

A Gift from the Goddess Chapter 122 book 2 chapter 14 by Dawn Rosewood

A Gift from the Goddess Chapter 122 By Dawn Rosewood Book 2- CH 14

I left Noah in Zac's capable hands and got his word that he'd call my father to say the job was completed per normal. He was risking a lot for my sake, I knew that.

A lot of risk for what seemed like absolutely no reason.

The level of danger associated with this insane plan wasn't lost on me.

After all, the last thing I wanted was for Zac's name to end up in my next manilla folder. I headed home as soon as I could, leaving enough time to arrive well before daylight, and walked towards my front door.

But it was as I was entering through the front gate to our property that something caught my eye.

It was an old lady, huddled up in a shawl, standing just on the street outside.

She had grey hair and eyes to match, clearly at an age that would suggest a retirement home or carer was required.

And yet she stood randomly outside my house at three o'clock in the morning, staring directly at me.

I paused for a moment and looked around, trying to see if she was with someone.

But when the empty street was completely silent and devoid of all other life, I started to wonder if maybe she'd gotten lost.

...Did I really have the energy to deal with this right now though? I was already so exhausted and just wanted to go inside to sleep in my own bed, something that would be a first after many days.

I could already perfectly visualise how soft my pillow would be...

just begging to be laid on and—

"I can save her," the old lady suddenly said.

"I can save the girl." ...

What? I took my hand off the gate handle and turned back around to fully face her, part of me still wondering if she was even talking to me.

“..Pardon?” I called back.

Wasn't it common for older people to lose their minds at a certain age? What if she was a dementia patient who wandered off? I should probably just look up where the closest hospital or retirement home was and tell them where to find—.

“The girl.Clarissa,” she said.

As if that was of any real help.

I blankly stared back at her.

“I'm not Clarissa,” I clarified.

“I think you've—.”

“I know that,” she snapped sharply, making me flinch a bit in surprise.

“Oh...kay.Well, is that...your daughter?” I asked, still trying to be polite.

“Or your carer? Do you want me to call someone for you—?”

But then she started to walk towards me, her stride more steady than I would have expected given her appearance.

There was something oddly strange about her too.

A weird atmosphere around her.

Or maybe I was just slightly unnerved by the whole creepiness of the situation.

“Do you not know who I am?” she asked once she stood within a few feet of me.

“Ma'am, truthfully, I'm not even sure if you know who you are.No offence,” I said, starting to get more uncomfortable the longer this drew out.

“If you just wait here a moment though, I'll head inside and wake up one of the maids.They can maybe help you out or something.”

I really didn't care about courtesy anymore and just wanted to leave as soon as possible.

There was something about this entire encounter that just rubbed me the wrong way.

Almost as if I could feel the hair at the back of my neck standing up. I turned around and tried to open the gate, but she quickly moved forward to stop me.

“Wait,” she said, and I had to bite back my instincts telling me to go.

Rational logic would suggest that there was nothing to be worried about. She was just an old lady.

Frail enough looking to be pushed over by the wind alone.

“Wait, a moment,” she repeated.

..And I reluctantly turned back around to meet her eyes.

Eyes that seemed to hold an intelligence there that I wasn't expecting.

And she spoke in a tone so low that I almost didn't hear her.

“...Do you know the true story of the Winter Mist?” she asked.

Her expression was completely serious as I shuffled uncomfortably under her gaze.

It was as though I could feel her scrutinising me, analyzing my face for any sort of recognition that I knew what she was talking about.

Which, of course, I didn't.

“Is that like a fairy tale?” I asked.

“Was it a book you used to read to your grandkids or something?”

But to my immense discomfort, she only continued to stare at me silently.

“..Ma'am...?” I really wanted to leave.

I was so close to home, merely a foot away from being back on the property.

Just a step forward and I could close the gate between us.

But she was so close to me that I wasn't sure what she would do if I tried.

Clearly, she wasn't right in the head.

However, at the sound of bird wings loudly flying into the air somewhere, she finally turned away, pulling the hood of her shawl up.

"I can save her," she simply repeated.

"Don't forget that." And she started walking back down the street towards town.

...What the hell had that just been? I didn't waste any more time in stepping through the gate and locking it behind me, my chest still pounding slightly from the whole ordeal.

So much fear caused by just one crazy old lady.

But if I had to say one thing that was far more terrifying than the old crone, I would have to answer that it was the man waiting for me once I finally entered inside.

As I walked through my front door, I saw a light had been left on in the living room.

A surprise given most people in the house should have been asleep by now.

Naturally, after everything that had just happened, I had every intention of just ignoring it and heading upstairs to my room instead.

...

However, I couldn't help but catch the familiar scent of someone I knew only too well.

My father. My foot had been on the first step of the staircase as I came to this realisation, so close to finally being able to go to bed, but I knew that the light had been left on for a reason.

He was expecting me.

With a small sigh, I stepped back...and headed towards the living room instead.

"My Raven," he greeted me, sitting in a leather armchair.

From where I was standing, I could only see his arm as he held a drink in his hand, the chair facing away from me.

"Father," I replied.

"I just received the call from Zac not long ago," he said, taking a sip from the glass.

"You're later than expected."

"Oh...Well, there was this old lady outside," I started.

"I think she was lost. Kept trying to talk to me and wouldn't let me leave—."

"I meant the job, Raven. You're several hours late from the job. The agreed upon time should have seen you home a long time ago."

"Ah..."

"Did everything go...smoothly?"

No. No, it had not.

In fact, I couldn't think of many ways in which it could have gone worse.

I'd dug into things I definitely shouldn't have, opening a door to a liability of my own creation.

Firstly, by accidentally killing an employee for a kidnapping job...then by failing to take care of the consequences of that mistake.

Now, I was continuing to hide that consequence because I didn't want the death on my hands.

Though, I couldn't mention any of this to him.

By this point, I was already in far too deep to come clean.

Besides...and I knew I shouldn't be...but I couldn't help but feel a little...curious.

Just what had that smuggler managed to find out? Was it related to the documents?

"Yep...it ah, it all went smoothly," I lied.

"I just had some issues getting into the building, is all. A crowd of people were drinking outside and, well, intoxicated or not, they'd still be witnesses. I decided to play it safe."

"Is that so...?" he mused.

A nervous feeling was bubbling in my chest. He couldn't know I was lying...could he? But then again...there was no such thing as a secret from Eric Reid.

I knew that better than anyone.

The silence seemed to stretch on for what felt like an eternity, quiet enough that I was painfully aware of how loud even my breathing seemed inside the room.

Could he sense how nervous I was? Hear the loud thumping of my heart? But, no, that was impossible.

Because love him or fear him, at the end of the day, my father was still just a man.

Aman.

Not a... 'werewolf'.

And, as a normal man, he didn't have the heightened senses I possessed.

That was always going to be something that kept us apart.

Thinking on that now, it was a stark reminder of where I'd accidentally found myself now.

Facing a crossroads of two paths.

On the one hand, I could continue to live blindly in fear, hoping that the eggshells around me would not crack under my mistakes, revealing to the world just how different I really was.

A path where I would follow the rules, taking each day one at a time.

Forgetting about everything I'd found out, everything I'd seen...everyone I'd met.

All so I could continue to loyally serve my father.

The man who raised me, doing what he thought was best for both me and the business.

And, in doing so, trying to save me from myself...and others...Or I could reach into my pocket to where that hotel keycard now laid.

A promise attached to it that maybe things didn't need to be like that.

A warm hand extended towards me through the darkness, offering sparks and a light that I'd never experienced before.

That I never thought even possible.

A way to take back control over the things that constantly scared me, learning to use them for myself instead.

To become a version of myself that had no limits.

If Kieran was telling me the truth and I really was what he said I was, and he was the same, then didn't I have no choice but to at least try and explore that option? To at least

take a chance that maybe one day I wouldn't need to be so afraid? My father could try a million different things to help me hide my secret.

To contain the creature and keep me protected under his umbrella of power, hidden from the world, but at the end of the day...he didn't really know anything.

Just like how I currently didn't either.

He was...just a man.

Just a human man.

Someone who could never truly understand me.

The only real question now was...

Am I actually doing this for him? Doing this out of love for him and for the business I was raised in? ..Or am I actually doing this for myself? I heard as my father then inhaled sharply, standing up from the chair he'd been seated on, and turned to walk towards me.

That fearsome gaze of his still pierced through me, as if he could see everything I was hiding from him inside.

But I held my resolve, keeping my expression steady, committed to this decision I'd made.

He walked until he stood right in front of me, staring into my eyes as he watched me carefully, bringing a hand up as he slowly reached for my face, and....

..And he gently touched my cheek.

"Good work," he said simply.

"You've done well." And, with that, he walked past me, leaving towards his own room to rest.

My shoulders relaxed the minute I heard his footsteps fade upstairs, but despite that minor relief, I was still helpless to the thoughts swimming around in my head.

Because for the very first time in my life, I had knowingly and willingly disobeyed my father, going even as far as to lie to him.

And yet, somehow, in spite of all of that...by some goddamn miracle.....I had gotten away with it.

Or, at least, that was the case for now.

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“Raven.”

Through the darkness I heard a voice, piercing through the haze.

It sounded urgent.

Someone calling out to me.

“Raven, shift back.”

Every now and then I would see snippets.

Just stilled images flashing before me, showing pictures of a living room.

Of a broken table.

Of a boy.

It felt somewhat familiar but I couldn't place it.

“Raven! —Ah, fuck.”

..And pain.

So much pain.

The voice continued to call out to me, pleading with me to do something...but I wasn't ready.

No, instead, I rescinded into my mind further to escape.

To try and forget what was happening.

...To pretend everything was okay.

And so, I hid from it all, blocking out the images and voices.

Waiting until, finally, things didn't hurt so badly.

..Until I was sure the pain had stopped.

“Raven,” came the voice again.

Only, this time, recognition finally kicked in.

Kieran.

It was Kieran’s voice and...and I’d shifted.Changing into the wolf and...—.

Oh...no, no...Instantly, my eyes flew open...and I found myself contained within his arms, wrapped up in a blanket.

He looked down at me with a face showing signs of exhaustion, his breathing heavy.

And I immediately knew something was wrong.

I wasn’t sure how long had passed but I was back to my normal self, implying it had been at least a few minutes.

But...there was something else too.

Something I’d come to expect from these lapses.

..I could smell the sickly scent of blood.I squirmed out of his grasp, pushing away just enough to get a good look at him...and there it was.

The source of the smell.

A large gash down the front of his chest.

Blood flowing from it...increasingly becoming worse ...pooling on the ground around us.

And, suddenly, it was as if the whole world tilted.

Everywhere I looked there was blood.

Red painted on every surface, on every piece of furniture, on every wall...curtain...and lamp.

And as I frantically looked around, I felt my breathing quicken, my heart starting to race.

...Just what had I done? This was exactly what I had been afraid of and yet I’d let it happen.

I turned back to Kieran, finding his face now so pale, and I quickly moved my hands to his chest to help stop the bleeding.

Hands that were soaked even up along my forearms already.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered.

"I-I didn't mean to do this." I'd told him that this was dangerous and a bad idea.

Why hadn't he listened to me?

"Raven...it's okay," he replied.

I looked at him incredulously, as if he were insane for not seeing the amount of blood he had lost.

It was a miracle he was even still able to talk.

"N-no...no it's not okay," I stammered.

"Nothing about this is okay...You're going to die because of me."

I could feel my entire body shaking, feel the tears beginning to form in my eyes.

Kieran had said he knew what he was doing, that everything would be fine, and yet everything had still gone wrong.

Was it because I was incapable of being helped? Was I actually a monster? "Raven, what are you talking about? I'm fine."

"Fine'?"

'Fine'!?" I repeated, my voice becoming shrill.

"You're bleeding out! I-I don't even have time to call an ambulance. Goddammit, Kieran! Why didn't you listen to me!?"

I kept trying to stop the bleeding but he then grabbed my hands and held them away from him.

"What are you doing?!" I screamed.

"Stop," he ordered.

"It's barely even a scratch."

“N-no, no, no it’s not. How can you say that? You’re “

“Raven, calm down and look,” he said, cutting me off.

“B-but I...I’ve killed you...I-I didn’t mean to...I—.”

“Raven!” he yelled this time, forcing me to meet his eyes.

“...I said I’m fine.”

..And as I slowly looked back down at his chest, I found that the wound was barely more than a surface- level injury.

Something that had already stopped bleeding a while ago.

“W-what...? I don’t understand...”

Carefully, I then spun my head around to look at the room...and found it completely normal.

Apart from a few broken pieces of furniture, the place seemed utterly the same.

No blood in sight.

But I had seen it so clearly, smelt the strong copper smell.

There was no mistaking it...How could that all be in my head?

“Come here,” Kieran said, and proceeded to lift me onto his lap with ease.

I was reluctant at first, still confused by what was happening, but it didn’t take long for me to realise what this meant. I threw my arms around him in relief, no longer caring if my sudden attachment to him was weird.

All that mattered was that he was alive.

That he was safe.

“J-I’m sorry,” I cried.

“I’m so sorry. I fucked up.”

His hand came up and gently stroked my hair, indulging my abrupt need for comfort.

Along with the blanket, his warmth was helping to calm me.

"You're fine," he said.

"You didn't do anything wrong."

"But I did," I argued.

"I failed. I-I wasn't strong enough. Regardless of whether it was minor, you still got hurt."

Even after Kieran tried to help me, it was clear that I was still a failure. It didn't matter if I was human or a wolf.

There were some things that I'd never overcome. Somehow, it felt like I would forever be a disappointment.

That this was my life now; useless to my father, and useless at things that should have been natural for me to do.

Just another screw-up to add to the list.

...But Kieran didn't seem to like that answer.

Immediately, he pulled me away and held my face so I was forced to look at him.

"Hey. Nothing you did was your fault," he said adamantly.

"I mean it."

"But I—."

"No," he instantly cut off.

"Take a breath and repeat after me"

'this was not my fault'"

I opened my mouth to protest but he gave me a look that made me stop.

As if telling me this exercise wasn't negotiable.

"This...was not my fault," I finally said in defeat.

I'd mumbled the words quietly but he still seemed satisfied by my reply nevertheless.

With a small nod in approval, he let go of me.

"Whatever that was...I've never seen anything like it," he said.

“By far the slowest, most painful changes I’ve ever witnessed. But... I don’t know. It’s giving me a weird feeling. Almost as if there’s more to it.”

“..What do you mean? Are you saying there is actually something wrong with me?”

“No...not wrong with you. But maybe more...something external affecting you,” he said, his brow furrowing.

“Are you wearing any jewellery? Or have anything metallic touching you like a piercing? It’d look something like silver.” I thought about it for a moment before shaking my head.

Accessories weren’t a good idea for me given my day job.

“No.”

“Okay...then how about diet. Do you drink any teas? Or regularly deal with any herbs?”

“No...,” I replied again, becoming increasingly more confused by the strange questions.

Kieran then stopped for a moment in thought, visibly trying hard to come up with something else before, finally, he asked one more question.

Only this time, I could tell he was reluctant to ask.

“..What about medications?”

And my body immediately stilled.

Yes...I had medications. I had regular medicine I took for anxiety and post- shifting side effects; mostly the pain and nausea. But...that was something I had been prescribed for years.

By a doctor.

A professional.

Or, at least, they were a professional...employed by my father.

Surely, he wouldn’t have though, right? Because that would mean....

“Raven?” Kieran prompted when I still hadn’t spoken.

I swallowed back the bile in my throat, hoping Kieran was wrong about this.

“Yes,” I answered.

“Yes. I have medication.”

“Can you show it to me?”

Almost robotically, I stood up and walked to where I'd left my bag, finding it on the counter.

It took a bit of shuffling before I eventually could locate it.

With everything happening so quickly, my fingers were trembling uncontrollably.

“Here,” I finally said, presenting it to Kieran.

He'd followed behind and swiftly took it from me, starting to inspect the contents immediately.

The whole time, I silently watched as he worked, subconsciously pulling the blanket around me more for comfort.

Wishing more than anything that this really would be ordinary medication.

Though it was rarely ever that simple.

“These...these are suppressors,”

Kieran said in shock, slowly looking up at me.

“They were designed and used in chemical warfare. Illegal now, of course.”

“...I don't understand how...”

“Raven,” he continued, voice completely serious.

“...How long have you been taking these?”

“Since my eighteenth. Maybe just before... I can't remember exactly.”

“Years?! You've been taking these... for years?”

I flinched at the outburst, taken by surprise.

“Sorry...I'm just...astounded you even have these,” he said.

“Suppressors were created for a specific war. A way to stop people like us from properly harnessing their abilities. They would poison water systems and then slowly, after a few

months, the victims would be too weak to fight back with full strength. Our pac— I mean 'town'...we were unfortunately the ones who originally designed them.”

“...They come from you?” I asked, struggling to take in all the new information.

“They shouldn't be,” he said.

“They stopped production after the war ended and it was agreed to never use them again. But...I don't know. Truthfully, I haven't seen any in person since I was a kid, but these...these look a bit odd. Their shape isn't quite what I remember...”

And then to my utter disbelief, I watched as he picked one up...and bit into it.

“What are you doing?!” I exclaimed.

“Didn't you just say they're dangerous?!”

But before I could take a step to stop him, he instantly spat it back out, staring at it intently.

“It feels weird,” he said quietly.

“As if there is the tiniest bit of sensation on my palm. Barely noticeable. Almost like...”

And he went quiet for another few seconds.

“Like what?”

The pauses and silences were driving me insane. I just wanted to know already.

“I don't know where you got these or who made them” he said darkly, “but whoever is administering them to you knows exactly what they're doing.”

It was the words I'd feared hearing and yet he was confirming it to be true. The worst case I hadn't wanted to believe.

“Are you sure?” I asked, though I knew it was redundant to still hope otherwise.

Only, as he answered my question, it turns out that it was far worse than I'd expected. So, so much worse.

“Raven...this has trace amounts of blessed silver in it.”

“Blessed...what?”

“It means they were poisoning you.”

I could feel as my body started to feel light, my legs swaying, and it was only a matter of seconds before Kieran had to catch me, stopping me from hitting the ground.

“Woah, let’s get you to the couch,” he said, hoisting me up into his arms.

Once comfortably seated and after my breathing had steadied, I decided to push through and ask the questions that I still needed answers to.

“So this whole time I really was drugged...just not in the way I thought,” I said, feeling bad for initially blaming Kieran.

“Do these pills explain all of my symptoms then? Can I get better?”

“I’m going to be brutally honest here,” he said.

“And I don’t mean to scare you but...I’m just surprised you’re alive. The suppressors alone over such a long period of time would have messed with you significantly, making using your abilities incredibly difficult. I assume that explains the extreme pain, a cause for the blackouts. But then to add in that someone was dosing you with silver? Even such a tiny amount? I mean...that’s a lethal substance. Highly poisonous, highly controlled and impossible to get your hands on for anything that isn’t approved by an elder council. The fact that you can shift at all, let alone just stand up, is incredible.”

“But...if it was meant to be suppressing my abilities, how come I still have better senses? More strength? Faster speed? Shouldn’t that be restrained?”

“Perhaps taking it for so long made it something you learned to live with, only diluting instead of removing he said in thought. But then his tone suddenly changed.

“Actually...it sort of reminds me of a story. Long ago, they used to say that the Silver Saintes—.”

Abruptly, he then stopped talking without warning, quickly looking over to me a little uncomfortably.

“What is it?” I asked, still waiting for him to proceed.

But he only continued to stare, as if having a debate internally over what to say.

“Ah...nothing. On second thought, it’s not the same thing,” he said.

“Just a story.”

He was doing it again, I could tell.

Shielding me from things he felt I wasn't ready to know about. I understood why...but it was still frustrating.

Sure, I was a little overwhelmed, but I had still managed to pick up things that sounded horrifying.

He'd mentioned wars, chemicals, poisons...a world hidden away that was full of people just like me, capable of abilities I'd once considered monstrous.

But never once did he elaborate further or give more context than necessary.

"I saw how overwhelmed you were over just meeting me so I didn't want to rush you into this world," was what he had said to me the other day.

Just what was on the other side of the curtain, still hidden? I didn't end up being able to press him for more answers though as he suddenly asked me a question instead.

One I wasn't expecting.

Or, at least, one I knew he would eventually ask...but I wasn't quite ready to answer yet.

"I need to know where you got these," he said, making my chest tighten with stress.

"...I need to know who gave you the medication, Raven."

And I instantly held my breath, frozen with confliction.

Because to give such an answer meant admitting something I still wasn't ready to believe.

Something that changed the way I viewed everything in my life up until now.

And that was that my father knew exactly what I truly was this entire time...and he had knowingly been dosing me.

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Book Two – Ch.# 16

He knew... he knew what I was and kept it from me.

Why though? It didn't make any sense. But... did it really matter? Even if my father did know, it didn't really change anything about my situation. It just added more questions that I would most likely never get answers to. After all, it wasn't as though I could

confront him about it. If he sensed even the tiniest bit of rebellion from me, I was sure that he would sooner lock me up than lose me.

“...Raven?”

Right... Kieran. He was still waiting for me to reply... only I wasn't sure what to do. I was in yet another dilemma of choosing two sides. Both of which had high prices with uncertain outcomes.

To tell him the truth, the real truth, meant inviting him in to see that side of my life. A side where he would most likely learn the dark actions of my father, our business, and of the work entailed within that. This, in itself, was a dangerous thing to divulge to anyone, the information thereby placing a target on Kieran.

...But I had to acknowledge something else too. By bringing Kieran in and telling him all of this... he would then be inches away from discovering the truth about me too. About all of my dark contributions up until now. Things that now made me feel emotions I never expected to feel.

Because a part of me suddenly felt... shame. Guilty. Afraid of what he would think if he learned of everything I'd done in the past. Of who I was during the day. Never before had I cared about another's judgement like this. My life had always been too busy to worry about something like that for long. But... Kieran was different. For the first time ever, I was beginning to care what someone thought of me. He had been nothing but helpful, doing his best to solve the issues that had plagued me for years now. I'd attacked, accused, threatened and pushed him away... and yet he didn't seem to care about any of that. I could see a goodness in him that no one else had ever shown me. Something pure that was given without asking for anything in return. He was either psychotic... or he did genuinely want to help me. Anyone else would have walked away already ...And it was for that reason which ultimately made the decision for me. One where keeping him away would still be for the best. “...A doctor,” I half-lied. It was a technical truth, though not quite right. “I don't know much about him.”

But apparently, I had grossly underestimated just how much Kieran had already picked up about my life. “...Was it your father?” he asked, catching me off guard.

My head immediately spun sharply to look at him, finding his expression serious. “...Why would you say that?” I replied. I was trying to make my tone sound casual despite the tension I felt. “I saw how afraid you were of him that night we met,” he said. “If he has hurt you, you can tell me.”

By that response? No, no I could not. He'd now just given me further confirmation that I was doing the right thing. Kieran involving himself was only going to end with him putting himself in danger as well. “I'm fine,” I lied, “He just... does what he thinks is best for me.”

“Raven, I mean it,” he persisted. “You don’t need to put up with being mistreated. In fact, I don’t think you should go back home at all.” “What...?”

“With the suppressors and silver, I think you should come back to Ashwood with me,” he said. “Be seen by a doctor that actually knows how to correctly assess you. Make sure there are no long-term effects due to what he’s done to you. You can live the kind of life you want there without ever having to feel afraid.”

Leave... my father?

He was offering me the very thing I’d been too scared to dream for. Escaping from it all, leaving my father behind... finally being free. And not just that, but to also be allowed into the world I was always meant to be raised into. Have unrestricted access to answers still unknown. About who I was, what was wrong with me, about how I could get better.

...Only, as I kept thinking it through, I soon came back to reality. Because it was just that... a dream. A fantasy.

The minute I stepped foot out of this town, he would track me down and immediately drag me back home. There was no such thing as being free.

Besides... even if I couldn’t see it myself, I was sure there had to be a reason why he gave me the silver and suppressors. There had to be. Everything he’d done had always had a purpose. ...Perhaps I was just missing something. “I’m sorry... I can’t do that,” I said quietly.

“Raven, I can’t just send you back there, helpless to stop whatever is happening,” he argued, clearly unhappy with my response. “You don’t want to tell me the truth, sure, but your face says it all. The bruises on your ribs say it all. I know something is going on with him. I can feel the manipulation a mile away.”

That prickled me, instantly making me become a little defensive.

There was nothing I could do and my hands were tied. It wasn’t as if this was easy for me or something I wanted. My place was by my father’s side. The only place I could ever be.

The best thing for everyone was if Kieran just accepted that and let it go already.

...Which, of course, he didn’t.

“You don’t think I haven’t thought about this? The man has a daughter who he keeps hidden away, rarely allowing them the opportunity to meet anyone outside,” he said. “That sounds exactly like isolation, ensuring that you’re reliant on him, and only him.” “Stop,” I quickly warned, not liking where this was going “And then add in the fact that,

despite being a rich man's daughter, you have fighting skills sharper than most skilled warriors I've met. Skills far beyond any average learning. I can't think of many reasons why you would need such a thing in a city like this, especially with the upbringing you should have had."

"...I said stop."

"It doesn't take a genius to realise he's using and abusing you, Raven," he continued, ignoring my words. "Whether he handed you the pills or not, I already came to this conclusion days ago. If you just come with me, I can protect-." "— Kieran, stop!" I finally yelled, tears threatening to fall from my eyes. Listening to all of this was too much. Both painful... and terrifying. Because if he had already figured out this much about me, then he was dangerously close to things he shouldn't know. To pry any further would make it near impossible for me to keep him safe.

"...Please stop. Please," I begged. "You don't know what you're saying." He finally took a moment to look at me properly, pausing just long enough to see my demeanour. "...I'm sorry, Raven... I didn't mean to upset you," he said softly. But I just shook my head, still trying to bite back the tears. He was making this so hard. So goddamn hard. Everything inside was now screaming at me to give in and tell him everything. To run away with him and pretend I could be someone new. But I couldn't. It was too late for that.

I went to say something else, to protest some more, but, as he continued to look at me with a face full of concern, eyes that held only sincerity... I felt myself crack.

...I cracked just the tiniest bit under that pressure... and provided a confirmation I never expected to give. One that didn't actually admit to anything, yet told him everything he needed to know.

"...If my life is truly as bad as you say it is..." I said, unable to hide the pain in my tone. "One full of sadness and abuse, and where I was helpless to the whims of an extremely powerful man in this city... why do you think I would stay?" No matter what he said to me, at the end of the day, I was still my father's raven. Just because my cage bars weren't always visible, it didn't mean I couldn't always feel them everywhere I went. The last thing I wanted to do was to trap Kieran inside here along with me.

"You think you've figured everything out, but you don't know me, Kieran," I continued, quickly regaining whatever composure I could muster. "And you don't understand half of what you're saying." "Raven, I'm trying to tell you that he can't touch you so long as you come with me," he said. "...I can protect you. I promise."

But if I were to accept his help, it wouldn't be *me* who needed protection. Already, I could visualise the manilla folder now... reading his name at the top... knowing what it would mean.... 1

I shuddered at the thought.

“I appreciate everything you’ve done for me,” I said, already feeling my chest aching with the words I was about to speak. “But... I’m not interested in leaving. I’m sorry.”

Before he could say anything further to make the decision harder, I quickly stood up and walked to the bedroom to get changed. Focusing on anything other than what was happening so I didn’t accidentally crack again. “I’ll stay around for a few more days in case you change your mind,” I heard him say, speaking from the other side of the door. “Unlike him, I’m not going to force you into coming with me. I want this to be your choice. Your decision. Something you clearly have never been given before.” Why was he making this so goddamn hard? I was already trembling so much, feeling my heart pulsing loudly in my chest. I didn’t need this to drag out any more than it was.

But as he mentioned his return back home, it did make me realise something.

That... this was most likely the last time I would ever see him. Not only because of the town difficulties he’d mentioned earlier, but it was also unlikely that I would be able to sneak out like this again. Doing so once had already been too risky.

And as for future mutual events we might find each other at...? Well, I doubted my father would allow me to attend anything like the Mayor’s party again after what happened last time

No, this... this right here, this very moment... this was goodbye. ...And as I thought on it more, coming to terms with what that meant, I suddenly felt an odd sense of clarity. ...Because whatever happened right now, it wouldn’t matter after today.

It was a thought that made me immediately walk to the door, opening it up to reveal Kieran on the other side. He had one arm up against the doorframe, his body leant forwards in a way that implied his head had been resting on the wood only moments before.

And, as I came face-to-face with him again, he instantly looked sharply up as if he were about to say something else. An expression that told me he hadn’t given up on trying to convince me yet.

But that didn’t matter to me anymore, my mind now already made up. Before he could get a single word out, I quickly moved forward and pressed myself against

him, catching him by surprise. And, instinctively, I gave myself over to that relentless urge I always felt whenever he was nearby

I arched my body upwards, weaving a hand through his hair, and right as a shiver of pleasure coursed through me... I brought my lips up to meet his.

...And it was perfect. The exact way I always imagined it would feel. Maybe even better. And though I could tell he was reluctant at first, possibly questioning my sudden change in attitude, it didn't take long before his mouth started to respond back. Moving against mine, drinking in every single sensation on offer... turning those sparks into flames.

When his hand moved to my waist and pressed me closer to him, an excitement of possibilities instantly bubbled into my mind. I could tell that he wanted me just as much as I wanted him. That, whatever this absurd obsession was, it was definitely felt mutually.

Was he feeling himself burning in the heat of those flames too? Intoxicated by my scent like I was his? I couldn't help but wonder what might happen if I truly did let go completely at that very moment... if I forgot everything else and gave myself over entirely. ...But this wasn't that sort of kiss.

No, this one was only meant in goodbye. And, though it pained me to do so, I slowly pulled myself away enough to meet his eyes. "I really do appreciate everything you've done for me," I said, taking a final moment to hold onto him, procrastinating what I needed to do. "You've given me knowledge that I might have gone the rest of my life without ever discovering, going about my days as I continued to think that I really was dangerous... that I was a freak. Now I can at least try to get better, even if that's not in the way you want." "...I thought that kiss was because you were agreeing to stay with me," he said quietly, disappointment heavy in his tone.

They were words that hurt me more than I thought they would, making me ache to take back everything I'd said and to agree to go with him. But this wasn't about me. This was about loyalty to my father... and about protecting Kieran. "...I really am sorry, Kieran." ...And I stepped backwards out of his arms, now moving towards the exit.

I grabbed my bag from the counter and immediately headed towards the front door, but it was as my hand was on the handle that I heard him speak behind me.

"Wait," he said, making me pause. "There is something you should know. Something that might make you reconsider."

And, reluctantly, I turned my head back to look at him, already struggling as it were with just leaving in light of what had happened between us. "What is it..?" I asked. But his expression only grew more intense, whatever he wanted to say clearly being

something he was unsure about. As if he was undecided whether he should tell me.

"Kieran... what is it?" I pressed. He finally took a deep breath and moved a step towards me. "I don't know how to tell you this," he said hesitantly. "...But he's not your real father, Raven."

“What...? What do you mean?” “I mean... there is no biological way that Eric Reid could have fathered you.”