.

As I sat up on a narrow table that seemed about four feet off the ground, the sheet that had been draped over me slipped down over my bare torso. The

fabric was rough and scratchy. You'd think they could at least splurge on Egyptian cotton for a burial shroud.

As I looked around the room, I realized I was no longer in that creepy attic—or in the house at all. The walls were pale white, and there was a low hum coming from the stainless steel machines positioned around the room. I didn't want to know what they were for, but the other tables that looked just like mine with undeniably human lumps beneath the sheets told me everything I needed to know.

A morgue. I was in a fucking morgue.

How? I was dead. I'd been to the afterlife, or at least my version of it. My memory was like Swiss cheese—too many holes to make sense of anything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours, or however long it had been since Alex had taken me to that awful party.

No. Not a party. How had my brain rewired that memory? Wishful thinking, maybe. More like denial.

The blood, though, I remembered clearly. I could still smell it, taste it, feel it sloshing around my lungs. It wasn't really there—there wasn't so much as a stain on me—but it felt real all the same, more real than anything that had happened in that attic.

Somehow, I wasn't dead. Somehow, I had actually survived. And yet, I was dead enough that I had ended up in a morgue.

I swung one leg over the edge of the table first, then the other. My body felt stiff and rickety, like riding a bike for the first time on summer break after a long hiatus. When my feet hit the floor, the pins and needles running down my spine made me gasp, and my knees gave out. If I hadn't caught myself on the edge of the table, I would've fallen.

Did I even have a heartbeat? I felt like it should be racing right about now, but I was too chicken to check. I wasn't sure I wanted to know the answer, or the answers to any of the other myriad questions buzzing around in my mind right now. I just knew I had to get out. Get out, get outside, get away from this awful place and the smell of formaldehyde and disinfectant. That smell lingered in my lungs just like the blood, forming a pungent cocktail.

My first few steps were pathetic, but while my legs were still all pins and needles, I managed to make it to the foot of the table. I noticed the clipboard hung on the railing and picked it up with trembling hands. They were shaking so badly, I had a hard time reading the words on the page. My vision was blurred, too, and no matter how many times I blinked, I couldn't fix it.

Name: John Doe

Age: Approximately twenty to twenty-five

Eye Color: Blue

Hair Color: Blond

Cause of Death: Acute hemorrhage due to unknown internal injury, no sign of physical trauma, dead on arrival.

I just stared at the words on the page for a minute. It figured I'd lived in this town most of my fucking life and whoever had found me still didn't know who the hell I was.

I really was dead. None of that was a nightmare, or my insecurities fucking with me in a bizarrely real hallucination. It had all actually fucking happened.

What did they mean, no sign of physical trauma? I looked at my chest where Sarah had plunged the blade in without hesitation, but there was nothing. Not a scar, not a drop of blood, not a trace of the fatal wound she had left behind.

What the fuck?

I had to get out of here. I had to get out, and the empty gnawing in my stomach was getting worse and worse and worse. My movement should've become easier as I walked, but halfway down the hall leading out of the morgue, I felt stiffer and shakier than ever.

Was I embalmed or something? No, there were no stitches holding my eyes and lips shut. They hadn't gotten that far, thank God. I must've just been brought in.

I heard a sound up ahead and froze. It took my body a second to actually stop walking, like it was on delay. Like the connection between my brain and body had been severed and not fully restored.

As I listened, another sense took precedence.

What was that smell? It was so familiar, so enticing and... metallic. I found myself walking toward it without intending to move at all, drawn in by its siren's song. The closer I drew, the more sounds I could hear. Someone moving around in the office up ahead, shuffling papers, the wheels of a desk chair scraping across the floor.

It was all so clear, even though I was much too far away to be able to hear that sharply. It was like every sound had grown amplified the moment that scent hit my nostrils, and the scent itself kept growing stronger and more alluring.

When I came within view of the open office, I just stood there for a few seconds, watching the man at the desk. He was bobbing his head to the music blaring from his earbuds, looking over a bunch of haphazardly scattered papers across his desk. He had a white coat, so I assumed he was the mortician, or at least an assistant.

Someone I could ask for answers. Someone who would know what was happening to me, or at least be able to help me figure it out.

I meant to ask him. I really did. I opened my mouth as I stood in the doorway, and his eyes met mine. Then, just as his gaze filled with terror, I was right in front of him, my hands wrapped around his neck. Gripping, squeezing.

Drink.

The feminine voice was a seductive hiss in my mind, an echo that seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere at once. I thought I was going insane, hallucinating, but the impulse to obey it was far more concerning than the voice itself.

I tried to loosen my grasp on the man, tried to break away, but I couldn't. The ache in my stomach grew to a crescendo of agony, and I felt like I was going to double over at any second. The blade had gone into my heart, so

why did it feel like a truck had hit me in the midsection? My gums hurt, too. It was a faint itch at first, barely enough to notice, but it soon became a sharp pain as if something was breaking through them.

I heard the crunch of bone, and no sooner realized my eye teeth had become a set of razor-sharp fangs than I buried them in the man's neck.

He barely even had time to scream.

Now I knew what the scent was. It was blood. Beautiful, sticky, warm blood coursing into my mouth and down my throat. The idea horrified me, but my mind and my body were separate, piloted by two distinct entities. I screamed for it to stop, but I just kept drinking, more and more until the howling ache inside my stomach subsided.

It never went away completely, not even after I felt the man's pulse cease, and I still kept drinking. Or, whatever was controlling my body kept drinking. I was aware of its presence now, an observer watching me from the inside. It had been there all along. Ever since I'd woken up, at least, and maybe even while I was struggling to escape the river of blood.

Maybe it was the blood. Maybe that was all there was. All I could see, smell, touch, taste.

When I finally regained control over my body, I collapsed against the wall, panting and staring at the corpse I'd left slumped against the felt-backed office chair. He looked so pale. I'd taken so much. So much I didn't even know how it all fit inside me, but I still didn't feel full. It didn't feel like enough, more like just enough to dull the ache and restore my senses for a moment.

I looked down at my hands. They were covered in crimson, and I could feel the blood dripping down my chin like juice from a watermelon. I looked around the room in a panic and found another lab coat hanging on the rack by the door. I grabbed it and wiped off as much of the blood as I could. There was a big leather jacket hanging on the rack, too. Probably the dead man's. I tried not to think about it as I covered myself and staggered out of the room, hoping to find the door.

A door. Another door. That was all I needed. A door with a sliver of light beneath it. One that would serve as a portal out of this world, out of this terrible reality that couldn't be any more real than the last one I'd escaped.

It couldn't be.

Somehow, I made it to a flight of stairs leading up to a quiet floor. Only a few of the overhead lights were still on, flickering fluorescents behind planes of plastic, trapping the corpses of a year's worth of insects in their shadows.

The door was open, at least from the inside. The cold air hit my skin, too real, too visceral.

I pushed it away, willing myself not to feel. I didn't seem to have as much control over this strange world as the last, but at least it was familiar. I had never been inside the morgue, but I recognized the view from the parking lot. It was right across from a factory outlet and a series of warehouses that always had empty parking lots.

No one was around, at least no one that I saw. To be fair, if I saw a guy stumbling out of a morgue wearing nothing but a leather coat, I probably wouldn't have been too eager to approach him, either.

I just had to get home. If this really was Winterhaven, my home was somewhere close by. I could go and hide in my room and curl up in my bed until I woke up in a different world. There had to be a better one. One where I wasn't a killer. A monster.

There had to be.

That singular goal gave me the focus I needed, and the time and distance that elapsed from the morgue to my street were eaten away by the dreamlike fugue lingering in my mind.

Only my car was in the driveway. Sarah's was gone, and that realization was the first thing that connected my current state to the blurry memories of the attic.

I wanted that to be another strange world I could escape with the opening of a door, but something deep inside told me differently. Something told me I

wouldn't be escaping that reality so easily. Maybe it was the same one I was in now.

No. This had to be a dream. It had to. I wasn't a monster. I didn't drink blood. I didn't hear strange voices telling me to do terrible things, and I sure as hell didn't listen to them.

I picked up the key under the mat, and my hands were shaking so badly, it took me four tries just to get the door open. I had wiped off the blood thoroughly enough that I didn't leave any behind, at least not visibly, but I could still feel it tacky and partially wet between my toes, the droplets that hadn't come off during my walk.

Would it all melt away in the snow? It was supposed to be warm tomorrow, assuming this was the tomorrow I'd last been awaiting. Maybe it would all just melt away, meaningless droplets flowing down the gutter and into the sewers.

I could still hear the dripping of blood from the guard's neck, little droplets so faithfully adhering to the rhythm that had matched his heartbeat when he was still alive.

Drip. Drop.

My feet kept the same rhythm as they traveled up the stairs, my steps as stilted as they'd been when I first woke up. I moved down the hall, propping myself up on the wall when the house spun and swayed so rudely. By the time I finally made it to my room, it was hard to tell if it was my head that was spinning or the world around me.

It didn't matter. I didn't even bother to lock my bedroom door. I wasn't even sure if I shut it, I just went to my bathroom and turned on the water, unaware of whether it was scalding hot or ice cold. The mirrors were fogged up, so probably the former.

I stayed in the shower until the water ran clear down the drain. Then I turned the water off, operating solely on autopilot, and went to my bed. I crawled beneath the covers, closed my eyes, and just stared into the darkness like I had done so many times when I was a kid. Unlike back then, now I knew what I was afraid of. What was waiting in those shadows.

It was nothing, and it was worse than anything I'd ever imagined.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

CHASE

I woke up with the worst hangover of my life. Or maybe my afterlife. After the flurry of fitful, disjointed dreams I'd had the night before, I wasn't sure. My mind was a mish-mash of blood, whispered voices and betrayals. The sweet sting of death, and the strange numbness that followed.

And then, the sun streaming in through my window blinds, illuminating a familiar world, made it all seem like a distant memory. I climbed out of bed and looked around for any sign of the night before. Of the impossible.

My room looked pretty much the same as it always had. I was a neat freak, as Sam put it, so there wasn't any clutter where secrets could hide.

My heart surged, very much alive and well—if a bit unsteady—as it pounded against my chest.

The jacket.

I searched my room and the bathroom, but there was no sign of it. How was that possible?

Unless...

Unless it really had been a dream. Unless it was all part of some awful hallucinatory nightmare, which best-case scenario would require me to sit through another year of therapy at the very least.

But it meant I was alive. It meant my best friends—and my boyfriend—hadn't betrayed me. It meant I hadn't killed anyone and turned into a monster

overnight.

Maybe it was just delusion, but I grasped onto that logical prospect with irrational desperation.

I went to the bathroom mirror to look at my reflection, just to convince myself I still looked human. And I did, aside from the dark circles it was going to take a truckload of concealer to hide, but my hair... it was white. And not a premature gray caused by too many stressors. It was bone white, without an ounce of pigment.

I stared at myself in shock for a few moments before touching a strand just to make sure it was real. I wasn't sure what I expected it to feel like, really, but it wasn't dry or brittle. Just white.

What the fuck?

The alarm on my bedside table rang shrilly, jolting me out of my disbelief. I turned it off and looked at the clock. Seven-thirty. I was going to be late to class.

It seemed like a ridiculous thing to care about, given all that had just happened. I mean, if you couldn't ditch class after you came back from the dead, when could you? But I had just enough threads of denial to grasp onto, overnight bleach job aside, and I wasn't ready to let them go.

Class was routine. Class was normal. Class was very much not something a dead guy would do.

But I couldn't just show up looking like a ghost. I rummaged through my cabinet, hoping I had a bottle of toner somewhere. Most of the bottles were empty. I really needed to go through this crap.

When I found a box of hair dye way in the back of the closet, I felt like I'd hit the lottery.

Until I realized the dye was from a Halloween costume I'd changed my mind about last year. It was a minty green, like something you'd wear to an anime convention, and definitely not my everyday style.

Bone white it was.

This was fine. This was normal. Just another Monday morning. I'd been wanting a new look anyway. I could imagine the look on Alex's face when he saw it.

The thought immediately filled me with dread, or maybe it was despair. Hard to tell the finer shades between the two.

No. No, I wasn't going to think about that. Nope. Not gonna let it ruin my perfectly normal, average morning.

I showered and tried to do something with my new alternative hair. It didn't look so bad once I'd dried and brushed it. My preppy aesthetic was going to need some minor tweaking to match, but I kind of liked it in a way.

By the time I got dressed and made it downstairs, I still had twenty minutes until class started, so I looked around for Sarah. Maybe she'd want to walk to campus. Her car wasn't in the driveway, though, so she must have stayed out late. Weird.

I locked up and walked out onto the street. The same asshole birds who always shit on the hood of my car were perched on the wires of the telephone lines above, and my boots made the same sloshing sound as they waded through the partially melted sludge on the sidewalk. Each step seemed to bring me closer to the ordinary world. The one I recognized, not the one I'd somehow dovetailed into.

I wasn't super into physics, and I'd taken only as much as I needed to satisfy my premed reqs, but Sam and I had taken the class together, and he went gaga over the whole multiverse theory. Maybe that was what had happened to me. I'd just slipped into a horrible alternate reality à la *Donnie Darko*, where everything was twisted and wrong, and woken up back in my own world grateful and wiser for it.

Like an episode of the *Twilight Zone*, or a really fucked-up rendition of *It's a Wonderful Life*.

Yeah. That made sense. More than anything else had, anyway.

I got weird looks as soon as I set foot on campus, but I had to remind myself it was just the white hair and not because everyone could somehow see they were among the walking dead.

There was a perfectly logical explanation for everything. Even this.

Especially this.

My first class was in the farthest building from my house because I was a glutton for punishment. The walk felt good, though, my aching limbs aside. It cleared my head, but it also made me more aware of the strange ache that was growing in my stomach with every moment that passed.

Just a stomachache, I told myself. Just indigestion. More of gravy than of grave and all that.

And no more voices. That was the most important part.

I walked up the steps to the humanities building and headed straight for my psych class. The lecture hall was huge and only partially filled, and none of the usual crew had arrived yet. Only Cyrus and Sam were in the same class, and the former and I had probably only exchanged a handful of words since he and his brother had moved into town.

As I thought about Sam coming in, I tapped my pen against the desk. Tap tap tap. The rhythmic drumming matched my heartbeat. Why was I nervous? Sam and I sat next to each other every other day in the same class. Just another Monday. Patient Psychology, then my seminar on immunology, followed by tutoring and bio lab, and last but not least, Western Civ.

Okay, it was definitely least in my book. In fact, I was thinking about cutting out of that class altogether. The last thing I needed was the overzealous professor breathing down my neck, and I still hadn't finished the revisions to that paper.

I was still coming up with a suitable excuse when I heard Sam's voice coming from down the hall. He walked in with a guy I vaguely knew from intra-Greek system events and headed right for his usual spot next to me. He stopped in the middle of the aisle when he laid eyes on me, and he stared like he was looking at a ghost.

Bad metaphor. I kicked myself a little too late.

It was just the hair. There was no way one of my best friends in the entire world had actually participated in some creepy moonlight ritual to tie me up

and sacrifice me to a blood goddess. That was just insane. Not the least of all because of everything else it would make true in the process if it had really happened.

I forced a smile, and he turned a few shades paler. Okay, this was a bit of a dramatic reaction to a new hair color, but that was just Sam. He was the king of hyperbole and overreactions, but he was straight, so no one ever called him on it.

The guy behind Sam had to squeeze past him because he was blocking the aisle. “Hey, Chase,” he said, nodding to me on his way by.

“Hey, Jesse,” I said, nodding back.

That jolted Sam back to reality. He came over and lingered by the desk he usually took, still staring at me without blinking.

“Hi,” I said, because one of us had to speak at some point. Because I was so desperate for this to just go the way I wanted it to. For this to just be normal.

Couldn’t he just fucking be normal?

I suppressed my irrational anger and forced my smile to widen, motioning toward the empty desk beside me.

Sam dropped his bag and then plopped himself into the chair, but it seemed more like he was collapsing than intentionally sitting down. He wouldn’t take his eyes off me.

“Hey,” he said after a bizarrely lengthy delay. His voice sounded strained, like his throat was closing up.

When the professor came in and started making chit-chat with the students in the front row about what they had done over the weekend, Sam looked away and fixated on her like she was the most interesting thing in all the world. There was no doubt in my mind, he was trying to avoid looking at me now. Like he’d gotten stuck before and didn’t want to risk getting drawn in again.

Tap tap tap.

The pen almost flew out of my hand, so I forced myself to stop the nervous habit and tried to focus on turning to the correct page in my textbook. That part of my memory was perfectly sharp. Page 178. Right where we'd left off on Friday morning.

As class started, I tried to focus on what the professor was saying, I really did, but it all went in one ear and out the other. The ache in my stomach was back, but at least it was making it hard to fixate on Sam's strange behavior. Of course, the fact that the ache was accompanied by a few dozen different strains of a newly familiar scent that seemed to come from everyone around me was less than comforting.

So my nose was a bit sharper. It was winter, after all. No hay fever to worry about. I couldn't actually smell blood. It was just soap and body wash, perfume and cologne, and all the other shit people soaked in. Blood didn't even really have a smell. Not to normal humans.

I was just still fucked up from that dream. That was all.

Continually veering my wandering mind back to the lecture was like trying to keep a herd of puppies in a single-file line, but at least zoning out made the time fly by. It felt like I had just arrived in class, and the next thing I knew, everyone was standing up and gathering their things.

Everyone except Sam, who'd leaped up and was already halfway down the open aisle.

So he was having a bad day. Everyone was entitled to a bad day, weren't they? That didn't make them a cold-blooded murderer.

I slung my messenger bag over my shoulder and walked out of the classroom. By the time I got out into the hall, Sam was nowhere to be seen.

It suddenly occurred to me I didn't have my phone, but when I thought about why that might be, my head ached, so I pushed that down like every other inconvenient thought guiding me toward a place I didn't want to go. A place I *wouldn't* go, not if I could help it. I would rather be anywhere else, even if it was fantasy land.



I WENT to my next class, and it went a little better than the first, considering I wasn't particularly close to anyone I took it with. I was friendly with the girls who sat in the same area, and talking about our weekends was a much-needed dose of normalcy.

Yeah, my boyfriend had taken me out for a special date. No, not that restaurant. Another one. Yeah, it was a little warmer lately, wasn't it?

Just nice, normal conversation with normal people. Like me. Nothing paranormal about it. Super normal, if anything.

Inane chatter.

I jolted and sat up straight at the whispering voice. I looked around, but I couldn't figure out who it was. Stacy and Ava were looking at me with concern, so I forced myself to chill out.

I wasn't hearing voices. I must've just overheard someone else. That was all.

The professor came in, late as usual. I actually managed to stay focused this time. I couldn't remember anything about the lecture the moment I left the classroom, but it was progress.

I headed into the concourse that connected the major classroom buildings and sheltered traveling students and faculty from the frigid elements. I must've been looking down because I bumped into someone, but they just looked at me and walked on.

On the other hand, I was left standing there, frozen like a statue. It wasn't the collision, but rather the sight of the four people at the end of the hall that had me lost.

Sarah, Sam, Cyrus, and Cameron were standing there in the hallway, all of them looking at me the way Sam had when he'd come to the classroom building, with the exception of Cameron. He just looked pissed, as usual. Pissed and maybe a little bit in shock. It was hard to tell, considering he always had that douchey scowl on his face when he wasn't smirking.

In an instant, it transported me back to the attic room. All of them were there, gathered around me, wearing those blood-red robes. Watching,

studying, apathetic and heartless. All except Sam, who wouldn't even look at me.

Fucking coward.

No. No, these were my friends. They loved me. They would never hurt me. Not even Cameron, if only because Sarah loved me. And she did, she always had. How could I doubt that? She was one of the few constants in my world, with my parents being divorced and my dad going MIA. She was all I had, really. Her and Alex and Sam, and if I didn't have them, who was I, even?

I couldn't afford for any of it to be true. And I was alive. Dead guys didn't walk. No matter how many other strange happenings were left unaccounted for, that one fact had to be true, and it meant the rest of it simply couldn't be.

I finally took a step forward, and they all looked like they were going to piss themselves. They didn't move, though. They just stood frozen, as if they were the ones bound to a stone table.

The tinge of guilt in their blood smelled so sweet. The whispering voice returned, louder and more undeniable than ever. This time, it was decidedly feminine. It was familiar, too, like an old friend I'd all but forgotten in the ravages of time.

Imagine how it would taste.

I pushed the voice aside. It was probably an alter-ego or whatever had emerged from the trauma my brain was convinced it had sustained, despite there being no physical evidence. I kept walking, and by the time Sarah looked like she had gained the presence of mind to run, it was too late.

"Hey." Forcing this smile was a little easier now that I'd had practice. Maybe I held it a little too long and didn't blink often enough, but they weren't exactly acting like their usual selves, either.

Sarah was the first to speak, her voice strained and raspy. "Hey."

Sam looked at her like, "See?" It was the same look he always gave me when something we'd been gossiping about turned out to be true.

Her eyes remained locked on me, though, more black than brown. She wasn't happy or scared, just focused and clinical, the way she had been that night.

No. No, she hadn't.

I hadn't even seen her last night.

Nope.

We could devour this whore in one bite, the voice purred.

The words were repulsive, especially knowing they came from my own mind, but telling myself I was just going crazy was strangely comforting compared to the alternative.

"Something wrong?" I asked when I realized none of them were going to speak.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Cameron blurted out.

Something inside me surged in response to his voice, and not the spiteful irritation that usually accompanied it. Whatever this thing was inside me—this other consciousness—she was way too interested in him. I pushed her back and held the door shut until she stopped struggling against it. My mind finally went quiet.

"What are you talking about, weirdo?" I shifted the weight of my bag on my shoulder. "It's Monday. I have to supervise bio lab."

More staring. Sam gulped audibly. "Are you... feeling okay, Chasey?"

Chasey. The pet name made my skin crawl, and the rage within my chest roiled like boiling water.

"I'm fine, Sammy," I said, mirroring his pleasant tone even though the way his breath faltered told me I hadn't quite succeeded. "Why wouldn't I be?"

He looked to Cyrus as if for guidance, but the other man's face betrayed nothing. It hadn't that night, either. No guilt, no shame, no trace of human emotion at all.

“N-no,” Sam finally stammered. He seemed to realize that response didn’t make sense in context and added, “No reason.”

I guided my thoughts back onto the narrow path that was my only way through this madness and nodded. “Well, I don’t wanna be late. Maybe I’ll see you at lunch?”

“Sure,” Sarah said. The word seemed to stick in her throat.

I kept walking, and when I glanced back over my shoulder, they were all still staring at me. The next time I looked back, they were arguing about something, but I turned my focus toward getting ready for bio lab. The freshmen were hopeless without me. It was a miracle they hadn’t blown up the lab, really.

The room was already full when I came in, and most of the students had started working on their projects. I went around the room and helped anyone who needed it. I got a few compliments on my hair, but it was a relief to be treated normally.

Halfway through the period, I was finally able to convince myself I was just imagining things. Sarah was always weird, and Sam was always kind of nervous and flaky. As for Cameron and Cyrus, well, their moods were as changeable as the tide, and I’d never cared enough to figure them out. The feeling, or lack thereof, was mutual.

I sat down next to a freshman who was having trouble getting her bases and alkalis straight, and as I poured the substrate into a vial to help her, the emergence of a familiar voice shattered my concentration.

What alchemy is this? hissed the voice in a decidedly curious tone.

I jolted and dropped the vial. It shattered beneath the hood, and the girl next to me cried out in alarm.

“Shit,” I muttered, shaking the excess liquid off my hands. At least I was wearing gloves and goggles. I closed the hood to keep the gases inside and hurriedly pulled off my gloves. I tossed them into the biohazard container next to the hood.

Three years in the department, and I had to go and be the one to break the no lab incidents record. Back to zero. The other students were looking at me worriedly, and I was starting to hate it. I laughed it off and made some joke I didn't even fully register about my clumsiness, but it seemed to satisfy them and they went back to work, allowing me to clean up my mess in peace. My hands were still trembling as I picked up the shards of glass and deposited them into a sealed receptacle.

In my countless infinities of existence, I've never met someone so adept at denial.

Her voice made me cringe, and I muttered under my breath, "There's no such thing as countless infinities. That defeats the whole point of infinity."

Try to count all the numbers between one and two, and then the ones between three and four, and tell me that.

I gulped. That was a pretty good point. My alter-ego was a snarky bitch, though.

I heard that.

"Shut up," I said, a bit too loudly. The students at the next table looked over, so I lowered my voice. "You're not real."

Then you're talking to a voice in your head that doesn't exist.

Another fair point.

I finished cleaning up and excused myself, since one of the other lab assistants had finally shown up. Once I made it to the bathroom, I made sure there was no one else in the stalls before going to the sink to stare into my reflection in search of whoever the fuck it was.

"Get a grip, Chase," I muttered, splashing cold water on my face.

Now you're just talking to yourself. That's a step down.

I looked up sharply, but there was only my reflection in the mirror, staring back in irritation. What had I expected?

"What do you want?" I demanded.

It's not what I want. It's what we want now.

I frowned. "And what the hell is that supposed to mean?"

You really haven't figured out who I am, have you?

"I know you're a figment of my imagination, spawned from..."

From what? she challenged. *From the night you're trying so pathetically to convince yourself didn't happen?*

I gritted my teeth so hard I could feel my dentist cringe. A flurry of images played in my mind's eye like a film reel projecting a movie I didn't want to watch. Only this movie came complete with surround sound and pain, and the scent of incense that brought it all back so much more vividly.

"No," I choked out, gripping the edge of the sink because my knees didn't seem to work anymore. It was getting so much harder to hold it all back. The weight of it felt like it would drive me into the earth like a hammer would a nail. "Stop it. It's not true. It's not."

But it is. You can't keep lying to yourself forever. I won't accept that the first human whose will has ever been strong enough to resist me is nothing more than a cowering child hiding under the blankets from reality.

Her words undid the last of my resolve. The threads of denial I'd been clinging to so desperately snapped and left me only with the cold nakedness of realization.

"It's you," I said, my voice steadier than I'd expected. "The blood goddess. The one they tried to sacrifice me to."

They didn't just try. They succeeded.

"Then how am I alive?"

Technically, you aren't. But you aren't dead, either.

I glared at the mirror. "Do you want to put that in words that actually make sense?"

My reflection moved on its own, and I didn't even recognize myself as my lips curved into a smile. It was me, but it...wasn't.

I really was losing my mind.

“My name is Ichor, Queen of Blood.”

This time, she was talking out loud. My lips weren’t moving, but my reflection’s were. I raised my hand to my lips, just to make sure, but I couldn’t stop staring.

“Yeah, and my name is Chase, Queen of What the Fuck. You’re not real.”

“Of course I’m real. And you are now my vessel.”

Vessel? My head was spinning too fast for that to even stick. “I don’t understand. They sacrificed me. They... *killed* me.”

Now that I’d said it out loud, every last bit I’d been trying to push away, every memory I’d tried to keep out, was all playing back at once. There was no more denying it, no matter how much I wanted to. This was my reality.

And so was she.

“That was the idea,” said Ichor. Now it sounded like her voice—my voice—was coming from outside of me. From my reflection, which was enough of a mindfuck in itself. “As you well know, it didn’t go as planned.”

I couldn’t help but let out a strangled laugh. The mirror didn’t move. “What happened?”

“My cult must have botched the ritual,” she answered, her arms folded. “I suppose it’s not really their fault. The old grimoires have been playing telephone with the original ritual for the last three hundred years.”

“Three hundred years?” I croaked.

“A drop in the bucket of my existence,” she said nonchalantly. “But it was the last time I walked the earth in a human vessel.”

It took me a few seconds to process that. When I realized I was never going to succeed, I gave up. “Who were you back then?”

“Prudence Whitmore.”

“Whitmore,” I murmured. “Sarah’s family?”

“Yes. She is my descendant,” she answered. “I prefer to reincarnate through the same family line. Most deities do.”

My head was spinning again. I was so not ready to question her on that. The existence of one goddess was more than enough for me to contend with, thank you very much.

“So how did you end up inside me?” I asked.

“Like I said, they missed a few key details in the ritual. Namely, the fact that there was to be only one witch present.”

“What are you talking about? There were five of them.”

“The men aren’t witches. They’re something else entirely, but I don’t think you’re ready for that just yet.”

I think I was grateful. “So, what, you think I’m a witch?” I asked with an incredulous laugh. The idea was just too absurd. “I don’t even watch horror movies.”

“Being a witch isn’t something you do, it’s something you are,” said Ichor. “It’s a born trait, just like freckles or brown hair.”

“That’s even more ridiculous. If you’d ever met my mother, you’d know there’s not a magical bone in her body.”

“And yet, you must have magical blood in order to sustain me. Otherwise, your body would have turned to ash by now.”

That thought made me shudder. Something told me she wasn’t joking, either.

I really wished she was joking.

“Okay, so for the sake of argument, say I believe you and I have some distant witchy ancestry. How did you end up in the wrong witch?”

“Before the ritual, I was trapped in an interdimensional energy stasis,” she said, as if that was supposed to be common knowledge. “To put it into words you will understand, I was sleeping. When they summoned me, my energy naturally chose the strongest suitable vessel.”

Now that was the most ridiculous part of all. “Sarah has been into this shit since forever, and obviously she’s way more hardcore than I ever imagined. I don’t even check my horoscope. How do you figure I’m the more suitable vessel between the two of us?”

“I’ve wondered that myself,” Ichor answered thoughtfully. “And yet, if you weren’t, we wouldn’t be here. Granted, I wasn’t expecting such a... *male* form, but I suppose it can’t be helped.”

I gripped the sink harder, fighting the urge to throw up. “So if the ritual had gone as planned, you would’ve, what, piloted Sarah’s body like you’re doing now with mine?”

“More or less, but she would have been pushed to the background. You, on the other hand, managed to fight the possession, so here I am, stuck as the talking bug to your Pinocchio.”

“That’s a pretty up-to-date reference for someone who’s been asleep for hundreds of years.”

She smirked. “I have access to your thoughts. All your memories, all your emotions, all your experiences are mine now. And I have to say, being possessed by someone with a backbone is probably the best thing that’s happened to you in your entire life.”

I glared at her. Well, I glared at me. Shit, I didn’t know anymore. “I thought you said I was tough enough to fight you off? Now you’re calling me weak?”

“Your will is strong. Your self-esteem, however, is in the gutter.”

I couldn’t believe it. Being dragged by my own reflection. That was definitely a new low. “How do I get rid of you?”

She raised an eyebrow. “You don’t.”

“Come on. You must want to get out of this as much as I do. I’ll just call an exorcist or something, and then you can go haunt Sarah like you originally planned.”

“Even if I were willing to trade down to a weaker vessel, which I’m not, I can only assume one mortal form every three celestial cycles. Were I to leave your body, I would be trapped in the Other for another three centuries. And you would go back to being a corpse.”

Part of me wanted to ask what the hell the Other was. The rest was sane.

I swallowed hard, instinctively touching my chest over the spot Sarah had stabbed. “Wait... if the guys aren’t witches, then what are they?”

“I am the blood goddess,” she repeated slowly, like she was speaking to a child. “I’ll let you fill in the blanks.”

My stomach churned. The memory of tearing into the guard’s throat was one of the fresher ones in the barrage that had so recently come back to me.

“Vampires?”

I felt like a complete idiot even saying the word out loud, but the look of approval in her eyes told me I was on the right track.

“Bingo.”

I went from feeling like I was going to be sick to hunching over the sink, retching. I was afraid all the blood I had apparently drunk would come back up, but nothing did. Just violent shame and bile.

I rinsed my mouth out, splashing cold water on my face to clear my head. “Alex is a vampire,” I muttered, more to myself than her. “All this time, I’ve been dating a fucking vampire.”

“It’s funny, you seem like the kind of guy who’d be happy about that.”

I shot her a filthy look. “A week ago, maybe. After he sacrificed me to his deity? Not so much.”

“Fair enough,” said Ichor. “In any case, Alex and Sam aren’t quite like the others. Not yet, at any rate.”

"What do you mean?"

"That's something we can discuss another day. Your poor little mind has been stretched enough," she said in a tone of mock sympathy. "So, what are

you going to do now?"

The fact that she was asking me was a relief. That meant she was telling the truth about not being the one in control. Not entirely. The last time I let her slip out, a man ended up dead, so that wasn't happening again. Not if I could help it.

I thought about the question for a few moments. What was I going to do? I couldn't just go back to the way things were. "I have to get out of here," I finally said. "I have to go. I can't be here right now."

"The coward's way out it is, then."

I scowled. "What the hell am I supposed to do? My best friends and my boyfriend killed me, and I just came back from the dead. You think I can just go back to living my normal life?"

She shrugged. "If it were me, I'd want revenge."

I watched her in disbelief. "They're your cult. Aren't you, like, attached to them?"

"I am, but it's not the first time they've reincarnated," she said casually. "They always find a way back to me, one way or another. They locate my chosen vessel and then serve her until the time is right for me to take possession."

Serve. That raised some questions I wasn't sure I wanted answered. Curiosity and jealousy got the best of me, though. "I need you to tell me something. Alex... was he with her, too?"

"I can't answer that. I'm not in his mind, and there's only so much I can sense upfront," she said. "But he is the reincarnation of my lover. They all are. Sarah was just the next best thing until I came around, and now she is useless to me, which makes her useless to them."

Damn. Talk about a stone cold bitch. It was really a surprise she and Sarah didn't get along more. "When you say 'reincarnate,' what do you mean? I thought you said they were vampires. Aren't vampires immortal?"

“More or less. The ones you know as Alex and Sam were quite tragically killed by hunters during my last incarnation,” she explained. “They’re human, for now. The process of turning a vampire is longer and more arduous than your cute little movies would have you believe. The others are merely much older than they look.”

As her words sank in, I felt another wave of disbelief washing over me. Cyrus and Cameron were that old? Cyrus wasn’t that much of a surprise, not compared to everything else, but the fact that Cameron’s douchery couldn’t be blamed on the fact that he was a twenty-something guy was definitely a shock.

“There are other means of revenge besides murder, you know,” Ichor said in a conspiratorial tone.

I hesitated. “Such as?”

“You hate Alex and Sam for what they did to you, but you already despised the others, so it wasn’t personal with them,” she explained, as if she were reading my thoughts. To be fair, I guess she was. “Deep down, I think you knew Alex was a shitty boyfriend and Sam was a two-faced coward, but Sarah is the one that really stung. You’ve played second fiddle to her all your life, and not only was she keeping all this from you, but she betrayed you in the most callous possible way. Simply because she needed a sacrifice. Now that has to hurt.”

I hugged myself, trying to steel against the fresh wave of pain her words brought over me. “You’re saying I should kill Sarah?”

“That wouldn’t be very satisfying, would it?” she challenged. “Think about what you really want. Not what you feel compelled to say you want because it’s socially acceptable, but the real, honest truth. Starting with yourself.”

I knew she was just fucking with my head, but once she’d put my mind on that train of thought, there was no going back. “I want her to suffer.”

A slow smile spread across her lips. “There. That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

“How?” I asked, my voice strained.

“That’s for you to figure out, but I’d say a good place to start is taking what she loves.”

Immediately, I knew she was talking about the guys. “Considering they belong to you, that would just be me doing your dirty work, wouldn’t it?”

Her smile widened. “You really are much more clever than you look. But our interests overlap quite well, wouldn’t you say?”

“Even if I could stand to touch any of those douchebags, they’re all straight except for Alex,” I informed her. “Although hell, for all I know, his attraction to me was just another lie.”

“That does pose a bit of an obstacle,” she mused. “But it is irrelevant. Regardless of my vessel, they belong to me, and that connection goes deeper than your silly human mating constructs.”

I grimaced. “You’re not using my body to have orgies with your reluctant harem.”

“We can discuss the matter later. For now, we can both agree on taking Sarah down a peg or two, can’t we?”

I considered it for a few moments. I didn’t want them. Any of them. I wasn’t sure I could ever look Alex in the eye again without wanting to throw up. Or strangle him. And I wasn’t really sure I’d have the strength to resist the next time I saw him.

Still... she was right. Sarah had taken everything from me. My boyfriend, my relationships, my life. If I wanted to take everything from her, the guys were a damn good place to start.

“Fine. But we’re going to do this my way.”

“And how is that?” Ichor asked boredly.

“Sarah takes me for a fool, so I’ll let her,” I said, standing up straight. “I’ll play dumb and pretend I don’t remember anything about that night. She can wonder how I came back, and it can eat away at her until the time is right. They can all torture themselves wondering.”

She cocked her head curiously. “Interesting. But it doesn’t sound very enjoyable for me.”

I snorted. “You’ll get your time. I don’t care about the guys. Not really. Once I’m done with Sarah, you can have them.”

She seemed to be considering it. “All right,” she finally said. “I’m curious to see how this plays out.”

I felt like I was making a deal with the devil, and technically, I probably was. But if it meant getting revenge—which felt like the only thing that would fill the gaping hole inside me—it was worth it.

Besides, it wasn’t like I had anything left to lose.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

CHASE

As I sat at the kitchen counter with a bowl of popcorn in front of me and my phone propped on a tripod, I examined the comments popping up faster than I could read in the livestream chat. I'd only been on for five minutes, and I didn't really have a reason for going live other than the fact that I hadn't for a few days, and people forgot you online quicker than lightning.

That, and I needed someone to talk to who wasn't just in my own head, or the roommate and ex-friends who were judiciously avoiding me.

"So anyway, I've been starving lately," I remarked, taking another bite of popcorn. "No idea why, but if you guys have any recommendations on not eating my bodyweight in carbs, let me know."

The first comment was about some dumb cleanse that sounded lethal, but I didn't really want diet advice from the Internet anyway. The chat took a more sinister turn when I saw a bunch of conspiracy theories about my relationship with Alex pop up. A few of them weren't too far off, but there was no way I could let them know that. Guess my viewers had better creep radar than I did.

I see why you do this, Ichor said. You have your own cult of worshipers in your scrying mirror.

I could feel her watching from the back of my mind in amusement. Her thoughts were separate from me, even though I had no idea how much access she had to mine, but it was kind of like skating with a partner. Even

though you were synchronized and had perfect timing, you were still different people.

Of course, being in the same body complicated things, but it had been a little less than a week since I came back from the dead, and being possessed wasn't half as bad as I'd thought it would be.

Having to pretend like I didn't know what my boyfriend and his cult buddies had done to me, on the other hand, was a different story.

Over the last few days, I had learned to communicate telepathically with Ichor, and while she sometimes got wind of thoughts I would rather her not hear, it worked for the most part. Personal space issues aside, she was a much better roommate than Sarah, that was for sure.

"No, Alex and I haven't broken up," I said, hoping to quell the gossip spreading through the chat like a virus. "We've just both been busy lately."

It wasn't a lie, really. He was busy avoiding me, and I was fine with that because I was busy plotting my revenge against him. I tried not to think too much about it, considering I could tell Ichor was still attached to her cultists no matter what she said.

I rolled my eyes at the responses and was about to respond when I heard the doorbell and frowned. No one ever rang the doorbell. It was always either Sarah or one of her flunkies, and they never knocked since they all had keys.

"Let's go see who it is," I said, pulling my phone off the tripod and carrying it out to the living room.

Do you really have to take that thing everywhere? Ichor complained.

I do, considering I'm surrounded by people who literally killed me once already and having an audience is the only way to ensure they don't do it again.

At least, I hoped the livestream would stop them. I really didn't know anymore.

You don't need to worry about that. If you die, I won't be able to return to Earth for three hundred years, so I'm not going to let anything happen to this vessel.

Touching, Icky.

I felt what I could only describe as a sound kick against the inside of my mind in response. *I told you not to call me that, you irreverent himbo.*

“Himbo? That's it, no more Twitter for you,” I muttered under my breath before opening the door. My former least favorite person on earth was standing on the other side, but considering that Cameron was the only one who had been open with his spite and general evilness, he was lower on my shit list than the others.

Immediately, a surge of arousal and adoration came from somewhere within me, but it definitely wasn't mine. Sure, Cameron was gorgeous, and he had that bad boy schtick down pat, but my hatred for him ran way too deep to find him anything other than annoying.

Something told me he was Ichor's favorite.

Ew.

“What do you want?” I asked, leaning in the doorway. I still had my phone in hand, but I couldn't read the chat. No way I was turning it off, though.

“Someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed,” Cameron said flatly.

I could practically hear the dreamy sighs of all the Cameron fetishists in the comments. Cameron had his own mini fan club among my followers, which really chafed at me, but the videos he had cameos in always got a ton of views—which translated to cash—so the joke was on him.

“Sarah isn't home,” I said, still blocking the door. I wasn't about to let him in.

“I didn't come here for Sarah,” he replied, frowning at the phone in my hand. “Are you filming this?”

“No, genius, I'm streaming. There's a difference.”

He rolled his eyes. “Can you put that down for a second? There’s something we need to talk about.”

I snorted a laugh. “Anything you need to say to me, you can say to the Martians.”

His nose wrinkled in disgust. “You still call them that?”

“My channel’s called Chase Space. Space, Martians, etcetera.” Admittedly, it wasn’t the best name, but I’d never actually imagined my channel would take off in the early days, and it was too late to change it now. I was about to shut the door on him, but Cameron’s hand shot out and he grabbed it.

“It’s only gonna take a minute.”

I let out a growl of exasperation, but before I could test whether he was going to continue masking his superhuman strength if I slammed his fingers in the door, Ichor spoke up.

You don’t need to be afraid of him. He’s not here to hurt you, he just wants to find out what you know.

I frowned. *And how do you know that?*

Because there’s no reason for him to kill you if he can compel you.

Compel? What the hell does that mean?

What it sounds like, she answered. Vampires can use psychic manipulation to persuade their targets into doing just about anything. Cameron is particularly adept at it.

Well, that was a horrifying new development. I found myself wondering just how many things he had compelled me to do or say, but the thought made me nauseous, so I pushed it aside.

I can sense his emotions enough to know he doesn’t have violent intentions, she continued.

I hesitated a bit, trying to decide if I trusted her assessment, but if I couldn’t trust her that much, I was already screwed. Besides, it was going to be hard to convince my viewers nothing was up if I refused to let him in. I’d never

acted afraid of him before. Quite the opposite, and if I started treating the guys differently, they were definitely going to suspect more than they already did. I needed to play it cool, at least until I took my revenge.

As fucked up as all this was, I kind of felt like a supervillain, and I wasn't hating it.

I stepped back and released the door so suddenly that Cameron staggered over the threshold before he caught himself. A smile of smug satisfaction spread across my lips before I looked down at my phone. "Sorry, Martians, my roommate's second-favorite brooding lover is apparently in crisis, and I have to play token gay therapist. I'll keep you updated."

When I looked up from turning off the stream and putting away my phone, Cameron was scowling at me. "You know, you might enjoy life more if you actually lived it rather than vlogging it."

His commentary had me absolutely enraged, all things considered, but before I could say anything, I felt a soothing burst of energy that definitely wasn't coming from me.

Easy, tiger, Ichor warned. Remember the long game.

She was right. I stepped back and crossed my arms, telling myself it would all be worth it when I finally got to see the look on his face as he realized his precious goddess was trapped inside the man he couldn't stand.

"You have five minutes."

"I only need three," he replied, his usual cocky self.

He took a step forward until we were toe-to-toe, and the only reason I didn't step back was because I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of seeing me shrink away. His green eyes flashed with something like anger, but far more intense, and he just stared at me, unblinking, like he was trying to see inside my brain.

What the fuck is he doing?

He's trying to compel you, Ichor explained. It won't work as long as I'm here.

Good to know. I was about to taunt him over his weird behavior and enjoy his discomfort when I realized I could use this to my advantage. I could see the confusion on his face, since it wasn't working as quickly as he was probably used to. I put on my best attempt at a glassy-eyed daze, and the way his face smoothed out in relief suggested he was buying it.

"Can you hear me?" he asked, his tone low and careful.

"Yes..."

"Good," he said, straightening up. "First things first, how the hell are you here?"

I stared blankly at him. "I felt sick, so I came home early."

He frowned in irritation. "I mean, how are you back from the dead?"

I just stared more, pretending like I had no idea what he was talking about. "I'm not dead..."

He studied my face closely, and for a moment, I was sure he had picked up on my deception. Then his expression relaxed. "You really remember nothing about the ritual?"

"No," I answered, bristling.

"Then what happened Sunday night?"

It was a struggle to keep the tears of rage out of my eyes whenever I thought about it. This was harder than I'd feared. Not because of him, but because I had to think about it.

"Alex took me out on a date."

"A date to where?" he pressed.

"I don't know. I must've drank too much. I woke up in my bed with a hangover."

That seemed to satisfy him. I was kind of insulted that he didn't even blink at the idea of me getting blackout drunk and thinking nothing of it.

He nodded thoughtfully. “Good. You’re going to forget we had this conversation now. And anything else you might remember from that night, you’ll dismiss as a weird dream. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” I said slowly.

I thought I was laying the whole space cadet routine on too strong, but he seemed to buy it. Of course, he had made it clear on many occasions he thought I was a complete ditz, so I might as well benefit from it. People had always assumed I was just another dumb blond, other guys especially. It used to bother me, but over the years, I had learned there were benefits to playing dumb. Benefits to having people underestimate you.

Yeah, it sucked to always be treated like a joke. Like I was expendable. But if that was the truth—if that was how they really saw me—then I might as well use it to my advantage.

“We’re done,” Cameron said. I got the feeling that was supposed to snap me out of it, so I blinked a few times and looked around like I was confused.

“Wait... what were you saying?” I asked.

“I was just asking if you could stay out of the house tomorrow night,” he said with an ease that made me realize he was a well-practiced liar. And here I had always thought his one virtue was honesty, even if it was brutal.

“Sure,” I said through gritted teeth. “But in exchange, I want a month without having to deal with you here.”

He raised an eyebrow. “A week.”

“Two or you can have your gross romantic evening elsewhere.”

He stared me down, and I could tell he was thinking about compelling me again. Son of a bitch. To his credit, he decided not to use mind control for such a petty purpose, but that was probably only because he was short on time.

“Fine,” he said. “You won’t see me for two weeks. Have a great day.”

“I will once you’re gone,” I said, slamming the door behind him.

That was impressive, Ichor said, reminding me of her presence.

“I’ve had practice,” I said flatly. “That should keep them off our trail, right?”

It will, she promised. *But what are you planning to do next?*

I shrugged, relieved she didn’t already know the answer to that. Maybe it was only because I had yet to make up my mind, but that was partially intentional. I tried to keep my thoughts surrounding revenge to a minimum around her, just in case she got any ideas of intervening.

“I’ll figure it out when the time comes,” I said. “I just need to get through midterms first.”

CHAPTER
NINE

CHASE

As I struggled to stay awake in Western Civ, I became aware of a voice whispering to me. I thought it was a dream at first, but then I recognized the unmistakable intonation as Ichor's.

Wake up.

I jolted upright with a gasp and found myself in the middle of class, a few people around me snickering. Professor DuPonte, AKA Professor Douchebag, was scowling at me.

I didn't usually fall asleep in his class, but it wasn't because he was a particularly engaging teacher. He took everything way too seriously, and he carried himself with an overly solemn air that didn't really fit a guy in his late thirties. He was just fucking hot. The new haircut—short on the sides, a little longer on top—and recent shave that left light stubble along his impossibly sharp jawline would've held my attention any other day.

Today was not that day.

You're a little late, I complained.

Ichor just chuckled.

"I'm sorry you're bored, Mr. Mardoll," said the professor. "Would you mind if I continued my lecture? I wouldn't want to disturb your beauty rest."

I resisted the urge to glower at him and subtly wiped a bit of drool off my chin. “No, Professor. I’m fine.”

“Good,” he said, turning back to the board where he was drawing some overcomplicated diagram of the Roman army structure. A real snore fest if ever there was one.

Now, if he wanted to go into detail about all those sexy legionaries and what they got up to off the battlefield, that would be another matter.

I tried to focus for the rest of class, and when it finally ended, I knew I wasn’t going to make it through the rest of the day.

I hadn’t been sleeping well, and weirdly enough, it had nothing to do with the blood goddess in my head.

Her intended vessel, on the other hand...

Sarah was hardly ever home, and when she was, she avoided me so effectively it was clear she was only trying to keep up the facade of normalcy. She was probably staying with Cyrus and Cameron the rest of the time. In fact, I was sure she was the one who had sent Cameron to interrogate me.

“Mr. Mardoll, can I see you for a moment?”

I froze at the sound of the professor’s voice and braced myself before I turned around. “Look, I’m sorry about drifting off in class—”

“It’s not about that, although it is related,” he said, studying me with a keen gaze that might have been swoony if he wasn’t the way he was. “You’ve seemed off lately. Are you doing alright? Trouble at home or anything?”

I bristled at the intimate line of questioning, but it was just a reminder I wasn’t keeping it all together as well as I hoped.

To be fair, I doubted any other students in his class were dealing with the fallout of coming back from the dead, so I wasn’t gonna beat myself up over it too much.

“I’m fine,” I said stiffly. “Just haven’t been getting a lot of sleep.”

“I assume that’s why your paper still isn’t in.”

I groaned inwardly. I’d forgotten all about that stupid rewrite. “Yeah, about that. I think I’ll just take the B-minus after all.”

His frown deepened, but rather than the usual irritation I found in his gaze, there was only concern. “That isn’t like you. I wouldn’t have expected you to accept mediocrity.”

His words took me by surprise, and I was strangely... touched. He was the one person who had ever really had high expectations of me, aside from my mother, and as annoying as it was, it was kind of nice.

Or maybe I was just overly sentimental from the lack of sleep. Probably that.

“I thought a B-minus was still above average,” I said flatly.

“Slightly. And not for you,” he countered.

His blood smells divine, Ichor said, chiming in with the worst possible thought at the worst possible moment.

I grimaced. Like I hadn’t already noticed. I could smell blood whenever I was around humans, and having the taste of the morgue worker’s blood still fresh in my mind wasn’t helping.

Dave Marsh. I’d spent one of those sleepless nights looking him up when the news reports came out about the “animal attack” in the morgue. He was thirty-six, a Libra, and a former member of the Winterhaven Bowling League. I’d tortured myself by becoming an expert on every mundane detail of his life when I should have been studying, and I had anonymously sent the biggest bouquet the flower shop sold to his funeral. I still felt like trash every waking moment I let my mind drift, and I’d more or less accepted the fact that I always would.

How Cyrus and Cameron lived with themselves was beyond me. I didn’t know how I was going to get through the rest of the semester with the guilt eating away at me, let alone three centuries.

“I’m just not going to have the time to devote to it,” I said, hoping to get out of the room as soon as possible. I hadn’t been this close to DuPont since I’d “woken up.” That was what I was calling it, since euphemisms made it easier to swallow.

Why was his blood so much harder to resist than everyone else’s?

“I could offer you an extension,” he said hesitantly.

It was clear that wasn’t something he liked to do, and under normal circumstances, I would have jumped at the chance. Medical schools frowned on candidates who weren’t well-rounded, and letting my humanities courses slide wasn’t going to do me any favors.

Not that I was going to be able to function as a doctor when I had a condition that was the exact opposite of hemophobia.

Let’s fuck him and drain him, Ichor said, way too eagerly. I could feel her getting all riled up like a coiling serpent, the way she did when Cameron was near. *I haven’t fed in ages, and your life is woefully dull.*

“No,” I gritted out.

Oh, shit. Did I say that out loud?

The look of shock on his face told me I had. Somehow, he didn’t look offended, just... more concerned.

“It was just an offer.”

“It’s not that,” I said, cringing as I edged toward the door. “I’m sorry. I have to go.”

I heard him call after me, but I ignored it and stalked down the hall until I was out of the classroom building. I didn’t stop there, either. I knew I had to get home and take a cold shower, or do whatever else would quell the burning fire within me.

You are so boring, Ichor said wearily.

“Shut up,” I muttered, fumbling for my keys once I reached the house. Sarah’s car wasn’t in the driveway, so I went straight to the kitchen, downed

half a pitcher of water hoping to dull the thirst that had my mouth bone dry, and collapsed against the counter. “What the hell is wrong with me?”

You’re my vessel, which means you’ve been physically altered. You have different needs now, and sanguinarianism is among them. You drained that man at the morgue easily enough.

“Stop it,” I pleaded.

You can’t do this forever. You have to feed eventually.

“No,” I snapped, trying to shake her out of my head. I knew it was useless, but it was instinct.

I just needed a cold shower. Something to clear my head. Maybe a good rest.

As I walked up the stairs, a familiar scent assailed my nostrils. It seemed my senses were still heightened.

When I saw Alex standing in my room, absently flipping through one of my bio textbooks, I froze. Usually, he was a rare and welcome sight, but it was all I could do not to lunge at him in a blind rage.

He looked up when he saw me watching him, and the smile on his face made me want to punch his lights out.

“Hey,” he said, setting the book down. “You’re hard to get a hold of these days.”

That was intentional, considering I had been ignoring his texts and calls, but admitting that would be counterproductive. “I’ve been busy. Something going on?”

He gave me a strange look. “I need a reason to visit my boyfriend?”

You always have, I thought. It earned a snort from Ichor.

“Guess not,” I said, sitting down on the edge of the bed. Of all the times for him to show up. I really didn’t need to deal with any of this right now.

At least it was a distraction from the urge to rip out my professor’s throat, which hadn’t lessened all that much with the distance I’d put between us. If

I slipped up where Alex was concerned, it would be less of a tragedy. All my love for him had turned to hate, or at least that was what I wanted to believe. The truth was probably that there was still plenty of both living alongside each other, but the truth and I weren't on speaking terms right now.

It's always convenient when dinner delivers itself, said Ichor.

I blanched when I realized what she was getting at. *He's one of your cult freaks. What if I kill him?*

You won't. Not if you let me help you, she answered.

As I contemplated the offer, Alex said my name, and I could tell from the look on his face that it wasn't the first time.

"What?" I asked absently.

He frowned. "Are you even listening?"

Usually, I would be tripping all over myself to reassure him he was the center of my universe now and at all times, but honestly, he could go fuck himself.

"Not really," I admitted. "Listen, whatever it is, can we talk about it another time? It's been a long day and I'm tired."

His frown deepened, and I waited for an outburst that never came. Granted, I had never actually intentionally tried to piss him off, but I had always imagined if I did, the results would be even worse than his usual mood swings. He always seemed like he had one foot out the door, almost as if he was just looking for an excuse to leave.

"I guess," he muttered. "I just wanted to check on you. You've been acting strange lately."

Oh, so now he was pretending like he cared about my well-being. "How sweet," I said through my teeth. "I'm fine, just have a lot on my plate with midterms and all."

"Yeah." He hesitated. "Well, I guess I'll see you later."

I felt a familiar tug as he went to the door. As pissed as I was, Ichor was right. I needed to feed, and if I put it off any longer, there was a damn good chance I was going to hurt someone who didn't deserve it. Alex certainly didn't fit the bill, so he might as well prove himself useful.

"Wait," I called after him.

He turned around with an expectant look on his face, and before he could say anything and piss me off even more, I crossed the distance between us, crushed my lips to his, and wrapped my arms around his neck. He stiffened up in surprise at first, but he soon relaxed and wrapped his arms around me as he returned the kiss.

He gave a low moan of approval and surprise against my lips as I backed up toward my bed without breaking the kiss. The moment our lips made contact, the thirst had turned into a flame.

Ichor was notably silent, which I could only assume meant she approved of what I was doing. And admittedly, it made it easier to focus without having a voice in my head that was even bitchier than my own.

"Chase," Alex purred, his eyes glazed as he looked down at me, pinning me to the bed. I could feel his erection rubbing against my thigh through his jeans, but I was excited for entirely different reasons. "You're so... different lately."

I pursed my lips because the smirk tugging at them was more than a bit bitter, and it was probably just as menacing. Not half as much as the violent thoughts his words brought to mind.

It figured he'd be all up in my ass now that I saw him for what he truly was. Our entire relationship, I'd had him up on a pedestal, worshiping him like he was the only pretty face with a dick in the Western Hemisphere. He could hardly even be bothered to send me a text once in a while, but now that I had to summon my willpower not to tear into his fucking throat and leave him as dead and cold as he'd left me, he couldn't get enough.

"I guess I am," I said, holding his gaze. I'd intended only on biting him, but apparently, that instinct was mingled with arousal. For once, Alex wasn't the one who'd sparked it, and now that I had a little distance from the

nearly disastrous encounter with DuPonte, I had to acknowledge the lust wasn't all Ichor. Not by a long shot.

It was the first time in over a week that my disgust for Alex was outweighed by something else, even if he was a poor substitute for what I really wanted. Besides, we slept together often enough that I knew he was going to catch on if I kept giving him the cold shoulder. I could hate-fuck him if it meant securing my path to vengeance. Fortunately, Ichor had the decency to go dormant for the moment.

I hoped.

Alex was studying me closely, stroking a curl out of my face. "You know, I like the new hair. It's sexy as hell."

"Great. I dyed it just for you."

He raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"No," I answered, pushing him off me to reverse our positions. I pulled my shirt over my head and stripped down the rest of the way before I straddled his hips. "Now shut up and fuck me."

He just stared at me for a second like I'd lost it, but the haste with which he unbuckled his jeans made it clear he didn't mind. "What's gotten into you?" he asked, his voice hoarse with approval.

"Do you have a condom?" I asked, ignoring him.

He blinked a few times before reaching into the pockets of his unzipped jeans. "Y-yeah," he said as I snatched it from him, tearing open the wrapper with my teeth.

Fortunately, my fangs hadn't made another appearance, but the way my jaw ached told me it was only a matter of time if I didn't get ahead of this thing.

I slid the condom onto Alex's cock, which was already stiff as a board, like he got off on being treated with half the disregard he usually showed me. It was lubricated, so good enough. His breath hitched as I positioned myself over his cock, letting the tip slip between my cheeks.

I'd never ridden him before. Aside from his occasional handcuffs and leather kink, Alex was about as boring and vanilla as it got, now that I could see him through the lens of objectivity I had been lacking throughout our entire relationship. Now, I just didn't feel like waiting for him to take the lead.

When I lowered myself onto him, his eyes rolled back in his head and his hands settled on my hips, his fingertips digging hard into my flesh. "Fuck," he said through his teeth, his hips surging into me.

I grabbed his wrists and pinned them to the bed, digging my nails in as punishment. Either I was imagining things, or they felt sharper, but the faint tinge of blood in the air just amplified my arousal and helped me forget who I was fucking.

"Chase," he breathed, gazing up at me in awe, his pulse quickening in time to my movements as I started grinding against him.

It was the first time he'd hit my prostate without taking forever to find it. If I'd known sex would be this much better, I would've taken the reins a long time ago. As I rode him, my head fell back in bliss, and even though I wasn't attending to him with the usual worship, the breathless moans he was making made it clear he was enjoying it just as much as I was.

I rose up and released my grip on his wrists to wrap a hand around my own cock. My thoughts naturally started drifting to DuPonte as I stroked myself while simultaneously riding Alex's cock at the perfect angle to hit my spot. Alex was a lot better as a sex toy than he was as a boyfriend, I'd give him that. Even the way his hands were hungrily groping my bare torso made the fantasy intense enough to put up with it.

The thirst I'd hoped to dull by giving in to even more primal needs was sharper now, just like the sharp teeth that had extended enough to push against my bottom lip. Alex was too focused on his own pleasure to notice, and as I stroked myself to climax, he came with my name on his lips.

"God," he said, panting as he stared up at me like I was some kind of incubus who'd just stepped out of his fantasies to fuck him. If he had any idea... "That was amazing."

I climbed off him and lowered my body onto his, leaning in to kiss his throat. I ran my tongue along his jugular and he shuddered involuntarily, grinding against me as he took me into his arms.

“Fuck,” he groaned as I continued to suck his neck until blood pooled at the surface. I intended to give him a hell of a lot more than a hickey, but at least that would cover the bite marks.

I stopped and his eyes met mine, glassy with lust and confusion.

“I’m going to bite you,” I said calmly, enjoying the bewilderment that crept into his arousal. “And you’re going to forget about it as soon as you leave this room. Understand?”

I’d never tried to compel someone, but I was still high off the orgasm and he was already eager to do my bidding as it was, so it seemed like as good of a time to try as any. My words sparked confusion, but I could feel the tendrils of control wrapping around his will. It seemed to work well enough, considering he hadn’t freaked out entirely.

Then again, knowing him as little as I obviously did, getting fang-fucked was probably another kink of his.

“Okay...?” He blinked like his own response surprised him. Guess it was working, after all.

Without waiting to test it any further, or give the compulsion time to fade, I leaned back in and sank my fangs into the side of his neck. The groan of pain that came from him was as delicious as the blood that rushed into my mouth. I pulled him closer, raking my hands through his hair as I drank greedily.

The first time I’d fed was a blur of confusion and pain, having just woken up from the afterlife, but this...this was ecstasy. In fact, the way my body responded to the euphoric rush of feeding from fresh human blood was more potent than any orgasm. It was the first time Alex had been in my bed without me having to fake the moans of bliss on my lips, but he really didn’t have all that much to do with it this time, either.

“Chase,” he whispered hoarsely, another shudder running down his spine. I could tell the compulsion was warring with his rational mind, and I forced

myself to pull away while I still could. His eyes widened as he looked down at the blood on my lips.

I couldn't help but smirk, my tongue flicking out to swipe away the last few drops. "Thanks. That was great," I said, pushing him off me. The wound on his neck was already healing. Guess my spit was magic, too. "Now get out of my room. And my house, while you're at it."

As I stretched out like a cat across my bed, he sat there on the edge of the mattress, a hand pressed to his neck as he stared at me. "What?"

"You heard me." I yawned. "I'm done with you. Take your clothes and get out."

Harsh, Ichor said in my mind, her voice dripping with amusement.

"Shut up," I muttered under my breath.

Alex was already standing, stumbling into his jeans, but he still looked at me blankly. "Huh?"

"Not you. Are you still here?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

He blinked a few times before he finished getting dressed and grabbed his jacket off the back of my chair. "Right," he mumbled, shuffling out of the room in a daze.

So, Ichor began. *How did that feel?*

I considered it for a few moments, staring up at the ceiling fan. "It felt pretty fucking good," I admitted. "But not half as good as what's coming."

Her chuckle echoed through my mind like a malevolent melody. *You're a fast learner.*

"Not really," I replied, rolling onto my side to close my eyes.

It had taken me most of my life to realize what I was to Alex, and all the people I once would've given anything for. As long as it had taken me to learn that lesson, at least I would never forget it.

CHAPTER
TEN

CHASE

The days leading up to the dance elapsed like nothing, and I was finally starting to feel like I had a handle on my afterlife. Feeding from Alex regularly and then compelling him to forget had taken the edge off, and while it wasn't a permanent solution, it was one that made it possible to go to class without eating anyone. Ichor had made no secret of the fact that she found my moral concerns absolutely pathetic, but as long as she was getting her needs met, I didn't see what she had to complain about.

An unexpected side effect of my rendezvous with Alex was that he had been blowing up my phone nonstop. I'd once longed for that kind of attention from him, but now it was just a nuisance. Of course, keeping him at arm's length only seemed to make him more desperate.

Alex wasn't the only one who'd stopped ignoring me, though. I didn't know what had come over Sam, but suddenly, he was back to being his usual cheerful self. He was acting like nothing had happened, which enraged me as much as Alex's clingy behavior did, but coming from Sam, the business-as-usual routine hurt even more.

I'd managed to compartmentalize my feelings enough to act normal around him. It was the only way I was going to keep my sanity intact, even if that was probably technically a form of insanity in itself.

Sarah was being her new usual flighty self, and Cameron and Cyrus had been hanging around the house more than usual. Cameron had adhered to

his promise to stay away for two weeks, but only to the letter. As soon as the two weeks passed, he was around constantly, as if just to spite me. Another more concerning possibility came to mind, and I realized he was probably monitoring me. If that was the truth, then my paranoia that someone was watching me at all times on campus and around the house was probably warranted.

Not that it mattered. I wasn't taking any chances, and I wasn't going to do anything that would jeopardize my plans for revenge. They were coming along pretty well, considering I had to keep secrets inside my own head.

The others' increased wariness had forced my hand a bit, and I knew I had to act soon, but first, I had to get the dance out of the way.

Before, it was something I had looked forward to from the beginning of the semester, but now... it was just something I wanted to get over with. And I had to pretend like I cared because I usually would. I had to obsess over picking the right clothes to wear, and by the time the event finally arrived, I realized I hadn't actually made any plans to meet up with Alex, which was probably the most important part.

Oh, well. I could always just brush it off as assuming he would take the initiative. And considering how obsessed he'd been with me lately, I wasn't surprised when he showed up right before I was planning on heading out myself, holding a white rose corsage in a plastic box.

He was such a cliché. It was like he was getting all the boyfriend motions out of some '90s magazine. How had I never noticed that before?

Oh, right. Love goggles.

My, he's eager. Ichor's voice was laced with amusement.

Tell me about it.

I thought you'd be happy, she replied. *Haven't you always wanted him to be more attentive?*

Attentive is one thing. This borders on stalking. And I wanted that before I knew he was a complete psycho who didn't give a shit about me.

That may have been true then, but I'm not so sure it applies now, she said, studying him intently. *Absence makes the heart grow fonder.*

Yeah. Funny how when you finally get what you want, you don't want it anymore, I thought sourly.

Oh, cheer up. It's the night of the dance. You love pomp and circumstance.

I rolled my eyes and followed Alex out to his car, surprised when he actually stopped to get the door for me. I gave him a look, but he just said, "I can't be a gentleman?"

I held my tongue and slipped into the car. He could be a lot of things, but a gentleman certainly wasn't one of them.

When we arrived on campus, the outside of the gymnasium was already adorned in hanging lights. I had to admit, it looked beautiful in the moonlight. The inside was even more lavishly decorated, making it almost unrecognizable. The dance was already in full swing, slow alternative music playing from the speakers positioned around the room.

"I'll go get us a drink," Alex said, walking off.

If only he knew he was going to be my drink later.

I wandered out a little closer to the dance floor, studying the others in attendance. Most people were wearing masks, but I had opted out because I just didn't feel like it. I was becoming one of those disaffected assholes who'd always driven me insane, but I just couldn't muster the energy to give a shit about stuff I usually would've gone gaga for. Not with everything else going on. It felt like a joke, going about my regular life when it had ended not so long ago.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder and I turned around, expecting Alex to be standing there with our drinks. Instead, it was a tall, handsome man I didn't recognize at first. Just enough of his features were cloaked in a sleek gray mask that it took me a moment.

"Professor DuPonte?" I asked.

"You looked a bit lost. I thought I'd see if you needed anything."

Those words were strange, especially coming from him. “I didn’t think professors attended these things.”

“I’m a chaperone tonight,” he replied.

I raised an eyebrow. “University dances have chaperones now, do they?”

“They should,” he said without missing a beat. He offered his hand. “Would you do me the honor?”

I stared at his hand for a moment before realizing I had to make up my mind. Reluctantly, I took it, trying not to pay attention to how warm it was. He swept me onto the dance floor, and my head spun as he led us. He was a much better dancer than I’d expected, and I wasn’t really sure why that surprised me so much.

“Isn’t this breaking some HR policy?” I asked dryly, only half kidding.

It wasn’t that I didn’t want to dance with him. It was a hell of a lot more enticing than the idea of spending all night on Alex’s arm. It was just the fact that his blood was as hard to resist now as it had been before. I was glad I’d fed from Alex last night, but even that only seemed to do so much. Probably because he wasn’t a fully fledged vampire yet.

“Why do you think I wore the mask?” he countered.

For some reason, his words made me blush, and I wished I’d worn one myself. “Still, dancing with a guy in Winterhaven is probably an even bigger scandal than dancing with a student. That’s a lot to go through if you just wanted to pester me about that paper again.”

He chuckled. “Oh, I’ve given up on that. And I’ve never been worried about what other people think, so I don’t see the point in starting now. But there is something concerning me.”

Before I could ask what he meant, I could feel Ichor rising up within my mind. Her feelings were becoming more obvious to me, and I could only imagine that went both ways. If there was one reason I had to act soon, it was that.

He’s wearing blackthorn, Ichor warned.

I frowned. *What is that?*

It's an herb humans use to keep vampires and other supernaturals at bay.

I considered her words for a moment, realizing I was looking for any reason to argue with them. In the end, I decided the risk of her expounding on the "other supernaturals" part wasn't worth it. Vampires were still more than enough for me to contend with. It's probably just his cologne.

There was another surge of agitation from her. *You think I wouldn't know? Where do you think vampires get the vulnerability from?*

I sighed inwardly. *What, you think he knows about us?*

I think he suspects something.

It was a fair point, assuming she was telling the truth. I couldn't really distinguish whatever she was picking up on from the heavenly scent of his blood. It weirded me out that we had the same senses, but they told her so much more than they told me.

"You really have been acting strangely," he said, studying me as closely as Ichor was watching him.

"You spend a lot of time watching me, Professor?" I challenged.

There was a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. Worry, too. "You've always been one of my most promising students. I expected great things from you."

"Expected?" I asked. "Was the paper really that bad?"

He smiled again, but this time, it didn't reach his eyes. "You know, this town can be strange at times. I've lived here all my life, and there are still things I don't understand."

"What do you mean by strange?"

I glanced around to see if Alex was looking for me, but I couldn't see him anywhere. Of all the times for him not to be up my ass.

DuPonte seemed to hesitate, like he wasn't sure he wanted to answer. "It's hard to explain, but I would imagine you know. You weren't born here, so you must be less immune to it than most."

“I’m sorry, but I really don’t know what you mean.”

I could practically feel Ichor thinking, *I told you so*.

Okay, so something was definitely up. And if he was questioning me about it, that wasn’t a good sign. My head was spinning, and being this close to him was way too much.

Especially when he raised his hand to touch the side of my face.

“For someone so intelligent, you’re not a very good liar,” he murmured.

The gesture was intimate enough that it would’ve been a shock under normal circumstances, but the close proximity to his wrist pushed me over the edge. I broke away, desperate to put as much distance between me and him as possible. He looked startled, but not surprised.

“I’m sorry,” I stammered. “I need some fresh air.”

Before he could say anything, I pushed my way through the crowded dance floor, ignoring the glares and cries of agitation I totally deserved. I didn’t stop until I made it through the gymnasium doors, and the moment the cold air hit my face, I finally let myself breathe in. A fresh lungful of air that wasn’t tinged with DuPonte’s blood helped, but not much.

When I heard footsteps behind me, I realized the temptation wasn’t over. I was actually relieved when I turned around to find it was Alex instead of DuPonte.

“Chase,” he said with a worried frown, taking a step toward me. “Are you okay? Who was that guy you were dancing with?”

There was no mistaking the jealousy in his tone, which filled me with rage and had laughter bubbling up in my throat at the same time. I couldn’t manage to contain it, but it didn’t matter.

He was jealous.

The guy who had been promised to another before this life even began, and struck up a relationship with me anyway. Knowing he was going to break my heart one day, even though it had actually ended much worse. Knowing

I was never anything more than a toy to him, just something to pass the time.

I looked into his eyes, focusing intently until I could tell he was successfully under my compulsion. “There’s something I want to know, and you’re going to tell me the truth.”

That in itself was a lie, ironically enough. I didn’t want to know, but I needed to. I needed to know whether this was something I could actually go through with, or whether I needed to just cut my losses and skip town, no matter what Ichor had to say about it. If she had that much of a problem, she could always jump ship and wait another three hundred years. Of course, I would probably end up dead in the process, but I wasn’t sure my second shake at life was a better option.

Not anymore.

Not if I couldn’t even be in a room full of people without a damn good risk of killing someone.

“Yes,” Alex said dazedly. There was a confused look on his face, like he wasn’t sure what was happening to him. He’d been easy enough to compel when he was drunk with lust, but I had never actually tried it cold like this.

Chase, what are you doing? Ichor asked warily.

I ignored her and the flurry of emotions I could feel rising up within us. I held Alex’s gaze, refusing to blink. “I want to know if I was ever anything more to you than a pawn. Did you ever actually love me?”

He didn’t answer at first. I could tell he was struggling against the compulsion, so I intensified my gaze and pulled him under again.

“Yes,” he said in a strained voice, frowning. “I do love you.”

Those words were just another dagger in my heart. It would be one thing if it had all been a lie, but knowing his version of love still let him do what he had done...

Somehow, that hurt even more. I didn’t fully understand why, but that didn’t stop the pain from clenching around my chest like a vise.

That was all I needed to know. It was where I should have stopped, where I should have just given up and left before he said something I could never unhear. But I couldn't. My curiosity always had gotten the best of me.

"Do you love me as much as you love her?" I asked. I wasn't even sure who I was talking about. Ichor, Sarah, or maybe both. The combination of them; the idea of the woman he had lived for as long as he was alive, and long before that.

The look in his eyes told me he understood the question better than I did. I knew his answer before it left his lips, but that didn't make it sting any less.

"No."

I took a step back, expecting a fresh wave of heartache that didn't come. Maybe there was just nothing left to break. Instead, I felt the one thing I realized I'd been seeking all along.

Resolution.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

CHASE

It was time.

Past time, really, but that didn't stop the butterflies in my stomach from revolting.

Winter break had finally arrived, and I had used my newfound leverage with Alex to "hint" about how much I'd like to visit a ski lodge for break.

Of course he wanted to make it a group thing. After all, the coven that kills together sticks together.

The lodge was actually a few miles north of the cabin we'd rented out, but the cabin alone was huge. It had two full stories, including a cozy loft, and it was furnished with warm but modern decor. There were three rooms, more than enough space for the six of us, but the idea of sharing one with Alex made my skin crawl.

Not that it was going to be a problem. I already had plans to get my revenge well before it was time to bed down for the evening.

Even Sarah seemed to have relaxed. Exams were over, and it was finally winter break, time to unwind and enjoy what was left of the holidays.

At least, that was the idea. I was definitely going to enjoy them, but everyone else was a different matter.

In my time with Ichor, I had learned that even she had to sleep. It wasn't just when she went silent. Sometimes I would notice her lack of snarky

commentary on everything I did, and I'd think she was asleep only to discover she wasn't. When I could feel strange flickers of energy I didn't recognize as my own, however, I knew she was dreaming.

What she was dreaming about was another matter, but it had become obvious to me there was still part of her that existed in that in-between world she wasn't at all keen to go back to.

In those rare moments of true privacy, I plotted my revenge, knowing there was a good chance she was going to change her mind when she realized what I had planned. It was strange not to be able to trust someone inside my own head, but if all this had taught me anything, it was that I could trust no one. If I made it through this, I was going to be ruined for relationships—romantic and platonic—for the rest of my life.

As the others explored the cabin, I lingered by the hearth. I could feel Ichor watching in the background, and the fact that she hadn't said anything told me she was at least somewhat wise to my plans.

What are you going to do to them? she asked, failing to hide the hint of concern in her voice.

She had made it clear she didn't give a shit about Sarah, but she was still protective of her loyal cultists, Cameron especially.

Nothing they haven't already done to me, I answered. I felt her grow still at the response, and added, *I'm only joking.*

She relaxed a little, but I could tell she didn't fully believe me. She had reason not to, but I was the one in charge here and there wasn't much she could do about it.

I hoped.

Your mind is so annoying, she finally said after a few moments' silence. I was startled by the sudden intrusion.

What are you talking about?

I've never known a human so capable at compartmentalizing. I suppose that's a result of trauma.

Agitation welled up inside me. *Fuck off.*

I wasn't sure if she was talking about the sacrifice, or about something else in my past, but it was a violation either way. We had come to an unspoken agreement that she wouldn't call attention to the things she dredged up in my mind, at least not the ones I had attempted to forget.

I looked up when I heard giggling coming from across the hall and realized it was Sarah in the other room with Cyrus, Cameron, and Sam. She wasn't even trying to pretend like she wasn't involved with all three of them anymore. She really had let her guard down, and she was going to regret it.

They're getting cozy, Ichor remarked.

I knew she was trying to get a rise out of me, so I ignored her. Must be nice, being so wholly adored by three men when I can't even get one to focus on me.

At least, not until I had totally stopped caring about what he thought. Somehow, the fact that he was all over me now just added insult to injury.

I had given Alex everything, including my virginity, and he had taken it all without a second thought. Knowing what I was about to do, I still felt conflicted, but it was just the ghost of the love I once held for him. Even that was based on a lie, so I told myself it was nothing more than my neural connections lingering stubbornly on the patterns they were used to.

You know, you could be the one at the center of that attention, Ichor said, warning me I hadn't kept that thought as compartmentalized as I'd hoped.

I folded my arms, looking into the fireplace. *It doesn't mean anything. It would be for you, not me.*

You act as if there's still a clear distinction between the two.

I wasn't sure what to make of that, or how to respond, so I decided not to. *In case you haven't noticed, they worship Sarah more than they do either one of us.*

I felt her surge of anger, but there was nothing she could do about it. No matter how much I had pissed her off, I was still her vessel, and she needed

me.

Maybe she was right, and I needed her a little more than I wanted to admit. She'd opened my eyes to a lot of things about my life I had been willfully blind to before. I wasn't even sure she meant to, but it was hard not to see the objective truth when looking through a stranger's eyes. Even if they were mine. It just didn't have the effect she probably hoped it would.

Love is meaningless if it's forced, I finally told her.

I could tell she didn't understand. And how could she? She was a goddess, so far removed from such petty human concerns and weaknesses. She didn't know what it was like to live and die in someone else's shadow. What it was like to put everything into another person and still have it not be enough, while someone else who wasn't even trying had it all.

"Here," Alex said from behind me, offering me a glass of punch. I could smell it was spiked from where I was sitting, and it was definitely not the first time everyone had gotten drunk since break.

It would, however, be the last.

I took it and thanked him, taking a sip to toast what was sure to be an entertaining evening, if nothing else.

"You feeling all right?" he asked, leaning on the arm of the sofa next to me.

I used to welcome his presence, but now it just made my skin crawl. "Fine."

I expected him to argue, or press me further, but of course he didn't. He just accepted it as truth because he didn't actually give a shit. It was probably just the bare minimum he thought he had to do in order to get laid tonight.

Well, he *was* fucked. But that was another matter entirely.

It was time. I had worried it would be awkward or clumsy to suggest going out to the lake, but all I had to do was bring it up to Alex and he got the others on board. He'd never been eager to do anything I wanted to do before.

I had also worried it would make me feel guilty for what I was going to do to him, but it didn't. As I pulled on my skates and prepared to put the final

phase of my plan into action, I found myself thinking about the last few months. About everything that had changed, and everything that hadn't. In a way, it seemed like hardly any time had passed since I had come back from the dead. In others, it felt like it was so long ago, it might as well have happened in a different lifetime.

And, technically, it had.

The winter air stung my cheeks and nose as we made it outside, but the view was well worth it. Even the cold didn't really get to me. I could feel it, but it was more like a computer prompt letting me know about my surroundings than something that actually affected me or caused me physical distress.

Sarah, on the other hand, was shivering even though she was bundled up in a parka and a thick Burberry scarf. She wasn't a fan of skating, which had been my biggest fear about executing the plan, but even that had gone off without a hitch.

Now all I had to do was put it into action.

"You sure this is safe?" Sarah asked warily, looking down at the ice.

I walked out onto the lake fearlessly, skating a figure-eight into the center. "It's more than thick enough," I assured her, skirting around the edge of the natural rink. Alex and the others came out to join me, and eventually Sarah did, too, never one to be outshone.

I tried not to roll my eyes as I watched Cyrus and Cameron fussing over her, guiding her along the ice like she was a struggling baby fawn. She really knew how to turn on the damsel-in-distress routine. To be fair, we were in my element, not hers. Traitorous bitchery isn't an Olympic sport, which is really too bad, because she'd be sure to take home the gold.

She had already placed me on her sacrificial altar. It was high time I returned the favor.

While Ichor was asleep and Sarah was in class, I had managed to take Sarah's grimoire and snap pictures of the whole thing. At first, I just wanted to look through it and see if there was anything I could use against her, anything that might help me with my revenge. When I found a sigil that

purportedly trapped vampires like some kind of demonic summoning circle, I realized I'd hit the jackpot.

I just had to hope it worked.

As I skated the pattern I'd worn into my mind over and over throughout the last few weeks, I felt a strange sense of calm come over me. It contrasted with the growing sense of nervousness coming from Ichor, but it was too late for her to do anything to stop me now.

The trap was set, and all that was left was for the beasts to walk into it.

Once I was finished carving the sigil into the pond, I skated outside the circle, knowing there was a good chance I'd be caught as well if I went past its barrier. I wasn't entirely sure I counted as one of them, but why take a chance?

"Hey, come on over," I called, cupping my hands around my mouth so my voice would carry across the chilly wind.

Alex looked up as well as Sam, and Cameron seemed vaguely annoyed. Cyrus never really had an expression on his face other than blankness, and I doubted that would change even with what was about to happen.

"What is it?" Alex asked, already on his way over to me.

"There's something beneath the ice," I answered, pretending to be interested in the plain, thick sheeting of ice beneath my skates.

Sure enough, Alex passed through the bounds of the circle, and I waited for the others to do so. All it took was him looking earnestly to get the other guys interested. Sarah came over, too, and she cast a wary glance up at me, like she knew something was up. Not that it mattered. Her protectors were already caught in my web, and I was going to make sure they got a bird's eye view for every second of this.

What are you doing? Ichor asked, her voice laced with as much curiosity as concern.

"You'll see soon enough," I answered out loud.

Sarah frowned. "What did you just say?"

“Nothing,” I answered innocently, my arms behind my back as I watched them inspect the ice.

“I don’t see anything,” Sam said, leaning down to stare at the ice along with Alex. Cyrus had never really been interested in the first place, and Cameron had already grown bored.

“No?” I asked, skating backward. “That’s weird. Maybe I was imagining it.”

I could see the strange looks they were giving me, and if this didn’t work, I was screwed. There was no way I’d be able to justify my weird behavior now, but it felt too good not to preen a little.

I held a hand out for Alex, motioning for him to come join me. He skated forward, but he stopped suddenly when he reached the perimeter of the circle. My heart leaped. Was it really working? Not bad for a total magical amateur.

A frown of confusion crossed his features as he tried it again, but this time, the barrier only pushed back more violently. He collided with Cameron, who barely caught him.

“What the hell, man?”

“It wasn’t me,” Alex cried, getting back on his feet. He stared at the spot in front of him, like he was looking for some invisible wall. To be fair, there was one. Sort of. “Something’s wrong. I can’t go past this point. It’s like there’s a fucking forcefield.”

Gold star, baby.

Cameron looked at him like he had lost his mind and rolled his eyes as he skated forward. When the same thing happened to him, the others panicked.

The next few moments were absolutely delicious, and they went by much too quickly. I just watched, feeling like a cat enjoying the sight of his prey scurrying around in vain.

Sarah was the first to realize what had happened. She always had to go and spoil the fun.

“What did you do?” she demanded, turning to me.

I frowned, acting like I had no idea what she was talking about. “What do you mean?”

She narrowed her eyes, but before she could question me any further, I lost it. I just started laughing, and I couldn’t stop. It had been building up for months, and now that my punchline was finally about to be delivered, it was all just too hysterical to keep inside.

I’d worried I would feel guilty at this point. Nothing could have been further from the truth.

The others were all staring at me like I’d lost my mind, the way they had during my breakdown in the middle of the ritual, but not Sarah. She was looking at me with an expression I knew all too well. She was perceptive, I’d give her that. She might not have known the details, but she was already honing in on the truth. Had been for a while now. I doubted I could have kept it from her much longer, anyway.

“Chase?” Alex asked warily. “What’s going on?”

“You know, don’t you?” Sarah asked, holding my gaze. She didn’t blink or react visibly, just stared. “How long have you known?”

“About your little midnight mass? From the beginning,” I admitted, savoring the looks of realization on Cameron’s and Cyrus’s faces. Sam and Alex were a little slower on the uptake. Funny, since they were supposed to be the two closest people to me in the world.

In the end, they had underestimated me just like everyone else did. And they were going to pay the price for it. They were going to pay the price for making me love them, and for betraying what little trust I had to give.

She’s more clever than she looks, Ichor said dryly.

I got the feeling she was enjoying this, too, trepidations aside.

I snorted. “I think you’re going to find it a bit difficult to get past that vampire trap. It won’t work as effectively on those of you who still have

beating hearts, but it'll hold you about as well as those leather straps bound me."

"How?" Cyrus asked. He sounded almost impressed.

"How did I know you're vampires, or how did I know about the trap?" I asked. When he didn't answer, I added, "The trap is from Sarah's grimoire, and the other was pretty fucking obvious. No offense, but for super old dudes, you guys are kind of naïve."

"What did you do?" Cameron snarled.

"The ice," Cyrus answered without taking his eyes off me. "He carved the sigil into it with his skates."

Yep, he was definitely impressed.

"I always knew you were the smart one," I remarked, skating a semicircle around them while still keeping my distance from Sarah. The trap wouldn't affect her, and I wanted her to think she was safe. For the moment, she was.

"Chase, we can talk about this," Alex said, holding a hand out to me like I was about to jump off a bridge rather than taking my revenge.

Meanwhile, Cameron was trying to dig into the sigil with his skates, which wasn't a bad idea, but I was kind of insulted he didn't think I'd already thought of it. The grimoire had promised only the one who created the sigil would be able to break it, and it looked like that was holding true.

"About what, Alex?" I asked sweetly. "About the fact that you sacrificed me to Ichor? About the fact that you've been saying you love me while fucking my best friend behind my back?"

There was confusion on their faces, Alex's more than anyone else's. It wasn't enough to convince me of his innocence, though. I mean, why the hell would it even matter if he was sleeping with Sarah or not? He loved her. That was betrayal enough.

And then there was the whole pesky murder thing.

"How did you know that name?" asked Sam.

I finally came to a stop. “Because she’s in my head, dipshit,” I answered, finally allowing my voice to show the bitterness I’d been nursing for months. He had the gall to look shocked. Maybe it was just the revelation that I was possessed by his goddess sinking in. “Has been ever since I woke up alone and confused in the fucking morgue.”

“No,” Cameron gritted out, his eyes flashing with rage as he moved toward me. “That’s not possible. Sarah—”

“Is supposed to be her vessel?” I finished for him.

I enjoyed the look of disbelief on his face more than any of the others. He was hurt. Maybe even heartbroken. Good, if it was even a fraction of what I’d been feeling ever since that night. Assuming he was even capable of feeling anything other than lust.

I just shrugged. “Yeah, so I heard. I guess we just meshed better.”

“You’re lying!” Sarah cried. She seemed more livid about that than she was afraid for the guys. I wondered if they were too blinded by adoration to notice. “You’re not a witch! You could never sustain her power, let alone stay conscious after possession.”

“And yet, here I am,” I said, holding my arms out. I’d expected to feel vindication at this moment, but she was so pathetic, it was hard to get my comeuppance. She just seemed like a spoiled child throwing a tantrum because she hadn’t gotten her way. I turned to Cameron and Cyrus. “You want proof? How else would I know about that dreamy little weekend you both shared with Ichor in Cabo while the Bubonic Plague was in full swing back home in Edinburgh? Then there’s that birthmark right on Cameron’s left—”

“That’s enough,” Cameron hissed. He was staring at me like I was some abomination, and to him, I guess I was. To be fair, he had just learned the creature he had worshiped for centuries was bound in the body of one of his least favorite humans, assuming I didn’t hold the highest title myself.

“You’re right. It is enough,” I said, turning back to Alex. “I think I’ve had enough fun with all of you. It’s about time for this to be over.”

“You don’t want to do this,” Alex said, his blood tinged with enough fear to turn its scent bitter. “I know you’re hurt, but please, just let me explain.”

“Hurt?” I echoed with a disbelieving laugh. If he had any idea that everything he did to try to calm me down just served to enrage me all the more, he’d shut his fucking mouth.

And he was about to. Forever.

“Hurt doesn’t even begin to describe it. And I hate to bruise your ego, but you’re not even close to being the one who hurt me the most.” I gave Sam a filthy look, but he just looked away like the coward he was. He wasn’t even going to try to defend himself. I wasn’t sure if that made it better or worse.

Sarah was the one I was really after, though. She was the one I really wanted to suffer. “You were like a sister to me,” I said, unable to keep my voice from trembling. “Did all that mean nothing to you?”

“A sister?” She laughed incredulously. “I have a brother, Chase. You were just a groupie.”

I couldn’t help the rage burning inside me, even though I knew that was exactly what she wanted. I rushed forward, but before I could tear into her throat, ignoring the furious cries of her helpless guardians, she drew something out of her scarf and held it up. A shrill ringing sound filled my head and sent me staggering back on my skates, forcing me to cover my ears just to make it stop.

She dropped the silver medal that had obviously been imbued with some kind of magic, then turned and skated furiously toward the other side of the lake. She wasn’t half-bad when she had motivation. Too bad I was better.

I wondered what her dear guardians would think, knowing that she was perfectly willing to abandon them. Then again, they were so lovesick, they probably wanted her to.

I wasn’t going to let her get away, though. I thrust my hand out without really thinking and felt a strange burst of power come to the surface. Before I even knew what was happening, a massive wall of ice shot up from the lake, blocking her path.

I stopped in the middle of the lake and stared in disbelief. *What did you do?* I asked, assuming it had to be Ichor.

That wasn't me, she said in a tone of disbelief. I had never heard that in her voice before. Probably not a good thing.

Overcoming my shock, I resumed my path toward Sarah, trapping her between me and the newly erected ice walls.

She was staring at me, her eyes wide with confusion and the first trace of admiration I'd ever seen in them. "What are you?"

My hand was still outstretched, and the surge of power that had summoned the ice wall had only intensified rather than subsiding. I could feel it at my fingertips, frost appearing all along my forearm, congealing into the form of a sharpened blade of ice. I didn't know how I had done it, and Ichor didn't seem to either, but we were both united for the moment in our hatred of the woman before us. The woman who had taken something from the both of us and was going to pay for it.

Even now, a deep sadness ate away at me just like the thirst. Sorrow for what could have been, and what I'd lost, even if it was all imaginary. Even if it was all just a game to Sarah. It was still my life, and knowing all the most important parts of it were fake couldn't change the magnitude of losing it. It wouldn't retroactively redirect all my energy and love onto someone who actually cared about me.

"We are one," I said, answering at the same moment as Ichor. I could feel her voice melding into mine, even as the blade in my hand was covered with fresh blood humming with the energy of the goddess. Somehow, it hardened and sharpened the blade within my hand. It was made even more formidable than the one Sarah had used to kill me, though it resembled it closely. I wasn't sure if it came from my mind or Ichor's, but either way, it would serve its purpose. "And we are so fucking done with you."

Sarah's eyes widened in horror, and I could hear the shouts of the others merging behind me, a raging cacophony. Before I could plunge the blade into her heart just as she had done to me, something pierced my right shoulder from behind, and my body went rigid.

For a moment, I could only feel numbness, and then the fire spread out through my veins like poison. It was concentrated at the point of impact, around the object that had lodged itself in my chest.

A bullet?

CHAPTER
TWELVE

CHASE

I turned to look at the others, but they all seemed as stunned as I was. Then I saw the figure moving past them and realized who the culprit was.

Professor DuPonte was walking toward me, a strangely configured revolver in his right hand. He kept coming as I sank to my knees, unable to stay upright.

“What’s happening?” I groaned, clutching my shoulder even though I couldn’t reach the spot where the bullet had gone in.

It’s a silver bullet, said Ichor. Her voice was a panicked hiss. *He must be a hunter. I told you something was off.*

“Not really the time for ‘I told you so’s,’ Icky,” I gritted out, collapsing and barely catching myself with one hand on the ice, the other still pressed to the wound.

DuPonte stopped in his steady encroach once he reached the perimeter of the circle, and I thought he was going to take the guys out, too, since he presumably knew I was a vampire, or something like it, but he didn’t. Instead, he tossed something onto the ice. A split second later, the circle around the sigil I had carved into the ice turned into a flaming blue wall, enveloping them.

Despite the fact that fire had made the short list of ways I was going to dispose of them when I was done with Sarah, I still felt a surge of panic at

the sight of all hell breaking loose on the ice.

A glance over my shoulder revealed Sarah had taken the opportunity to get around the ice barricades, a look of conflict on her face as she glanced between the hunter and the vampires trapped in my burning web.

Time seemed to slow down as I watched her making her decision. I was more interested in her than the man who was walking toward me with every intention of finishing what he had started. He had traded his gun for a blade, and judging from the silver runes etched into the metal, it was yet another enchanted toy.

I watched the look of betrayal on all the guys' faces as Sarah turned and rushed for the edge of the pond, disappearing into the woods as soon as she'd abandoned her skates. I hoped that bitch's toes froze off.

She was a witch. A powerful one. She could have done something, and yet she had left them to burn. The men she supposedly loved. The cult who'd worshiped her so faithfully.

It should've been satisfying. It should've brought me endless amusement to know that, if nothing else, I had ruined their illusion of their beloved goddess in waiting. But it didn't. Like everything else, it just left me feeling empty.

What do we do? I demanded as the hunter drew nearer, scrambling back from him as far as I could with blood gushing from the wound in my shoulder. *What kind of blade is that?*

Not that it would've been less concerning if it were the regular variety you could buy at any flea market. Vampire-adjacent or not, I was still pretty fucking sure I couldn't live without a head.

I don't know, Ichor answered. *As long as that silver bullet is still inside this body, I can't heal us.*

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," I snapped. And I thought my skin sensitivity to cheap jewelry was bad.

It figured even my sweet revenge couldn't go as planned. I stared up at the professor-slash-hunter as he came to a stop a safe distance from me, like he

wasn't taking any chances even though he was the one with the fucking sword in his hand. There was no expression on his face, but his eyes betrayed a hint of knowing sorrow.

"I really hoped I was wrong about you," he said sadly, raising his blade. "That you weren't a monster. But that's not true, is it? You're something worse than any of them."

I couldn't respond. My throat was too tight, and the fire in my body was spreading. It felt like it was going to consume all of me.

What was far more concerning was the fact that I couldn't feel Ichor anymore. She was there one moment, and the next, she was asleep. I tried to wake her up to no avail. I wasn't sure if she had abandoned ship or was just that badly affected by the silver, but either way, I was alone.

Just like always.

I made a pathetic attempt to lunge with what little energy and motor control I had left, since the fire in my veins was making it hard to even think, but he knocked me back down effortlessly with the sole of his boot planted in my chest. I landed on my back, letting out a cry of pain as the bullet shifted in my shoulder. I was bleeding profusely, and the surface of the ice was slick with the stuff, just like the river of blood in my dream.

This was it. This was how it had started, and this was how it was going to end.

Blood. It was always blood.

The professor was standing over me, his boots settling in the pool of blood on either side of me, taking the hilt of the blade in both hands as he aimed at my heart. This time, I knew he wouldn't miss.

I could still hear the men shouting behind the blazing wall of fire. It should've been a comfort knowing that at least they were going down with me, but it wasn't. Yeah, I had fantasized about setting Alex on fire more than a time or two since waking up, but now that it was actually happening, something in me snapped.

It wasn't just him, or even mostly him. I couldn't let this happen to Sam, no matter what he'd done to me.

"Trust me, this death is far more humane than you could expect from any other hunter," the professor said, his voice soft and gentle, as if he were doing me a favor.

I smiled at him through gritted teeth, leaning back on my elbows with my right knee bent and the blade of my skate against the ice. "Since I'm about to die, I feel like I can be honest."

He raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"You're a really shitty dancer."

His expression didn't change other than a hint of amusement glimmering in his eyes, but it was enough of a distraction that I was able to bring the corner of my skate down hard enough to break the ice. I pushed what energy I had left into the movement, letting it amplify the vibrations that ran through the ice.

DuPonte frowned in confusion, but he looked back over his shoulder and followed the crack eating away at the ice with his gaze as it quickly made its way toward the circle of blue fire.

"No," he cried, turning away from me to rush forward. Too little, too late. With the sigil broken, the flames immediately vanished, and the vampires were freed.

They wasted no time. The four of them surrounded him, leaving nowhere to go but the same way Sarah had run.

It was the first time I'd ever seen Cyrus and Cameron in their true forms. Their eyes were darker, animalistic, and even Sam looked fiercer, like the monster I now knew him well to be. He wasn't yet a full-fledged vampire, but he was still ravenous. It was a reminder of what I had probably looked like to my first victim. If there was any silver lining to dying a second time, at least it would be my last.

The hunter backed up, and just when they were about to corner him, he threw something onto the ice, causing a flash bomb to go off.

Damn, I had to get some of those hunter toys.

Not that I was going to survive long enough to bother. I could feel the bullet edging its way even deeper into my flesh, and what little of my strength was left gave out then. The bullet had definitely at least nicked my brachial artery. I collapsed against the ice, feeling my blood soak through the thick layers of my clothes.

“Don’t let him get away,” Cameron snarled.

I could hear them chasing after the hunter as I lay on my back, staring up at the darkening sky, wondering if the moon was going to peek out from behind the clouds soon enough to be the last thing I saw. Probably not, at the rate this night was going.

I could feel myself slipping, my consciousness sinking under the waves as my body went limp. The fire in my veins had dulled, or maybe I was just incapable of feeling anything anymore. It felt like everything was slowing down, fading.

My vision blurred, and when I saw two shapes hovering over me, I was sure it was just another hallucination. I could hear familiar voices arguing, but I couldn’t make out their words. They were distorted and distant, like they were coming from above the water that had already swallowed me whole.

Water. Blood. Was there really a difference?

My vision finally cleared as one of the figures grabbed me and pulled me into his arms.

Alex. He was looking down at me, his face a grimace of despair. He cupped my cheek in his palm, and he felt so warm compared to me. He always felt cold, so that was saying something.

“Chase?” His voice was strained as he searched my face, as if he was trying to find some trace of consciousness only to come up empty. “It’s okay. You’re gonna be okay.”

I tried to say something, but the words got stuck in my throat. Probably for the best. I didn’t really trust myself not to turn my last words into one final act of desperation.

I realized who the other person was now. It was Sam. Cyrus and Cameron must've been the only ones who went after Sarah. That was a shock, but I knew better than to think these two were here because they actually cared about me.

I couldn't help but smile anyway. I could see Alex with relative clarity, and I had just enough strength to reach out and brush my fingertips against the stubble along his jaw. "You know, this is the first time you've ever looked at me like that. But it's not really me you're looking at, is it?"

His brows knit together, and his gaze grew somber as he repeated, "It's fine. Everything is going to be fine."

He never answered my question, but as I finally gave in to the current, it didn't matter. I already knew the answer.

I always had.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

CHASE

The first time I woke from the dead, I was confused and cold. This time, I woke up in the middle of a soft bed, covered in blankets and bathed in the warmth of the fireplace across the room. I knew exactly where I was, too. The cabin. I'd recognize those gloriously tacky antler ceiling lamps anywhere.

For a while, I just lay there staring up at the ceiling. I didn't know where the others were, only that they had to have brought me here. For all I knew, they were already off with Sarah.

No... they wouldn't leave. Not all of them. Not now that they knew I was currently serving as their beloved goddess' vessel.

Or at least, I had been. While I lay there trying to figure out what to do next, or to muster the energy to care about doing anything at all, I searched my mind for any sign of her and realized I was still alone.

I hadn't actually noticed how much Ichor had become a part of me, and now that she was gone, I felt broken. Incomplete.

I brought a hand to my right shoulder and felt the bandages. Someone must have carved the bullet out, but somehow, I hadn't lost enough blood to bleed out.

Or maybe that was Ichor's lingering influence, wherever she was.

"You're awake."

It was Cyrus's voice. At first, it surprised me, since he'd gone after the hunter—and if he survived that, I just assumed he would be with Sarah.

I sat up slowly, but it took more strength than I had, especially with the weight of the blankets piled on top of me. Before I could process his movement, he was next to the bed, helping me sit up.

I recoiled, but I didn't have the energy to do much else. "Don't touch me."

"Okay," he said, holding his hands up in surrender. "I'm just trying to help. You shouldn't be getting up at all. You need to save your strength."

"Don't tell me what to do, you geriatric tick," I hissed, pushing myself up onto my feet just to spite him. My head spun, and the room shifted severely enough to send me pitching forward. To my chagrin, Cyrus caught me against his chest. To add insult to injury, there was a hint of amusement in his tired gaze as he looked down at me.

"This 'geriatric tick' just spent the last few hours picking bullet fragments out of your shoulder and performing three transfusions, so you might want to listen to him," he said in a patient tone that just pissed me off even more.

I pulled back from him and sat down on the edge of the bed. He was right. I could hardly sit upright, let alone stand. His words made no sense, though.

"If the bullet is out, Ichor should've healed me on her own," I said, looking down at my hands. They were the same ashen hue as before, when I'd gone so long without feeding I had almost drained DuPonte dry.

In hindsight, Ichor was right about that one. Definitely a missed opportunity.

Cyrus's brows knitted together slightly. "If what you said about being Ichor's vessel is true, then yes. You should have."

I looked up at him sharply, overcome by a fresh wave of anger. "You think I just made this up? As if I'd come up with any of this fuckery by myself."

"That's not what I meant," he said, running a hand through his dark locks.

Before he could clarify what exactly he did mean, and before I could decide if I gave a shit, the door opened. I was at once relieved and enraged to see it

wasn't Alex, but Sam wasn't much more of a welcome sight.

"He's awake," Sam murmured, looking over at me with a strange mixture of concern and guilt. I knew the one was only on Ichor's behalf, but for the moment, I wasn't about to admit there was no sign of her.

"Awake and agitated," Cyrus sighed.

"Oh, you haven't seen agitated," I informed him. "But that's gonna change if you don't tell me where the fuck Professor Douchebag is. Now."

"The hunter?" Cyrus frowned. "He escaped. Cameron and Alex are out looking for him. You don't need to be afraid. We're not going to let him touch you again."

I stared at him for a moment, incredulous. "You think I'm afraid of him?" I finally laughed when I saw the confusion in their expressions. "I'm going to finish what he started, and if I see either of you assholes again, you're next."

They exchanged a look that just pissed me off even more. Too bad the power that had flowed so freely through my body before was inaccessible to me now. I couldn't even get on my fucking feet, but the energy was still there. I could feel it, even though I couldn't feel Ichor.

Maybe it was like a battery. I just needed to recharge.

"You can't go after a hunter," Sam said in a wary tone. "Whatever happened, however you came to be Ichor's vessel, it's obvious your power isn't stable."

"Speaking of which," Cyrus said before I could respond. "Where is Ichor?"

I narrowed my eyes. "I don't know. She bailed as soon as we got shot. Probably the silver."

Sam and Cyrus both stared at me in dismay.

"She mentioned it before she dipped," I clarified. "I take it that's the bloodsuckers' Achilles' heel?"

"If it had worked its way into your heart, you would have died," said Cyrus.

“Right, because I’m totally a normal, living human right now,” I countered. This time, I managed to stand upright without wobbling, but I took a few seconds just to be sure. In the process, I had another troubling realization. Someone had changed me out of my bloody parka and clothes, and I was wearing only an oversized white T-shirt that reminded me way too much of the robe they had sacrificed me in.

“Who the fuck did this?” I demanded, stretching out the fabric of the T-shirt.

They both went silent. Even Cyrus seemed nervous to give an answer, which was fair, because there really wasn’t a safe one.

I ignored them both and brushed past Sam to get to the dresser across from the bed I had woken up in. I rummaged through the drawers, tossing aside the knitted blankets and extra pairs of gloves until I found a baggy pair of sweatpants I usually wouldn’t be caught dead in, but the time for such qualms was long past.

“You shouldn’t be up,” Sam protested, reaching out even though he seemed wary of actually making contact. Guess he was still gun-shy after what he’d seen me do to Sarah. And he had reason to be, because I was about one ill-timed remark away from turning him into a Popsicle—assuming I could figure that trick out again.

Instead, I ignored him, too, pulling on the oversized sweats and tying the drawstring taut enough to cling to my waist. The whole damn outfit was a crime against textiles, but I just needed to get the fuck out of this cabin.

Of course Cyrus was blocking the door. I stared him down, ready for a fight, but before I could say anything, the lights flickered overhead.

He looked up and seemed paler than usual, which I took great satisfaction in. It was becoming obvious that my haywire power was somehow connected to my emotions, but he didn’t need to know how little control I had over it.

“Move.”

He didn’t budge at the command, but a hint of wariness crept into his frigid demeanor. “You can’t leave.”

“It wasn’t a request,” I snapped, shoving past him. As far as I could tell, super strength wasn’t in my arsenal even under ideal circumstances, but the forceful gesture surprised him enough to let me pass.

I made a beeline for the stairs, ignoring the ache in my chest and the fact that the room seemed to tilt with each step I took. I clung to the stair railing and took a deep breath when I made it to the bottom.

One step at a time.

The living room was empty, and there was still a roaring fire in the downstairs fireplace. The sight of the cozy cabin almost exactly as we had left it was nauseating.

The sound of footsteps hurrying down the stairs behind me told me I didn’t have much time, but right now, I just needed a jacket thick enough to survive the walk to my SUV. I was glad I’d insisted on driving myself, even though I hadn’t thought Alex would be coming back at all. There was no sign of my parka in the coat closet, of course, but Sarah had left a thick puffy coat behind as a backup and we were around the same size, so I pulled it on.

Something told me she wouldn’t bother coming back for it. It was three seasons behind, anyway. She never had possessed an ounce of style, but that didn’t stop the masses from slobbering over everything she wore and calling it “vintage.”

Barf.

I was still pulling my hair out of the coat’s collar when I realized Cyrus was blocking the front door this time, a stern look of determination on his face. Sam was still back at the bottom of the stairs, but he looked ready to spring.

My chest was getting tighter by the minute. The moment that bullet had hit me, it was like it unleashed all the memories and emotions I’d had to suppress these last few months just to get by.

The betrayal. The fear and confusion. The dull, ceaseless ache somewhere inside me like something crucial was missing, and I couldn’t even try to replace it because I didn’t even know what it was.

And of course, now there was a literal fucking bullet hole to contend with.

Before the showdown could commence, the front door opened and an icy blast of air hit my back, turning my hair into a tangled, snowy mess. I was still getting the damp strands out of my mouth when Cameron and Alex walked in.

“What the hell is he doing up?” Cameron snapped. Since neither of them looked hurt, I was going to go out on a limb and assume they hadn’t found DuPonte. I wasn’t sure who the relief that washed over me was on behalf of, but either way, I stamped it out.

Maybe I had sustained some brain damage after that fall on the ice.

“We’re working on it,” Cyrus muttered. “You try making him do something he doesn’t want to do.”

Alex cocked his head like he didn’t disagree. My hand twitched at my side because his pretty-boy face was just begging to be rearranged.

“Just compel him,” Cameron said, already walking toward me. I was about to break the bad news to him, but the truth was, I didn’t know how resistant I would be to his abilities now that Ichor was gone, so I backed up instead.

“Take another step and I’ll turn your balls into snow globes.”

He snorted, but he stopped where he was when the overhead light flickered fortuitously. He glanced up, then back at me with a newly etched frown on his face.

Before I could make good on the threat, someone grabbed me from behind. Probably Sam, because he was really on a roll with the whole betrayal thing. I kicked and struggled, knowing it wasn’t going to do any good but hoping it would at least hurt, and tried to focus on gaining some control over my fair-weather powers.

Anytime you wanna step in would be great, Ichor.

There was no response from her as Sam’s arms wrapped around me, pinning mine to my sides. Cameron wrapped his hand around my throat, forcing my head up so I had no choice but to look at him. I was ready to spit

in his face when his eyes locked on mine, boring into me the way they had that day at the house.

This time, I actually felt it—the unnervingly familiar push of someone trying to invade my mind. It was only familiar in essence, because I still couldn’t remember all the other times he had compelled me and wiped the memory of it so efficiently, but it made my skin crawl all the same.

With Ichor gone, was I vulnerable to compulsion again? I fought against it, anyway, and Cameron’s frown deepened the longer I held his stare.

“Be still, Chase,” he ordered in a low, silken voice that sounded too appealing to be his. It was entreating and rich like a siren’s song, whispering gently to something within me that wanted desperately to obey.

No. No way was I letting this fucker rummage around in my head. I gritted my teeth to shake him off and refused to look away in the process.

“Get fucked, Cameron,” I said, echoing his sultry tone.

His eyes grew wide in confusion, and he took a step back. I could see Alex and Cyrus on either side of me now, so I knew Sam was the one holding me.

“It’s not working,” Cameron said, staring dumbly at me. It was probably the first time in his life anyone had defied him, dusty old bastard that he was.

“What do you mean, it’s not working?” Cyrus protested. “You’ve compelled him plenty of times before.”

“You son of a bitch,” I seethed as he confirmed what I already knew.

They both cast me a troubled glance before going back to ignoring me. I started trying to get out of Sam’s grasp again, but he was a hell of a lot stronger, and I wasn’t even sure it was because of what he was. He was obviously more affected by magic than a normal human would have been—enough that a vampire trap had worked on him—but it was hard to tell how far the other vampire traits went.

Cameron turned back to me, his eyes sharp with suspicion. “How are you resisting? I compelled you just last month.”

“Sorry, but I faked it,” I said in a wry tone, letting my expression slip into the dazed act I’d put on back then just to mock him for a split second. “I almost feel bad for Sarah, since she’s apparently a much better actor than I am.”

His face fell in agitation, and he turned back to his brother. “You try it. Maybe it’s me.”

Cyrus walked closer, but I could tell from the doubt in his eyes he didn’t have high hopes. There was curiosity, too, which ticked me off to no end. He met my gaze, and it was admittedly hard to look away from those sky-blue eyes that seemed deeper than the ocean, but that was true even under normal circumstances.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he said in a slow, soothing tone that was admittedly more effective than Cameron’s had been.

“A little late for that, isn’t it?”

He didn’t react, just kept his eyes on mine, and the longer I held his stare, the harder it was to remember why I was so fucking angry. “You’re exhausted and in pain. You just need to take a deep breath and relax.”

His words seemed so reasonable, I had little choice but to obey them. The breath that filled my lungs was deeper than any I’d been able to take on my own, but the rush of oxygen gave me a sudden burst of clarity. So did the knee-jerk response of terror that filled me as the three of them started closing in on me while Sam had me restrained like I had been that night, struggling and helpless.

I couldn’t breathe at all, but the hyperventilation helped me break from whatever thrall Cyrus had me in. Sam must have loosened his grip, because this time, when I thrashed against him, I managed to slip out of his arms.

“Don’t,” I hissed, springing back against the wall as far away as I could get from all of them. The front door was nowhere near close enough for me to dart through, but my path was blocked by Cameron and Alex anyway.

As if to reinforce my verbal warning, the lights started blinking erratically, and a violent gust of wind flung the door open behind the guys. A veil of white came crashing into the room, powdery snow acting like a

smokescreen that gave me the chance to lunge for the keys on the hook next to the door and run through it blind.

“Shit!” Alex cried from behind me. “Where’d he go?”

“Did he do that?” Sam asked, sounding incredulous and fearful.

I didn’t wait for them to catch up. I just kept running, even though I could hardly trudge through the snow. Just as I was beginning to fear I wasn’t even heading in the right direction, I crashed into the hard surface of a car hood. My SUV. I’d never been so relieved to see that clunker in my life.

My hands were half-frozen and trembling as I groped for the key fob, but the click of the doors unlocking wasn’t coming from my SUV. It was coming from the car beside it.

Shit. I’d grabbed the wrong keys.

Oh, well.

I could hear the guys barking orders at each other. Alex was calling my name, like I was still the loyal mutt who’d always come running when he beckoned. The wind muffled their voices, which was blowing so hard it felt like knives on my exposed skin, but it wouldn’t take long before they caught up.

I went around to the driver’s side door of the other vehicle and managed to kick out enough snow around it to get it open and squeezed in. I pulled it shut and hit the lock button before turning the car on. The fancy leather upholstery and new car smell told me it definitely belonged to one of the twins.

To my relief, the engine roared to life immediately as soon as I pressed the ignition button. Definitely a perk.

I could hear the shouts of realization in the distance as they heard the sound of the engine, but I was already in reverse, using every ounce of winter driving ability my life in the frigid Northeast had provided me to get down the hill in one piece.

It was a damn miracle when I felt the tires' traction find the road, but this thing was a beast. God bless whoever invented snow mode.

Driving sixty on a downward slope in the middle of a blizzard was probably suicidal, but the prospect of crashing wasn't nearly as bad as the idea of staying around those assholes for another second. As I drove, the path in front of me became just clear enough to see, even though it seemed like the blizzard was getting worse.

For a second, I thought about the way the door had blown open at the same moment my weirdo Carrie powers started fucking with the lights. Was it me? It felt too crazy to even think, but so did the idea that I could create giant ice walls.

Damn, that felt like a long time ago. So much had happened, all of it a clusterfuck of impossibility and insanity, I couldn't even keep my thoughts straight.

The adrenaline eventually shifted into relief when I had been on the road for ten minutes without either crashing into an embankment or seeing the telltale headlights in my rearview.

I realized I was gripping the wheel so tight my knuckles were white, but it took some effort to ease up. My head still felt tingly from Cyrus's attempt at compulsion, so I turned on the radio, hoping to drown it out.

The satellite radio signal was sketchy in the storm, but I finally found a station playing some pulsating thrash metal that was clear enough. I fucking hated it, but at least it would keep me awake.

Now that the adrenaline had worn off, I was exhausted. Or maybe Cyrus had just succeeded in convincing me of that. Either way, I had to stay vigilant to keep my heavy eyelids from drooping.

The radio started crackling again, but I figured it was just the signal since the stretch of highway I was driving on cut through a mountain. When the music turned to a familiar voice, my blood ran cold.

I seriously preferred the thrash metal.

“Chase,” Alex said, his voice coming through the car speakers loud and clear. A fresh wave of dread washed through my veins. “Where are you?”

Fuck, I was too tired for this. Now they were pirating the damn car radio?

“If I wanted you to know that, do you really think I would be driving as fast as I can in the middle of a blizzard just to get the fuck away from you?”

I heard a snorted laugh in the background, but Alex didn’t respond to that. “I know you’re upset, but you have to pull over. It’s not safe for you to be out there, not the least of all because you’re going to crash and get yourself killed.”

“And what, finish the job you started?” I challenged, met with silence, so I kept going. “Don’t pretend like you give a shit about me as anything other than a takeout container for your fucking blood goddess.”

More silence. Guess he knew there wasn’t any point in arguing the obvious truth, and that was probably the closest he had ever come to being honest with me other than that night I had compelled him at the dance.

“You’re right,” he finally said. “I’m a shitty boyfriend, and you have every right to hate me. I don’t expect you to trust my motives toward you, and I don’t know how much of all of this you even know about, but I’m pretty sure by now you understand what Ichor is to us. Who she is.”

“Of course I do. You’re her harem boys,” I spat, keeping my eyes glued to the road. It was a distraction, but if nothing else, the call was keeping me awake. “I asked her to spare me the gory details, but I know all about your little cult and the bloodline witches.”

He was quiet for a few seconds before asking, “And hunters? Do you know about them?”

“I’d say last night was a pretty fucking solid crash course, wouldn’t you?”

Alex sighed. “You don’t understand everything. I can tell you don’t. Just please let me speak to Ichor.”

I gave a bitter laugh before I could help myself. “Sorry, I can’t put your mistress on the line right now, but even if I could, she’s not the one in

charge. If anything, she's a mouthy backseat driver I can't kick out."

If she had been listening, that remark certainly would have drawn her out.

"That's not possible," Cameron chimed in, pissy as ever. "There's no way you could maintain co-consciousness. You're not even a witch."

"Take it up with her, she's the one who filled me in. Or don't, because for all I know, the chick's not coming back for another three hundred years," I informed him. "As much as I'd like to continue this little chat, I need to focus on the road. Tell Budget Edward he can fish his Escalade out of the lake when I'm done with it."

"Chase—!"

I turned the radio off completely and cranked the volume dial down for good measure.

If I'd known it would feel this good to hang up on that bastard, I would've done it a long damn time ago.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

CYRUS

“He really wasn’t kidding about that whole fishing-the-Escalade-out-of-the-lake thing,” Cameron remarked. We were watching Chase from a safe distance while Alex and Sam did another sweep of the town for any sign of the hunter. Catching up with Chase had been easy enough, but trying to talk him down off the road wasn’t nearly as effective as I had hoped.

Maybe letting Alex be the one to call him was a mistake. Actually, in hindsight, it definitely was. As infatuated as Chase had been with him from the beginning, all that love seemed to have turned to hate overnight.

Not that I could really blame him. If the person I loved had offered me up as a sacrifice, I wouldn’t have too many warm feelings, either.

Then again, Sarah had ditched the four of us, and as far as she knew, we were just piles of ash on the ice.

It wasn’t that I wanted her to stay. I was relieved she had gotten the hell out of Dodge and had the good sense to stay that way the moment she realized there was a hunter in town. One who had been right under our noses all along. It was the fact that she hadn’t even bothered to try reaching out just on the off chance we were alive, and I knew there were payphones around town. I wasn’t surprised she had ditched her cell phone. We had already gone over protocol for what she should do if she was separated from us and had to go on the run alone.

If I couldn't find her, at least I knew the hunter couldn't either. For the moment, I was more concerned about Ichor. We all were. I still didn't understand how she had ended up in Chase, let alone how he seemed to be the one in control. More troubling was the prospect of her going all this time without even trying to communicate with us. Not even in the dreams that had served as a poor substitute for real contact with my beloved in all the years of our separation.

At least I knew she was here, regardless of how complex the situation surrounding her vessel happened to be. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to feel now that I knew she and Sarah weren't united as we had always planned.

For the moment, I was trying not to think about any of it. We had to focus on Chase, namely keeping him from getting himself killed and banishing Ichor in the process, ruining everything we had worked for. What mattered was that Ichor walked the earth once more, and everything else could be resolved.

"I'm just surprised he still hasn't realized the parking brake is on," Cameron remarked, studying the human in the distance.

Chase had parked at the edge of the lake on the outskirts of town and, true to his word, had been trying to push my Escalade out onto the ice.

"Yeah, but you have to admire his persistence," I said, watching as he struggled in vain against the back of the SUV. "At least we know strength isn't one of his new powers."

Cameron snorted. "Or common sense. You want to stop him, or should I?"

I considered it for a moment, since Chase seemed to have finally figured out he needed to put the SUV into neutral to get it moving. How someone so ditzy in nearly every practical matter could be clever enough to have us all fooled for months, I didn't know. I was at once impressed and insulted. To be fair, he had been through a brain-frying amount of trauma over the past twelve hours.

"I'll take care of it," I decided. "He hates you the most."

“I think that honor belongs to Alex now,” Cameron said, clapping my shoulder. “Do whatever you have to do to get him back to the mansion. I’ll make sure the wards are strong.”

I nodded to him before making my way over to the lakeside. I came up slowly behind Chase, deciding it was a better approach than appearing in front of him suddenly, considering how wired he was. He was still grunting and trying to push the SUV when I made my presence known.

“Need a hand with that?”

His eyes widened, at once filled with hatred and fear in equal measure. Mostly hatred, though. Both were perfectly warranted emotions, as far as he was concerned. For the time being, he was safer around the four of us than anyone else in the world, but I didn’t expect him to believe that.

Humans were generally transparent. They wore their emotions and a good percentage of their thoughts on their face without even realizing it. Over the centuries, I had become an expert at deciphering those subtle shifts in body language and expression, but Chase had the most expressive eyes I’d ever seen. Sarah had always said he didn’t know how to keep a secret, and given the way he wore his heart on his sleeve at all times, I had assumed that to be true.

Obviously, we were both wrong.

Nonetheless, it became clear to me he was planning on running even before the idea had fully entered his conscious mind. Before he could take a step, I was right in front of him, trapping him between my body and the SUV. He staggered back against it, and it began to roll forward from the impact. I reached out and caught one of the fins on the roof, holding it in place as I gazed down at him.

His eyes narrowed, and the venom in his voice was even more pronounced than before. “How long have you been watching me?”

I shrugged. “Long enough. A word of advice—check the parking brake next time before you push.”

He raised his hand, and even though I saw it well in advance, I let him slap me across the face. It was nothing at all to me, but I regretted it when his

face screwed up in pain and he clutched his hand.

“Son of a bitch! What, are you made of lead?”

“Pretty sure I’m the same density as any human being,” I answered flatly. “Another word of advice. Never hit something that hard with an open hand. Try a fist next time.”

The sound that came from him was somewhere between a scream of rage and a kitten trying to roar. He kicked the rear left tire, and that didn’t seem to go much better for him, but he was calmer by the time he looked back at me.

“What do you want?” he demanded.

I held out my hand, and he scowled before dropping the keys into my palm. He stormed off toward the path leading away from the lake, muttering something about wooden stakes.

I was starting to see why Alex put up with all the drama. He was charming when he was pissed, in a rabid mongoose kind of way. I followed him at a slight distance and wasn’t sure he’d noticed until he cast a vicious glance over his shoulder.

“If you don’t stop following me, I will scream, and I will tell the cops you and the other Witches of Eatdick fucking murdered me.”

I couldn’t help but snort at his remark. Where did he come up with these?

“You can do that,” I said calmly, falling into step beside him. It wasn’t hard, since he was short and the snow came up to his knees. “But you look pretty alive to me. It’s hard to prove a murder without a body. Even harder when the victim walks into the station to file the report himself.”

His eyes narrowed again, and the fact that he turned away from me and kept walking was enough indication he knew I was right. I was torn between intervening in his struggle against the wild north and not wanting to piss him off so much he had a heart attack. I had never spent all that much time around Chase, but this seemed far beyond even his usual levels of agitation, understandable as that was.

When I realized he wasn't getting the rest of the way up the embankment on his own, I offered a hand. "It would be a lot easier if you just let me drive you back. Come on, you're obviously freezing."

Whatever control he'd exerted over the weather before, it seemed absent now.

The strangest part was that had never been in Ichor's wheelhouse. Her power was all related to blood, extending to the creation of iron weaponry and a few other creative uses, but not ice, and sure as hell not a blizzard. Whatever was going on, he obviously wasn't a normal human, but he wasn't a witch, either. Not one I'd ever encountered, and he was a guy, so there was that complicating factor. A few bloodlines were passed down patriarchally, but he didn't resemble any of them.

Before we could unravel any of the mysteries surrounding the botched ritual, we had to get him contained somewhere we could protect him until we could figure out what the hell to do with him.

"Fine," he said through his teeth. It was a shock he'd agreed at all, and I wasn't going to give him a chance to change his mind. I led him back to the SUV and turned the heat on, surprised he hadn't keyed the leather seats.

Chase was dead silent as I pulled down the path, save for his pounding heart. I assumed it was racing because he was angry, but back at the lodge, he'd seemed as scared as he had that night.

I wasn't sure why that look in his eyes had stayed with me. His was far from the first life I had taken, or even the first human sacrifice. In the many centuries I had been serving Ichor, I had become immune to the guilt that had once plagued me so long ago that I didn't know if it had ever been real at all, or if it was just a projection of the humanity I assumed I once possessed.

Every so often, I glanced over at him, wondering when he would notice I wasn't going back to the house he and Sarah shared on campus. I'd discreetly put the childproof locks on, so he wasn't getting out. I wouldn't have put it past him to jump out while the car was still moving.

He sat up suddenly, stiff and alert as a meerkat. “Where the fuck do you think you’re taking me?”

“I told you I’d give you a ride. I didn’t say where.”

“You son of a bitch,” he snarled, unbuckling and reaching for the door. He jerked the handle to no avail. “I’m not going back to where you assholes sacrificed me. Let me out!”

“I can’t do that, Chase,” I said calmly, turning down the street that led toward the mansion. It was secluded enough that we could restrain him without arousing too much suspicion. Without a witch, we couldn’t ward him in, but it would be easy enough to restrain him the old-fashioned way. “You’re in danger, and it’s clear you’re not making the most prudent decisions right now.”

“Prudent?” he echoed, turning to me. “You really want to go there?”

“You think you know what you’re doing, but you don’t. However much Ichor told you, she wouldn’t have told you everything. You might have lived in Winterhaven all your life, but there’s an entire world hidden beneath the surface you don’t even know about.”

“Obviously.” He folded his arms and scowled out the window, but at the moment, he seemed to have given up on escaping. I just knew better than to let my guard down.

“I’m serious. We’re far from the most dangerous things out there,” I continued. “There are other cults. Other deities. Other covens. Then there’s... whatever the hell you are.”

“Me?” he snapped. “I’m human, or at least I was until you fuckers killed me.”

“If that were true, you wouldn’t have come back from the dead.” He didn’t have a response for that, so I kept going. “You’re a magic user, that much is clear. Unfortunately, that doesn’t narrow it down much.”

“I just used Sarah’s stupid creepy book. It was practically paint by numbers, and I’m not a fucking warlock.”

“Witch,” I corrected. “And the sigil wouldn’t have worked unless someone imbued it with power.”

“So Ichor did it. So what?”

“Ichor can’t use magic on her own. That’s why she needs a mortal vessel.” It was probably a bad idea to be explaining any of this to him, but the only way I was going to keep him in line was by building some semblance of trust. He seemed to hate me less than the others, which wasn’t saying much, but it was possibly my only chance.

“For what, exactly?”

There it was. The question I was hoping he wouldn’t ask. “What do you mean?”

“Why does she want to be here in the first place? Shouldn’t she be happy with blood heaven or wherever the fuck it is she came from?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Try me.”

“As you wish,” I said, taking the last turn toward the mansion. “Remember when I mentioned those other deities?”

“Yeah...”

“Well, they each have their own intentions for being here, and most of them don’t align with the continuation of the human race.” I glanced over to see if he was still with me. “Believe it or not, Ichor is one of the more benevolent deities out there, and she and her paladins are among the only things keeping those malevolent entities in check.”

“Paladins?” he asked flatly. “You named yourselves after the lamest roleplaying game class?”

I raised an eyebrow. “That’s... debatable. And we’ve been around a lot longer than roleplaying games. Or this country, for that matter.”

He just grimaced in disapproval. “Great. Glad I was sacrificed for a noble cause, at least.”

I pulled to a stop near the end of the drive and turned to face him. “You won’t believe this, and it probably means nothing to you, but I meant what I said that night. None of this was personal.”

“Right. You just had to bump up your ritual, and I was the only ‘virgin’ on hand.”

“More or less.”

“There’s still one thing I don’t understand,” he said, holding my gaze. “What are the odds of getting an honest answer out of you?”

“Pretty good, depending on the question,” I said with a shrug. “The time for secrecy is over. You don’t have to like it, but we need each other.”

He scoffed at that, but he grew somber immediately. “How long did they know?”

I tried to make sense of his question, but came up empty. “I’m sorry. How long did who know what?”

“The others. I know you and the other asshole have been around forever, but I grew up with Alex, Sam, and Sarah,” he explained. “I spent time with their families and sat in their hospital rooms when they broke bones doing all kinds of dumb shit. The guys are definitely at least semi-mortal right now, even if they’re reincarnated vampires, so how long have they known about all this? The past lives, Ichor, everything.”

I hesitated, trying to consider the ramifications of giving him the truth. It didn’t seem like the most sensitive thing he could have asked, and I couldn’t exactly hand him over to Alex or Sam for an answer. “You’re right. They are mortal, but they’re not human. The distinguishing traits of a paladin surface during puberty, usually around thirteen or fourteen. Sarah has known her destiny all along. The witches in her bloodline keep the lore from one generation to the next and prepare Ichor’s chosen vessel when the time comes.”

He didn’t respond for long enough that I began to worry. Hell, why had I even said that in the first place? It was more than we’d spoken in all the years since Cameron and I had come to Winterhaven, but the words just spilled out.

Was he compelling me?

No... no, that wasn't possible. And it was clear from his expression he wasn't doing it consciously, even if he was capable of it. I'd just have to keep from letting my guard down again. I wasn't used to being vigilant around humans, but whatever was awakening within him was like nothing I had ever encountered, and it was foolish to leave anything to chance.

When I smelled the salt of the tears filling his eyes, I knew honesty had definitely been the wrong choice, but there was no going back now. He wasn't crying, but I could hear him holding his breath, so I knew it was taking a monumental effort. When he finally spoke, his voice was strained, and something in the way it broke made me feel something I hadn't since I could remember. Guilt.

Or an emotion close enough to be just as unsettling.

"So Alex has known he was destined to be with her since we were kids."

I hesitated. "Sarah?"

"Ichor," he corrected. "He knew he existed for her. He knew he loved her, and he chose to be with me, anyway. He chose to let me fall in love with him. To let me think we were going to spend the rest of our lives together, when I was nothing more than a temporary distraction."

"Chase..."

"It's fine," he said, sitting up straight with a slight sniff. "I needed to know, and now I do. So thank you for that."

I just stared at him for a few seconds, not knowing what to say, or why I felt like I needed to say anything at all. By the time Cameron and I had come around, Alex and Chase were already dating. I thought it was kind of a dick move even back then, but if Sarah put up with it, it wasn't any of my business, and I certainly wasn't going to complain about her attention being less divided.

"Yeah. Sure," I said, realizing it was also the first time in recent memory I'd actually felt awkward.

“I’d like to go inside.” His voice was steady again, and as sedated as he seemed, I could tell this new stability was just the calm before the storm. Literally, if what had happened at the lodge was more than a fluke.

“Okay,” I replied, turning off the car. I waited until I was at his door to unlock it, but he made no further attempt to escape even when the door was all the way open. He fell into step beside me as I led him up the shoveled path, completely silent, but his scent was tinged with fear. Understandable, considering we were walking into the place that had been the stage for his death.

At least he seemed like he was going to go into the house willingly. I still expected a struggle at the door, but he just walked in and looked around the open entryway.

“So this is the bachelor pad,” he said in a flat tone. “Looks different in the light of day. Guess the rumors about it being haunted were true after all.”

“Cameron bought it back when the town was founded,” I explained. “We come and go.”

“Why? What’s so special about Winterhaven?”

I hesitated, weighing whether it was safe to answer that. I needed to be more careful. “A lot. It’s hard to separate the legends from the facts, but there are plenty of people who think this is the spot where Lucifer originally fell. Since then, it’s been a hotbed of supernatural activity of one variety or another.”

“Great. They should put that on the town brochures. I’m sure it would really boost tourism,” he muttered, walking further into the house.

I studied him closely as he inspected his surroundings. He stopped in front of a charm dangling from the archway separating the entryway from the living room, poking one of the dangling bells.

“And what does this do?” he asked.

“It keeps evil spirits out, supposedly.”

He looked pointedly over his shoulder. “Not very effective, is it?”

Before I could respond, I heard someone barreling down the stairs, and from the pattern of the footsteps, I knew it was Cameron.

“Oh, good. You got him,” he said, looking Chase up and down like I’d just brought in takeout. “Why isn’t he tied up?”

“Why aren’t you muzzled?” Chase shot back.

“Guess you’re back to your old self,” Cameron said, walking over to him. Chase stood his ground, but his pulse quickened. “Now let’s try to fix that. Where the fuck is Ichor?”

“Cameron,” I warned, afraid he’d undo what little rapport I had established with Chase. “Shouldn’t you be out looking with the others?”

“They’re on their way back. They chased the hunter past the territory line,” he answered. “Still no sign of Sarah.”

“Territory?” Chase echoed, looking between us.

“Most cults have established territories,” I explained. “We try not to cross them, but hunters have no such qualms.”

Cameron frowned. “Sorry, since when are we giving the meatsuit a rundown of shit he doesn’t need to know?”

“He’s Ichor’s vessel,” I reminded him, even if it was only for the time being. Hopefully, Cameron had enough sense to leave that much unspoken. “He already knows plenty, and it’s not like anyone would believe him.”

Chase frowned, too, so I knew I had gotten my point across without directly threatening him. Even if he blabbed, anyone who was crazy enough to think he was telling the truth could easily be compelled otherwise. He had no tangible proof of anything.

Cameron seemed somewhat pacified by my reasoning. Enough to drop it, at least, but he was still studying Chase in disapproval. Even I wasn’t sure exactly why he and my twin had developed such an enmity long before Chase knew anything about our true nature. Probably because Chase was the only person in my recent memory who had never fawned over Cameron.

And he had the balls to mouth off to him. Now that he'd resisted Cameron's compulsion, it was going to be even more of a thing.

"Fine. If you want to babysit him and have story time, be my guest," Cameron said, holding up his hands. "But right now, I want answers. Starting with how the hell he ended up coming back from the dead."

"No," I said firmly, stepping between them. "He's been through enough. There's no point in getting into all this before the others are back, so he might as well rest."

Cameron was giving me a look he hadn't worn in ages, but I held his stare until he backed down. "Suit yourself," he gritted out. With that, he stalked out of the house, slamming the door behind him.

I sighed. "I'm sorry about him."

"Why? At least he's always been honest about what he thinks of me."

His listless tone made it sound less like a challenge and more like a statement of fact.

"Come on," I said. "I'll show you to your room upstairs."

"My room?" he asked warily. I waited for him to follow me, relieved that he seemed to have finally accepted he wasn't going anywhere. For the time being, anyway.

"You can't be alone, and this house is protected against hunters and everything else that's going to be sniffing around a new incarnation," I explained. "That's what it's called when a deity—"

"Possesses a human body, yeah, I gathered."

"Fair enough," I said, pushing open the door to the guest room. It wasn't the one Sarah usually stayed in when she was over, but I figured he'd prefer that. "Try to get some rest. Just call if you need anything, I'll hear."

"I'm sure you will," he said, shutting the door.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

SAM

By the time Alex and I made it back to the mansion, I was fucking exhausted. We'd been all over the tristate area and lost the hunter's trail at the territory border. We'd never even picked up on Sarah's, which was both a concern and a relief.

She knew how to stay hidden. I just wasn't sure how long that would be now that we knew the ritual had not only been a failure, but completely botched in every way.

The hushed tones of a bitter argument hit my ears as soon as we walked in, but I wasn't sure why the twins were bothering to be quiet. They never gave a shit who heard their fighting.

Unless...

"He's here, isn't he?" Alex asked before I had the chance.

The twins stopped to look at us, and Cameron looked hella pissed, so I could only assume the answer was yes.

"He's upstairs, sleeping," Cyrus answered, leaning against the bar across the room. He was always a somber son of a bitch, but I hadn't seen him this bad in a while.

"And he came of his own free will?" I asked doubtfully.

Cyrus snorted. "Hardly."

“Did you hurt him?” Alex demanded.

Cyrus gave him an incredulous look. “What, now you want to act like a model boyfriend?”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“You tell me.”

“All right, that’s enough,” I interjected. Sometimes I hated being the group referee, but no one else was going to do it while Sarah wasn’t around. “We all have questions, and there’s no point going at each other’s throats when no one has the answers.”

No one said anything, but at least the fight was over for the time being.

“I’m waking him up,” Cameron said suddenly, stalking toward the stairs. “We’re done wasting time.”

Cyrus looked like he was about to go after him when a door closed upstairs and Chase appeared at the top of the stairs. The fact that he was still in the sweats and T-shirt from the lodge was proof enough he hadn’t come here willingly, and he looked like he hadn’t slept in a solid week. Then again, if he’d been plotting against us the entire time leading up to the lodge trip, he probably hadn’t.

“Chase,” Alex said, brushing past Cameron to meet him at the bottom of the stairs.

Chase pointedly walked past him without a single glance, and all four of us were on edge as we watched, waiting for his next move. Would he try to run again? His power was unpredictable enough to be a liability, especially with Ichor stuck in limbo between full incarnation and sleep.

“Since everyone’s here, let’s get the interrogation over with,” he said tonelessly, his arms folded as he walked into the center of the room. His entire posture was defensive, and I’d never seen him this shut down. He was like a different person. “While we’re at it, I have a few questions of my own.”

No one replied for a few seconds. We all just looked at each other awkwardly until Cameron spoke up.

“Great,” he said, walking over to Chase. Alex and Cyrus both tensed up like they were ready to pull him back if needed. And hell, I was, too. “Let’s start with how the fuck you’re here.”

“I already told you,” Chase said, matching his biting tone.

“No, you said you woke up in the morgue. You didn’t say what happened between that and the ritual,” Cameron pressed.

Chase frowned, and I could tell he was thinking about whether he was going to answer. “I died,” he finally said with a shrug. “At first, there was nothing. I was just floating in space, if you could even call it that.”

A tense silence fell over the room. Cameron was the first to break it, as usual. “What do you mean, nothing? You didn’t see a white light? No dead relatives coming to help you cross over?”

“Cross over to what?” Chase asked.

“The afterlife,” I explained. “When humans die, their spirits are taken to a different place to either reincarnate, or move on. They’re not supposed to go to limbo.”

“He wasn’t in limbo,” Cameron snapped. “That’s not possible.”

“Then what the hell does it sound like he’s describing?” I countered.

He didn’t have an answer for that, but it didn’t stop him from glaring.

“Limbo?” Chase said flatly. “Seriously?”

“It’s not what it sounds like,” I sighed. “Some call it the Peripheral. It’s the outer ring of the Other.”

“Which is...?”

I hesitated, but none of the others tried to stop me, so I answered, “Most humans move on or get reincarnated, but some—the really shitty ones, or the ones with too much unfinished business—end up in the Other. It’s also

where supernaturals get stuck between incarnations if something goes wrong, but it's not for normal humans."

"Great. So I guess my fundie grandmother was right about where I'd end up, then," he muttered.

"That's not it," Alex insisted. "You were supposed to move on. To reincarnate. You're not meant for that place. You're... good."

That rekindled the flame of rage that had died down in Chase's eyes. "Oh, is that how you justified it? You were just sending me on to bigger and better things?"

Alex didn't answer, but I knew he felt as uncomfortable as I did. This wasn't a discussion either of us had ever planned on having.

"Let's just say for the sake of argument that he did somehow end up in limbo," said Cyrus. "What happened then?"

Chase hesitated. "It's hard to remember. I tried to get out and ended up almost drowning in a river of blood. Then I found a door, and when I stepped through, I woke up in the morgue."

"A river of blood," Alex said, echoing the disbelief the rest of us felt. He looked at Cyrus. "Do you think...?"

"I don't know," Cyrus said, visibly shaken, which was rare.

"That's bullshit," Cameron snapped. "We fucked up the ritual, and he ended up possessed instead of Sarah. That, I can accept, but there's no way in hell he overpowered Ichor's consciousness."

"And yet here he is," Cyrus countered, gesturing to Chase. "You have any other explanations?"

"Yeah, I do. He's lying," Cameron said, casting an accusatory glance at Chase. "Ichor was never in him to begin with."

"Then how do you explain his power?" I protested. "Or the shit he knows?"

"I don't know," Cameron said, shrugging dramatically. "But I sure as fuck don't believe his story."

“Then you can let me go,” Chase said. “By all means, go find that traitorous bitch who left you all to burn alive and see if stabbing her through the heart brings your goddess back. It’s not like I want to be here.”

Cameron closed the distance between them before any of us could stop him, and he had Chase pinned against the wall by the throat in the blink of an eye. Alex snarled and looked ready to lunge, but he stayed back for the same reason I did. All it would take was a flick of his wrist and Chase really would be dead.

“Cameron,” Cyrus said in a warning tone.

“I don’t know how you did this, or what the fuck you are, but I’m not buying your bullshit,” Cameron seethed, ignoring his brother. “You are *not* her vessel.”

Chase didn’t even blink. I wasn’t sure if he was in shock, or if he just didn’t give a shit. He wasn’t the same person anymore. Not since he’d woken up, even if he’d kept up the mask for a while. That was clear to me now.

Rather than struggle, he leaned into Cameron’s grasp and whispered something in his ear I couldn’t make out. My senses were better than a human’s, but not anywhere near as sharp as an awakened vampire’s. Whatever he said, Cameron’s face went blank and all his rage dried up in an instant. For a few moments, he just stood there frozen in shock, staring at Chase like he was the one whose life was literally in the other’s hands.

He recoiled as suddenly as he’d charged, and Alex and I immediately took the space between them in case he got any more ideas.

“What?” I demanded, looking at the brothers. Cyrus seemed as stunned as Cameron, though not quite as shaken, so I assumed he’d heard it, too.

When I looked back at Chase, his eyes were fixed on Cameron in a blank stare, save for the hint of a smirk on his lips. They were paler than usual, but it was hard to tell if it was from the cold or his condition.

Cyrus reached out, but Cameron shrugged him off and stalked through the door, slamming it loud enough behind him that the house shook.

“What did you say to him?” Alex asked, looking at Chase with a newfound wariness.

“Just a brief message from your lover to ease his doubts,” Chase answered, folding his arms. “Now you’re going to answer my question.”

“I will,” Alex said, taking a step toward him. “I know it doesn’t change anything, but you have the right to know why I did what I did.”

Chase frowned in confusion, his nose wrinkling. “What? No, I don’t care about that. I want to know how long I’m stuck here. And I want my phone. I have shit to do.”

Ouch.

Even Cyrus cringed in secondhand embarrassment for Alex. “Like I said, now that we know there’s a hunter in town, it’s not safe for you to be on your own.”

“Right,” said Chase. “Because it’s so safe here with your killer cult and a vampire with anger issues who already despises me.”

Cyrus sighed. “I won’t let Cameron near you again.”

Out of everyone, it surprised me Cyrus was being so gentle with him. Then again, if Chase was Ichor’s vessel—and I had no alternative explanation—he had reason to want to keep him happy.

Well...“happy” was probably an overstatement. Pacified, at least.

“Here,” Cyrus said, taking Chase’s phone out of the pocket of his coat. I watched in disbelief as he offered it to him.

Even Chase seemed not to know how to respond. He hesitantly took the phone. “What’s the catch?”

“No catch.” Cyrus shrugged. “You’re not a prisoner here. If you still want to walk out that door, you can. One of us will just have to follow you around at all times. The choice is yours.”

He seemed to consider it, though I was sure if he’d had the choice, he would’ve preferred to go back to limbo. “Cool. In that case, I’m going

home,” he announced, walking out of the room and through the front door.

Alex shot a filthy glare at Cyrus. “Nice job, genius.”

Cyrus stared blankly at the space Chase had occupied just a few seconds earlier. “I didn’t think he’d choose that.”

I groaned, running a hand through my hair. “So, who gets the first shift on stalker duty?”

Cyrus and Alex both looked expectantly at me, and I sighed.

“Fine. Here we go.”

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

CHASE

As I carried the last box of Sarah's shit out the door, I checked to make sure the seal over the door frame was still intact. It was far from the only ward I had set up using the grimoire she'd left behind, but it was currently my favorite since it kept vampires out. Even ones who'd already been invited in.

I set the box down at the curb with the others for the local clothing mission to pick up, and when I stood up, my fourth and fifth least favorite people respectively were standing just off the property line.

I was really getting tired of that appearing-out-of-nowhere trick Cameron and Cyrus liked to pull, but if I didn't hate them so much, I might have wanted them to teach it to me.

"Getting a head start on spring cleaning?" Cameron asked flatly. He had his hair slicked back, a few tendrils falling loose into his face, and he was wearing his usual uniform of a too-tight T-shirt, tighter jeans and his favorite battered leather jacket. Cyrus looked like a catalog model with his tan sweater and khakis. Opposites, as usual.

"Just taking out the trash," I said, brushing the dust off my palms. They weren't as good at the spy routine as they liked to think. Not nearly as good as Alex, but then again, he was apparently a savant at sneaking around.

Cameron looked down at the box on top of the stack I'd just finished, filled with a bunch of crap from Sarah's bookshelf and a few pieces of cheesy memorabilia I assumed were from their dates.

“If there’s anything you want, help yourself. Or you could always set up a shrine,” I said sweetly.

His eyes flashed in irritation, but he pocketed some small object I didn’t get a good look at from the box. “Still deluding yourself into thinking you can go back to your normal life?”

“Yep,” I said, folding my arms. “And it looks like you’re still deluding yourself into thinking the greaser look is still in fashion.”

Cameron’s eyes narrowed, but he didn’t respond to that. “It’s been a damn week. We’ve done it his way and given you space,” he said, jerking his head toward his brother. “It’s obvious that’s not working, so it’s time for you to grow up and face reality.”

“Which is what?” I challenged. He was a lot easier to deal with now that I knew he couldn’t enter the property, but I wasn’t sure he knew it yet. Guess I’d find out how closely they’d been watching me. I was curious anyway.

“The fact that you’re not human, for one thing,” said Cameron. “You’re not even a regular vampire, and there’s still no sign of the hunter who tried to kill you, or any of the others I’m sure he’s told about your existence by now.”

“He’s right about that,” Cyrus agreed, frowning in concern that might have seemed genuine if I didn’t know better. And in a way, I guess it was genuine. It just wasn’t meant for me. “How are you getting by, anyway? You have to be thirsty and I know you haven’t left the house.”

So that was it. They were counting on starving me out.

“Please,” I scoffed. “I spent my high school years yo-yo dieting to look good in Spandex skating outfits. If I can resist the lure of Oreos, blood is no big deal.”

Cyrus snorted a laugh and even Cameron’s eyes held a glimmer of amusement in them, which just pissed me off. I wasn’t kidding.

“Be that as it may, you have to feed,” Cyrus insisted. “And it’s not just blood. There are a lot of aspects to being awakened that we need to address.”

“Oh, so now you believe me,” I said, looking pointedly at Cameron.

He didn’t answer right away, so I knew I must have struck a nerve with what I’d said before about Sarah. “I believe it. That doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“That makes two of us,” I said. “It’s not like I enjoy having all these memory snippets of you three getting your freak on a la *Downton Abbey* rattling around in my head, but there’s not a spell for lobotomizing yourself. Trust me, I’ve looked.”

Cameron looked like he wanted to murder me again. Cyrus just sighed.

“You shouldn’t be playing around with Sarah’s grimoire,” the latter warned. “You’re new to magic. You’re more likely to hurt yourself than to actually be able to execute any of those spells.”

“Oh, I moved on from that crummy little diary of hers ages ago,” I informed him. “The *Liber Arcanum* is decent, though. At least it’s a challenge.”

They looked at each other, then back at me.

“You’re bullshitting,” Cameron said with a mocking laugh. “You can’t even read that thing. It’s written entirely in Latin.”

“Not entirely,” I corrected. “Some of it’s in Aramaic, so I have to use a translation app with those passages, but the rest is easy peasy.”

“You know Latin?” Cameron asked doubtfully.

“Of course I know Latin, I’m premed,” I said, planting a hand on my hip. “*Veni vidi vici*, bitch.”

“I’m impressed,” said Cyrus. “But just because you can read the spells doesn’t mean you’re ready to use them.”

“True. But that’s easy enough to put to the test.”

They both watched in confusion as I turned around to walk back into the house. I waited on the other side of the door, keeping it propped open.

“What are you doing?” Cameron demanded. “We’re not finished with this conversation.”

I ignored him and just stood around boredly, waiting for him to get impatient. It didn’t take long.

He was so predictable.

Cyrus watched intently as his twin stalked the length of the driveway, but the second Cameron tried to climb the first porch step, he flew back into the yard like he’d just been yeeted by some invisible hand.

I burst out laughing. It was hardly even a drop in the revenge bucket, but damn, was it funny. “Shit,” I said, taking out my phone. “Can you do that again? I wasn’t recording.”

Cameron managed to stay on his feet, but his nostrils flared and his eyes were blazing like a raging bull's. “A moon ward? Are you fucking serious?”

“Yeah, it’s pretty sweet. Supposedly, it works on everything spooky that’s ruled by the moon,” I said. “I’m not sure if that’s true, but it seems to work well enough on vampires. Or maybe it’s just assholes.”

Cyrus just watched the whole thing in silence, but I could see the wheels turning in his head. He was definitely the smart twin.

“How did you know to do the purification ritual beforehand?” he asked. “It wouldn’t have worked otherwise.”

“There’s this little thing called the Internet,” I said, holding up my phone and wiggling it in the air. “You can find anything if you look hard enough. I had to send nudes to some guy I met on an occult message board who calls himself a wizard to get the PDF file, but whatever.”

“You can’t do this, Chase,” Cyrus said, his voice taking on sudden urgency as he walked over to join Cameron in my yard. “You’re playing with fire, and you have no idea what the consequences will be.”

“Chill. They weren’t even my nudes, just recycled unsolicited dick pics guys send me on Instagram.”

Cameron rolled his eyes. “He’s talking about the karmic blowback, you vapid little twink. You got lucky with the ward, but you could just as easily have opened a portal to hell.”

I considered that for a moment, wondering if it was really that much worse than what I’d already been subjected to. “I have a livestream in ten, so can we wrap this up?”

“Here’s the CliffsNotes,” Cameron said in his usual threatening tone. “You’re a rechargeable battery, and the more energy you expend on bullshit—energy that doesn’t even belong to you—the more danger you’re in.”

I looked over at Cyrus to gauge the accuracy of what his brother was saying. I still didn’t trust him. Not by a long shot, but he was nowhere near first place on my least favorite person list.

“He’s telling the truth,” Cyrus said, as if he knew what I was thinking. “It takes a huge amount of energy just to sustain Ichor’s presence in this world, whether she’s awake or not. If you run out of energy, your body will begin to decay.”

“What, like autophagy?” I grimaced at the mental image. “Awesome. As if going prematurely platinum wasn’t bad enough.”

“Auto what?” Cameron asked.

“Exactly like that,” Cyrus said, ignoring his brother. Point for him. “I know you don’t trust us, but you can at least trust that we have a mutual interest in keeping you alive so Ichor can return.”

I chewed my bottom lip, thinking about it as much as I wanted to slam the door in both their faces. While I was still weighing the options, I felt a shift and looked up to find Cyrus standing right in front of me on the porch.

I gasped and staggered back, but he reached out and caught me by the waist before I could fall. Fear blossomed in my chest, turning my heart into a conga drum, but there was more amusement in his gaze than predatory intent. Still plenty of the latter, though, but he was a vampire. Something told me that was always there.

“How did you—?”

Cyrus smirked, setting me back on my feet. He pulled his shirt up and tugged his jeans down enough to reveal the intricate tattoo on his hip bone, and more of his washboard abs than I needed to see in the process. The design looked like some kind of messed-up triquetra.

“What is that?”

“It’s the Seal of Sovereigns. It makes me immune to compulsion, and certain forms of lesser magic, but it comes at a cost,” he explained. “I have to drink blood more often, and that’s just one example of the equivalent exchange law. First rule of witchcraft? Magic always exacts a price.”

I gulped, letting his words sink in. Okay, so maybe delving into advanced magic when I had only just learned it existed wasn’t such a great idea, but hindsight was twenty-twenty.

Another thought crossed my mind. “What do you mean, 'lesser' magic?”

Cyrus just grinned. “There are all sorts of things you don’t know. Things I could teach you—if you cooperate.”

I looked away because holding his gaze was becoming a challenge. I told myself it was just more compulsion, even though I didn’t feel the telltale push of someone trying to invade my mind.

“Fine. But only on one condition.”

“What is it?” Cameron asked impatiently.

“Anything,” Cyrus said, earning another glare from him.

“I don’t want to be left alone with him,” I said, pointing at Cameron. I’d rather not even be sharing the same solar system, but if I was going to be stuck at the mansion, it seemed like too much to expect to avoid him completely.

Cyrus chuckled. “That, I can do.”

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

CAMERON

“Do you really need this many scarves?” I asked, grabbing a handful of silk and yarn stuffed into a box filled entirely with like items. “Does *anyone* need this many scarves?”

Chase looked up from the suitcase he was trying to stuff with the shit he “needed immediately” by kneeling on it. “Considering I’m about to move in with four vampires, yeah. I’d say a little neck protection is warranted.”

I snorted, looking through the gauzy blue fabric in my hand. “I hate to break it to you, but you’d need a suit of chainmail to fend off a vampire intent on having you as a snack.”

He scowled in response. “You’re not even supposed to be here.”

“No, I’m not supposed to be alone with you,” I countered, jabbing my thumb toward the window, where Sam could be seen hauling more shit into the back of his truck. “We have a chaperone.”

Chase rolled his eyes and zipped up the bag once he’d conquered physics by cramming a store’s worth of clothing into it. “It’s always the technicalities with you,” he said, dragging the suitcase over to drop it on my foot. “Oops. Sorry about that.”

“Sure you are,” I said, grabbing the handle of his bag and hoisting it over my shoulder. The display of strength seemed to irritate him as much as my non-reaction. “Are we about done here?”

Chase paused, looking around the mostly empty room, save for the furniture and décor I assumed had been there from before he and Sarah moved in. It was the first time I'd actually been in his room. He kept everything tidy enough to please even the most anal retentive serial killer, and it smelled vaguely of the vanilla-and-cinnamon cologne he wore. Why he always had to walk around smelling like a damn cinnamon roll was beyond me. It was probably subtle enough to the human nose, but it was a shame to mask the natural bouquet of his blood with something so inferior.

Something told me he wouldn't appreciate that thought, which made me even more tempted to share it. Instead, I left the room and walked downstairs, ready to get on with it. He was enough of a pain in the ass without having to follow him around. At least in the house, he'd be easier to keep track of. As long as he was housing Ichor, I didn't trust him alone for a second.

What the fuck was she even thinking choosing him as her vessel? In a thousand years, I'd never had reason to question her judgment, but this...

I stopped at the front door when I realized Chase wasn't with me. I left his suitcase by the door and stalked into the living room, ready to ream him out for dallying when I saw him standing there in the middle of the room, staring down at a photograph he had picked up off the coffee table.

I didn't even need to look to know which one it was—the one where he, Sarah, Alex, and Sam were all standing in a line with their arms draped around each other, bundled up in winter gear against the backdrop of a ski lodge. Alex looked as bored and annoyed as a fifteen-year-old as he did now. I wasn't sure how he was going to cope with the next few hundred years of existence if he thought this was bad. Sam was grinning like an idiot, making bunny ears behind Chase's head. Chase and Sarah were hanging off each other, and the photographer had captured them in the exact moment they were both laughing hysterically at something.

The gleeful kid in the picture barely even looked like the morose guy staring down at himself. Chase hadn't been much older than he was in the picture when I'd met him, but he'd still changed a lot over the years. He wasn't the same scrawny, awkward kid in Coke-bottle glasses.

Hell, he'd ended up pretty damn hot, objectively speaking. His long, curly hair would've been a bit much on anyone else, but it suited his genteel, classic features. He looked like the kind of willowy, feminine boys the great Victorian painters were always drawing for "aesthetic" reasons. At the moment, he really did resemble a painting, frozen in a moment of time as static as the one that had caused the slight frown on his full pink lips.

"You ready?" I finally asked. He jumped violently enough that I knew he hadn't heard me come up. He was human in that regard, at least, but every supernatural trait or lack thereof I managed to pinpoint and define just led to more questions. I had encountered just about every supernatural being in existence during my time on Earth, and he didn't really fit the bill for any of them.

"Yeah," he said in a slightly hoarse voice, setting the picture back on the table. He kept his head turned a bit as he walked past me, but the scent of salt in the air betrayed him.

For once, I decided not to tease him.

"Hey," Sam called from the door in his usual chipper tone. It annoyed me enough as it was, so I really wasn't sure why he thought it would yield better results with Chase. "Did you get everything?"

"I did," Chase said, brushing past him on his way out to my car parked behind his truck. I gave Sam a sympathetic shrug as I followed him. Couldn't really feel too bad for him, though. Of all the twisted shit I'd done, betraying my childhood best friend wasn't on the list.

Not that I could say I would have done any differently in his situation. The oath I had taken to serve Ichor might have been established many lifetimes earlier, but the passage of time had done nothing to lessen my devotion. Quite the opposite. If she asked it of me, I'd kill my own brother without a second's hesitation, and I knew he'd do the same. That was just what it meant to be a paladin. No one came before the goddess.

Not even Sarah.

I'd just never imagined they would be different allegiances, or that a heart that wasn't even beating anymore could be pulled in two different

directions.

Fortunately, Chase wasn't in a talking mood on the drive back. I didn't really know what to say around him, short of the antagonistic shit that came out of my mouth way too easily. He was the closest physical link there was to Ichor right now, but he was still so... Chase. Sarah's annoying, clingy friend who was always whining about some petty drama he could have easily avoided if he'd just wake up and realize Alex just wasn't that into him.

Not for keeps, anyway.

It didn't take too long to load everything into Chase's room. It didn't take up as much space as I'd expected. He insisted on unpacking everything himself and promptly kicked me and Sam out without a word of thanks.

Fair enough.

Downstairs, I grabbed a beer and wished it would actually do something. I envied Sam and Alex in that way. Plenty of others, too. They got the best of both worlds in a sense—the guarantee of life after death that came with becoming a vampire, while getting to enjoy their vices with all the passion and chaotic intensity that came with being human until the final deal was done. Drinks, food, sex, even pain. The euphoria once provided by the things that made life exciting and rare had turned dull and gray in comparison the moment human blood first met my lips.

The only time I felt anything close was when I was with her. The goddess of blood—my sustenance and my purpose.

It had been so fucking long. Three hundred years. You'd think in that time, I would have built up a tolerance or at least some patience, but each second beyond that deadline I had set for our reunion might as well have been an eternity. The others couldn't understand, not entirely. They had lived the bliss of ignorance for most of their mortal lives, and the span in between. Cyrus understood, but if he felt the same torment from it as I did, he was better at hiding it than me.

Sometimes I resented him for it.

“What’s wrong with you?” Alex asked as he came into the room. He’d just come off his shift patrolling the territory, and Cyrus would have picked up the baton by now.

“He just spent the morning packing up Chase’s closet,” Sam answered for me. “He’ll be in a pissy mood for the rest of the night.”

I flipped him off, but he wasn’t wrong. I couldn’t remember the last time a human had been able to get under my skin the way Chase did. I wasn’t sure if it was because I hated him, or if I hated him because of it.

Alex looked upstairs, a weird expression on his face that had become all too common lately. I would’ve asked him about it, but one, I didn’t really care enough to bother and two, I was pretty sure I already knew the answer.

“There’s something we need to discuss,” I told them, leaning against the counter as I worked on my second beer. The habit was enjoyable even if the alcohol didn’t do anything.

“About...?” Sam cast a glance upward, too, like we were being haunted by some vengeful ghost.

Technically, we kind of were.

“What else?” I challenged.

“Shouldn’t we wait for Cyrus?” asked Alex. Always the good little Boy Scout.

“No,” I answered flatly, keeping my voice low just in case Chase was eavesdropping. I’d hear his door open, though, and light as he was, his footfalls on the squeaky old floor boards would give him away. “Cyrus has been making questionable judgments lately—letting Ichor’s vessel go free range among them.”

Sam frowned. “Chase agreed to come here voluntarily. That’s a pretty good start.”

“And how long before he gets some bright idea to try a spell that nukes what’s left of Ichor’s energy?”

He didn't have an answer for that. Alex looked like he was thinking about it, too.

"What do you think we should do, put him in a magically induced coma?" he asked. "We'd need a witch for that, and in case you haven't noticed, Chase is the closest thing we have right now. I doubt he's gonna volunteer to work up the spell himself."

I gave a grunt of irritation. It had always chafed my ass that vampires couldn't use magic, but that was why each coven had a witch. Sarah had always been reliable, but now...

"I'm just saying, the situation is fragile. And before long, he's gonna be bitching about going back to class when break's over."

Alex and Sam both grimaced like it was the first time they'd thought of that.

"Couldn't we just ward the campus or something?" asked Sam.

The rock star wannabe was smarter than he looked, but dumb as fuck when it came to magical shit. That, and he was still drowning in guilt, which meant he had turned into the patron saint of Chase lately. As if making concessions for him to go back to living his old life was going to make him forget we were the ones who'd taken it from him in the first place.

"The amount of energy it would take to hold a ward over a huge property that's not even bound to a single person would be insane," I replied. "Besides, there are enough threats to worry about on campus."

"It was just a suggestion," he mumbled.

"Why are we talking like Sarah's never coming back?" asked Alex. "Maybe it's not too late to reverse the ritual."

"Reverse it?" I scoffed. "You know how painstakingly exact we had to be to pull this shit off the first time, and we still fucked it up. You really think we can just suck Ichor out of Chase and pop her into Sarah?"

"I don't hear you coming up with any ideas," Alex shot back. "You're the one who's madly in love with her." The look I gave him automatically must

have been as venomous as my feelings toward him at the moment, because he swallowed audibly and took a slight step back. “I’m just saying, we all invested a lot into making this happen. I don’t think we should just give up.”

“We’re not giving up,” I said, trying to suppress my anger. Not for his sake, but because I really didn’t want to deal with another kitchen renovation. That shit took weeks, and I didn’t like humans poking around my den. It was bad enough my least favorite human was living in the upstairs guest room. “We just need to come up with a plan based on more reasonable expectations. Ichor takes priority over everything. Even Sarah.”

The words stuck in my throat, but if I had been able to drown out my humanity during the bloody first few years of my afterlife, I could get over this, too. My attachment to her was relative to Ichor, and now that she served no purpose to my goddess, she served no purpose to me. It was just a matter of whatever was left of my soul catching up to that knowledge.

“So what do we do?” Sam asked. He and Alex looked to either me or Cyrus as the de facto leader, depending on who was in the room.

“Even if we could extract Ichor from Chase’s body, it’s too great of a risk,” I said, finally voicing what I’d been struggling with for the past week. “I don’t know how, but he overpowered her, which means either he’s impossibly strong, or she’s weak. Since I’ve seen him try to eat plastic fruit before, I’m pretty confident it’s the latter, which means we need to focus on drawing her out gradually. Building up her strength until she has the energy to incarnate fully.”

“In him?” Sam asked warily.

I could understand his trepidations as a heterosexual male, but I was still annoyed. It wasn’t like Sarah was the form I was used to Ichor taking, either. She was pretty enough, but I’d always have a preference for the short, voluptuous woman with the halo of golden curls who’d appeared to me like an angel on the battlefield, and he didn’t hear me bitching. “If your devotion is that fragile, maybe you’re in the wrong cult.”

“That’s not it,” he snapped. “It’s just... going to be hard to see Chase that way, even if he is her.” He raked a hand through his long black hair. “This is

already confusing enough.”

Alex rolled his eyes. “He does raise an interesting point, though. If Chase isn’t feeding regularly, Ichor won’t be able to surface at all.”

So we could agree on something after all. “You know him better than anyone,” I said. “How big of a pain in the ass is he going to be about taking blood?”

Alex’s hesitation didn’t bode well. “He must have been feeding somehow. He couldn’t have lasted this long otherwise.”

“Yeah, but Ichor was co-fronting until the lodge, if he’s telling the truth,” said Sam.

“He is,” I muttered. They both looked up at me, and I regretted saying anything.

“What did he whisper to you, anyway?” Alex asked, a hint of suspicion in his voice.

“That’s none of your concern,” I told him. “Suffice it to say, I believe him. And it’s not just about blood.”

An awkward hush fell over the room, as the obvious sank in. It clearly wasn’t a big deal for Alex, but I could tell Sam was a little freaked out by the prospect. He’d get over it.

“The tantra is one thing if it’s Ichor piloting his body, but...” Sam trailed off.

“Energy is energy,” Alex mumbled, clearly unhappy with the direction the conversation had happened to take, even if he was accepting it. Guess he still cared enough about his ex to be jealous over the idea of anyone else fucking him. “Cameron’s right. She won’t be able to take control at all if we don’t keep the vessel in good condition.”

“Okay,” Sam said in a hesitant tone. “Then who goes first?”

“First, you idiots might want to consider the fact that Chase has to consent to it,” Cyrus said, coming in through the back door.

Sam jolted as the door shut, like he'd been caught whispering behind the teacher's back. Coward. "Cyrus. We didn't think you'd be back until later."

"Clearly," he said, looking straight at me. "Staging a coup, dear brother?"

"Don't be so sensitive, Cy," I shot back, tossing him a beer. He caught it right before it smacked him in the face. "Besides, with the way you've been fawning over him, I'm sure you won't mind the conclusion we reached."

He set the beer aside, not taking his eyes off me. "If you want to get pissy about the way I handle things, have at it. Let's see how far you get with him."

"I'm for damn sure not gonna take him on a moonlight stroll and read him sonnets."

"What, you want to force yourself on him?" Cyrus challenged, his voice dripping with derision.

The surge of rage that welled up within me made me second guess that whole not leveling the kitchen thing. It would be worth it to wipe that sanctimonious look off his face. "I didn't hear you protesting when we killed him, but no. There's a middle ground somewhere, obviously."

"I'm his boyfriend," Alex said, his voice rough with agitation. "If anyone gives him tantra, it should be me."

"You're his *ex*-boyfriend," I reminded him. "Pretty sure the 'til death part applies to dating, too. Besides, it'll take more than one of us when he eventually goes into heat, and he hates your fucking guts even more than he does mine."

"He hates me, too," Sam chimed in. "And he sees me as a brother, so there's that."

"Yeah, an evil twin, maybe," Alex said, earning a shove from Sam.

"Let's just start with the blood and go from there," Cyrus said, always the peacemaker even when he was the one starting shit. "The vessel isn't showing any signs of deterioration yet. We have time."

I wasn't so sure, but I decided not to admit it at risk of him realizing just how closely I had been attending to Chase's emotional state. He was right about one thing: time would tell.

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

CHASE

If there was one benefit to living in the cult's mansion, it was the fact that they bugged me a hell of a lot less now. I didn't know if Sam and Alex were staying scarce out of fear or awkwardness, but neither missed a chance to volunteer to go off and do whatever the hell they were always doing outside. Looking for DuPonte and his hunter buddies, probably.

The thought shouldn't have worried me, but it did. Residual impulses, I guess. It was hard to just stop caring about two people you'd loved fiercely for most of your life, even if they had never really cared about you.

Their absence left me home with the twins most of the time, which was more tolerable than I had anticipated. They left me alone for most of the day, and as promised, Cyrus spent the evenings easing me into the whole witchcraft thing. I thought I was doing pretty fucking good until Cameron came into the kitchen while we were working one night, took one look at the potion I was brewing on the stove, and started laughing his ass off.

"Ignore him," Cyrus had told me. "Just try it again."

It had taken ten fucking times to get it right. I swore they'd fucked me up with second guessing myself after my streak of what Cameron insisted was "beginner's luck."

Later that night, the others were out later than usual and Cyrus had suggested we sit in the living room, since it was raining and I guess he

wanted to indulge the traditional vampire pastime of sipping wine and gazing solemnly out the window.

I didn't mind playing Dracula's bride as long as he kept the wine coming. I was good enough at compartmentalizing that I could enjoy Cyrus's company while still wanting to rip his unbeating heart out of his chest and swallow it whole.

That last bit was kind of much, but I was dealing with all sorts of uncomfortable cravings, and without Ichor there to blame it on, I was also indulging in some cognitive dissonance to cope.

That night, I was curled up on the sofa across from Cyrus, nursing a ridiculously huge glass of wine while he read some book covered in symbols that weren't from any lexicon I recognized. Usually, I'd be on my phone and responding to comments now that I had finally gotten back to uploading vlogs on a regular schedule. It had taken me a while to come up with a reasonable excuse for the change of scenery, and I'd settled on just telling the truth about what had happened, minus all the supernatural and murder bits.

Basically, my audience knew there had been a huge blowout and Sarah had totally ghosted everyone, leaving me to deal with rent I couldn't afford, and now I was living with four guys, including my ex-boyfriend. I really enjoyed all the supportive comments trashing Alex and read through them whenever I was having a suckier day than usual.

All in all, my life wasn't that different from the way it usually was on break. There was still the matter of spring semester, though, and I wasn't looking forward to that discussion. I'd been trying to figure out a way to broach it all evening, but just when I had finally gotten up the nerve, Cyrus closed his book and looked up at me with a faint smile.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

I snorted a laugh, taking another sip of wine. "I think that's an overvaluation."

"I don't know why," he said, responding like it was a serious answer. "After working with you these last few days, I can safely say you're smarter than

you give yourself credit for.”

“It was a joke,” I said flatly.

“Jokes always contain a grain of truth,” he said, leaning forward with that intent stare that always made my heart patter, until I remembered how Sarah was its intended recipient. I was just some weird placeholder. “Or what we think is truth, at least.”

“That’s deep. You should put it on a T-shirt.”

He just smiled and stood to cross the room. I shifted back a little as he joined me on the couch, trying not to look as wary as I was.

“How are you feeling?”

“About what?”

He shrugged. “About everything, I guess. Being here mostly.”

I set my glass aside and pulled my knees up to my chest, watching him. “Aren’t you too old for this?”

“Too old for what?” He seemed genuinely confused by my question.

“For asking questions you don’t really care about the answers to.”

His expression softened with understanding. “And what makes you think I don’t care?”

“I know you don’t,” I corrected. “You care about Ichor, and you care about Sarah, but I’m nothing to you. I always have been, and none of that’s changed.”

He didn’t answer right away. He usually didn’t. He always waited a little bit, like he was actually pondering what I was saying. “Everyone cares for a different reason. Yes, you’re right, I do see you differently now that you’re Ichor’s vessel, but that doesn’t make it any less genuine.”

“Doesn’t it?”

He cocked his head slightly, watching me with a look I couldn’t read. Sometimes I was tempted to try to compel him, but whenever I got close, I

chickened out. I didn't know why, really. Maybe I was just afraid of what he'd tell me. It hadn't gone so well with Alex.

"You've had a long day. You must be tired."

I might have commented on the change of subject if I hadn't welcomed it. "Yeah. You could say that."

The truth was, I hadn't felt this shitty since I'd woken up from the dead, but if I admitted that, the guys were probably going to freak out.

Cyrus reached out, and I froze in confusion. He brushed a few hairs out of my face before pressing his hand to my forehead. He was cold to the touch, but it wasn't like I ever would've had a chance to notice that before. "You're warm. You haven't been feeling well, have you?"

I shrugged, nestling further into the sofa. "Like you said, it's been a long day."

"When was the last time you drank blood?"

I eyed him with new wariness. It felt like this was where he'd been leading the conversation all along, I just didn't know why. "I don't know. The last time I fed from Alex, I guess. Right before the lodge trip."

His eyebrows lifted. "You fed from Alex? He didn't tell me that."

"He doesn't know," I admitted.

Cyrus watched me for a long moment. Long enough for me to decide it was a mistake to admit that, but I'd had just enough wine to loosen my tongue. Probably what that fucker had planned all along.

"You compelled him to forget?"

"All things considered, I think I was well within my rights."

His gaze softened. "I'm not judging. I'm just surprised you were able to do that. It took me a long time to be able to effectively compel a human, and having someone forget something is more difficult than implanting a false memory."

“It was Ichor’s idea, and it was the only way to get her to stop nagging me about my ‘delicious’ professor,” I admitted. “I’m not sure I can even do it now that she’s gone.”

He chuckled. “That sounds like her, all right.”

“Everything came so easily when she was around,” I said, glancing out the window. The rain had mostly stopped, but a few lazy droplets still streamed down the panes. “Not that you’re a bad teacher or anything.”

“I’m afraid I can’t come close to the symbiotic relationship you share, but it’s better than nothing, for the time being.”

“Is that why you’re training me?” I asked. “You’re hoping she’ll come back?” He hesitated, and before he could bullshit, I added, “I don’t mind, I’m just asking. I want her back, too.”

“You do?” He sounded doubtful.

I shrugged. “I hated it at first and wanted her gone, but then she disappeared and I’ve felt like a part of me was missing ever since. I’m sure that sounds crazy.”

“Not at all.” He moved closer, but despite my better judgment, I couldn’t bring myself to pull away. “An indwelling is the most intimate experience two souls can have. Sharing memories, thoughts, power...” He swept his fingers along my jaw, his voice low and husky as he added, “And sharing flesh.”

I stared up at him in stunned silence, and I hadn’t felt so tongue-tied since the time I had won a backstage pass to meet my favorite rock star in ninth grade. “I guess that’s one way to put it,” I said breathlessly.

“I see why she was drawn to you,” he said, his gaze traveling over my face and down to my throat with the same slow, seductive air as his fingers brushing against my skin.

“And why is that?” I asked, finding it harder to take my eyes off him than I would have liked. Or to blink, for that matter.

His lips curved into a dangerous smile that made a chill run down my spine for all the wrong reasons. “Fire and ice is a powerful combination.”

Before I could respond—and what the hell was I even supposed to say to *that?*—Cyrus looked up, his eyes flashing in irritation. I saw why soon enough. Alex was standing in the doorway, a murderous scowl on his face.

At one point, the idea of him being jealous over me would have been a dream come true, but now, it just made me want to stab him with a butter knife until he was dead. Like, actually dead, not just the kind of dead where you’re asleep in a morgue with a shitty dye job and seeing human beings as pouches of Capri Sun.

Cyrus made no effort to shift our intimate position, but I moved back from him, not because I gave a shit if Alex suddenly cared about me, but because I had been jarred from whatever trance I’d fallen into. I wanted to blame it on compulsion again, but the truth was, Ichor hadn’t taken everything with her. The memories lingered, and alongside them, instincts that were hard to untangle from my own.

“Am I interrupting something?” Alex asked bitterly, his eyes locked on Cyrus.

“Actually, you are,” he answered without hesitation. “What is it?”

I was starting to understand why he was Ichor’s favorite.

“It’s your brother. It’s happening again.”

That cryptic remark seemed to hit its target, because Cyrus’s entire demeanor shifted in an instant and he was already on his feet. “What? It’s not even a full moon yet.”

Full moon? And here I’d thought that was a werewolf thing. Then again, if the lunar ward worked on both of them...

Alex shrugged. “I’m just the messenger. But don’t tell Cam that; he told me to fuck off and not say a word to you.”

“Of course he did,” Cyrus muttered, turning back to me. “I’m sorry. I need to take care of something.”

“Sure. Good luck with... whatever that is.”

He nodded, and the next instant, he was gone. “Holy shit,” I muttered, staring at the space where he’d been half a second earlier.

“It’s hard to get used to, isn’t it?” Alex asked, walking into the room.

I just stared blankly at him, standing in the middle of the living room with my arms folded. “Are you seriously trying to make conversation right now?”

“Come on, Chase,” he said, taking a step toward me. “You can’t hate me forever.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Trace Garland is still on my shit list for pulling my hair in third grade gym class. You seriously think I can’t hold a grudge against you for murdering me for longer than a few months?”

He sighed, like he always did when he thought I was being unreasonable. Come to think of it, I’d never even noticed the habit before, but I was reframing so many of our interactions retroactively that even pleasant memories had turned sour.

“You’ve known me longer,” he said. “And you weren’t in love with Trace.” He walked over to stand in front of me and reached out to cup my face in his hand, since he was apparently taking lessons in vampire seduction from Cyrus.

He needed a few more.

“You still love me. I know you do,” he said, lowering his voice to the tone that had once made me swoon. Now, it just made me nauseous. “We’ve shared too much to just throw it all away.”

“That didn’t stop you, did it?”

He gave me a weary look. “I’m sorry. Is that what you want to hear? If I spent the next ten years groveling, would it really make a difference?”

“No, but it would feel good. Come to think of it, so would this,” I said, giving in to the only urge that still lingered where Alex was concerned. I

punched him as hard as I could in the gut, and he doubled over with a wheeze.

“Wow,” I murmured, looking down at my hands. “Cyrus was right, that was so much better than a slap.”

Alex was still holding his stomach. “A sucker punch? Really?” he said through gritted teeth.

“Remind me again what was so honorable about baiting me to your woodland lair with a date so your friends could jump me?” I asked, cocking my head.

“Fine. I deserved that,” he muttered. “Now, can we talk?”

“There’s nothing I have to say to you,” I said. “I thought it was obvious enough when you let your secret girlfriend put a dagger in my chest, but if you need me to spell it out, fine. You and me? Over. No sequel, no spin-offs. If you were on fire and I happened to be watering plants nearby, I wouldn’t even shift the hose a quarter of a degree to put you out. That clear enough for you?”

He set his jaw, and I could hear his pulse quicken in agitation. That was... new. Maybe not feeding in so long was starting to affect me. “That’s not an option. Not now that you’re Ichor’s vessel. You can hate me all you like, but that makes us bound. You need me.”

A harsh laugh escaped me before I could stop it, but his words were just too hysterical and his sincere tone even more so. “I need you for what, exactly?” I challenged. “Emotional support? Because you were a shitty fucking boyfriend way before you sold me out. It took being possessed to see it objectively, but my eyes are all the way open now.”

“Okay, so I was a shitty boyfriend. Doesn’t mean I was bad at everything,” he said pointedly.

“Ohh. That’s what this is about. You think I’m, what, jonesing for your magic dick?”

He shrugged like the smug asshole he was. “All I’m saying is, you never complained when we were together. You were too busy calling me 'Daddy'”

in bed.”

“Right. As in emotionally unavailable and a colossal disappointment,” I shot back.

He rolled his eyes. “Live in denial, then. You’ll change your tune soon enough.”

Something about his words set me on edge in addition to pissing me off. “What are you talking about?”

“Nothing,” he said in his version of an innocent tone.

I narrowed my eyes, contemplating the odds he’d stay dead if I just killed him right there. Instead, I locked my gaze on his until I saw the usual dumb, sleepy haze of compulsion come over his face. Good to know I still had it. He’d already used up what was left of my patience. “Let’s try this again. I ask, you answer. What the hell do you mean soon enough?”

He frowned slightly, like he was fighting it, but only for a second. No endurance, this one. “You’ll have to feed soon.”

I waited for the rest to come, but that was it. “So? It wouldn’t be the first time and you’re not the only one with blood.”

“Not just blood,” he answered, still dazed enough I knew he hadn’t broken the compulsion. I really should’ve just done this from the beginning. Way less frustrating than trying to talk to him like a human being. “The Sanguine requires sustenance to maintain human shape in the material realm. The lust is for both flesh and blood.”

“Flesh?” His words echoed Cyrus’s a bit too closely for comfort. “Don’t tell me I’m turning into a fucking zombie.”

“Not for food,” he corrected. “The vessel has to consume tantra through sex with her Bonded once each lunar cycle at a minimum.”

“Tantra? What the fucking hell is tantra?”

“Erotic energy,” he answered.

“And why would I need that?”

"Because blood alone can't sustain the vessel forever," he said, as if it should be obvious.

It took me a few seconds to process what I was hearing. I really wanted to believe he was lying, but Ichor had taught me how to sense that. Besides, it was easy enough to tell with the love goggles off now. He was telling the truth.

Fuck.

"In case you haven't noticed, I'm not a 'her,'" I said flatly.

"It doesn't matter. Tantra is tantra. You're the receptive vessel, and without it, you'll die."

"I'm sorry... did you just call me a cum dumpster in fancy magical terms?" I demanded.

He didn't answer, which was probably because brainwashed Alex didn't have a whole lot going on up there. I released his mind with a curse under my breath, and this time, I didn't bother to wipe his memory. It took energy I didn't have, and I kind of wanted him to know he was my bitch now.

Alex blinked a few times as he came to, and his confusion immediately turned to rage. "Did you just fucking compel me?"

"Chill out. It wouldn't be the first time for that, either," I said, brushing past him.

"Hey!" he cried, following me. "We're not done with this conversation."

"Oh my god, your voice is so fucking annoying," I growled, pressing my fingertips into my temples. "I can't believe I used to want to spend more time with you."

He opened his mouth to retort, but the sound of an otherworldly snarl that damn near shook the house, vibrating through me like a gong, stopped us both short. I looked up at Alex. "What the hell was that?"

"Shit," he said under his breath, his attention fixed on the door in the kitchen that was always locked. I'd been planning on compelling him to open it for me eventually. He finally looked back at me, a few shades paler

than I'd ever seen him go. "That was Cameron, and it means we need to get out of the house. *Now.*"

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

CHASE

I ignored Alex's suggestion, since whatever was in that basement couldn't be worse than another minute alone with him. It was probably less perilous to him than I was if he kept talking, for that matter.

I tried the doorknob, but it was locked. No surprise there. Alex caught up with me and grabbed my arm, forcing me to face him.

"I said we need to go," he snarled.

"I know," I shot back, jerking out of his grasp. "That's part of the reason I want to stay."

Agitation lit his eyes, but another growl from downstairs turned it back to fear. The floor trembled beneath my feet. "You don't understand."

"Then enlighten me," I demanded, facing him with folded arms. "Or I can compel you again. Either way, you're giving me an answer."

He hissed a breath through his teeth, but I could tell he was actually thinking about it. "There's something wrong with Cameron."

"Yeah, no shit. I could've told you that."

"No, I mean really wrong." Before I could tell him I knew that, too, he added, "He's not just a vampire, he's... something else entirely. Sometimes he loses control, and he has to be confined."

I frowned, trying to put it all together. “Okay, so if this happens often, why are you freaking out? Can’t you just restrain him?”

“The only way to restrain him is to use a magic sigil.”

“So use one.”

“We can’t. Vampires can’t use magic.”

“What?” I cried. “That’s bullshit. Cyrus has been teaching me all week!”

“Teaching, yes. Practicing, no. That’s why each coven has a witch. Since our witch was Sarah...”

The mention of her name brought on a fresh wave of rage, but I pushed it down for the time being, eyeing the basement door.

“Open it,” I finally said.

“What? No, I’m not opening the fucking door, I have to get you out of here. The basement isn’t guaranteed to hold him.”

“I’m not trusting the judgment of a guy who keeps a giant monster in the basement with no backup plan,” I told him, pointing. “Open the fucking door or I’ll make you do it in a tutu.”

Alex grimaced, but I could tell from the look on his face I’d won. He took out a set of keys and unlocked the door, but he blocked me with his arm when I tried to go past him. “Stay behind me, and if I tell you run, fucking run.”

“Trust me, I won’t hesitate to leave your ass behind as a snackrifice.”

He just rolled his eyes and started walking down the steps. I was expecting a dark, rickety staircase leading into a big concrete room full of boxes, but the torches spaced out on the paneled walls gave the entire place a warm glow, illuminating a room more vast than I had expected. There was a massive bookshelf on the far wall, piled to the brim with leather tomes of various sizes and hues. I would’ve been drooling over the promise of old book smell any other time, but the eerie vibe of the rest of the basement kept me on edge.

All of that was just noise in the back of my mind, though, because the first thing I really saw was the giant beast caged across the room. The bars gleamed too brightly to be steel, but they didn't look strong enough to hold the creature within.

Pacing the narrow path of the cage was what I could only describe as some kind of lion with white fur so shiny, it seemed to have a glow all its own, and piercing golden eyes that were almost phosphorescent. The beast was a good foot taller than me at the shoulder, and I couldn't even imagine how massive it would be standing on its hind legs. Despite the fact that the cage was too low for that, its musculature gave the impression it was capable of walking on two legs or four, like some kind of feline werewolf. It had twin fangs that poked out of its mouth like a saber-toothed cat's, and when it turned to lock eyes on me, its mouth opened in a guttural roar to reveal a row of smaller but even sharper fangs within its great black maw.

That sound had been intense enough from upstairs, but now that I was in the same room, it made my bones quake. I was at once arrested by terror and mesmerized by the creature's beauty.

Cyrus and Sam were already down there, and they both turned toward us with matching looks of shock that soon turned to rage directed at Alex.

"What the hell are you doing, bringing him down here?" Cyrus hissed, reappearing between us in the blink of an eye.

"I compelled him," I said before Alex could sputter out a defense, just to save everyone time. "Is that thing really Cameron?"

Cyrus wavered a moment before he nodded. "Yes. It is. But it's not safe for you to be down here."

"From what I hear, if he gets out, it's not safe to be in this town."

He didn't have a response for that, so I knew I was right and felt the first hint of fear since I had been staring down the barrel of a hunter's gun. The beast was still pacing the cage like a restless tiger, a low, angry rumble perpetually coming from his throat.

"The cage is made of silver. That should hold him back," Cyrus said, raking a hand through his hair. "We've just never had to test it before."

“You need a sigil,” I said, ignoring his and Sam’s look of surprise. “I’m witchy enough, so I might as well try.”

“You’re not ready for that,” said Cyrus.

“I wasn’t ready for pretty much anything that’s happened over the last four months,” I reminded him. “It’s worth a shot.”

He hesitated, looking back over his shoulder.

“He has a point,” Sam said thoughtfully. He was probably just trying to win back points, but I wasn’t going to complain at the moment. I really, really didn’t want to be werecat chow. Or whatever the fuck Cameron was.

“Even if it works, it’ll take a huge amount of energy,” Cyrus warned. The fact that he was telling me this was proof he’d already made up his mind, even if he didn’t know it yet. “If you don’t replenish it, you’ll die, and the process for that is...”

“Complicated, yeah, I know. Alex filled me in on the whole sex vampire thing, which we’ll talk about later,” I assured him.

Cyrus shot a murderous glare at Alex, but another snarl from the cage quelled whatever argument was on the horizon for them.

“He’s really freaking out this time,” Sam said in a nervous tone. “How much worse could he really make it?”

“Fine,” Cyrus gritted out, looking back at me with fresh concern. It was almost believable. He jerked his head toward the alchemy lab in the back of the room. “Get Sarah’s sigil kit,” he ordered Sam.

Sam wasted no time going over to rummage around through all the bullshit. Being a witch seemed equal parts mad scientist and kindergarten teacher, between all the finger painting and mixing stuff. Cyrus brought me something off the bookshelf on the other side of the room. It was a thick leather book with the words *Liber de Vititi* engraved in silver on the cover.

“Book of the Forbidden?” I asked Cyrus, beginning to flip through the pages. Unlike the *Liber Arcanum*, this one actually had an index with different topics, but I didn’t recognize most of the words.

No... they were names. Had to be. Some of them were just represented by strange symbols that definitely weren't Latin in origin.

"I don't know that much about it," he confessed, which didn't really bolster my confidence. "It's rumored to be among the oldest grimoires in existence. It includes the directions and sigils for binding everything from angels and demons to..."

"Whatever he is," I said, looking over at Cameron's snarling form. The second I made eye contact, he took a swipe at the bars and roared like the caged beast he was. "I don't know, though. I think he's actually a lot more pleasant in this form."

"This is the book Sarah used to bind him," Cyrus explained. "There's no word for what he is—none that we know, at least—but she tried everything until she found one that worked well enough on him. I'm sure there's a mark or something."

I raised an eyebrow. "You never asked? Seems like the kind of thing you should keep in a password logbook."

"I never imagined it would be a problem," Cyrus said with a weary sigh.

"Here," Sam called, carrying an armful of junk over to a table in the center of the room. "This is all the stuff she kept down here."

I wasn't crazy about inheriting Sarah's hand me downs, but it wasn't like I could make a run to the local witch shop for new shit.

Hell, there probably was one. This was Winterhaven, after all.

I flipped through the pages, but I couldn't find any bookmarks. Not even a dog-eared page. On top of everything else, the bitch had to be disorganized.

When I realized I wasn't going to be able to find it the easy way, I decided to try the process of elimination. The sigil had to be drawn large enough to actually contain the subject, if it was anything like the others I'd been studying, so I got set up on the floor and handed the book to Sam. "Here. Make yourself useful and hold this."

He seemed surprised I was talking to him at all, but he knelt down and did what I asked. Fortunately, there was a pencil thrown in with all the other crap in Sarah's "kit," so I started crossing off the entries I could read enough to know they didn't fit his description.

"What are you doing?" Alex cried. "You can't write in that!"

I shot him a dirty look. "I need to keep track of the bindings it isn't so I can narrow down which one it is. But by all means, if you think you can do it better, be my guest."

He was still sulking as he watched alongside Cyrus, but he kept his mouth shut, so I went back to work. I took out my phone once I reached the limits of my Latin III knowledge, which mostly concentrated around medical terminology, and downloaded a translator app.

"You're using a smartphone?" Sam asked doubtfully.

"Might not be aesthetic, but it works," I told him, trying to ignore the hellbeast sounds Cameron was making from his cage. I was pretty sure my presence was just amping him up, but my interest in the binding was more than just a matter of self-preservation. The whole town was going to become Fancy Feast if we didn't get a handle on this.

I had most of the index crossed off the list of potentials soon enough. There were some entries that didn't really seem to fit, but I didn't want to rule them out just yet, so I left them unchecked and kept going. Unfortunately, most of the options left were either names, or those strange symbols.

I chewed my bottom lip, trying to scan the non-Latin pages in the tenth translator app I'd downloaded with no luck, since none of the guys had a clue what language they were written in.

"You don't need to do this," Cyrus chimed in. "It's too much pressure to put on you right now."

"Please," I snorted, getting back on my feet and taking the book back from Sam. "I did my entire senior project the weekend before it was due and ad-libbed the presentation. This is nothing."

As I approached the cage, Cameron started raging even more. His massive fangs clamped down on the bars and he thrashed his head when the silver burned his tongue, sending a billow of smoke up from his mouth.

“What are you doing?” Cyrus asked, suddenly at my side.

We were going to have a talk about him doing that, assuming we both survived the night. “I’m down to the weird names, so I figure I’ll try each of them and see what he responds to.”

“Huh. That’s clever,” he mused, studying his brother’s monstrous form.

“We’ll see, if I don’t summon a demon in the process,” I said dryly, starting with the first name on the list. Cameron’s only response was to keep snarling, so I moved on.

Guess it wasn’t Farthagor.

The further down the list I got, the more agitated he became, but it was hard to tell if he was reacting to the names, or just my presence. Evidently, he hated me even more in this form. I only had five names left, so I was probably going to have to try it all over again.

That, or I’d crossed the right sigil off already by mistake. This was like an MCAT practice test from hell.

Maybe I was just pronouncing them wrong. I’d tried every pronunciation I could conceive of for each one, but I didn’t even know the origin of the names, so there was no way of knowing if I was saying any of them right. Hell, we were constantly learning new shit about Latin, let alone whatever language this was. It figured demons would be sticklers for shit like that.

“Um... okay, let’s try this one,” I said, looking back into the beast’s piercing golden eyes. “Arventh...uras? Arventhiras?”

His eyes flashed with sudden fury, and he lunged at the cage again hard enough to rattle it. Cyrus yanked me back before I could react, but the cage held by some miracle. I wasn’t so sure it would the next time.

“I take it that’s the right one,” said Alex.

“Okay,” I said, catching my breath since I was pretty sure my lungs had just turned inside out like a plastic mold. “Great. Let’s go with that.”

As I went back to setting up on the floor, Sam took up his post as a book stand again while Cyrus and Alex started binding the cage in more silver chains, for all the good that was going to do. At least Alex wasn’t bothering me anymore.

The instructions for the ritual used to craft and activate the sigil were simple enough. It required the blood of the damned, and human blood. Hopefully mine would suffice for the latter, and I had four great candidates at my disposal for the whole damnation thing.

The hardest part was the drawing. The sigil was intricate, and every line and dot counted.

I was knee-deep in focus when I felt a presence looming over me from behind. I turned to find Sam leaning in over my shoulder, watching intently.

“For fuck’s sake, would you stop breathing down my neck while I’m trying to do Satanism?” I hissed over my shoulder. “It’s hella distracting.”

“We’re not Satanists,” Sam grumbled, but he moved back.

“You’re right. They have rules against murdering innocents. Now shut up, I’m drawing.”

He complied, and I finished the sigil in a couple of minutes, double and triple checking it against the illustration for good measure. “There. Now I just need blood for the activation.” I grabbed the blade mixed in with Sarah’s things, relieved it looked clean enough. When I looked up, Sam was standing a few feet back.

I smirked. “What’s the matter, Sammy? Don’t you trust me?”

He swallowed audibly. Cyrus came over, but Alex kept his distance, too.

Pussy.

“Here,” he said, offering his hand. “If it calls for damned blood, a full-blooded vampire’s will be more potent.”

I reluctantly took his hand, not sure why this was so awkward. I should've taken great glee in carving into the bastard's palm, considering he'd been perfectly content to sit by and watch while I got carved up. The act of bloodletting just felt strangely intimate now that I was vampire-adjacent.

The scent plumed around me the moment his skin yielded to the sharpened metal, and my head spun. It took a second to quell the ache in the pit of my stomach that had been easy enough to ignore up until then.

Cyrus didn't even flinch as I drew the blade across his wrist. They always did it on the lifeline of the hand in movies, but the wrist seemed more practical, considering how inconvenient a hand injury would be.

I should've known better, because the wound started healing before my eyes as soon as it was made. Cyrus's blood poured onto the white chalk on the floor, and I waited for something to happen, but nothing did. I finally decided I was just going to have to go for it and hope for the best. I slit into my own arm and couldn't help but cringe. It didn't hurt as bad as I'd feared, but the sensation made my skin crawl. I decided next time, I was definitely going with the palm.

At first, nothing happened. My blood was still dripping onto the sigil, since the wound hadn't yet closed. Cyrus offered me a handkerchief because he was still old-school enough to carry one around in case he ran into any damsels in distress. I took it and held it against the wound without taking my eyes off the sigil.

I was convinced it was another failed experiment when the mingled blood staining the sigil began to swirl. I was tired and the scent of fresh blood in the air was fucking with my head enough that I wouldn't have been surprised if it was a hallucination, but the muttered curse from Sam told me I wasn't the only one seeing it.

I moved back as the blood began to seep into the lines of the sigil, matching them perfectly as it spread its way across the entire design. The blood took on a faint purplish glow, and I couldn't take my eyes off it. It had somehow transmuted into ink, and the chalk sigil I had so painstakingly drawn on the cement floor became pure light, lifting off the echoes of its original etchings to hover a few inches off the ground.

“Holy shit, it actually worked,” I blurted out. Not quite as under my breath as I hoped.

“The fact that you sound so shocked is proof you shouldn’t be doing this,” said Alex.

“Shut up, it worked,” Sam said, elbowing him.

Cyrus offered a hand to help me up, but I ignored it and got up on my own. “Okay. I did my part. Now, you guys get to figure out how to lift a two thousand pound hellcat onto the sigil.”

“Cameron and Sarah usually did this before he shifted,” Cyrus admitted, running a hand through his hair. “Lifting the cage isn’t a problem, but I’m not sure it’ll hold. He’s done a lot of damage.”

He certainly had. Cameron was pacing again, his eyes following me. He had stopped growling, but his silence was far more unsettling.

“I don’t suppose he has a leash?” I asked, only half-kidding.

“Keep Chase out of the way,” Cyrus ordered, looking at Alex.

Alex reached for me, but I shrugged away from him, going over to the bottom of the steps to watch from a distance. He and Sam closed ranks in front of the staircase, but I wasn’t sure how much use they’d be if Cameron actually came for me.

“You’re both still weak and mortal, aren’t you?” I asked.

Clearly, they took offense to the question.

“We’re not weak,” Sam said defensively. “We’re stronger than humans, just not as strong as Cyrus and Cam. Yet.”

I watched as Cyrus approached the cage. He didn’t look scared, but he was definitely being cautious. Cameron’s lips curled back in a snarl as he got closer, but when Cyrus grabbed one of the chains secured around the bars and started pulling, he didn’t flip out like I expected.

“Calm the fuck down,” Cyrus said in a scolding tone. He was making decent progress, and he was right. It was obvious the weight of the cage and

its very angry occupant wasn't an issue for him, but the silver bars creaked and groaned with each inch closer the cage drew toward the sigil.

I frowned. "Is it just me, or is the light of the sigil not as bright as it was before?"

"Binding circles don't last long without something to bind," said Alex. "They expire."

"Great." After all that, there was a damn good chance I was going to have to do this all over again.

I hadn't even realized I was holding my breath until the clatter of metal precipitated the collapse of the left side of the cage. Everything happened in an instant. The cat seemed to lunge at Cyrus at first, but it was me his eyes were locked on.

Alex pulled a knife I hadn't even realized was clipped to his belt until then, his body shifting like he was ready to lunge if the beast moved another inch. The blade was covered in runes that glowed faintly, so I assumed it was magicked somehow. Sam grabbed me, shielding me with his body as he looked over his shoulder at the scene unfolding on the basement floor.

Before the beast could leap fully off the ground, Cyrus had him by his thick white mane and dragged him across the sigil, taking himself down in the process. Cameron swiped his massive claws out at Cyrus with a hellacious roar, and it resonated through me with such force I thought the sound was going to tear me apart. I clamped my hands over my ears and gritted my teeth to bear through the pressure in my skull and the shrill ringing in my ears.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a spray of blood as Cyrus fell back—or threw himself, which seemed more likely.

"Chase?" Sam's voice was distant and muffled like it was coming from underwater. It took me a minute to realize his hand was on my shoulder because I felt detached from all sensation other than that awful sound.

I looked up at him as the ringing gradually subsided and I could think again. "You didn't hear that?"

“Hear what?” he asked, his brow furrowed.

I looked back at the center of the room and felt more relief that Cyrus was already on his feet than I should have. I told myself it was just because the privilege of taking him out was mine.

Cameron lunged for the vampire again, but he seemed to hit some invisible wall, just like he had with my ward. I realized I was holding my breath again when a sigh of relief escaped me.

At the same moment, I realized somehow I’d ended up leaning into Alex, who had his arm draped protectively around me. I shoved him off and ventured a bit closer to the circle. “It worked?”

“Looks like it,” Cyrus said, turning back to me. There were four huge slash marks across his chest that had turned his shirt to tatters and, judging from all the blood, the skin underneath hadn’t fared much better. “Are you all right?”

“You look worse off than me,” I informed him, nodding to his chest. The wounds were still seeping blood. “Why hasn’t that healed yet?”

He looked down, peeling away the bloody strips left of his shirt. “Wounds inflicted by him don’t heal as quickly for some reason,” he explained. “We’re not sure why. Beyond that sigil, we don’t even know what he is.”

I eyed the raging cat warily. He had given up on escaping his bonds for the moment, but he was still watching me hungrily, his jaws dripping with blood from his own gums thanks to him trying to gnaw his way out of the cage.

“You said there are other creatures besides vampires,” I said.

“None like him,” Cyrus replied, watching his brother thoughtfully. “None that we’ve been able to find, anyway.”

“Even Ichor doesn’t know what he is?”

“You’d probably know the answer to that better than I would,” he said in a wry tone. When he saw my confusion, he added, “She keeps plenty of secrets of her own.”

“Probably smart,” I said, my arms folded as I studied Cameron. “So, what do we do with him now?”

“He’ll go back to normal when the full moon ends,” said Cyrus. “Until then, the sigil will hold him here.”

I blinked. “What about food and water?”

“You care?” Cyrus asked, his tired eyes shining with amusement.

I rolled my eyes. “Cameron can rot and starve in the desert for all I care, but I draw the line at animal cruelty.”

“He’ll be fine,” he assured me. “He’s even sturdier in this form than he is as a vampire. You, on the other hand...”

He took a step closer, and I felt like I was frozen in my own summoning sigil. The combination of his blood’s scent and the force of his gaze were dizzying, and I was already off my A-game. I already felt like shit, and that ritual had taken more out of me than I expected.

“You need to feed,” he said, taking my hand. He turned it over to reveal the thin line across my wrist I’d forgotten about in all the chaos. Unlike his wounds, it hadn’t even healed at all. “You should have prepared for at least a week before attempting something like that for the first time.”

As the revelation Alex had dropped on me came back to the surface, I felt a combination of dread and embarrassment. It was annoying enough to have to rely on blood for survival, let alone that.

“I’m still kind of fuzzy on the specifics,” I admitted.

Cyrus gave me a knowing smile, looking down at my bloody clothes. “Why don’t you go upstairs and get cleaned up, and I’ll take care of this mess? Then we can all talk.’

I looked back at Alex and Sam, who were both pretending like they weren’t listening, and grimaced. “Can’t wait.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY

CHASE

Taking a shower while there was a giant monster chained in the basement was the closest I ever wanted to get to living a Hitchcock film. I was washing my hair for the third time, since the basement had its share of cobwebs and dust in addition to an unhinged demon, when I suddenly got dizzy and had to grip the shower bar to keep from slipping. When the feeling didn't go away, I sank to my knees and tried to brace through the dizzy spell.

Cyrus really wasn't exaggerating about the whole running on empty thing. I had been exhausted lately, but this was something else entirely. I looked down at my wrist and realized it was bleeding through the waterproof bandage I'd wrapped it in before my shower.

Blood loss? That might account for the weakness and the lightheadedness, but not the dull ache in my core, and the cut wasn't that bad. It had only gotten worse since the ritual, and while I'd brushed it off as hunger pangs from not feeding as often as usual, I was starting to think it might be something more serious. It felt like someone had taken a wrench to my insides and was twisting mercilessly. Now, it even hurt to breathe.

"Shit," I muttered, dropping to my hands and knees as the water cascaded down my back. It soothed my aching muscles, but the steam wasn't helping me breathe any easier. The pain rapidly spread out like a band around my chest, making it impossible to get anything more than a brief gasp of oxygen.

What the hell was this, a panic attack? Of all the times...

No. No way, this was something else. It had to be. I'd dealt with my share of anxiety over the years, but this was physical and no amount of talking myself down would help.

I turned off the water and carefully climbed out of the shower before reaching for the terry cloth robe on the nearest rail. I had barely gotten my arms through the sleeves when another wave of pain hit me like a punch in the gut. I cried out in spite of myself and barely caught myself on my hands and knees, since the floor was slick with steam.

If this was some karmic retribution for sucker punching Alex, the universe really needed to get its priorities straight.

My effort to pick myself back up so I could at least get to my phone on the counter to call for help was a resounding failure. There was a knock at the door, but it hurt too bad to answer.

Fuck. I had locked the door.

I was trying to catch my breath so I could tell that to whoever was on the other side when something slammed into the door and it popped open, leaning on its hinge. Cyrus was kneeling down in front of me before I could even blink, and he took my face in his hands, searching earnestly for something.

"Chase? Look at me," he ordered, pushing the wet hair out of my face so I could see him better. I thought I was already complying, but the growing panic in his expression suggested otherwise.

"What happened?" Alex's voice came from the door, but I didn't even bother trying to look. I did, however, regain the presence of mind to pull my robe shut. His days of free shows were over.

"What do you think?" Cyrus snapped. "I shouldn't have left him alone after the ritual. It took even more energy than I thought."

"He needs blood," Alex said, his voice tight with concern he had no fucking right to. The pain was just making it impossible to stay as angry as I wanted to be.

“It hurts,” I gritted out, clutching my stomach. Now it felt like knives, or at least, what I thought they would feel like. I didn’t remember the gruesome events leading up to my actual death, which was probably a good thing. This was sharp and piercing, and if it had been anything like this, I’d rather not remember.

“I know,” Cyrus said, his voice gentle as he pulled me into his arms. “I’m going to fix it. Just drink.”

His words made me notice the familiar scent of his blood in the air, and he pressed his wrist to my mouth, blood seeping from a freshly created wound. I wasn’t sure if he’d opened it with his fangs or his nails. The drop of blood that hit my tongue matched its intoxicating scent, and something else took over me the way it had in the morgue. For a second, I thought Ichor was back and in the driver’s seat, but this was something else. Something raw and vicious and foreign. Even the thirst that had come over me in the morgue wasn’t like this.

I wished I could say I wasn’t myself anymore, but that wasn’t true. The moment I tasted his blood, the hunger became me. I was barely even aware of sinking my teeth into his flesh to reopen the wound that was already closing. Cyrus gave what I thought was a gasp of pain at first, but the way it was drawn out, tinged with pleasure, made me think otherwise.

It wasn’t a conscious observation, but rather something that faded into the background, just like the pain and the embarrassment and the rage that had permeated absolutely everything since I had woken up. I could feel my grip on his arm tighten, my nails digging into his flesh, but he made no attempt to pull away. Instead, he held me closer, his free hand slipping into my hair, stroking and then grasping.

“That’s it. Good boy, take what you need,” Cyrus said in a rough, husky voice as he continued stroking my hair. I would’ve normally been pissed, but as the vibrant taste of his blood eased the pain, I became even more aware of the sensation. I’d had a guy’s hands in my hair plenty of times in far more intimate situations, since Alex could never keep his hands off my curls in bed, but this was... different. Something about the languid touch unwound every tense thread in my body, and I gave in to Cyrus's embrace, focusing instead on every sweep of my tongue against his broken flesh.

At some point, I must have blacked out, because I was no longer clinging to his wrist like a crazed animal, but rather dangling limp in his arms. The room shifted again, but I soon realized he had just lifted me up off the floor and was carrying me somewhere down the hall. I could hear distant voices. Sam's and Alex's, no doubt, but I couldn't make out what they were saying. I couldn't even keep my head upright.

The next thing I knew, I was in bed—Cyrus's, judging from the scent of the linens—buried under a pile of blankets.

"It's started already?" Sam asked from a slight distance.

I tried to get up, but a strong hand against the center of my chest gently pushed me back down. The conversation continued in broken snippets I heard between the increasingly lengthy periods of blackness, and it was hard to connect the fragments.

"He's burning up," said Sam.

"It was never this bad with the others." Alex.

Cyrus didn't speak, but somehow, I knew the cool hand against my forehead was his. The touch was the only thing that made the blood boiling in my veins tolerable, but it disappeared and a pathetic whimper of protest escaped me.

"He needs more blood," said Cyrus. He was a shadowy figure looming over me since my vision was blurred. "Mine alone won't sustain him at this rate."

My consciousness kept drifting in and out. I kept jolting awake even though I hadn't realized I was falling asleep, and my brain was reset to the primal mode of fear. It was hard to remember where I was, but I sure as hell remembered who I was with. The sound of their voices and the fuzzy sight of them all leaning over me like they had that night made what little energy I had left surge in panic.

All of a sudden, I felt the bed compress with another person's weight, and the now familiar scent of Alex's blood cleared away some of the fog in my mind. Thirst and rage mingled in a strange cocktail, but I was too weak to

do anything about either one. He took me into his arms and I resisted instinctively as he tried to press his bleeding wrist to my lips as Cyrus had.

“No,” I hissed, pushing his hand away.

“Ow,” he muttered. I might’ve clawed his face, but I couldn’t be sure. “A little help here?”

“I’ll hold him down,” Sam said, climbing onto the bed on my other side. My eyes flew open and I saw him staring down at me, his hands wrapped tightly around my wrists, pinning them to the bed. When his eyes met mine, he went pale. “Fuck, I... what’s wrong with his eyes?”

“What?” Alex muttered, still trying to hold my head still so he could force his blood down my throat. I wasn’t even sure why I was resisting, but I kept drifting in and out between the present and the night of the ritual, and instinct had taken place of consciousness. “Oh, fuck. Cyrus?”

I didn’t know what they were panicking about, but Cyrus’s silence made it seem pretty fucking bad.

“Just make him drink,” he finally said, his voice low and sullen. “Now.”

I gave a muffled cry as Alex forced my mouth open and his blood trickled onto my tongue. Sam had me fully restrained, but I was losing the energy to struggle, anyway. The last thing I heard before I blacked out was Cyrus saying, “I was wrong. It’s already happening.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

SAM

“What do you mean, 'it's already happening?'” I demanded, looking over at Cyrus. It felt like a risk to take my eyes off Chase even though he had blacked out for the moment. “He can't be in heat. You said there was time.”

Cyrus shook his head. “It doesn't matter. Not right now.”

“The hell it doesn't.” I didn't know where the growl under my words came from, or the courage to speak the words themselves, but I'd said them and there was no going back now.

He narrowed his eyes, and I waited for him to lash out. Instead, he sighed. “It's complicated.”

“Meaning you don't know.”

“Meaning it's complicated,” he repeated firmly. “The binding shouldn't have taken that much out of him. Not if Sarah could do it without even being possessed.”

“But he's not a witch,” I pressed. “He's a normal fucking human, and he isn't meant for any of this.”

“You don't think I know that?” The red bleeding into Cyrus's eyes usually scared the shit out of me, and it did. Just not enough to back down. “The important thing now is to replace as much of the energy as we can.”

I hesitated. "Blood isn't going to be enough this time, is it?"

His silence was more than enough of an answer.

A strangled moan came from Chase, who was just beginning to stir. Thank God.

"Where?" he asked, his voice hoarse and weak. At least he wasn't struggling anymore. I'd felt even more like shit having to hold him down and force blood down his throat, but what choice did we have?

"You're safe," I told him, reaching out to put a hand on his arm. He was still burning up.

His eyes cleared up at the sound of my voice, but I knew better than to think it was a comfort. At least they were his eyes now, and not the ghostly white hue that had flashed in them before, whatever the hell that was supposed to mean.

Chase looked at me, then Cyrus. "Where is Alex?"

I blinked. "He went downstairs to check on Cam. You want me to get him?"

"No," Chase hissed.

Well, at least he was sounding a bit more like his usual self.

"How are you feeling?" Cyrus asked warily.

"Like shit," Chase muttered. "What happened?"

"You blacked out," I answered. "You lost more energy in the ritual than we thought."

Chase sat up more, and the slight shift caused the sheets to drift further down his torso. We'd taken the robe off him since it was soaked in blood anyway, and my fucked-up brain had to obsess over the reminder that there was nothing under those linens.

I swallowed hard. Why the fuck was my mind so far off into the gutter today? I had to get it together.

"Why did that happen?" Chase asked, still in a daze.

“As a vessel, your needs are changing,” said Cyrus. “Your soul needs to consume energy just like your body needs blood. Housing a deity and using magic takes a lot of energy, and it’s not always practical to feed daily, so the soul of a vessel learns to conserve energy for release over time. Think of it like an animal hibernating for winter.”

I poorly muffled a laugh. That was one way to put it.

Chase listened closely, but it was hard to tell what he was thinking. So far, Cyrus was giving him the censored version. I didn’t know all that much myself, if I was being honest. I just knew what my role was as a paladin, and what I was expected to provide.

“Okay,” Chase said in a wary tone. “So it’s like an extended release drug, and I have to, what, binge on blood and energy so I don’t run out again?”

“More or less,” said Cyrus. “Your reserves got much too low, and that’s my fault. You weren’t showing any overt signs of deterioration, so I thought we had more time. Every few weeks or so, when the energy reserves are in need of replenishing, it triggers a state of need. More often, if you use too much magic. The thirst becomes insatiable, and the vessel requires near constant sustenance in order to meet those needs and return to normal.”

The more he talked, the more suspicious Chase looked. “When you say feed, you mean...?”

“Consuming anima through blood and tantra through sexual contact,” Cyrus answered. His serious demeanor usually made him seem cool and refined, but given the subject matter, it was hard not to find it funny. I refrained from showing any sign of that, since I knew Chase really would kill me. “They both fuel different kinds of magic. When everything is functioning properly, you’ll go into heat once your reserves are low enough, and there are supposed to be signs in advance. My guess is the sudden rush of energy from creating the sigil depleted it too rapidly and you went directly into heat.”

Chase turned a few different shades of pink as the words sank in. It was rare for anything to render him speechless, but that had done the trick alright. “Heat? I’m not an animal.”

"Of course not," said Cyrus. "But it's heat, all the same."

Chase shook his head. "Are you seriously telling me I'm going to turn into a magical thot every few weeks for the rest of my life?"

Cyrus hesitated. "I'm not sure what that is, but... probably? More or less often, depending on how much tantra you use."

For a few moments, Chase said nothing. He just stared off at nothing in particular, then casually reached for one of the pillows beside him. He buried his face in it and screamed at the top of his lungs.

Cyrus winced. Guess the pillow didn't do enough to muffle the sound for his sensitive ears. "Are you all right?" he asked worriedly.

When Chase looked up from the pillow, his eyes were wild with familiar anger that came as a relief. "No, I'm not fucking all right! As if turning into a blood lush wasn't awkward enough, now I'm a literal thirst trap."

I couldn't help the laugh that escaped my mouth, and they both turned to glower at me. I held my hands up in my defense. "Sorry. Not funny."

"It's not!" Chase hissed. "I'm not a slut. Alex is the only guy I've even kissed, and I wouldn't go back there if he were the only queer guy in Maine."

"Can't blame you for that," I said, hoping to lighten the mood slightly.

I'd been freaked out when I first realized what Chase being Ichor's vessel would mean down the line, but I'd had plenty of time to adapt to the idea. Maybe a little too much. Now that he was in heat, his scent changing gradually, it was hard to deny how much I wanted him. How much I always had. But I really wasn't ready to go there yet.

"I understand this is a lot to process," said Cyrus. "But it doesn't have to be Alex."

Chase stared blankly at him. "That's far from being my only problem with this situation. I'm not even dating anyone, and if I were, living with four dudes is probably not a selling point on Tinder."

"Isn't it Grindr for gay guys?" I asked.

“See?” Chase threw up his hand as if I’d just proved his point. “Even Sam knows more about being a gay slut than I do.”

“I’m not sure if I should take that as a compliment or not,” I mumbled.

It was Cyrus’s turn to look confused, but the misunderstanding was clear enough to me. I just wasn’t going to be the one who corrected it. Chase hated me enough already, and he was definitely the type to kill the messenger.

“A grinder for what?” Cyrus asked once he’d been parsing the question for a few seconds without any luck.

I snorted. “It’s a hookup app that helps horny people find each other for one-night stands, Grandpa.”

Understanding lit his eyes, but a possessive anger I recognized all too well immediately took its place. “That’s not how it works. You can’t just take tantra from anyone. Regular human blood might work well enough to satisfy the thirst for anima in a bind, but it would be like living on junk food. There is no substitute for tantra. The paladins exist to provide the vessel with both. Outside intervention is unnecessary.”

And unwelcome, I thought.

I watched Chase carefully, trying to gauge his response. He wasn’t as expressive as usual, but that was probably just the exhaustion. He wasn’t teetering on the brink of stasis anymore, but he was still far from optimal.

“No. No way,” he said firmly. “Getting down and dirty with Ichor’s harem is not what I signed up for.”

“You didn’t sign up for any of this,” Cyrus said, always taking things way too literally. Sometimes I wondered if he’d spent a few of those centuries locked up in a coffin somewhere. “And I’m afraid you don’t have a choice. Even if outside sustenance would sate the need, we don’t share.”

Chase raised an eyebrow. “The four of you have literally been fucking the same deity for lifetimes.”

“That’s different,” said Cyrus.

“How?” he demanded.

Cyrus sighed. “It would be impossible for any one vampire to fully satisfy a vessel in heat. Two are required at a minimum, and that’s stretching it. We have the same possessive instincts as any other man, but sharing with another paladin is different from sharing with a mortal.”

He said the word like it left a bitter taste in his mouth. And it probably did. Cyrus never had enjoyed being around humans with a few notable exceptions. Actually, I wasn’t sure if he even enjoyed it then, or just tolerated it out of necessity.

“I’m not Ichor, and I’m sure as hell not Sarah,” Chase said, folding his arms in agitation. “You’re not even bi. Why the hell would any of you be jealous? Aside from Alex, who only wants anything to do with me when I hate him.”

I winced. He wasn’t wrong, though.

“It’s not a choice, it’s instinct,” Cyrus answered calmly. “The four of us are bound together in our devotion, and that naturally extends to the vessel as well. Granted, Ichor was supposed to be the prominent consciousness, but the instincts are the same.” He glanced over at me. “I’m sure even Sam has felt it by now.”

Now it was my turn in the hot seat. Thanks, Cy. I cleared my throat, trying to come up with an answer that wouldn’t give me away or enrage Chase. Easier said than done.

“I’ve felt... something, yeah,” I finally said, choosing my words carefully.

Chase frowned, looking at me like I’d lost my mind, which was pretty much what I’d been afraid of. Whatever he was thinking, he brushed it off and turned back to Cyrus. “And if I refuse?”

The troubled shift in Cyrus’s demeanor alarmed even me. “That would result in complications.”

Chase gave him a disgusted look I couldn’t really fault him for. All of this was beyond fucked up. I’d been normal long enough to know that, even

though sometimes I got the feeling the twins were more at home in this twisted world than the mundane one.

“I’m sorry,” Cyrus said quietly. To my surprise, he actually sounded like he meant it. “I had hoped to ease you into things. I thought we had more time.”

“That’s why you’ve been acting like that?” Chase demanded. I couldn’t tell if he sounded hurt or pissed. Maybe both. “You were just trying to get in my pants for your stupid cult thing.”

“That’s not true,” said Cyrus. “I’m not going to pretend my motivation has nothing to do with being a paladin, but regardless of why, I am drawn to you.” He reached out and stroked Chase’s jawline. To my amazement and irritation, Chase didn’t push him away. Cyrus’s thumb swept across Chase’s bottom lip, eliciting a trembling breath as Chase stared up at him. The rabbit was caught in the wolf’s trap. He just didn’t know it yet. “I exist for you. We all do. Tending to you, fulfilling your needs, is the greatest pleasure our kind can know.”

Chase’s heart was pounding so hard even I could hear it. Cyrus’s words were making me uncomfortable, not only because of this new irrational jealousy that had sprung up within me, but because he was right. I had been ignoring my feelings for Chase for long enough that I thought I was immune, but whatever pheromone or energetic signature was at play now that he was in heat, it had only amplified and unleashed what was already there.

I thought Cyrus was going to kiss him for a minute, and figured I would find out just how far that whole sharing thing really went. I knew we had shared lovers in the past, but that was another lifetime ago, and maybe I wasn’t such a contradictory bastard back then.

Instead, Chase turned his head away at the last moment, hugging his arms to his bare chest. “What about Sarah?”

A conflicted look came over the other vampire’s face, and he paused for a while before answering. It helped that he always did, so when he actually needed time to think, he had it. “Sarah was a false vessel. Ichor has chosen you, and so I belong to you both, body and mind. We all do.”

Chase gulped, moving back until the headboard stopped him. He looked more like a deer in headlights than a rabbit at the moment. Cyrus's words were having an equal effect on me, but for an entirely different reason.

Did he really mean what he said about Sarah, or was he just bullshitting to get what he wanted from Chase? I didn't doubt he was experiencing some semblance of the same magnetic pull I had felt ever since Chase's heat began, but the idea of him toying with my best friend's feelings pissed me off more than anything.

The stakes were too high to argue and risk undoing all the progress he'd made now, though. I had to admit, Cyrus was better at the whole seduction and reason thing than I was, and the most important thing was restoring the energy Chase had lost binding Cameron. I could deal with Cyrus one on one later.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

CHASE

I *belong to you both, body and mind.*

Meaningless words from a man I couldn't trust to give me the time of day, but they stirred the hunger within me all the same.

It seemed the heat was literal, since the only relief I got from the fire under my skin was when I was in physical contact with one of them. With each second that passed, it was getting harder to resist the urge to fall into Cyrus's arms, like that was my natural state and anything else was an unnatural contortion.

"If we do this," I began carefully, unable to look either of them in the eye, "it doesn't mean anything. It's just pragmatic."

"If that's what you want," said Cyrus.

"It is," I said firmly.

When I looked up, Cyrus was already pulling his shirt off, which was more enthusiasm than I'd ever seen him show about anything other than ritual sacrifice. The sight of his bare torso did away with the rest of my shame-induced hesitation. A small space formed between my teeth, but I managed to keep my mouth from falling open entirely. Not that I was hiding my shock well, if the glimmer in his eye was any indication.

Oh, what the hell—the guy knew he was attractive, to say the least. Pretending otherwise wasn't going to make this any less awkward, so I might as well enjoy it.

Cyrus's arm wound around my waist, and he pulled me flush against his muscular chest hard enough that a rush of breath escaped me. Before I could take another, his lips met mine with unexpected force. One hand slipped into my hair, and the other stroked along my spine, making me gasp. He took the opportunity to slip his silken tongue into my mouth, and all I could do was open wider as he explored every crevice.

I'd never been kissed like that, and I found myself kissing him back without a second thought. Or a first. It was kind of hard to keep hold of any train of thought when my head was spinning and his hands were groping me with all the vigor of a young lover and all the seasoned expertise of what he was. My mouth was literally watering, even though I had always figured that was just an expression, and that had sure as hell never happened with Alex.

He pulled away suddenly and tore the sheet off my naked body. I didn't even have the time to feel self-conscious before he covered my body with his, pinning my wrists to the mattress before he dove in for another dizzying, mind-melting kiss.

Cyrus's knee slipped between my thighs, pushing them apart as he lowered himself even further, grinding against me. The friction finished the job of getting me hard, and there was no hiding it. That was obviously the aim, though. He broke the kiss and started sucking on my throat. The light nips on my flesh should've put me on edge, but all I could feel was one surge of pleasure after another as he worked his way down my chest.

His tongue flicked against my nipple, pebbling the sensitive flesh. My hands were still pinned, so I could only squirm so much until he shifted his grasp down to my hips instead.

Before I could fully process what was happening, Cyrus had my cock in his hand and the crown in his mouth, sucking at it as hungrily as he had at my neck.

"Fuck! Cyrus, what the hell?"

He lifted his head, his eyes glazed with confusion and something else that was harder to process. "What, is that not how you like it?"

My already heated skin grew flushed with embarrassment I'd been too distracted to notice until that moment, but the sight of him between my legs, his full lips glistening with my precome, jarred me out of it.

I propped myself up on my elbows, too dizzy to do much else. "It's not that. I've never... I don't..." I trailed off when I realized I didn't actually know what my objection was. I'd expected him to just climb on top of me and shove it in, or maybe finger me first, since he seemed more considerate than Alex. Definitely not this.

He raised an eyebrow. "You mean you haven't done this before?"

My face grew unbearably hot, and all I could do was purse my lips. I'd sucked Alex off plenty of times, but he'd never offered to do the same, and I was too awkward to ask.

"That's pretty lame, even for Alex," Sam muttered.

I'd forgotten he was there until that moment, somehow, but when I tried to squirm away from Cyrus, Sam grabbed my wrists and pinned them like the vampire had just done. His dark hair hung down around his face as he looked down at me with a crooked smile on his lips that made my heart thump wildly. It was probably just the heat, but I was seeing him from a new angle in more ways than one.

"I'm sure we can fix that," he said with a wink only he could pull off without coming off like either a total creep or a cheeseball.

Okay, so it was still cheesy, but that was also part of his charm, so it worked for him. Even I could admit that.

"I'm sure we can," Cyrus agreed, tracing his finger over the slit of my cock where his tongue had been teasing seconds earlier. "Grab the bottle in my nightstand drawer, would you?"

Sam released me and left to do what he'd asked. Meanwhile, Cyrus pushed his fingers into my cleft, and started circling the tight ring of muscles.

"Huh," he said.

My body went rigid, and I could practically hear the record scratch in my imagination out loud. That was not something you wanted to hear from the guy getting ready to finger your asshole. “What?” I hissed.

“Nothing,” Cyrus said quickly. “You’re just slick already.”

“I’m what?” I asked, sitting up on my elbows to stare at him between my legs, wishing he was anywhere else.

Cyrus held up his hand, his fingers wet with something that looked like lubricant, clear and slick. I stared blankly for a few seconds while my brain short-circuited, but he just looked curious. Like I was a science project yielding some unexpected results.

“What the fuck is that?” I cried, torn between horror and mortification.

“Some sort of natural lubricant,” he answered, rubbing it between his fingers. “Must be a side effect of the heat.”

“Shouldn’t you know?” I pressed.

“I’ve never been with a male vessel,” he answered. “I guess it makes sense, though. The entire point of a heat is to prompt physical and psychological changes that lead to as much energy collection as possible. You become desperate for sex and blood, and everything that happens is just nature trying to take its course.”

“There is nothing natural about that,” I hissed, folding my legs in front of me for what little modesty that afforded.

Cyrus blinked slowly, as if he didn’t understand what the problem was.

“He’s right,” Sam said, sounding like he’d already come to terms with this clusterfuck way too quickly. “It’s not a big deal.”

“That’s easy for you to say!” I snapped.

At least now I knew why I was practically drooling, and it wasn’t just because Cyrus was melting my brain. It was heat. Somehow, that was less upsetting. Marginally.

“It’ll certainly make tending to your heat easier,” Cyrus remarked. He had a devilish look in his eyes, as if he was planning out everything he was about to do to me. The thought alone turned me on, as much as I didn’t want it to. “Lie down, Chase.”

The sound of my name in Cyrus’s gentle yet commanding voice was screwing with my head. It was like a switch had flipped, and my automatic response had gone from doing the opposite of whatever he told me to obeying. I didn’t think it was just the heat overpowering me, either. It pissed me off, but it was a distraction from my humiliation, at least. As I lay back, my head fell into Sam’s lap before it could hit the mattress, and he slipped his fingers into my hair, stroking tenderly.

“It’s working already,” Sam murmured, his voice husky and full of intrigue. “That didn’t take much.”

“He’s neglected, what do you expect?” Cyrus answered, slipping his lubricated fingers deeper into my ass. They were carrying on their own conversation once more, discussing my body and the reactions they elicited so easily with a casualness that was at once calming and infuriating. I felt like I’d been abducted by aliens, poking and prodding and experimenting with the different responses of my body.

To be fair, I had checked out the moment Sam started petting my hair. I’d never had that kind of response to anyone’s touch before, not even Alex’s, but every caress seemed to strum some sacred chord within me, its vibrations spreading out through my oversensitive body. It felt as good as what Cyrus had been doing a moment earlier, at least until he pushed his fingers in slowly but without warning.

I gasped, tensing up instinctively, but Cyrus had his left forearm stretched across my hips, pressing down just above the base of my cock so I couldn’t move much. Sam’s right hand left the nest of my hair and traveled down to my nipple, absently rubbing it between his thumb and forefinger. The touch sent another wave of relaxation through me, allowing Cyrus to work his fingers in up to the last knuckles, like they had somehow coordinated their efforts well in advance without even needing to discuss it.

And as long as they kept going, I really didn’t care.

“Damn, he’s tight.” So was Cyrus's voice, and the notes of approval in it hit my ears like a song. “Alex really has been slacking.”

The mention of my ex’s name was enough to allow anger to peek through the pleasure, and without realizing it, a growl of frustration escaped me. My hands were already on Sam’s arms, clawing desperately at him as he teased my sensitive flesh.

Cyrus gave a husky chuckle that chased away any emotion or thought that wasn’t pure, burning lust. “All right, point taken. You’ll have forgotten all about him anyway by the time we’re done with you.”

I shivered again and tried to speak, but all that would come out was a needy whimper as Cyrus went back to sucking my cock, simultaneously fingering my ass in a scissoring motion. When he suddenly crooked his fingers into my prostate, I cried out in response to the burst of pleasure deep within my core.

He finally withdrew his fingers, but the sight of him stroking his monster cock—literally, since he was a bloodsucking vampire and all—was more than consolation enough. I forgot how to breathe again. His member was long and thick enough that even though he was fully erect, the weight of it kept it from sticking straight out. He caught me watching him, and a sexy smile tugged at his lips.

“Like what you see, pet?” Cyrus asked in a smug tone that would have come off as prickish from anyone else.

I had already sat up without really thinking about it, and found myself crawling toward him on my hands and knees. The surprise in his gaze made my mouth water even more, but before I completely lost my mind to the cock-thirsty whore I’d apparently become, I at least remembered the one useful thing I’d learned in health class. It helped that the teacher had collectively ruined bananas for all of us. That kind of thing stuck with you.

“You have condoms, right?” I asked.

They exchanged a weird glance, like I’d just asked if they had sex tubas or something.

“What? Vampires don’t wrap it up?” I asked dryly. “Because I don’t buy the ‘no sensitivity’ bullshit.”

“It’s not that,” Cyrus said with a soft laugh. “Some tantra can be transferred through any direct sexual contact, but semen is the primary source.”

“So you have to fill me with your magic vampire come,” I said flatly. “For the good of the world.”

Cyrus winced a little, like the words hurt to hear. “Must you always be so...?”

“Obscene?” Sam offered, suddenly right behind me. When had he taken off his shirt? “Yeah, he talks like a sailor from Beverly Hills, but he’s a shy little kitten underneath.”

I glared at him over my shoulder, but he just came around and kissed the other side of my neck. It was startling, but if he’d wanted to distract me, he succeeded. It wasn’t even just the relief from the heat that was affecting me now. Every touch, every kiss, every accidental brush of flesh against flesh was pure ecstasy. I wasn’t sure if it was the tantra they were talking about, or just the fact that it had been so long since I’d been touched, but I wanted more.

“I can see that,” Cyrus said, closing the distance between us so they had me surrounded on both sides. When he stroked a cluster of fallen curls behind my ear, the tingling left behind wherever his fingers had been left no room for doubt. I’d wondered how I was supposed to feed from sex, but it was already happening without even trying.

Might as well go all the way. I ran my hands down Cyrus’s chest and let my fingers trail greedily over the cut of his hips. His eyes darkened with curiosity as I bent down and took his cock into my mouth. His breath hitched and his hands found my hair again as I sucked gently on the crown, swirling my tongue around it in a clockwise motion.

The thrill of pleasuring a new lover when I’d only ever been with one man before compounded with the soft tendrils of energy that flowed into me. I sucked harder and realized the tantalizing taste on my tongue wasn’t just his arousal, which was alluring enough, but the tinge of magical energy. It was

easy to recognize now that I had some practice, and whatever beast within me thirsted for tantra, it roared to life at that first taste.

“Good boy,” Cyrus purred, his hand cradling the back of my head, gently guiding it up and down as I sucked his cock. He stopped breathing whenever I focused on the crown, so I paid it extra attention, sucking and laving in alternation.

The salty taste of his precome on my tongue was just as addictive as his blood, and equally arousing. I wasn’t sure how vampires enjoyed blowjobs when those instincts were always crossed, but fortunately, I was fully sated on blood and ravenous solely for the energy pouring into me with every throb of his pulse against my tongue.

I’d sucked Alex off before, even when I wasn’t really into it, but this was different. It wasn’t just my boyfriend stuffing his cock down my throat and thrusting until he came. It was raw and sensual, rough and soft. Sex had always been something I did to please Alex, just another of my many attempts to keep him satisfied and fulfilled in our relationship. I enjoyed making him feel good, but that was pretty much the extent of what I got out of it. I’d never imagined the act of giving head itself could actually be pleasurable. Blindingly so.

I stole a glance up at Cyrus as I ran my tongue up the underside of his throbbing member and the sight alone would’ve been enough to get me hard, if I wasn’t already painfully so. His eyes were dark and filled with the natural complement to the thirst that swirled within me, demanding satiation.

“Fuck,” Sam muttered under his breath, resting a hand on my ass. Normally, the fact that he was getting a view like that would have made me cringe, but my body responded to his touch with such bliss that it was hard to remember this was anything other than natural. The comfort that came with the gradual energy transfer made it feel like we’d done this a thousand times before, and yet, it also felt like the first time I’d done anything with anyone.

As I sucked Cyrus’s cock, Sam kept groping me, tentative only for a moment before he started to spread me open. I gave a startled cry against

Cyrus's cock as I felt Sam's tongue flicker against my hole, and Cyrus fisted my hair even harder, a groan of pure, animalistic pleasure rumbling from his chest. He was all the way at the back of my throat now, but who needed oxygen, anyway?

Sam kept working his tongue in like Cyrus had done with his fingers, rimming me like he ate ass for dinner. I'd definitely never done that, and didn't think I ever would, but it felt too fucking good to hold myself to sexual mores I couldn't even remember the point of, anyway. When he reached between my legs to stroke my cock at the same time, my cries became more desperate.

His tongue disappeared, and he released my cock just on the verge of the climax it felt like my life depended on. When I felt him positioning himself behind me, settling his hands on my hips, the need spiked. He spread me open again, just like he'd done before inserting his tongue, but I was so not prepared for the size of the cock that pushed against my entrance.

Damn, Sammy, I thought, since Cyrus's cock was buried too far down my throat to do more than moan and whimper in pain as Sam thrust into me in one sharp movement. He hadn't applied any extra lube, so that shouldn't even have been possible, but Cyrus was apparently right. My new magical augmentations were practical, if unnerving. Sam stroked my spine like that was somehow consolation and started thrusting with the same entitlement Alex had always taken into the bedroom. The difference was that he found my spot in two thrusts, and from that point on, the pain was just an afterthought.

"Still think you're gonna have trouble adjusting to the new vessel, Sam?" Cyrus asked in a knowing tone, his fingers sweeping along my jaw in approval as he pulled out enough for me to start licking up the underside of his cock, tracing the jagged line of the vein running along it.

"Oh, shut up," Sam muttered, thrusting into me harder, already breathless from the exertion. His touch was so gentle in contrast as he continued stroking me, his fingertips featherlight on my skin as if he was enjoying the sensation as much as I was.

Sure, I wouldn't be able to look at him the same way—if at all, ever again—but in that moment, it was totally worth the future awkwardness.

Cyrus's grip on my hair tightened, and he growled again, a sound I found way sexier than I should have. I took that as an invitation to take him back into my mouth until he hit the back of my throat. He tensed up and muttered a curse under his breath in what sounded like French as he came.

I'd never really liked swallowing, it was just something I did out of obligation, but I wanted him come as badly as everything else about him. I drank him down, and when he'd pulsed his last stream down my throat, I licked his shaft clean of every last drop until he gently tugged me away.

Every cell in my body felt like it was surging with power just as before, except now there was only rapture. Sam's blissed-out groan brought me back down from the high in time to enjoy the next gentle climb upward. With my hands free, I propped them both on the mattress in front of me and arched my spine as Sam fucked me like he owned me.

And fuck, in that moment, he did. I never thought I'd end up crying his name in the throes of ecstasy, but there was a lot about my life that hadn't turned out the way I'd planned. What was one more night?

What I really wasn't expecting, by any stretch of the imagination, was for Sam to whisper my name against my ear, his body arched over mine as he ground into me. Guess he was already vampiric in his own right, because his teeth sank into my neck just shy of breaking the skin, and he gave a low growl as he came inside me.

The second rush of pleasure and power was enough to push me over the edge, but Sam's hand finished the job. I'd never been that in sync before with anyone, but I guess there was a first time for everything.

At some point between sucking Cyrus's cock and Sam fucking me into the mattress, I'd ended up more on my stomach than my hands and knees, which was good since I didn't think I could support myself anyway. My arms and legs felt like jelly, and electricity crackled over my skin as the power settled in.

“Fuck,” Sam breathed, pulling out with far more gentleness than he’d shown going in. “That was amazing.”

“That was fun to watch,” Cyrus purred, giving my side a languid stroke. “How do you feel, pet?”

So that wasn’t just a one-time nickname. I could get used to that. It took me a second to catch my breath enough to answer, but when I did, I still wasn’t sure there was a word to describe it.

“Okay,” I finally said, since neither of them needed more encouragement in the cocky department. When I looked up, Sam was giving me a halfhearted scowl, still clearly spent from what we’d just done.

“O-k-a-y, or just o-k?” he asked dryly.

I stretched out like a cat, a smile tugging at my lips as I slipped into post-coital euphoria. “Just o-k, but no period.”

“Well, that won’t do,” Cyrus said, stretching out at my side. “Let’s see if we can upgrade that to ‘good.’”

“And then we’ll go from there,” Sam said, his breath tickling the back of my neck as he lay behind me.

I shivered involuntarily. Man, they made one hell of a team.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE

CHASE

"What the fuck?"

I hadn't awoken to the sound of Alex's voice in a while, and I really didn't miss it. That morning, it greeted me like a piercing siren. Somehow, I'd ended up with a sex hangover that was just beginning.

Sam moaned drowsily beside me, pressed up against my back with an arm draped over my hip. Cyrus was on my other side, and when I opened my eyes, he was already awake. I wasn't sure if it was Alex's intrusion, or if he just woke up looking alert and perfect like a total dick. Maybe both. I'd fallen asleep with my head on his chest, and woke up in the same position, my leg draped over his thigh.

Somehow, the cuddling felt even more intimate than what we'd done the night before, but maybe that was just the ritual feeding frenzy talking. Back to the real world.

"Calm down," Cyrus said, sitting up once I lifted my head off his chest. He didn't seem bothered by getting caught in bed with another guy, so Ichor must've been right about the whole "transcending bond" thing.

"I'll calm down when you tell me why the fuck you're in bed with my boyfriend while I've been stuck downstairs catsitting," Alex snapped.

"You knew he had to feed," Cyrus reasoned.

"Yeah, and I thought I'd at least be part of the process."

“No idea why you thought that,” Sam scoffed. “But I can see why you wanted first dibs, so he wouldn’t have anything else to compare it to.”

Alex’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

I groaned, sitting up to rub my eyes. “It’s too damn early for this,” I said, gathering the sheet around me before I climbed out of bed. “I’m taking a shower. By the time I get out, everyone needs to be less loud.”

Cyrus chuckled as I closed the door, locking it just in case any of them got any ideas. I wasn’t in the fragile state I’d been in last night. Nowhere near it. The high had settled in a little with the tantra, and this novel hunger was still gnawing at me, but not with the same sharp teeth as before.

My abused ass aside, I felt... good.

Better than I had in a long time, actually. I turned the shower on at full heat and moaned in bliss as the massager’s head beat my aching muscles into submission. I took my time, since I really didn’t feel like tuning in to the argument I could still hear through the thick walls, even if it was muffled.

When it ceased altogether, I became suspicious enough to bring the watery bliss to an end. I grabbed the towel hanging on the hook next to the shower and wrapped it around me before climbing out, so startled to find I wasn’t alone that my foot slipped on a puddle of water and I almost bagged.

Cyrus caught me, moving too swiftly for my mind to process it, but I was far from grateful as I looked up at him.

“I’d ask if you’re trying to kill me, but that’s really a given, isn’t it?” I asked, my hands finding his chest instinctively. The droplets of water clinging to my fingertips soaked into the fabric of his shirt. Sam was dressed, too, lingering by the bathroom door.

“We didn’t mean to startle you,” Cyrus said, letting me go once my feet were on solid ground. “

“You do know locks exist for a reason, right? Because in case you forgot in your old age, generally, when a door is locked, it’s because someone wants to keep you out.”

Cyrus gave me a lopsided grin that made it way too easy to forget I was pissed. “Given the way we found you last night, I’m sure you can understand why we’d be concerned about leaving you alone for too long.”

I just huffed, looking past him to Alex, who was standing in the doorway looking as if I’d just kicked him. “What were you guys arguing about, anyway?”

“Not arguing,” Sam corrected. “Just talking about how bad Alex is at sex.”

Alex gave him a seething glare I thought was going to turn into a deathmatch right then.

I covered my mouth to muffle a laugh, but I didn’t try all that hard. “Well, whatever was wrong with me last night, I’m fine now, so I think I’m just gonna go back to my room.”

Sam and Cyrus exchanged a look. Sometimes I thought *they* were the twins.

“That’s not really how this works,” said Sam.

I folded my arms over my chest, partly to keep the towel on. “What do you mean that’s not how this works?”

“You’re not out of heat,” Cyrus explained.

I grimaced. “Do we have to call it that?”

“Need, then,” he offered. “The vessel typically stays in the nest for the duration, so her paladins can attend to her.”

I raised an eyebrow, but it took him a second. “Or his,” he added with an apologetic grimace.

I just sighed. “Nest? Really? I’m not a bird.”

“Den, if you'd prefer,” said Alex.

I looked up sharply. “We’ve been over this. You are not a part of this discussion.”

“Come on, you really want to be limited to two straight dudes?” he asked flatly, still blocking my way out.

I shoved past him a little harder than I probably needed to. “I’d let that quadrupedal meat grinder in the basement fuck me before I let you come anywhere near me ever again,” I informed him, sorting through the closet to find something to wear that was light enough not to be torture on my skin. The heat was barely noticeable, but it was getting stronger again. I hadn’t been able to feel it at all a moment earlier, but that could have just been the hot water.

As much as I hated to admit it, they were right. This was far from over.

I thought about making at least Alex leave before I got dressed, but you know what? He could suffer. It would be a little reminder of what he was missing.

“Speaking of which, how’s Cameron doing?” I asked, letting my towel drop once I’d selected a thin white top I could leave open and tight, distressed black shorts. I slipped them on along with a pair of briefs, and I was still buttoning them up when I realized they had not only had the desired effect on Alex, but Sam and Cyrus as well.

All three of the idiots were crammed into the doorway, gawking. It was bizarre seeing that look on Sam’s face, kind of flattering seeing it on Cyrus’s, and downright enraging on Alex’s.

“What?” I asked, propping a hand on my hip.

Cyrus cleared his throat and looked away. “Cameron’s fine. He’s still... affected, but he’ll come out of it soon.”

I leaned back against the wall, folding my arms over my chest and leaving the robe open. Alex was still ogling, but Sam had taken a sudden interest in a chip of paint on the light switch cover.

“Shouldn’t someone be down there with him?”

Sam and Cyrus looked pointedly at Alex, who cried, “I’ve been with him for twelve hours! It’s someone else’s turn. Besides, I don’t know what I’m supposed to do if he gets loose.”

“I’ll go,” Cyrus sighed, looking back at me with a familiar glint in his eyes that made me feel way too flustered. “That way, I can spend the night with

you.”

“Yeah, whatever,” I mumbled. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see him smirking. When I turned around, he was gone.

And now I was alone with Sam and Alex. I decided to just ignore them and started making the bed. They both sprang to life, finishing the task for me.

Hmm. This, I could get used to.

“Can I get you anything?” Sam asked, looking at me with those big, innocent puppy eyes, like he wasn't a homicidal dickhead. Or at least an accessory to them.

“I wouldn't mind a sangria,” I said, sitting back against the headboard. Might as well see how far this could go.

He hesitated. “You're uh, not supposed to have alcohol. That was in the handbook.”

“The handbook?” I echoed. “Are you telling me there's a fucking handbook for this?”

“Well, that's what I call it,” he said sheepishly. “Cameron put it together a while back. Said it was easier than explaining everything each time we came back from the dead.”

Came back. Sometimes it was easy to forget that shit was more than just some religious myth. It was as real as Cameron and Cyrus being near-immortal vampires.

“And why exactly does your handbook say I can't drink?”

“It's about purification. Your body needs as much help processing the tantra as possible,” Alex explained. “Your job is just to relax, drink as much blood as you feel like, and let us pleasure you.”

I raised an eyebrow. “First time for everything, I guess.”

Sam snorted another laugh. Alex just glared at him.

“Are you thirsty?” Alex asked. “You obviously don't have a problem with my blood.”

I paused to consider it since I was admittedly thirsty, and if someone had to bleed, I'd slightly prefer it to be Alex. "It's fine, I guess."

He frowned, but he walked over to sit next to me, unfastening the top button of his shirt.

"I'd rather drink from your wrist," I told him. Less intimate.

The look in his eyes made it clear he knew why, but he was smart enough not to argue. He just sighed and rolled up his sleeve. The sound of his heartbeat grew louder as my hearing sharpened, like a camera refocusing, and I licked my lips in anticipation as I knelt forward. I took his arm and felt my fangs lengthen without even having to do it consciously. I bit into his wrist, and the moment his blood flowed over my tongue, I forgot about my hatred, even if it was only for the moment.

His breath hitched, but to his credit, he didn't whine about it like I'd expected, since this was the first time I was feeding from him without compelling him. My grip on his arm tightened as I kept feeding, and I was too deep in bloodlust to really react when he started stroking my hair.

"Good boy," he said. I found those words more infuriating than soothing when they were coming out of his mouth. Just not enough to break away.

Once I'd had my fill of blood, I pulled away, but satiating one kind of thirst had unleashed another. Without even realizing it, I had placed my hands on Alex's shoulders, my fingertips digging into his hard muscle. His eyes lit up with surprise that turned immediately to lust. I knew that expression well enough, even if it no longer meant what it once had.

I kissed him because it seemed like a natural extension of feeding from him, and I now craved tantra with as much veracity as I craved blood. The first tendrils of it wove around me and sank into my skin as he returned the kiss, wrapping his arms around me.

He rolled us both so that he was on top of me, his hair falling into his eyes as he looked down at me. "God, you're hot," he muttered under his breath, his hands traveling down my chest. He'd touched me a thousand times before, but never like this. He'd never looked at me like this, either, his eyes

dark with passion and insatiable hunger, like I was the thing he'd always desired most.

It was enough to jar me out of my lust-fueled haze, and I pushed him off me. The confusion on his face should have pissed me off, but I was too hurt to be as angry as I wanted to be.

At least it had dulled the heat, for the moment.

"What's wrong?" he asked as I moved as far from him as the bed would allow, pulling my shirt closed.

"Everything," I snapped. I wasn't sure if it was whatever hormonal fluctuations heat had sparked, or if it was just part of the ebbing and flowing moments of realization that had followed my murder, but either way, seeing him look at me like that had triggered a mood swing from hell. And Alex had never been very good at dealing with the old-fashioned kind to begin with.

Without me noticing, Sam had climbed into the bed on my other side, and while his hands on my shoulders made me tense up at first, I slowly began to relax as he massaged the tension out of my muscles. His hands were so strong that it hurt when he dug his fingers in, but it felt good.

"Forget about him," Sam purred in my ear before kissing my neck. His teeth grazed my flesh, and my head dropped back against his shoulder automatically.

I couldn't believe my body was responding like this to him, of all people, but it was better than letting Alex claim what I could hardly even manage to give away to him before. His sudden interest just added insult to injury.

Sam started doing this thing with his tongue behind my ear and I stopped caring about... anything, really. I certainly didn't notice he was peeling my shirt off my shoulders until his left hand started roaming my chest, his right fisted in my hair to keep my neck fully exposed to him. When he started rolling my nipple between his fingers, I came undone. He'd learned that little trick way too fast.

By the time he had me on my back, his athletic body poised over mine, I had pretty much forgotten Alex, so he'd made good on that promise. The

more we touched, the less weird it became that I was touching my best friend. And it helped that he really wasn't that, not anymore. The way his energy "tasted" helped, too. It was addictive. Sweeter and milder than Cyrus's bold yet intoxicating energy; different, but just as satisfying.

He was already unbuttoning my shorts, and the look in his eyes was confirmation they had achieved their purpose in tormenting him. "You know, it would be easier if you just didn't wear clothes."

"Who said I was easy?" I taunted.

Sam gave me that crooked boy-next-door grin, and the moment there were no clothes left between us, I took him back into my arms and he settled between my legs. He bent to kiss me again, but it wasn't long before I felt the vibrations of a growl against my lips. He broke the kiss and looked up, his eyes flashing with a hardness I wouldn't have thought him capable of.

Well. Not before.

"If you want to watch, sit the fuck down instead of looming like a creep," Sam said, jerking his head toward the chair in the corner of the room.

Oh, shit. Alex. I really had forgotten he was there.

As opposed as I was to the idea of him getting anything out of this, it was kind of poetic justice to make him watch Sam fuck me like he never had.

"Yeah, Alex," I said, tilting my head back enough to see him standing there with a murderous glare. "Feel free to watch. Maybe you'll pick up a few pointers for the next moron who comes along."

Sam gave a throaty laugh as he pushed my thighs apart. My cock grew painfully stiff again as he positioned himself at my entrance. Whatever weird changes my body was going through definitely made sex more convenient if I was going to be this horny all the time.

Hell, maybe I was easy these days, but what had being a virtuous little virgin ever gotten me?

Oh, right. Dead.

Sam pushed two slick fingers inside me and smirked at my whimper of protest. “No matter what you think right now, you need the prep.”

I bit down on my bottom lip to stifle another pathetic sound, but I couldn’t stop my back from arching as he hit my prostate.

Damn, he was good at that.

I was deep enough in heat that even the pain registered to my brain as pleasant, and something to demand more of. When I started bucking against his hand, Sam said in a husky voice, “Okay, fine. But if you tear, don’t blame me.”

“Just shut up and fuck me,” I muttered.

Despite my desperation and the lubrication, it still hurt like hell the moment he drove into me. Sam silenced me with a kiss and swallowed my pain down like it was his favorite drink. He gripped my wrists to pin them, but in another of the one-eighty displays of tenderness and brutality he alternated between so well, he laced his fingers with mine instead.

I scarcely recognized the man on top of me, his eyes dark with wicked hunger and his muscular body covered in a sheen of sweat as he fucked me. I’d sure never expected him to be this dominant in bed, and I only realized then that meant I had thought about what Sam would be like in bed. Not that either of us could have imagined it would turn out like this.

I still hated him, but that somehow made it hotter. It offered a bitter edge to the sweet taste of lust, and the way he growled when I dug my fingertips into his back said he felt the same way.

“Just how vampirey are you?” I asked breathlessly, my fingers still tangled in his soft black tresses, now damp with sweat.

His lips quirked as he ground into me with a perfectly calculated lack of care. “The best way to explain it is that I have a learner’s permit.”

“Fangs?” I asked, a bit too hopefully.

He laughed, but it was a short, strained sound, and it never touched the darkness in his eyes. “Not yet. Sorry to disappoint.”

I bit my lip harder, thinking. “Bite me anyway,” I finally decided.

His brows lifted slightly. “That would hurt a lot more.”

“Well, if you’re gonna be a little bitch about it...”

His eyes flashed at the challenge and the next second, his teeth were on my neck, biting down hard enough to elicit a gasp. My body tensed up, and the involuntary squirming made what he was doing to my ass more painful than pleasurable. He was right about it hurting like a bitch, so it probably said something about me that I came from that alone. Something I really didn’t want to analyze right now.

Someone’s breath hitched, and it wasn’t Sam’s, since the vibration of his growling had never ceased against my throat. Alex must have been enjoying himself.

Good. Because this was as close as he was ever getting again, and I hoped it hurt.

“God, Chase,” Sam gasped as he finally released my throat. His eyes were no longer dark when he looked down at me. They were unmistakably tinged with red that reflected the light like nothing I’d ever seen. All I could do was stare at him in mingled fascination and fear, but he was too busy with his own climax to notice. He fucked me harder, running his tongue along the wound his teeth had torn, lapping at my blood like it was the best thing he’d ever tasted.

When he came, the pressure of him filling me with his seed and tantra pushed me over a different kind of brink. It was a full-body, soul-deep kind of shudder, and while I wasn’t sure I’d call it an orgasm, it was every bit as enjoyable.

“Sammy,” I murmured in spite of myself, tightening my grip on his hair as I pulled him close. His aggressive thrusts finally ceased, and his bloody lips were parted in breathless wonder as he gazed down at me. His eyes were more brown than red now, but the tinge was still obvious.

“I always loved when you called me that,” he said, because he was just that much of a dick.

I narrowed my eyes. “Get off.”

He gave me a quizzical look, but he pulled out with far more gentleness than he’d gone in with once again and licked the remaining blood off his lips. “Mercurial little thing, aren’t you?” he asked.

“You have no idea,” Alex said, ruining what was left of the moment.

I rolled onto my side just to flip him off, but I couldn’t bring myself to get up just yet. My entire body was pulsing with tantra, like one long, extended orgasm, and the most fucked up part was, I wasn’t even satisfied.

Not yet.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR

ALEX

When I found out Chase was back from the dead, I had been certain he wanted to kill me.

I was wrong.

He didn't just want retribution, he wanted vengeance, and he wouldn't be satisfied until he'd ripped every last shred of sanity from me. I already had a feeling, but watching him and Sam from the corner, listening to his every mewl and moan? That cinched it.

He was loving every minute of it, too.

Not that I could really blame him.

There was only so much I could take, so I was nursing a glass of scotch in the kitchen when Cyrus came upstairs from the basement.

"That was a short shift," I remarked.

Before Cyrus could answer, Cameron came up behind him and my heart stuttered even though he was walking on two feet and wearing clothes again.

"You're done already?" I asked doubtfully.

"You make it sound like I was painting a fucking landscape," Cameron muttered. His voice was so hoarse, it almost hurt to hear it. He didn't look as rough as he usually did when he came upstairs after a full moon, though.

“He shifted back not long after I took over,” said Cyrus. “I just wanted to make sure he wasn’t going to shift back at night.”

“How are we so sure he won’t?” I asked, eyeing him.

“We’re not,” Cameron said, snatching the scotch bottle from in front of me. “But I heard you were gonna need someone to tag in.”

“Speaking of which,” Cyrus said, frowning at me. “Why aren’t you with Chase?”

“Because Sam is,” I answered, polishing off the rest of my glass. “I tapped out somewhere between rounds three and five.”

Cameron grimaced, reaching over to refill my glass. “Sounds like you need this more than I do.”

“So all this time, he and Sam...?” Cyrus trailed off.

“Yep,” I muttered. “Apparently, Sam’s not so straight after all, and they have great chemistry. Who knew, right?”

The look he gave me was almost sympathetic, which was more insulting than anything.

“Someone should get up there before Sam’s cock falls off,” said Cameron.

“Sure,” I said. “Why not? Wouldn’t want there to be a dick in this house that hasn’t been inside my boyfriend.”

Cameron walked past me, patting my shoulder. “Cry me a river, pal. If anyone needs me, you know where to find me.”

I glared after him, then looked over at Cyrus when I realized he was still there. “What are you waiting for? I know you two don’t have any qualms about crossing swords.”

Cyrus rolled his eyes. “I just wanted to make sure you’re good.”

“Good?” I echoed. “I’m pretty fucking far from good, Cy. Haven’t even been in the ballpark since before the ritual.”

“He’ll come around eventually.”

“You really believe that?”

He hesitated. “Honestly, I was just trying to make you feel better. I really have no idea. But if you can’t get him when he’s in heat, it’s probably not gonna happen.”

“Thanks for the pep talk.”

“Come on,” he laughed. “I’m curious.”

“About what, exactly?” I asked, reluctantly following him up the stairs.

“You wouldn’t remember this, but the second day of a heat is always the roughest,” he said. “Yesterday was interesting enough.”

Before I could ask what the hell he meant, the sound of a snarl coming from Chase’s bedroom had me on edge. It was definitely Cameron, but it didn’t sound like he’d shifted. Pretty sure Chase would have been screaming his head off. Unless Cameron had...

Fuck.

Cyrus had the door thrown open before I could even move, but the scene inside wasn’t the bloodbath I had feared. Cameron was definitely still human, even if he had a naked and confused Sam pinned to the wall by the throat. Usually, I would have tried to intervene, but after that afternoon, Cyrus could deal with his brother.

Chase was standing up with the sheet barely wrapped around him, his curls spilling over his shoulders.

“Let him go!” Chase cried. Before he could reach for Cameron, Cyrus grabbed his wrist and pulled him back.

“Cameron?” Cyrus asked warily, keeping himself between Chase and his brother. “What’s wrong?”

“Look at his neck,” Cameron said through his teeth. I didn’t even need to see his face to know what it looked like. Sam’s was what caught me off guard. His eyes weren’t quite as red as Cyrus’s and Cameron’s, but they were sure as hell close. Nowhere near their usual honey shade.

Cyrus looked down at Chase, and while the shift in his expression was subtle, it changed the entire current of energy in the room.

“Who did this?” he demanded, his voice uncharacteristically rough as he swept Chase’s hair aside, revealing the red crescent mark that wasn’t quite a scar yet.

So that was what they were freaking out about.

“I told him to bite me,” Chase said, his voice a literal hiss.

That was new.

The lights flickering overhead, however, was far too familiar. The air felt colder, too. It might have just been my imagination, but after what I’d seen at the lodge, I wouldn’t put too much past him.

Cameron looked up and even he seemed wary, but he didn’t loosen his grip on Sam’s throat.

“He’s not even a full-fledged vampire yet,” Cameron snapped, looking back at Sam. “At least, he wasn’t.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Sam demanded, giving him a hard shove. When it actually had an effect and made Cameron stagger, everyone looked shocked. Especially Sam. He looked down at his own hands in confusion, like he had no idea how he’d just done that.

That made two of us.

“That shouldn’t be possible,” Cyrus said, staring blankly at Sam. I could count on one hand the number of times I’d seen him shocked, and so far, all of them had involved Chase, with one exception.

“Yeah, since when is Sam stronger than Cameron?” I chimed in.

Cameron glared daggers at me. “He’s not stronger, he just caught me off guard.”

“Sure,” I said, studying Sam closer. “And what’s with your eyes?”

“What about them?” Sam asked defensively.

“They’re red,” said Cyrus. “Somehow, you’re turning. Partially, at least. You really have no idea how it happened?”

I realized Sam must have bitten Chase again after I’d left, but I decided not to admit I was there the first time, since that was apparently taboo or something.

Sam shook his head slowly and looked kind of haunted. It was a lot like the expression I was sure was on my face when I’d had to watch him fucking Chase for hours on end. Then again, that kind of endurance probably counted as a vampire trait, too. He looked up at Cyrus suddenly. “The other night, Chase’s eyes were white, and you said we were ‘wrong’ about something, so maybe you’re the one who owes us an explanation.”

“Wait, he what?” I asked, bewildered. “When did this happen?”

“Just shut up for a minute and let me think,” Cyrus growled, pressing a hand to his temple.

Chase had a hand on his neck, but it had stopped bleeding a long time ago. “What do you mean, Sam’s turning?” he demanded, grabbing Cameron’s arm. “Into what?”

“What do you think, dipshit?” Cameron scoffed. “A vampire.”

Chase narrowed his eyes. “Watch it, or next time, I won’t just bind you, I’ll banish you to the Other.”

Cameron’s only response was to set his jaw in annoyed silence. I’d wondered how he was going to feel about knowing who had come to the rescue when he shifted, but Cyrus had apparently already filled him in.

“Okay, everybody just calm down,” Cyrus said, even though he seemed like the most sketched out of all of us at the moment. “There has to be a rational explanation for this. Chase, did Sam’s eyes change before or after he bit you?”

He wrinkled his nose. “After? The whole day has kind of been a blur.”

“I bet,” I muttered.

He shot me a look before turning his attention back to Cyrus. “Why does it matter?”

“It matters because it’s the difference between Sam biting you because he turned, and Sam turning because he bit you,” Cyrus answered. “Neither explanation makes any more sense than the other, but it’s a place to start.”

“How could I have done that?” Chase asked. “I’m not even a vampire.”

“No, but you are Ichor’s vessel,” said Cyrus. “I guess it’s possible your blood has the same turning agent as a vampire’s even if she hasn’t fully manifested.”

“That still wouldn’t explain it,” said Cameron. “It’s taken Alex a whole fucking year to turn.”

It was a valid point. I’d been consuming vampire blood at regular intervals for the past few months, and I was barely more than human. So was Sam, last I knew.

“So that’s how you guys do it?” Chase asked, his shock momentarily outweighed by the curiosity in his eyes as he looked between the twins.

“It’s more complicated than that, but that’s the gist of it,” said Cyrus. “It usually takes anywhere between six months to a year and a half of regularly consuming vampire blood before the final stage. Sam is only a few months in, and so far, he hasn’t shown much of a change at all.”

“So maybe it just reached critical mass,” Chase said, shrugging. “That, or my blood is super concentrated vampire juice. I still don’t see what the big deal is.”

“Of course you don’t,” Cameron said, rapping lightly on Chase’s forehead like he was knocking on a door. “You’re a Valley girl in there. It’s a miracle you managed that spell without opening up a portal to hell.”

“One more remark like that and you’re getting magically neutered,” Chase warned.

Cameron scoffed, but he backed off.

“Look, this isn’t the time to figure all this out,” Cyrus said, always playing peacemaker even though he had been the one starting shit two minutes earlier. “We’ll deal with it later. Right now, Chase is supposed to be resting and recharging.”

“I’m not a battery,” Chase mumbled.

“You kind of are,” I said, earning a look of irritation. He didn’t flip me off or threaten to kill me, though, so we were making progress.

Hopefully.

“In that case, less talking, more recharging,” Chase said, slipping his arms around Cyrus’s neck. He leaned up and pressed his lips to the vampire’s before Cyrus had the chance to respond.

Even Cyrus seemed to be easily swayed by the effects of the heat. He returned the kiss and took Chase into his arms, a wild look in his eyes when he finally pulled back. “You need more blood... Alex’s isn’t enough.”

I guessed he could smell my blood on him, which was kind of unnerving, but I was annoyed by the implication that mine was somehow subpar.

“Later,” Chase pleaded, running his hands down Cyrus’s chest. “Shower?”

Cyrus chuckled, but there was as much lust as amusement in his eyes as his gaze traveled over Chase’s body. “Go ahead and get started. I’ll be there in a minute.”

Chase gave him an innocent smile before traipsing into the bathroom.

“I’m gonna go clean up myself,” Sam mumbled, still in a dazed state as he walked out of the room.

“Are you coming or not?” Cyrus asked, looking back at Cameron.

The other vampire hesitated a moment before shrugging and following him in.

And then there was one.

At least now I knew, without a doubt, I was in my own personal hell.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE

CAMERON

“G et. Out.”

Chase stood there, brandishing a drugstore razor with more confidence than I’d seen some men show when they were holding a semiautomatic rifle. He had partially wrapped the shower curtain around himself as soon as he saw me.

“He’s the one who invited me,” I said, nodding at Cyrus. “Are you seriously trying to threaten a vampire with a Gillette?”

He looked down at the razor and seemed to think better of it, abandoning it on the ledge without letting go of the curtain. “What the hell do you want?”

“What do you think?” I challenged, walking forward before Cyrus could stop me. I grabbed the curtain and yanked it open, sneering at the look of indignation on Chase’s face. “Calm down, princess, you don’t have anything I haven’t seen before.”

His eyes flashed in rage that was way too amusing, no matter how easy it was to elicit. “Don’t you have a stack of love letters to Sarah you should be jerking off to?”

I set my jaw in irritation, not wanting to let him know he was capable of getting to me. It was annoying enough that he was.

"You're still in heat, and I assume you'd rather not be, right?" I asked, deciding to try a different strategy with him.

His eyes narrowed suspiciously. I could tell he wanted to argue just for the sake of argument. "That doesn't mean I'm desperate enough to fuck you."

I snorted. "Yeah, well, you and Sam have been going at it like rabbits all day from what I've heard, and that still hasn't worked, so you're running out of options. Unless you'd prefer Alex..."

That hit the mark. I enjoyed getting a rise out of him way too much.

"And what, you think your magic dick is going to fix it?" he challenged.

I shrugged. "More or less. I'm a full-fledged vampire, for one thing, and for another, I've been around a hell of a lot longer than those two. I know what I'm doing."

He glanced warily between me and Cyrus, and while I expected him to put up more of a fight, he just muttered something under his breath and pulled the curtain back shut. Cyrus was already stripping out of his clothes, so I did the same. It wasn't the first time we had shared a lover, but it was the first time we had shared a guy, so that was a little... weird.

Not nearly as weird as the fact that it was Chase, though. Or the fact that I was actually into it. I wanted to believe it was just the heat, but the truth was, I'd never been that easily swayed by hormones and the like. Not in years.

I walked into the shower on Chase's other side, but he had already wrapped his arms around Cyrus's neck, pulling him in for another searing kiss. I wasn't sure if it was meant to make me jealous or not, but the fact that it was kind of working was just a testament to how fucked up this whole thing had me.

Not that it stopped me from enjoying the view. Chase had a great body, I'd give him that. He was lithe and athletic, his muscles toned from years of perfecting his craft, but there was an elegance to his form as well. Something soft and tantalizing, just like the light curls stretched so heavily by the water coursing down his skin that they nearly reached the base of his spine.

A familiar possessiveness rose up within me as I watched Cyrus's hands settle on Chase's waist, his fingertips biting into the other man's flesh.

Cyrus pushed him up against the wall of the shower and a sharp gasp escaped Chase's full lips. Before he had the chance to respond, Cyrus crushed their lips together and Chase melted into his embrace.

This was such a different side of the human, and I couldn't help but be fascinated. He was usually so self-conscious even though he took great pains to appear anything but, but there were few things a human could mask without triggering my intuition. He was better at it than most, apparently, considering he had gone under my radar for months with his little revenge scheme.

Now, though... at first, Cyrus seemed to be the one in control, but when Chase finally broke the kiss and the other vampire's eyes fluttered open in a daze, I knew that to be false.

Chase's tongue flicked out across his lips, running his hands down Cyrus's bare torso. The other man just stared at him as if he was in some kind of trance, waiting for his next command. "About the blood..."

Understanding darkened Cyrus's gaze and a slow smile curved his lips. He stroked Chase's jawline and turned his head to bare his own throat. "Take all you want."

I expected Chase to hesitate, considering how appalled he had been at the idea of needing blood as sustenance in the beginning, but he didn't. He leaned up on his toes to close the height difference between them, and his fangs lengthened before he sank his teeth into Cyrus's throat. He bit down hard enough that it should have hurt even a vampire, but the way Cyrus's eyes rolled back in his head made it clear his response was more one of ecstasy.

As I watched Chase feed from him, the vague and irrational sense of jealousy became harder to ignore. Then again, blood was even more sacrosanct to vampires than sex, but I still wasn't used to feeling this way. We were paladins. Sharing was just part of the job. It came with the territory, and yet, the beast I had so recently put to bed was already clawing at my chest like Chase was its territory exclusively, and it would be willing to tear into Cyrus without a second's thought to protect its claim.

Whenever I shifted, I was aware of what happened only in the vaguest terms. This most recent time, though, had been an exception. I had still been in the background, unable to pull the beast back, but I was aware of more than I usually would have been, and even now, I remembered more of it than I should have. I'd thought its initial response to Chase was one of aggression, but now I wasn't so sure. Not with the rush of possessiveness I was currently experiencing.

I dug my fingernails into my palms, and the pain helped force it back a little. Usually, the only time I was completely safe was right after a shift, but it was clear something was off. Maybe Chase had fucked something up with his jerry-rigged binding sigil. Either way, I knew if I didn't intervene, there was a damn good chance the beast would.

They seemed to have forgotten all about my presence when I took Chase by the arm and gave him a less-than-gentle tug. He spun around to glower at me as I tore him away from Cyrus's throat, but before he could ream me out, I snatched him against me and kissed him until the acrid tang of vampire blood was on my tongue. His lips parted for me, like this was just a natural extension of the hateful little song and dance we had done a thousand times before. When I felt the surge of euphoria and lust that came with plundering his waiting mouth, I found myself wondering why we hadn't.

I would've liked to think the heat made it possible to forget how much I hated him, but it didn't. In fact, the hatred was still there, fiery as ever, and it added a shameful amount of enjoyment to the conquest. He always had sparked my temper in a way I hadn't experienced since I was human, and it seemed that effect was just as powerful on my libido.

Chase gave a strangled moan and I swallowed it down, refusing to give him a moment to breathe. My hands explored his body on their own, as if they were taking the opportunity to state the curiosity I had felt on more than one occasion. Not that it took much arguing with my conscious mind.

He seemed to be having the same problem, if the conflicted look in his vivid green eyes was any indication. He was already breathless, and the sight of those slightly parted bloodstained lips unleashed something within me that was more controlled than my beast, but no less dangerous.

I had only planned on letting him feed from my wrist, but I wasn't one to be outdone. Besides, the thought of his little fangs buried in my throat was admittedly arousing. Without a word spoken between us, he seemed to understand somehow. Maybe he had inherited more of Ichor's powers than he let on.

I gritted my teeth and swallowed down a growl of pleasure and pain as he bit me. The scent of my blood was immediately diffused in the steam, and the fact that it was drowning out Cyrus's scent made it a little easier to deal with the more possessive aspects of my response to Chase's heat.

"Fuck," I muttered, digging my fingers into his hair. It was as lush and silken as I had imagined, even in the water. His arms were wrapped around my neck as he drank eagerly, and memories I thought were long-lost resurfaced.

Memories of being human. Mortal. Of being young and hopelessly in lust with a being so far beyond the scope of my reality, I could scarcely even fathom her. Not that it had ever stopped me from loving her.

Guilt momentarily outweighed the desire, or at least eclipsed it. I wasn't supposed to feel this. Yes, he was Ichor's vessel, but that was it. For all I knew, there was no part of her consciousness that remained in him. And yet, that didn't stop me from wanting him.

He had drunk more than enough to sate his thirst, even though he didn't show any signs of stopping anytime soon on his own, and as usual, all the emotions I didn't want to feel were turning to aggression. That, I could handle. That, I could control, even if it was only by the skin of my teeth. Every last sharp, jagged one of them.

Chase's eyes widened in confusion I ignored as I pulled him away only to spin him around to face Cyrus. The other man caught him, catching on to my intentions before our prey did. Then again, we always had worked pretty well as a team. In the bedroom, at least. Outside of that, it was iffy.

Another gasp escaped Chase's lips as I leaned down to kiss the hollow of his shoulder and neck. My teeth scraped against his heated flesh as I positioned myself at his entrance. Water was hardly sufficient lubricant, but I was already leaking precome and in his current state, he was probably too

desperate to complain about it being rough. His body tensed a little as my crown slipped into his cleft, and I realized he was already slick, so Cyrus must have prepped him. While he clearly knew what I was planning, he didn't protest. Instead, he braced himself with his hands on Cyrus's shoulders as I drove into him.

His groan of mingled pain and hunger sent another surge of arousal through me, as if I needed any help in that department. Lust and self-loathing had become a toxic yet powerful combination that demanded an outlet, and I found it in the man in my arms. Somehow, it felt like less of a betrayal if I fucked him as hard as I despised myself, and he certainly wasn't complaining. Every moan and whimper was proof of his approval, even if most of them were swallowed up by Cyrus's feverish kisses.

Every now and then, our hands would meet in Chase's hair, and I yanked back a fistful of the white curls to bare Chase's throat. Cyrus's fangs sank into the human's sensitive flesh I had just revealed, and the scent of Chase's blood perfumed the room. If I wasn't already half-mad with need, that alone would've pushed me over the edge.

It had been a long damn time since I'd fucked a guy, and it was for a far less utilitarian reason than usual. Technically, I didn't even have to seduce him. He could get through the heat with the others, and I could probably find a way to live with the jealousy. Muting it would be necessary when the goddess was called back into her vessel, if nothing else, but I didn't have to do this. Not now.

And yet, I was having a hard time just keeping my barbs from coming out. Just one of those shifter features that occasionally manifested when I was in my human form, if I was particularly worked up. That hadn't happened in a long time, either. Something told me Chase wouldn't take that very well, and while that alone was incentive, I didn't want to have to face the fact that I had so little control around him.

As Chase's tight hole clenched around me, I felt his pulse thundering away against my sensitive member as the flurry of thirst and physical desire became one. Not that they had really been separated in any meaningful way since I was human.

As I came inside Chase, something so much more unforgivable than desire surged through me. The French had a euphemism for orgasm. *La petite mort*, the small death. What a fitting irony that this was the first time I'd actually felt alive in centuries.

It didn't last, of course. The moments worth remembering never did, but this one had become an indelible carving on my soul. One I would carry with me forever like a scar, a constant reminder of just how far I had fallen.

From grace. In love. I wasn't even sure it mattered anymore.

Cyrus had started stroking Chase off at some point, their tongues tangled in ecstasy. I wasn't sure if it was the tantra rush that came from my ejaculation or what Cyrus was doing to him that pushed him over the edge—maybe both—but some part of me wanted to take all the credit for that heavenly moan written in the silken sin of Chase's voice.

I pulled out before I could lose myself in him entirely, and I must've been rougher than I intended, because he stumbled a little. Cyrus caught him effortlessly, and they resumed their makeout session, seemingly forgetting I was even there.

Without a word, I washed up and got out of the shower, wrapping a towel around my waist in my haste to leave. I had been a manwhore long before seduction was a skill required for sustenance, but this was the first time I had ever felt ashamed. Not because I had just fucked my mortal enemy, or even because that experience alone had uncovered the uncomfortable truth that I was in far less control of myself and my longings than I had ever imagined. No, it was because as much as I wanted it to be a chore, it wasn't.

I had loved every fucking minute of it.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX

CHASE

I woke up in a tangle of limbs and wasn't entirely sure which of them were mine, or who the others even belonged to. I was pretty sure it was Cyrus's arm draped over me, given how heavy it was. Sam still hadn't hit his super jacked vampire growth spurt. I opened my eyes and saw his familiar dark hair, and his thigh was draped over mine, with one arm wrapped around my waist. They had me completely trapped, so there was no sneaking out of bed quietly.

Hell, I was having a hard time remembering whose bed we'd ended up in. A look around the room and all the sports shit told me it was Sam's.

"Off," I muttered when pushing him off me proved harder than expected. He was heavier than he looked. Or maybe he just seemed light in comparison to Cyrus and Cameron, but anyone would.

He mumbled something into my chest and pulled me closer. Cyrus was starting to stir behind me, but he was a solid wall of muscle I was no closer to escaping than Sam's vice grip.

Ugh. Who would've thought straight dudes were so cuddly?

I decided to try something I had been toying around with, before I ran out of juice. In retrospect, all the magical experimentation probably hadn't helped.

Oops.

I placed a hand on Sam's bare shoulder and tried to focus my intention on spreading energy into my fingertips. I still couldn't figure out how I'd done the ice wall thingy, but I had managed a wintery blast that allowed me to escape the lodge, so a little frostbite couldn't be hard.

"Ow!" he cried, sitting up sharply and rubbing his shoulder. His confusion turned to irritation when he realized I was the culprit. "What the fuck?"

"I did ask nicely the first time," I said in an innocent tone. "Kind of."

"Too early, too loud," Cyrus mumbled into my hair. For a vampire, he really didn't function well without his beauty rest.

To be fair, I had taken more blood and tantra from him than anyone. But he was still a murdering son of a bitch, so I elbowed him off and extricated myself. As I started trying to sort my clothes from the others in the pile on the floor, I realized they were both watching me.

"What?" I asked, pulling Cyrus's T-shirt on over my head since they had left the outfit I'd worn to bed in tatters during our most recent tryst. I wanted to take a shower, anyway.

"You seem like you're feeling..." Cyrus trailed off, sitting up enough that the sheet slipped down his bare torso. The fact that it was just regular hot and not mouthwatering, "instant cock whore, just add lube" hot, was a relief. Maybe the heat was finally over.

"Back to his usual hostile self?" Sam offered. He caught the pillow I lobbed at him.

I shrugged. "Yeah, well, now that the heat's over, I don't exactly feel like cuddling with psychopaths, so."

Cyrus frowned, sitting up the rest of the way to grab his jeans off the floor. "What makes you so sure it's over?"

"For one thing, my first impulse when I look at you is more stabby than swoony," I answered, folding my arms. "For another, I don't feel like my blood is on fire."

He didn't seem convinced, which ticked me off for reasons I wasn't sure of. Then he looked at Sam. "You should call the others downstairs. There are some things we need to discuss, and Cameron will be able to tell if he's out of heat or not."

I narrowed my eyes. Now the reason was becoming a bit clearer. "I'm right here, y'know. I don't need Cameron to tell me what's going on with my fucking body."

Cyrus gave me an apologetic glance, but I knew he didn't actually get it. He was subtler about it than his brother, but he still saw me as Ichor's property, and theirs by extension.

That was going to stop. Maybe a meeting was in order, after all.

By the time I had showered and gotten dressed, the others were all standing or sitting around the living room, like they had carefully calculated how to put as much space between each other as possible. Sam was leaning against the side of the piano, Alex was on the couch, Cyrus was in the opposite armchair, and Cameron was being his usual creepy self over in the corner. Now that the heat was wearing off for them, too, the awkwardness of the whole gay threesome thing was apparently setting in.

Not that I could bring myself to pity them too much. Especially not when they stopped talking as soon as I walked into the room.

Were they trying to piss me off, or was it just something that came as naturally to them as it did to Alex?

"What's wrong, guys?" I asked flatly. "Did I walk in on the planning sesh for your next moonlight ritual? Planning on sacrificing me to any other deities of bodily fluid? The god of phlegm, perhaps?"

"Yeah, I'd say he's pretty much back to normal," Cameron said in response to whatever question I'd missed. I could venture a guess. He had barely moved away from the wall when I blinked, and the second I opened my eyes, he was right there in front of me.

I stumbled back on impulse and cursed the fucker for catching me. The smirk on his lips made it clear he got a rise out of it, and apparently, it wasn't getting old for him. He looked down at me and took my chin

between his thumb and forefinger, studying me intently. His eyes were smoldering, and while I didn't feel the telltale invasion of compulsion, for all I knew, he was exercising some other weird vampire trait.

"I hear you've been playing around with magic again," he purred.

I gave Sam a withering look. "Narc."

"It wasn't him, it was me," Cyrus said, watching us with his hand propped against his cheek as he reclined in the armchair like the debonair asshole he was. "Now that you're feeling better, there are some things we need to settle."

I gave a hard shove against Cameron's chest, but he wouldn't budge. His grip around my waist tightened instead, and the dark amusement glimmering in his eyes as he looked down at me had me feeling like a mouse under a cat's paw yet again.

"In other words, it's time to rein you in," he said. He pushed me back against the wall, and he had me blocked in before I could even move. He pinned my hands above my head. "Or did you think we spent all week letting you bleed us dry so you could do your little parlor tricks?"

"That's funny, coming from you," I said, refusing to give him the reaction he wanted. The others weren't as quick to jump in as usual when he was being an ass, so it looked like I was on my own, anyway. I'd remember that. "Considering my 'parlor tricks' are the only reason you're not still a slobbering beast chained up in the basement and all."

He blew a puff of air through his nostrils. "You got lucky, but you're fully charged now, which makes you a ticking time bomb. And now it's my job to make sure you don't go off."

Before I could respond, I felt it—the push of his compulsion against the gates of my mind. I resisted instinctively, but the familiar calm washed over me, crashing down over the fire of my rage like a tidal wave. I sank back against the wall, limp in his grasp.

Fuck. It was getting harder to resist, and I didn't know if that was because Ichor wasn't there, or some weird side effect of feeding. Either way, it was

hard to mount a proper defense when I couldn't even remember why I was resisting in the first place.

What the hell was he doing? Not that I'd put it past Cameron just to compel me for the hell of it, but there had to be a reason, and the others were letting it happen. Betrayal was just a given at that point. I barely felt a twinge of disappointment for letting my guard down, and I would've been devastated before.

"Let's get this straight," he continued in a silken tone that stroked my hackles down as soon as it raised them. "You're not going to use magic without explicit permission from one of us. No self-serving spells of convenience, no tricks, and none of your petty little games. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I murmured. The more energy he pushed into me, the firmer his grip on my mind became, but then it reached the tipping point. As if some failsafe went off, triggered by the attempt at assuming absolute control, the hold he had on me shattered, and every bit of resistance and energy I'd used to push back against him broke loose along with it.

I saw the spark of alarm in Cameron's eyes as the lights flickered overhead and the floor shook, like there was an earthquake below. I didn't know what was happening, or how to stop it even if I wanted to, but for the time being, all I had was rage and a deserving outlet. The power that flung him across the room didn't come from my physical body, and it wasn't something I had any conscious control over, but I could deal with reining it in later.

Right now, it was like my vision had narrowed to a pinprick. All I could see or hear—even if I was vaguely aware of the others mounting some attempt to stop me in the background—was him.

Somehow, I ended up on top of Cameron, my hands wrapped around his throat like I'd fantasized about countless times. In reality, it was so much better. The look of dismay on his face made it all the sweeter, and the fact that my nails had lengthened into claws at some point without my realizing it was only a tangential concern in comparison to the euphoria that washed over me the moment I drew his blood. The blood wasn't enough, though. It was the taste of fear that left me wanting more. Craving it.

“What’s the matter, Cameron?” I taunted in a voice that didn’t sound like my own, even if it didn’t have the same raspy quality it took on when Ichor was in the driver’s seat. There was part of me that wanted to believe someone else was in control, but the truth was, even though I had no idea how I was doing what I’d done, I knew deep down I could stop it if I really wanted to. I just didn’t. “You don’t like switching things up?”

He grabbed my wrists as if to push them away, but I barely even registered his resistance. He coughed a laugh as my hands tightened around his throat, his voice hoarse as he spoke. “Sorry, but I’m just not that versatile.”

"Chase, that's enough," Cyrus said in a scolding tone, behind me all of a sudden. He took me by the arm and pulled me off his brother, but I yanked out of his grasp.

"Don't touch me!"

"Just calm down," he said, holding up his hands. "You're going to hurt yourself."

"*Him?*" Cameron cried, getting back to his feet. "Who just got choked out by an angry gremlin?"

"You're right," Cyrus said in a mocking tone. "Are you feeling okay? Would you like a Band-Aid?"

"Oh, fuck off."

"Don't start fighting each other before I'm finished fighting with both of you!" I hissed, turning back to Cameron. "If anyone needs to calm down, it's him."

He raised an eyebrow. "Me? I’m not the one who’s having a meltdown. Nice job, by the way. I just won a bet thanks to you."

I eyed him warily, feeling the chaotic energy recede back into my fingertips. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Compelling you?" he asked, as if it should be obvious. "The easiest way to get you to flip the switch and lose control."

"You son of a bitch," I seethed. "This was a test?" Somehow, I was more incensed by the prospect of that than another betrayal. I had to admit, if they were trying to set me off, Cameron was the best pick for the job.

"Something like that," he said with a shrug. "Cyrus was of the opinion you could be trusted with a little more freedom, and I disagreed. Looks like you proved me right, by the way."

"I was on your side, FYI," Alex said, raising his hand.

All three of us turned to him and snapped, "Shut up."

I glared at the twins. I really didn't want to be a part of their whole psychic bond thing. Another growl welled in my throat, but at least it sounded more human than eldritch abomination this time. "So you baited me into doing this just to teach me a lesson about wasting my power?"

"It's not your power," Cameron countered, standing right in front of me once again, so close I backed into the piano. "And this is proof positive you need to be put on a leash."

"Says the hellcat," I countered. "You get your werewolf period every month and turn into a thousand pounds of raw, unbridled rage, and you seriously want to tell me *I'm* out of control?"

"That's enough," said Cyrus. "Both of you."

"You're right. It is enough, and I'm done with this bullshit. With all of you," I said, turning to stalk toward the door.

"Chase, wait!" Sam called after me.

I ignored him, but I fully expected one of them to try to stop me before I reached the door. When I managed to get it open, it felt like a damn miracle, even if I was greeted by a snowy gust of wind.

Okay, so maybe I should've grabbed a coat first, but I wasn't about to let a little cold weather diminish my dramatic exit. I took a step over the threshold only to be flung back into a wall I was pretty sure was Sam.

"I tried to warn you," he murmured, setting me back on my feet.

I spun around to look at him, then the others, who were watching me in various states of concern and, in Cameron's case, schadenfreude. "You warded me in? How?"

"Sarah left some old things behind. We were hoping it wouldn't be necessary," Cyrus said in a weary tone, walking over to join us in the foyer. "Clearly I was wrong about that."

"Don't," I snapped. "Don't try to make this out to be some noble attempt to grant me freedom. Freedom you had no right to take away in the first place."

"That ceased to be true when you became Ichor's vessel," he challenged.

"Go fuck yourself, Cyrus," I said, turning toward the others. "All of you. I'd rather power down permanently than ever let any of you fucking touch me again."

I stalked up the stairs, and this time, they all had the sense not to follow me. I slammed the door and locked it, then spent the next half an hour pushing the armoire against my bedroom door. I knew it wouldn't stop them physically, but at least the prospect of breaking an antique might give Cyrus pause. He seemed like he cared about that shit.

Once I was finished, I collapsed against the massive wooden piece of furniture, barely holding back the tears stinging my eyes. Why was I even this upset? It wasn't like I had actually put it past them to compel me. To control me. It wasn't like I actually thought they saw me as a person rather than a device to be used and put away when it was convenient. Just a vessel for their precious fucking goddess. A replacement for Sarah.

I sank to the floor as I let the tears flow freely, since there was no point in stopping them. Even if they could somehow hear my quiet sniffles from downstairs, they already thought I was pathetic. Weak.

And maybe they were fucking right. Worse than anything, though, was the realization that only came on the heels of realizing that—despite everything and all my common sense—I had actually thought things were changing. At least as far as Sam and Cyrus were concerned. I thought maybe...

God, I was such an idiot. All this time, trying to convince the world there was more to me than the naïve, vapid boy they all saw, and it turned out they were right all along.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN

CYRUS

I stared up at the ceiling, listening to the sound of furniture being dragged across the room, the vibrations across the floorboards causing little chunks of plaster to fall down.

Well, that had gone about as terribly as it could have. And here I thought we were finally making progress.

"What is he doing up there, herding elephants?" Alex asked warily.

"Maybe someone should go up and check on him," said Sam.

"Don't," I said, shaking my head. "Just give him some time. He needs space right now."

"What he needs right now is discipline," Cameron countered. "He clearly doesn't possess any, and your strategy of babying him has accomplished fuck all."

"Then what would you suggest?" I asked bitterly.

"Compelling him," Cameron answered with a shrug.

"Right. Because that worked so well when I had to pull him off you five minutes ago."

Cameron rolled his eyes. "He wouldn't have gotten to the point where that was possible if you'd just let me do it from the beginning."

"You really think taking away more of his free will is going to fix things?" I challenged.

"Yes!" he cried, throwing up his hands. "If I had it my way, he wouldn't be able to form a single fucking thought without permission. Then, Ichor might have a chance at resurfacing."

"It's not that simple and you know it."

"Is it?" he pressed. "Or are you just losing sight of what's important?"

I narrowed my eyes and had him up against the wall before I even knew what I was doing. I was still high off the transfer of tantra, which was always exhilarating, even if it took its toll energetically. It also came with a surge in alpha male hormones I apparently wasn't immune to just because I was a vampire. If anything, it had only seemed to amplify those feelings—at least where all this was concerned.

Where *he* was concerned, if I was being honest with myself.

"Don't you fucking dare question my priorities," I said through my teeth. "Not when you can't even be trusted with a task as simple as compelling him for his own safety."

"His safety," Cameron scoffed. "You always did get off on white knightng. He's not her, Cyrus. You get that, right? He's not her, and there's a damn good chance he never was."

"That's bullshit," I spat. "There's no way he could know half the shit he knows, or do half the shit he does if he wasn't Ichor's vessel."

"That's all he is," Cameron said pointedly. "Her vessel. The sooner you start treating him like it, the better our chances will be of getting her back."

"You weren't saying that last night," I shot back. "Maybe you're the one who's losing sight."

Cameron grabbed my throat, shoving me back, but I kept a grip on his shoulders and pushed back. It was about to become an all-out brawl when Sam intervened.

"Hey," he bellowed, putting a hand on my shoulder. I tensed, fighting the urge to tear into him. He was still mortal enough he wouldn't come back from it like Cameron. "Come on, guys, that's enough."

I reluctantly let go of Cameron, if only so no one else would get caught in the crossfire. Besides, he was right. Fighting wasn't going to accomplish anything, and it sure as hell wasn't going to bring Ichor back.

Deep down, I knew there was a chance Cameron was right, at least in part. Maybe the chaos of the heat was fucking with my head. Maybe I was losing sight of things.

"I'm going out," I muttered, walking toward the door. Usually, it was Cameron who stormed out, but if I didn't get out of the mansion now, I didn't know what I would end up doing.

When I'd been walking a few miles and was still no closer to having a level head, I decided I might as well patrol the territory while I was at it. I was still no closer to being calm or level headed. Hell, I couldn't remember the last time I'd attacked Cameron like that.

Kicked his ass, sure, but he was usually at least the one who instigated it.

I made it all away to the territory line before I sensed it—someone was watching me. They weren't on the territory, not yet, but they were close.

I tensed, planning my next move as I turned in the direction of the intrusion. "Why don't you go ahead and come out instead of hiding in the bushes like a coward?" I challenged.

A moment later, a man emerged from the trees, a familiar sneer on his lips. He was tall and willowy with skin the color of bone and long, stringy black hair reaching down to his elbows. I hadn't seen him in the better part of a century, which was about a century too soon, but I would know him anywhere.

"Rowan," I said, taking a step closer to look over the other man. His face was a death mask, pale and blank. There was something unnatural about the contortion of his features, but nothing about any of them in particular that could be pinpointed.

"It's been a long time, Cyrus," he said in what was more of a hiss than a voice. "Not to offend, but I was hoping I would catch your brother first."

"I'm sure you were," I said flatly, folding my arms. Why Cameron tolerated this cretin had always been beyond me. Then again, the same reasons I distrusted Rowan were probably the reasons Cameron liked him. "What business do you have in our territory?"

"Near it," he corrected, raising a spindly finger. "And it's mere curiosity. I hear you have found yourselves a new vessel."

I narrowed my eyes. "And how did you hear that?"

"These things have a way of getting around," he said in a pleasant tone. "I thought I might warn you of that. For Cameron's sake."

"I'll be sure to let him know you stopped by," I muttered. "I would prefer it if you left now."

"Of course," he said in a tone of mocking respect. "But one last thing. I do have a message to deliver."

"A message?" I asked. "From who?"

"From Sarah," he said, his sneer growing when he saw my reaction. "I take it this is the first time you've heard from her since the hunter came to town."

I narrowed my eyes. How much had she told him? "What did she say?" I asked, knowing the bastard would draw this out for as long as he damn well could.

"Simply that she is in the process of righting what has been wronged," he answered with a shrug. "She wouldn't elaborate any further than that, but I trust the message hits its mark."

"It does," I said through my teeth. "Now leave."

"As you wish," he said with a gallant bow. He turned away, stopping a few feet from our territory line. "Do send Cameron my regards."

I watched in silence until he was fully out of sight, and then did another sweep of the territory after that just to make sure he was really gone.

If Rowan was any true representation of his deity, I never wanted to meet Thanatos.

I had plenty of time to consider what I was going to do on the way home, and ultimately, I decided against telling the others about his visit. Cameron was already unstable, and the others would follow his lead. There was no doubt he would want to go after Sarah, and he would probably want to kill me knowing that I had let our only solid lead on her whereabouts walk off.

The truth was, she was a liability now, and so was he when it came to her.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-EIGHT

CHASE

One Month Later

I had spent the better part of the last month in my room, coming out only for food on occasion, since there was a full bath in the guest suite. I had, of course, exhausted every attempt at getting out of the room, but the window was warded shut as securely as the front door.

One last “fuck you” courtesy of Sarah.

When I ran into one of the others downstairs, the next best thing to being alone was ignoring them completely. I was already used to it with Alex, so it really wasn't that much of a stretch.

Aside from the odd taunt I let roll off my back, even Cameron had given up for the most part. If I had known that would get under his skin more than retorting, I would've started giving him the silent treatment a long damn time ago.

It was a little harder when it came to Sam and Cyrus. They were the two who had given me the most space at first, and then Sam had started being super attentive, bringing me peace offerings of magazines, books, and my favorite junk food. Tossing the first ten care packages in the trash hadn't deterred him, so eventually, I had just given up.

He hadn't.

The more time that had passed, the warier I grew that I was going to go into heat and end up forgiving them. At this point, it was the principle of the matter more than anything.

The fact that they thought they could compel me when it was convenient for them was infuriating enough, and even if Sam had just been going along with that, he was still complicit.

It had been a month, though, and there was still no sign of the heady, intoxicating lust that had come on so strongly the first time. I remembered Cyrus had said something about there being warning signs, so I figured I would at least have the chance to prepare this time. Hopefully.

My stomach was growling, so I ventured downstairs at five in the morning, hoping it would be too early for the denizens of the undead. There had to be some perks to having vampires as roommates.

When I saw Cameron sitting at the kitchen table, his hands folded in front of him as he stared off at nothing in particular, I realized otherwise.

I stopped in the doorway and turned around, hoping he hadn't seen me. I realized that was foolish, if only because of his enhanced hearing.

Stupid vampires.

"You're up early."

I turned around to face him, leaning in the doorway with my arms folded. "Speak for yourself, Nosferatu. I'm not the one who's wired to be a night owl."

He snorted. "Guess not." He kicked out the chair next to him with his foot. "Have a seat."

I narrowed my eyes. "Why? Are you going to compel me if I don't?"

He didn't answer, just kept giving me that annoying blank look, so I rolled my eyes and took the seat as far away from him as the table would allow.

"You bored of giving us the silent treatment yet?" he asked, leaning back.

"Nope," I answered, doing the same.

He just sighed. "You're going to have to give in eventually, you know. When your next heat comes around, you won't have much of a choice."

"I think you sorely underestimate my willpower," I told him.

I was expecting him to make some smartass remark, but instead, he shrugged and said, "Maybe."

I looked away, annoyed that his newfound way of agitating me seemed to be acting pleasant. Relative to his usual behavior, at any rate. "Well, it hasn't happened so far."

"No," he agreed. I could feel him watching me, and I didn't even need to look up to know what the look on his face would be. Curiosity blended with smugness. "You haven't been feeling anything?"

"Shouldn't you be able to tell?" I challenged.

"Not if it's early."

I rolled my eyes. "No, I don't feel anything. Maybe being pissed works as a counter aphrodisiac."

"Maybe," he snorted. "If anyone could resist a heat out of sheer stubbornness, it's probably you."

I frowned. I really wasn't sure if I should take that as a compliment or not.

"You haven't been using magic," he continued. "That could be why it's delayed."

"So if I just keep not using magic, I won't go into heat again?" I asked, looking up at him.

He hesitated. "It might take longer, but no. It'll happen eventually. Just existing as a vessel burns through a surprising amount of energy."

I figured he was telling the truth about that, if only because he had plenty of incentive to deter me from using my power. Ichor's power, and his mind.

Cameron got up, and I figured he was leaving. Instead, I heard him rummaging around in the kitchen. "How do you take your coffee?"

I frowned. "You're going to make me coffee?"

"Cream and sugar it is," he said, turning on the sink.

"Black, actually," I mumbled.

He snorted. "Just full of surprises, aren't you?"

I rolled my eyes. "Can vampires even drink coffee?"

"Of course we can," he said. "Doesn't mean it does anything for us. Just like alcohol."

"That sucks."

He looked over his shoulder. "I'd say the trade-offs even out."

"If you say so."

He turned on the coffeemaker and leaned against the counter to look at me while it percolated. "Don't pretend like you didn't spend your mortal life lusting after the vampires in those movies and romance novels you enjoy so much."

"Okay, I won't," I said, shrugging. "And I'm sure you and Sarah got plenty of laughs out of that little inside secret, but that doesn't mean I actually wanted to become a vampire."

"Sure."

"I'm serious," I insisted. "You guys live, what, indefinitely if something doesn't take you out?"

"About that. So I take it the idea of eternal life doesn't appeal to you?"

"Considerably less so after visiting the afterlife," I said dryly. "But what's the point of something that lasts forever? That's like a 'special edition' Michael Kors bag you can just buy off the shelf at any time."

He cocked an eyebrow. "It's like what, now?"

I sighed. "Never mind. I just mean some things are beautiful because they don't last. It's not like I wanted to die young or anything, but life is

supposed to be finite. That's what makes it precious. That's why people fight as hard as they can to preserve it in the first place."

"That's pretty irrational, isn't it?" he asked. "Something is valuable because it doesn't last, but you want to make it last longer because it's valuable."

"There's nothing rational about humanity," I informed him. "That's kind of the point."

The coffeemaker started gurgling, so he turned around and reached for a mug off the rack by the sink. I watched him closely. Not that he needed to poison me when he could just compel me to do whatever he wanted, or snap my neck with a single flick of his wrist.

"Is that why you wanted to go into medicine?" he asked.

"That's part of it," I admitted, not sure why he had taken such an interest in me all of a sudden. I was sure he had some ulterior motive, though. "Not everyone is an antisocial psychopath, you know. I liked the idea of helping people. That, and the challenge."

He didn't say anything for a moment until he set the steaming cup of coffee in front of me. "You say it like it's past tense."

"Isn't it?" I asked. "Even if you fuckers let me go back to school, I can't practice medicine if I can't even be around humans without wanting to drain them dry."

"You seemed to have decent control before," he reasoned. "You got through the whole semester without tipping anyone off."

"I killed a guy," I said pointedly. "I'd say that's a pretty big faux pas."

He went back over the counter, but I was too busy thinking about the morgue worker to care what else he was doing.

"It bothers you," he said.

I looked up at him as he started rummaging in the refrigerator, pulling out a carton of eggs and bacon. "Of course it bothers me. Is that a joke?"

"Technically, it was probably Ichor, not you."

"No. I was there," I said, shaking my head. "I could've tried harder to stop her."

"Could you?"

I hesitated, because I really wasn't sure. That night was a blur. There was still part of me clinging to denial. I needed to believe it wasn't real. That I wouldn't do something like that, no matter who was in the driver's seat at the moment.

"I guess it doesn't matter, does it?" I finally asked. "A man is dead either way. He's never going to see his family again. He's never going to do all the things he put off doing because he thought he had time. Because of me."

"Maybe," Cameron agreed. After a long pause, he said, "For what it's worth, you're the only vampire-adjacent creature I know with a body count in the single digits."

I scoffed. "Comforting, I guess."

I took a sip of the coffee, since my throat was starting to feel dry. Because Cameron was being uncharacteristically forthcoming, I was warring with myself over whether I wanted to ask a question that had been lingering ever since I found out he and the others were vampires.

"Can I ask you a personal question?"

"Could anything stop you?" he countered.

"Did it ever bother you?" I asked, ignoring his barb. "Having to kill people to survive, I mean."

He stopped whatever he was doing at the counter with his back turned to me. For a moment, I thought he wasn't going to answer. When he finally did, his voice was lower. "We don't have to kill people to survive. That's how it shakes out, because once the bloodlust takes over, you lose track of everything else, but yeah. It did bother me. In the beginning."

"When did it stop?" I asked, afraid to know that answer, too.

He paused, like he was considering it. "I don't know. Just happened gradually, I guess. For me, anyway. Cyrus never had too much of a

problem."

"Seriously?"

He snorted. "Believe it or not, I was originally the conscientious objector. Literally." He looked over his shoulder and saw me staring at him in confusion, so he added, "Ichor turned us during the Hundred Years' War."

"So you were a draft dodger?"

"Conscientious objector," he corrected in a pointed tone. "I didn't want to fight, so I became a chaplain."

I almost choked on my coffee. "I'm sorry, you what, now?"

He scowled. "What's so funny?"

"You were a preacher?" I asked flatly.

"A priest, actually," he said, turning on the stove. "What's the matter, can't picture it?"

"No," I said, squinting. "And I'm really, really trying."

He just laughed. Usually, it was a dry, derisive sound, but this was just a laugh. "Yeah, well, it was literally another lifetime ago."

"What about Cyrus?" I asked.

"He was a soldier," Cameron answered. "A good one."

"I guess I can see that a little easier," I admitted. "How did you guys get turned, anyway?"

"We were stationed in the same battalion, at the front," he answered. The smell of fresh food that usually would've made my stomach growl was making it churn instead, but I figured it was just a result of the subject matter at hand. "Cyrus was wounded in battle. Fatally. By the time I got to him, he was on his way out, barely conscious. I got caught in the crossfire, and I thought that was it. For both of us."

His voice grew melancholic, and when I looked up, he was staring out the kitchen window, like he was deep in thought.

"Then, she appeared," he murmured.

"Ichor?"

"I thought she was an angel at first," he said with a nostalgic smile. "How wrong I was."

"Yeah. More like the devil in disguise."

"I guess the devil is an angel when you're a demon," he reasoned thoughtfully. "In any case, she was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. One look at her, and it all faded away. The pain. The regret. The fear of the unknown. I knew that whatever happened on the other side, as long as she was there, it was going to be okay."

"I guess she did lead you into the afterlife," I mused. "All it cost was your soul."

He gave me a look, turning off the stove. "She gave us purpose. For that, I'd happily follow her to Hell."

"Well, that's good, because with your rap sheet, that's probably exactly where you'll end up," I said, looking down at the plate he set in front of me. "What is this?"

"You need to eat something besides the junk food Sam keeps sneaking you. And don't think I haven't noticed you scurrying off with it like a squirrel when no one is looking."

My face grew red. "Since when do you care what I eat?"

"You're Ichor's vessel," he said, like there was ever a chance I could forget it even for a minute. "Of course I care. There's more to keeping you in good condition than anima and tantra. The practical shit matters, too."

"Sure, Mom," I said dryly, reluctantly taking a forkful of the eggs. They hit my stomach no sooner than the nausea that had been mildly annoying me all morning turned into a roaring flame.

I leaped out of my chair, practically colliding with Cameron in my beeline for the nearest bathroom. I realized two feet away from the table that wasn't

going to happen, but I managed to collapse near the kitchen trash bin before I started puking my guts out.

"Okay, the eggs can't have been that bad," Cameron said, watching me with a grimace.

I was too busy retching to answer him. He was probably the last person I wanted to see me like this, but when he came over to pull my hair back, my humiliation went into overdrive. I was too sick to tell him to fuck off, though.

A few minutes later, once I was reasonably sure I had voided all the contents of my stomach—and probably an organ or two—I collapsed on the kitchen floor.

"You okay?" Cameron asked warily. He sounded genuinely concerned, which was true enough, since I was housing his beloved. Her energy, at any rate.

"I will be once I jump off a bridge," I groan.

"Here," he said, offering me a cold cloth. I took it eagerly and held it to my face. The coolness helped stave off the lingering nausea.

"Thanks," I mumbled. I really didn't want to thank Cameron for anything, but I wasn't exactly running at optimal, and my head was all jumbled.

"I told you all that junk food was shit for you," he said, rubbing my back in small circles.

That was just a bridge too far, even if there was a part of me—heat or no heat—that relaxed at his touch. I shrugged away, trying to get back on my feet. Cameron pulled me up the rest of the way, which was probably a good thing because my legs were far from steady.

"Easy," he warned.

"What's going on?" Alex asked from the doorway. Because why wouldn't he be here to witness my humiliation, too? The more, the merrier. "Chase, are you okay?"

"He's fine," Cameron answered for me. "He just got sick from all the candy and other shit Sam's been plying him with."

"It's not the damn candy!" I snapped. "I'm fine."

"You don't look fine," Alex said, frowning. "You're pale and clammy."

"Go fuck yourself, Alex."

He held up his hands in defense. "I'm just saying, I'm worried about you. That's all."

"You don't get to worry about me," I said, pointing at him. "I'm still not talking to you."

"It seems like you're talking to Cameron," he said bitterly.

"Yeah, and you're the one person I hate more than Cameron," I shot back. "Now, would you both leave so I can clean up my vomit in peace?"

"You're not doing anything," Cameron said in that infuriatingly firm tone he thought he could use with me, like he was my father or something. I was about to argue when he scooped me into his arms suddenly enough that I cried out at the sudden shift.

"What the hell?" I cried, scrambling in vain to get out of his arms. "Put me down!"

"Nope," was all he said, carrying me toward the stairs.

I growled in frustration and he laughed, which made me even angrier.

"Calm down," he said, placing me down on my bed once we made it to my room. "I swear, you're like some kind of evil forest creature."

"*I'm* evil?" I scoffed.

"Yeah, you," he said, leaning down to peck my forehead.

I froze.

He froze.

We all screamed for ice cream, or something like that. My brain was malfunctioning. Did he just...?

Cameron stared down at me, like he wasn't any more certain of what he had just done than I was. The fact that it seemed to have been an automatic impulse was more perplexing than anything. For a few moments, neither of us said a word.

"Okay," he said, stepping back from the bed like it was on fire. "Get some rest. I'll be down the hall if you need anything."

"Yeah," I said, still partially convinced I was dreaming as he walked out of the room. All I could do was stare at the door for a few moments.

What the hell was that?

CHAPTER
TWENTY-NINE

CAMERON

I kissed him.
Chase.

I had kissed Chase, and not just on the lips or anything. We'd done that plenty of times, but there was no intimacy there. Just lust and heat.

And yet, here we both were, stone cold sober in the light of day, and I had fucking kissed him. On the forehead.

What the hell was wrong with me?

I kept replaying that moment a thousand times over in my head, not just to torture myself, but trying to make sense of it. Trying to understand exactly where the impulse had come from, so I could make sure I never gave into it again. Ever.

Maybe I was losing my mind. Yeah. I'd heard that could happen to vampires if they were old enough. Maybe it was just finally my time to start checking out. Somehow, that was more comforting than any of the alternatives that presented themselves for a fraction of a moment before I chased them away.

It didn't stop me from spending the next few days raking myself over the coals for it, though.

Eventually, concern took the place of my own dismay when I learned from the others that Chase wasn't doing any better.

At first, I thought it was just his delicate, semi-human constitution getting the best of him. Chase was hardier than I had given him credit for, I could admit that, but he was still a bit neurotic. He was always working himself up over one anxiety or another. Surely that played a role in his physical condition.

When he was still sick a week later, I figured it was a stomach bug, and the fact that Cyrus had asked me to meet him to discuss something told me he was as concerned as I was. Not for Chase, I told myself. Just because he was the vessel. Just because keeping him alive and healthy, at the very least, had become my new reason for existing, and I really didn't want to have to admit I couldn't even do that much.

"What is it?" I asked once Cyrus and I were alone in the downstairs study, even though I already knew the answer to that question.

He had been plenty distant lately, and while I had assumed it was just his lingering bitterness about our most recent war fight at first, now I wasn't so sure. Usually, it didn't last as long. Maybe he was just struggling with his own demons. One bratty, unexpectedly alluring demon in particular.

"He's not getting any better," said Cyrus. "I think we need to bury the hatchet and figure out what to do next."

I raised an eyebrow. "Oh, are you still sulking over that?"

He gave me a filthy look. "I'm serious. We need to start thinking about getting some outside intervention."

"What, are you suggesting we take him to a doctor?"

"Of course not. Not a regular one, at any rate."

He hesitated, and I knew there was something he was trying to say, but he didn't want to just come out and say it. "What is it?" I pressed.

"Are you still in contact with Deanna?" he asked.

Now I understood his hesitation. He had given me shit about maintaining my friendship with the leader of another cult for decades, and now that it would prove useful, he didn't want to have to admit he was wrong.

"I am," I said, folding my arms. "You want me to ask her to bring her healer to take a look at Chase?"

He clenched his jaw, and I had to admit, I was taking no small delight in how unpleasant this was for him. Considering what a sanctimonious son of a bitch he was all the time, I felt entitled to a little bit of gloating.

"Just to be safe," he said. "And being sick isn't the only issue. It is also the fact that he hasn't gone into heat since the first time."

"Jonesing, are you, brother?" I asked dryly.

He shot me the dirtiest look yet. "Do you always have to be such a dick?"

"I could ask you the same," I countered.

He sighed. "Just make the call."

The truth I wasn't going to admit was that I had considered calling Deanna plenty of times already. Ever since Chase had first started getting sick, really. I just knew it was going to be a big fucking deal if Cyrus wasn't on board with that, but now that he was, there was no reason to delay it any longer.

We'd figure out what was going on with him, one way or another, and fix it. Then, maybe I could finally get a decent night's sleep.

CHAPTER
THIRTY

CHASE

I had been up in my room all day, which had become the new normal. Not because I was avoiding the guys—although in retrospect, I regretted wasting so much well time doing that—but because I could barely take two steps these days without feeling completely exhausted.

It wasn't even like I had been using magic. At first, I thought Cameron or one of the others had done something to me. Maybe poisoned me in an attempt to keep me in line, but as time wore on, there was no denying they were worried, even if it was only for Ichor's sake.

The truth was, I was getting a little worried myself.

I couldn't keep anything down. Not food, not the steady supply of blood the guys still insisted on trying to force down my throat. I sure as hell wasn't up for feeding the other way.

Hell, I couldn't even bring myself to care what they were talking about downstairs. I could barely hear the low murmur of voices, and while I would usually have been on the floor with my ear pressed against the hardwood trying to listen, I didn't have the energy to care, let alone snoop.

At least, not until I heard a couple of unfamiliar voices join the din.

Summoning strength I really didn't have, I got out of bed, pulled on a robe—which had become my go-to outfit of choice, much to my chagrin—and went down to see who it was.

There was always a part of me that was convinced Sarah was going to walk through that door any day now. Maybe even Ichor wearing Sarah's skin like a new Prada dress.

I had nightmares to that effect nearly every other night, and when it wasn't those, it was my brain torturing me with incredibly vivid replays of waking up in the morgue and everything that had happened soon thereafter.

Even in my dreams, I was a bloody, vicious monster ruled only by thirst, and it wasn't like that was far off from the truth.

Knowing I didn't actually need human blood to subsist on had not done any favors for my guilt.

I started down the stairs, gripping the railing tightly, because my balance was as shaky as my constitution lately.

The closer I got, the more distinctive the voices became. The one currently speaking was a woman, her voice deep and gravelly as she asked, "And how long has he been like this?"

"He's been like this for a little over a week, but he was sick before that, on and off. A couple of weeks, maybe," Cyrus answered.

Another woman's voice, softer and younger, chimed in. "And he doesn't have any health issues?"

"None we're aware of," said Cameron.

"No," said Alex. "He's hardy. He's never even missed a day of class."

I wasn't quite sure if they were talking about me or a draft horse. Before I could find out, someone shushed the others. I froze, realizing I was about to be caught. Before I could book it back up the steps, Cyrus appeared at the bottom of the stairs with Cameron close behind him, giving me a knowing look.

"Speak of the devil," said Cameron.

I flipped him off half-heartedly.

"Come on," Cyrus said, holding his hand out to me. "I was just about to come get you, anyway."

I reluctantly took his hand because I had only been up for a few minutes and I already felt shaky. I let him lead me out into the living room, where the two unfamiliar women were standing. Alex was sitting on the sofa across the room. Sam was absent, probably on patrol since one of them was at any given time.

"Hello, Chase," the softer-spoken woman said, giving me a warm smile. She was petite, with long raven tresses and tawny skin. Her dark brown eyes gleamed with kindness as she looked at me, but the woman to her left, easily a good foot taller, looked like she got in fist fights with semi trucks for a hobby. She had short, spiky blonde hair and hard blue eyes, and her muscular arms were bare beneath her black tank top, like it wasn't negative twenty degrees outside.

Yep. She was definitely a vampire.

"Who are you?" I asked warily, not really in the mood for friendly introductions. Especially not if these people were friends of the cult.

"My name is Elisa, and this is Deanna, our cult's leader," said the smaller woman. She sounded so casual about it, like it was just your average social club. Like there was nothing to be ashamed of, or even given a moment's pause over.

And to them, there probably wasn't.

"Sorry, but I've already got one patron deity living in my head, and I really don't have room for another," I said flatly.

"They're not here to proselytize," said Cameron. "Elisa is a healer. She's here to figure out what's wrong with you."

"That's the idea," she said in a pleasant tone. "If you'll allow it."

I had barely known her for a minute, and it was already annoyingly difficult to be rude to this woman. What, did she eat sunshine for breakfast?

"What's the catch?" I asked, glancing over at the others.

"There is no catch," said Cyrus. "You can trust them. They're Cameron's friends."

"That's all the more reason not to trust them," I reminded him.

He sighed. "Please, Chase. Just let her have a look at you. No one is going to do anything against your will."

"You guys know you could just take me to a doctor if you're really that worried, right?" I asked, folding my arms. "You know, an MD? Those people who spend at least twelve years of their lives training for this kind of shit?"

"You're a vessel," said Cyrus. "If this were any mundane human illness, Ichor's energy would have resolved it long before now. This is a little beyond the capabilities of allopathic medicine."

I frowned. He had a point. I just wasn't about to admit that. "What are you going to do?" I asked, turning back to Elisa.

"I'd just like to have a look at you, first things first," she said, motioning to the chair next to her. "If you're alright with it."

Despite their insistence that I had a choice, I knew that would all go out the window the second I put up any actual resistance. Nonetheless, I was too tired, and I had to admit, I was kind of curious if this woman could actually tell what was wrong with me. I'd never had any kind of illness like it, and when I cross-referenced my symptoms with the usual online symptom checkers and my textbooks, the only plausible explanations that came up weren't very plausible at all. Not for a cis guy.

I sat down in the chair, watching the petite human like a hawk. At least, I assumed she was human. She certainly didn't smell like a vampire, but if she was hanging out with them, that probably meant she was a witch, and I wasn't sure that was much better.

She knelt down in front of the chair, holding her hands up on either side of my head. "Just try to relax. And close your eyes."

I was hesitant to do as she said, but having my eyes open had never stopped the guys from doing whatever the hell they were going to do, so I didn't see

the point in worrying about it now.

I shut my eyes and turned to take a deep breath, but that just made me feel like I was going to hyperventilate, so I stopped. I waited for the feeling of compulsion, or whatever she was going to do to me, but it didn't come. I could feel a gentle push, but it was just like when Ichor had sent soothing energy into me to keep me calm, not like when Cameron and Cyrus were trying to force me to do something, or to forget something they had already done.

I had to admit, it was... pleasant. But when it came to vampires and anyone who willingly associated with them, I knew better than to trust my own feelings. They were never reliable.

The energy hummed quietly through me for a few moments, but nothing else happened. I was surprised when Elisa finally pulled away, looking up at me with an expression I could only describe as confused wonder.

There was no way that was good. She seemed too sweet to have such an interested look on her face about someone who was on the verge of death, though, so that gave me some hope.

"What is it?" I asked. I felt like I was going to explode if I didn't get the answer.

She opened her mouth like she was going to speak, then closed it, as if she didn't trust herself to phrase it right. And that had me more unsettled than anything.

"Oh, dear..." she trailed off.

"What is it?" Cyrus asked impatiently.

She looked up at him in a daze, as if she had all but forgotten he was there. When she looked back at me, I realized I had been right earlier. That look in her eyes was definitely wonder. "He's pregnant."

I didn't know what I was expecting her to say, really. Just... not that.

Anything but that.

THE END OF BOOK ONE.

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