

Chapter 20

"Can you stop staring?" Shae said.

Angie's eyes lit up like a kid in a candy store, while Shae eyed her with murderous intent.

"It can speak!" Angie exclaimed loudly. "Can I cuddle the demon kitty now?"

Shae leapt beside me and curled into a ball.

After all the tears and heartaches, I got my friends back. He kept his promise after claiming his price in the dirtiest way possible.

I told them about the curse and his wing. It felt good to share it, to not be alone in all this mess. But the question remained how it'd be broken.

"Look into Cain's place," Angie suggested.

"Stop leading her into more trouble, Angie," Nat reprimanded, watching Shae warily. "He could harm her."

"Cain can't harm me. Not really. If anything, he's possessive and concerned over my well-being," I scooed.

"I can't look at Xic the same way anymore," Nat said, voice low. "He's on my head like a sword of Damocles."

Angie hued loudly. "Aeron is taking this *'I'm keeping my eyes on you'* to an impossible level. Everyone thinks we got hots for each other."

Angie exclaimed suddenly, "Who was the hottie that came in earlier?" She wiggled her eyebrows. "Total spark fest."

"Don't be presumptuous," I warned her. "And don't try to cook anything behind my back." I paused, arching a brow. "Cain will kill you."

"I don't know why you would threaten me with him," Angie said, looking smug.

I couldn't comprehend why as well.

"But...who is he?" she pressed.

"Logan, the owner of this building," I told them. "Nice and polite, but weird. To put it simply...I don't feel good around him."

"Being around Black brothers has rubbed on your senses," Angie said dryly. "He's an attractive guy who brings you your favorite vanilla latte. Does he do that every day?"

Yes, *and I never take a sip of it.*

"Shut up, Angie, and stay away," I warned her. "I mean it."

"Excuse me!"

We looked at the entrance of my studio.

"Anastasia, right?" the woman asked, taking on her glasses. "Sophia Owen. My assistant contacted you."

I stood and shook hands with her. Nat and Angie left after a brief goodbye.

I gestured for Sophia to sit while Shae stirred, eyeing the stranger with quiet intensity.

I ordered her coffee, but she politely declined, glancing at her watch every few seconds.

Her beauty and grace defined words. Dressed in a royal blue suit, she embodied strength and presence.

We discussed business for thirty minutes. She needed twenty identical blue dresses, all the same measurements.

Her assistant had already shared the details—design and color were finalized. It was my first major order after the studio opened, and I was thrilled.

As she stood to leave, I couldn't ignore what I'd felt all along.

"Are you related to Logan?" I asked.

Sophia was neither offended nor surprised by my blunt question.

"Distant relatives would be an appropriate term to use for us," she said, chuckling. "Hair and eye color are a family thing."

I walked her to the door.

Sophia faced me. "That coffee is on hold. I'm glad I came in person. I wish we had more time to chat."

I inched slightly when she touched my arm. A strange weight settled in my stomach, as if her touch had pulled a thread inside me I didn't know was there.

"Until we meet again."

I stayed at the door for a long time after she left. Logan. Sophia—they haunted me somehow.

More than Cain.

I dropped my scissors again. This time, I didn't pick them up; I just chose to stare.

Needing air, I slipped out to the terrace. I rubbed my right palm. Red pinpricks covered it. I only now noticed I was bleeding slightly.

I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose, exhausted. I leaned over the railings and surveyed my surroundings warily.

The night was quiet and dark. The air was heavy and palpable, but didn't stir trouble.

"Anima won't appear," Cain whispered behind me, his voice, a magnet of deadly hypnotism.

He grabbed my shoulder and turned me. "I'm not going to hurt you."

My lips parted in a soft gasp when he kissed my palm. The pinpricks vanished immediately. I looked at them in shock.

How did he do that? And why would he have healing powers? Is that not reserved for the good guys?

"Even if I want to"—his gaze seared into mine—"I won't."

His towering frame loomed, cold and intimidating. "Even a scratch on you is unacceptable, Anastasia. Avoid getting hurt or I'll be forced to intervene."

His thumb rubbed my healed palm. "Your life is not yours, love."

His words coiled around me like taut silk—a threat, a promise, a noose.

His touch was ghostly, soft—but lethal enough to make me faint.

I preferred his disgust and silence over this twisted attention.

He was suddenly so physical...menacingly intimate. His malice bore a new color.

His desire to devour me.

"Am I making you uncomfortable?" His question took me by surprise. "You're practically radiating nerves and fears, Anastasia. Is it because you kissed me?"

"No." It came out too fast. "W-what do you take me for?"

"Is that why you returned to this room that night?" He took a step closer. "And inched at my name?"

I seethed at his conceit.

"Why isn't there anything about you in history?" I asked in an attempt to change the topic.

"Because I exist between one and zero," Cain replied without looking my way. "There's heaven and hell. Good and evil. Life and death. I'm in between."

Silence thickened around us.

"I'm not created by God. Why would I be mentioned with his toys? I'm the ink between the lines of scripture."

"It doesn't bother you?" I whispered. It bothered me. "That humans don't know about you?"

Cain chuckled darkly.

"They do," His reply was curt. "But the Blue Bloods wipe their memory clean of me."

He leaned against the railing.

"History needs heroes or villains. I'm neither." His eyes gleamed, wicked and cold. "I'm the silence after the scream."

The weight of his gaze crushed my breaths.

"The Blue Bloods," I whispered. "Do they exist between one and zero?"

Cain laughed—sharp, unfriendly. "Why don't you tell me?"

"I'm not from that lineage," I said calmly. "They ousted my ancestors, stripped them of their powers. I'm human—happy to be."

My heart stuttered when he grabbed my left wrist and pulled me closer.

"You're free to stay here or come to my room," he said, his voice low and cold. "I couldn't care less—so long as you stay out of trouble."

He tugged a few strands of my hair, his fingers brushing them with deceptive gentleness.

I wanted to pull away, but my body betrayed me.

"Anima won't come?" I said meekly.

His eyes stayed on my hair, his fingers repeatedly threading a few strands and letting them slip through his grasp—again and again. It was a gentle gesture.

He was so contradictory.

"I've cast a barrier around the estate," he murmured. "It's blood-forged. The kind that sings when something wicked dares to cross."

He looked into my eyes. "You can roam freely at night, if you want."

"I can?" I asked, surprised.

"Shae's on an errand," he added, finally letting go of my hair. "I figured you'd prefer a barrier to me."

I looked away while clearing my throat.

"See, I'm not that evil." His smile wasn't kind.

"Yes, of course." I let out a wry chuckle. "My gratitude, Mr. Black. I couldn't ask for a more benevolent captor."

I pushed at his chest when he grabbed my hips.

"Cain!" I turned my face to the side when his mouth neared mine.

"Don't provoke me," he purred in my ear. "I may not harm you, love, but I can soil you."

I staggered back when he let go of me.

"You don't come near me," I screeched like a wounded cat. "Stay away from me."

I hugged myself to shield my body from his prying eyes.

"Sweet dreams, Anastasia," Cain smirked, taking a step back. "You have yearned for them all your life."

I couldn't sleep a wink that night, and when I finally managed to doze off, I woke up late in the morning. I was running around like a chicken without a head while getting ready while cursing the wicked doom living across my room.

"Ana!" I stopped running and looked at Sibyl. "Leaving without breakfast again?"

"I'm late, Sibyl," I protested.

"Set the table." I turned wildly at his deep voice.

Him sneaking up on me was going to kill me soon. My wrist, however, had not hurt in ages.

"I don't have time," I moaned in protest.

He just pulled the chair out. When I refused to comply, Cain pushed me down on the chair roughly and sat as well.

Sibyl came with a handful of servants, served breakfast, and left.

Cain started eating, and I could do nothing but gawk at him. I had never seen him eat before.

"Is my face that interesting?" he asked without looking.

Cain grabbed my wrist before I could stand.

"Don't even think about rebelling," he said.

I pulled my wrist out of his grip.

"Don't just grab me as you please," I snapped.

"I won't ask twice, Anastasia," Cain commanded.

"Stop this farce," I said, getting out of my chair. "I don't need anything from you."

The care. The attention. The concern for my well-being. He could dream all he wanted—nothing was changing.

I was not falling for his traps.

I had taken only two steps from the table when my body froze in place.

"Why do you keep forgetting, love?"

Cain appeared before me through black, formless shadows. They rose from the ground and slithered around him.

His glowing blue eyes with red slits were terrifying.

"You cannot even breathe without my consent, Anastasia. What made you think that you could walk out on me?"

My lungs constricted. I tried to open my mouth, but I couldn't.

My lips seemed to be sewn.

"How adorable!" Cain mocked. "To think you can beg me."

I gasped loudly when he released me.

"You—"

I gawked at him in shock as he shoved a sandwich into my mouth before I could scream.

"I'm tolerating everything because of my wing." His gaze was contemptuous. "The day I get it back..."

Cain got in my face.

"You can fucking go to hell, live or die, I don't give a dime," he spat, venom in his voice.

"Get on your high horse before you suffer humiliation falling face down."

I had so much to spit his way, but I chose silence.

Cain grabbed my arm when I tried to leave.

All anger morphed into confusion when he took one of his three rings—the skull one. He slid it onto the index finger of my left hand.

I blinked in surprise when the ring transformed to suit my size.

"Don't lose it," Cain said, his voice softer now. "Anima won't come near you as long as you have this. If you run into some other trouble..."

Cain rubbed the skull-like bird head. "Just touch it. I'll come."

He let go of my hand.

"You'll be chauffeured," Cain smirked. "It's a dangerous world out there."

I counted backward while breathing deeply.

Don't snap. Don't snap.

"I can take care of myself," I bit back.

"It's either the driver"—Cain stepped forward intimidatingly—"or me."

I stomped toward the car.

"Have a good day, love," he had the nerve to call after me.

"Choke on all the bad luck, asshole!" I screamed at the top of my lungs and got in the car.

He's either a sword or a velvet rope.