

Chapter 12

"What?" Audrey snapped. She turned to me, fuming with hatred. "You did this, didn't you? You bloody —"

"Audrey!" Hannah snapped. "Quit whining and get it done."

She raised a hand as Audrey opened her mouth to protest. "Cain's not pleased. Piss him off, and it'll be your last mistake."

Audrey stormed out of the room, slamming the door.

My lips thinned as I looked at Hannah and the table. This was ridiculous. She knew Audrey would react, yet she snatched the shoot off her plate and dumped it on me—last minute. I knew Hannah was not behind the decision.

We had arrived at the Black Forest that morning, our last stop on our tour of Germany. It was a beautiful place, though somewhat dark and ominous. Although shooting in such a dim place was a technical nightmare, it was perfect for the direction Cain was taking. The Allicere.

I shivered at the thought of his name. I still couldn't fully process everything I knew. It all seemed so surreal, yet I knew it was true. Horrible, terrifying, dangerous, and true.

I hadn't seen Cain since that night on the roof, but I knew he had arrived at the Black Forest a few days before we did. I wasn't looking forward to seeing him, to say the least.

Hannah pulled me out of my thoughts.

"Cain decided yesterday," Hannah leaned back in her chair. "Sharon is the model. She asked for you."

That explained everything.

"It's not fair, Hannah," I said, exasperated.

"Right and wrong?" Hannah chuckled dryly. "The world is not kind to those beneath them. We're toys for their amusement."

I stood. "I won't take Audrey's place."

"Say that to Cain," she shrugged. "He's the boss, not me."

She was not the Hannah I knew.

"If you want to ruin your future chances, be my guest. Otherwise, do as you are told. You only have a day or two left."

I snatched the table from her desk and left.

Audrey was waiting for me outside the office.

"I'm not letting this slide," she hissed. "This will be your last shoot."

She stormed away, fuming.

"This is getting ugly, Ana," Nia said once we were alone. I thanked the heavens that she was with me during this shoot. Being in a foreign country, an entire ocean between me and my home, with Cain, Audrey, and Hannah, had to be one of my worst nightmares. And I had awful nightmares.

I patted her shoulder, and together we went out.

I knew there would be rumor mills. The agenda was clear. Cain wanted to ruin my reputation. I refused him that satisfaction.

Just two more days.

"Anastasia," Sharon beamed, grabbing my hands. "I missed you—and your creations."

Her friendly demeanor was creeping me out.

"We didn't part on a good note, but let's forget, hmm?" I tried not to wince when she caressed my cheek. "I like you a lot. You are...unique." There was mania in her eyes. "And I like unique things."

"We're running late," I said coolly, stepping back. "Boss won't appreciate it."

Sharon winked. "I can't wait to wear your dresses."

Sharon went to her car. I boarded the bus with Nia, still chilled by her cryptic behavior.

We reached our location in an hour and got on with the shoot. Everything went smoothly after the initial hiccup.

Audrey was furious, but she didn't act on a whim. I stayed on edge the entire time—the added responsibility and Cain's presence made everything ten times worse. I was avoiding him like the plague.

I succeeded until I found him blocking my path to the cottage.

"Ms. Grace!" Cain smirked. It wasn't friendly.

I held my ground, though it was crumbling beneath my shaking feet when he neared me. I was scared, yes, but he was not going to see it.

"Displeased to see me?" he asked. I couldn't help but wonder... There was something in his eyes.

I remembered how Harold's eyes had changed, that night on the rooftop. I wondered if Cain's did the same.

"I've got work to do," I said, finally averting my gaze.

"Of course, you do," he purred.

I stood firm when he passed me.

"Don't disappoint me," Cain whispered near my ear. "Gawk at me later, love. You'll have plenty of time."

I rushed inside the cottage. Blood rushed to my face at his words.

"Focus on work, Ana. Just focus on your work."

"Anastasia!" Sharon's assistant came to me. "She's asking for you."

I raised a questioning brow.

"It's her dress. She needs adjustments."

"Where is she?" I asked.

"By the lake. Cain and Hannah are with her."

I nodded at her and headed out.

"Anastasia!" Sharon rushed toward me. "This dress is hideous. I don't know how it got approved for this shoot. I would have fired the person."

I was glad Audrey wasn't around. Sharon was butchering her collection throughout the shoot.

"Be a darling, Ana. Fix this dress. Get rid of these flowers. Add something—whatever makes it worth my time."

"But—"

"Don't say no, sweetheart. I put up with the rest. This"—Sharon shuddered—"is unacceptable."

"We cannot entirely rip off the flowers, Sharon. I will try to do whatever I can."

I couldn't understand why she was making a fuss. The dress was fine.

"I knew you wouldn't disappoint me," Sharon said happily.

I texted Nia to bring what I needed and just prayed it turned out well in the end.

"You're a natural, aren't you?" Sharon commented as I worked on her dress. "Others would have panicked."

"It's my job," I said, standing up. "This should—"

Sharon grabbed my pendant.

"Will you look at this beauty?" Her eyes twinkled as she examined it. "This will go perfectly with this dress."

I pulled my pendant out of her grasp and stepped back.

"Is it done?" Cain joined us. A shiver ran up my spine as he neared.

"There's one piece missing, darling." Sharon hugged Cain's arm. "Her necklace, it goes perfectly with my dress."

She looked at me sweetly. "But Ana dear doesn't want to let go of it for a few minutes."

"That's out of the question," I said firmly, looking at Cain.

"This shoot is not happening as long as I don't get that." Sharon eyed me wickedly.

Hannah had arrived to the scene as well.

"No," I said firmly.

"Ana!"

"Not happening, Hannah," I cut her off. "If she doesn't want to do the shoot, so be it."

Sharon blocked my path.

"I was going to return it. Seeing how bitchy you are over a petty necklace is pissing me off." She gripped my pendant.

Her gaze was greedy as she stroked the crescent part softly. "Why did you have to make me angry?"

"I can't give it to you, Sharon," I said calmly. "This one holds personal feelings. Please, let it go."

"I see." Sharon smirked and pulled the pendant off my neck rather brutally.

I watched her, wide-eyed, as she threw my pendant in the lake.

"We're done, Cain," Sharon said as she walked away triumphantly.

"Ana!" Hannah looked at me sternly. "Do you have any idea what you have done?"

My hand went to my now bare neck. They didn't know what it meant to me—losing that pendant.

It was my only protection against Cain and the Anima.

"Sort this mess, Hannah." Cain's cold voice reached my ears.

He went after Sharon.

Damn these arrogant asses.

"Ana!" Hannah jerked me a little. "You are going to—"

"No!" I said firmly.

Hannah took a long look at me. Then she shook her head and turned around.

"Pack up!" she yelled to the rest of the crew and left.

I jerked Nia's hand off when she palmed my shoulder and turned the other way.

"Don't be reckless. This place is not safe. I heard there is going to be a heavy blizzard," she tried to reason.

I didn't look her way.

"We'll sort—"

"I'm not coming," I finalized.

Nia knew better than to argue with my stubbornness. She patted my shoulder reluctantly and left with the rest.

I removed my jacket and rushed into the cold water to find my pendant. Laurel said not to take it off. It was the only thing keeping me safe from those vile beings—including Cain.

It was his plan—I knew it.

He couldn't do a thing unless this pendant was removed. He made Sharon do his dirty work.

"I'm not going to lose it." I moved further into the lake. "I won't let him win."

I searched like crazy, but I couldn't find my pendant. I was more vulnerable than ever.

I cursed when my knees gave way and I fell in the water. The sky was almost black now, and the weather changed for the worse.

I stumbled out of the water and rushed toward my jacket.

I needed to tell Laurel. I dialed her number with shaking hands and waited for her to answer.

"Ana?"

"Laurel—"

A chill ran down my spine when I felt a ghostly caress on my back.

"Anastasia, are you okay?"

The phone slipped from my hand as I blinked into the darkness. Fear clenched my stomach when shadowy figures emerged from nowhere.

"Anastasia!"

Wind whipped past me, biting cold and sharp like shards of ice against my cheeks.

I spun around, the crunch of snow beneath my feet loud in the stillness, but only shifting shadows met my eyes.

The cold deepened, seeping through my soaked clothes like a chilling grip; crows cawed overhead, their harsh cries echoing like ominous warnings.

I fled into the forest, heart pounding. With each step, the forest grew thicker, darker—as if the nightmare itself wanted to swallow me whole.

I fell face down into the snow, its icy dampness biting my cheek. My breaths came shallow, ragged, and my vision swam like a fogged mirror.

I crawled back when Anima appeared, closing in on me until I was cornered—trapped beneath the weight of their hollow, unblinking eyes.

"Anastasia."

One of them stretched its deformed, claw-like hand toward me, its twisted mouth curling into a sickening grin that smelled faintly of decay. I hid my face in my palms, the hot rush of fear pricking my skin.

I was going to die here.

The darkness twisted and swallowed the edges of my vision, and I felt gravity pulling me down like a weight dragging me into a bottomless pit.

The last thing my fading consciousness saw were dark shadows reaching for me.